

THEME AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The concept of theme has been and still is the ground on which different opinions and approaches meet. This not surprising if we consider the complexity of the concept and the difficulty to approach it. That is the reason why each writer who dealt with it started either from well-known definitions trying to enlarge them by adding new elements or devised new definitions which would almost deny the existing ones. Distinctions are important to be observed between *theme* and *motif*, *theme* and *subject*, as more than once, in dealing with these concepts, misuses may occur.

Key words: *theme, thematic material, psychoanalysis, work of art, motif, recurrence*

Jean Paul Weber who based his approach on the psychoanalytic thematic criticism of the concept, founded his critical system on the data furnished by the modern psychoanalysis. His view on thematic criticism starts from the suggestions and the points of view offered Ch. Mauron's psychocriticism and Bachelard's phenomenology. He also retains Freud's statement concerning the fact that some trauma of childhood has important consequences in shaping an adult's personality. Yet, he enlarges this aspect and thinks that one should also take into consideration the infantile life as a whole. Starting from this premises he considers that it is necessary to investigate both the sensorial-affective complexes and the sensual and social ones. This conception led him to the presentation of a specific theme in a work of art. That is why, in his opinion, each artist has a certain personal theme which he expresses unconsciously by means of a number of symbols. In his work "*Genèse de l'oeuvre poétique*" the French writer states: "*We understand by the concept of theme an infantile event or situation (in its broadest meaning) which is susceptible to manifest itself unconsciously, in the work of art or in an aggregate*

of works of art (poetical, literary, pictorial) either symbolically or directly, being clear enough that by symbol we understand any analogical substitute of the symbolised"¹.

The definition of the concept of theme appears clearer in his "*Domaines thématiques*". He specifies here again: "*Nous entendons par thème, ici comme dans notre précédent ouvrage, la trace qu'un souvenir d'enfance a laissée dans la mémoire d'un écrivain (et en généralisant, dans celle d'un savant, d'un philosophe)*"².

This remembrance, or thematic recollection is not always unconscious. However, unconscious usually remains the relationship between the theme and the work of art. Weber establishes some distinctions between *personal* and *impersonal* themes. The personal themes, he says, are specific and allow to define the personality of the artist, while the impersonal themes may be common for several writers.

Closely connected with the concept of theme he introduces the concept of *symbolised theme*. This concept shows that one can transplant a theme from one field into another, this being an unconscious act, the symbol constituting itself as a consequence of a direct intention. Moreover he is convinced that the majority of the literary works have a monothematic character, though he doesn't argue the possibility of plurithematic works, mentioning that the themes can be gathered in a hypertheme based on a system of symbols.

Conceived as the expression of the unconscious, the theme may be represented by an object, for exemple the clock in Poe's works, by a painting, by several objects, and so on. The theme can also emerge from the gathering of several recollections from childhood. Here he gives the exemple of the reminiscences concerning the capturing of the

birds. The reminiscences are gathered in the *theme of the dead bird* which is to be found in Malarmé's work.

Speaking about a theme to be found in different works he points out that the various shades of meaning under which it appears pleading for its uniqueness. His example is again from Poe with whom the *theme of the clocks* appears under the form of the hour plate, the meeting of the hour hands, the traject of the time piece which goes up and down. Yet two important questions arise as far as the analysis of the creation process is concerned: how could one demonstrate that an author's work centres on a unique theme?; what are the means and ways of detecting this theme?

In order to answer these questions J.P. Weber proposes a series of steps that should be taken. Firstly, the critic must look for the clear and distinct recollection which may be related with the author's works. Secondly, he must look for simple texts with a symbolic significance. Thirdly, he must clear up the stylistic obsessions and vocabulary obsessions connected with certain recollections which in their turn may be attested in some texts. And finally, he must explore the author's work in its wholeness, trying, if possible, to reduce everything to the supposed theme.

Such an analysis, in Weber's point of view, can be said to be successful only if the supposed theme allows the interpretation of the majority of the author's works. The theme appears at first as a simple hypothesis of the work which results from the analogical analysis of several texts. This kind of analysis may confirm or infirm the initial hypothesis according to which the theme has been investigated. He also speaks about two kinds of analysis: when the theme which is relevant in some texts which have an autobiographic character, the analysis has a progressive character; in case that there aren't any documents, the thematic analysis proceeds from some constant symbols which have been found in the work while exploring it. In this case the analysis has a regressive character; it goes back from the literary text to the events which happened during childhood.

According to this method the difficulty of detecting a certain theme arises when no autobiographical hints are given. In this case the

critic has to discover the theme in a text and then to try by reading the other texts to confirm or infirm it. In Weber's opinion, the theme is not something given; it can be identified only in works which have an autobiographical character, this being the major basis of his approach. What he is trying to discover are the unique themes. Another shortcoming of Weber's method consists in the fact that he deals only with the works of well-known writers.

Jean Pierre Richard conceives his thematic approach through the principle of recurrence. Richard considers the literary work as being an experience through which the writer tries to build something, tries to discover his self. However different the experiences, that is the literary works may be, they all have almost the same structure, capable to reveal some themes that shape our life. In order to point out the writer's endeavour to create his own literary world by identifying himself with his work, J.P. Richard tries to detect these specific themes.

In J.P. Richard's point of view, the themes are only hidden relations which reveal themselves while analysing expressions, symbols, images, which appear in the text at certain intervals. He also states that there is "*a concrete principale of organisation, like a pattern, or a fixed object round which a whole world has the tendency to constitute and disclose itself.*"³

He thinks that to identify a theme one must start from the criterion of recurrence. In other words, Richard believes that the major themes which shape the inner structure of a text are the ones which have the highest frequency, being a kind of obsessive presence. We must add that Richard's approach is not based on quantitative principles; what he has in mind is the topological function of the themes. For example, we can find in a writer's first period of creation a number of themes which can disappear in his later works or can reappear after a period of time. He thinks that the themes are not to be found in the recurrence of isolated words but in the wholeness of the language used by the writer. The theme or themes which prove to be the major ones are the expressions of the writer's experience.

Ronald Barthes has a descriptive perspective towards the thematic analysis. In "*Michelet par lui-même*", Barthes states that "*a theme is a reality*

independent of any idea, influence or image"⁴. As to the way of recognizing it he proposes three solutions:

- it may be recognized due to its recurrence; the theme may be traced in the whole work of an author; the theme resists the passing of time, it never changes; the recurrent character of a theme or several themes is made efficient by its/their verbal fixity; they are always signaled by the same image or word.

- a theme has a substantial effect; it asks for a certain attitude on behalf of the author towards the qualities of the material he works with.

- a theme can be reducible; all its variants converge into one.

Barthes asks for a total reading which presupposes to detect the themes and the relationships among them. At the end of the essay he achieves a classification of the major themes: he speaks about *malefic*, *benefic* and *malefic-benefic themes*.

Oscar Walzel is concerned with the problem of thematic material. In "*Content and Form in the Poetic Work*", in the chapter devoted to the thematic material Oscar Walzel develops the interesting thesis on the origins of this material. Then, he speaks about *discovery* and *invention*. The former, in his view, is "*what is given*"⁵ while the latter is "*the surpassing of the given*."⁵ To put it in other words discovery refers to the act of taking over a thematic material from a writer by another one. This doesn't mean to copy the original but to rework it, to reshape it. The invention refers mostly to the writers who introduce elements never used before. Discovery refers also to the act of taking a certain passage from an author's work and of placing it in another writer's work only on the condition that these passages function in the new work. That is what Goethe did when he made Miphistopheles sing a song from Shakespeare. Goethe commented upon this: "*Why should I exhaust my imagination to invent an original song when that of Shakespeare was exactly what I needed?*"⁶

Yet when an author takes over an old thematic material he endeavours to surpass his predecessor by presenting it from a different point of view. Euripides for example took over subjects that had been dealt with by Aeschylus and Sofocles. In doing so he was sure to be able to give the

thematic material a new interpretation. The old material has been revised, reworked on in order to take out of it something new. In fact, there was a time when taking over already written materials was not considered a literary theft. In other words the same thematic material could be found recurring in several writers' work like an obsession. They may be considered as eternal themes that keep luring the authors.

Starting from the distinction made by Walzel concerning the thematic material taken from reality or being based on the already existing printed works, one can say that there may be two types of thematic relationships between these two kinds of thematic material and the building up of a work of art. When an author starts from an already known play, or novel, he has the theme in mind and what he does is to build on it, round it, while in the other case the steps he takes are different, that is the author starts from an event, a life experience. In this latter case the theme will result freely from the work of art while in the former case the theme is somehow forced into the work of art.

Wolfgang Kayser approaches the concept of theme considering that it is the essence of a work of art be it a novel, shortstory, play or a poem. In "*The Literary Work*" he states: "*The theme of the novel "Werther" (Goethe) is the sensible young man, that of "Ilyad" is Achile's anger, that of "The Odyssy" is the return of Ulysses, and that of the "Luisade" is the discovery of the sea-way to the Indies.*"⁷

It seems that for Kayser the theme is nothing else but the essence of a novel, of a play. That this is so can be easily seen if we think of the example given by Kayser concerning the theme of "*The Odyssey*". The substance, the essence of this long story is nothing but Ulysses' way back to Itacka. All the episodes concerning the difficulties he met with are just accessories, elements to clothe the skeleton of the story.

Northrop Frye in his "*Anatomy of Criticism*" seems to have the same opinion on the concept of theme. "*A theme is what is left when the reading process is over. And of course, what the reader generally remembers after having read the novel is only its essence. Any reader will tell you at any time what the book is about but, he will forget the names of the characters, the secondary episodes, in a word all that is meant to gravitate round the theme.*"⁸

Boris Tomasevski states, in his attempts at defining the theme and the motif, that the theme is "the unity of meaning of different elements of a work of art."⁹ His definition takes us back to the already mentioned ones which, graphically, might be represented as a centre, a focus from which or towards which a great number of rays converge – the author starts from the theme and builds his work of art, the theme is not established apriorically. Yet, Tomasevski brings some new elements to the subject-matter. He says that we can speak about the theme of a work of art as a whole and about the themes of the component elements of the work. Moreover, Tomasevski stresses that in choosing a theme the writer will respond to it, that is why any work of art has to contain a unifying theme or a major theme which can be perceived in the process of reading. As a result, he formulates a series of conditions to be met concerning the concept of theme. First of all *the themes must be interesting*. The first condition presents two difficult aspects any writer is confronted with and has to answer: must the writer create obeying the public taste which generally is directed towards essays, short stories, amusing books?; must he contribute with his genius to the development of literature adding new perspectives and progressive elements? Finally Tomasevski selects a middle way, a compromise: a writer should combine the pleasure the reader looks for with the requirements of true literature. Secondly the theme *must be taken from reality*, in other words it should be efficient for the contemporary cultural necessities. The most common form of actuality is represented by the daily events, but in this case the theme will not last in time. This kind of theme will be chosen for detective stories. That is why when the author takes a theme from actuality he must choose it carefully. The author must look for eternal problems of human interest and so Tomasevski reaches the field of the so-called *general human themes*. These themes, in order to become actual must be based on concrete materials which have their sources in the daily common life. However, this actuality must not be understood only as a representation of the contemporary life. A writer may deal with a theme from a certain historical period and still make it actual. It may generate a greater interest

than the flat description of the contemporary life. The interest of the reader/audience in a certain theme is "determined by the historical conditions of the moment when the literary work appeared"¹⁰. This statement means that the writer should not write a novel, a play which deals with history only because the period of time when he writes is a revolutionary one. The public taste does not lie in the copied reality but in its artistic presentation. It means, for example, that in a period of war the writer should not concentrate on its presentation but rather on a similar event taking place in ancient times. In doing so he will capture the interest of the public by presenting an ancient theme which has its echo in contemporary life. Further more Tomasevski says that "it is not enough to choose an interesting theme. It is necessary that the interest should be maintained, it is necessary that the reader's attention should be stimulated. The interest is what attracts, the attention is what retains".¹¹ In other words, the writer must know how to handle his *interesting theme* in such a way as to get hold of the public's attention. To achieve this, "the emotional moment of the theme"¹² plays an important part. By *the emotional moment* Tomasevski understands the emotional presence of the writer in his work; he must sympathise with or hate one character or another. The emotions generated by the literary text are the basic means for catching the attention, "the reader must be guided in his sympathies and emotions"¹². That is why the theme of a literary work must have an emotional shade, must give birth to a feeling of indignation or of sympathy. Nevertheless one should not forget that the emotional moment is part and parcel of the book and it is not provoked by the reader. The writer, while presenting directly or indirectly his attitude, his emotional attitude towards a certain character, negative or positive, will influence the reader's emotional attitude in such a way as to induce him into reacting towards his literary work as he has intended to.

Tomasevski has also identified two types of distribution of the thematic elements. The first one refers to the "causal-temporal relationship among the thematic moments which are introduced"¹³, to be found in novels, short stories or as the critic puts it "the fabulative literature"¹⁴. The second type refers to "the concomitance of the exposed material

or to a succession of themes without any causal relationship with the exposed material.”¹⁵ This second type is to be found in descriptive or “nonfabulative literature”¹⁶, that is in lyrical poems such as a sequence of images.

Tomasevski distinguishes between *theme* and *motif*, two concepts that sometimes are taken one for the other. The concept of theme is a concept of *inclusion* of the lexical material of the literary work. The constitutive elements of the literary text may be disclosed through a *thematic determination* called the *decomposition of the work*. To support his theory he chose Puskin’s shortstory “*The Shot*”. He states that this process may go on up to *indivisible parts* which are the smallest divisions of the thematic material. “*The theme of an indivisible part is called motif*”¹⁷. From this interpretation of the motif we can draw the conclusion that any theme is made up of motifs going up to the identification between theme and motif when we meet with an indivisible part. Tomasevski’s theory has the same approach to the analysis of the literary text as what is known the *Chinese boxes* technique or the French *mise en abime*. This approach may be useful when we deal only with one literary work such a novel, a shortstory, a play, but not for the purpose of the thematic analysis of the whole work, because it would be rather inadequate.

Serge Doubrovsky has an existential approach to the concept of theme. In “*Why the New Criticism*” he gives the following definition to the concept of theme: “*The theme, the basic notion of the modern criticism, is nothing else but the affective colouring of any human experience at the level at which it brings into play the fundamental relationships of the existence, that is the particular way each human being lives in relation with the outer world, with the other human beings and with the divinity*”¹⁸. In other words Doubrovsky states that the theme is an existential choice that we make, which is to be found at the heart of any opinion concerning the world, the existence at large. The theme is the support for, the material out of which the literary work grows, it is its architectural design.

Criticising Ch. Mauron’s psycho-analytical interpretation of Racine’s work, Doubrovsky shows that themes are not fixed patterns which have been given once and for ever. On the contrary, they are in a permanent change and

evolution. Ch. Mauron sustains the idea that Racine takes the same theme over and over again playing with different variants. But this theme, Doubrovsky points out, acquires consistence right in the process of these successive variations which enrich it. For Doubrovsky the function of any thematic analysis is to follow and reconstruct the inner life of themes, how they appear, come to life, develop and finally are fulfilled. If we were to think of a theme as something fixed, something given, then the authors making use of the same theme will write identical literary works, which, of course, is not true because, while building on the same theme, writers will come up with personal variations. Writers can deal with the same theme and still their works of art be different just because the theme is not a fixed pattern but a source of countless variants.

CONCLUSION

Drawing a conclusion out of these approaches we may say that the theme is the element from which an author starts building his work, it is the subject, basic for the development of a discourse. The dichotomy theme/motif is also to be considered carefully as the concepts refer to different levels of abstraction. Each approach of the concept of theme adds elements missing to others or even brings into discussion new contradictory issues. Whatever the approach, an exhausting definition of this concept should include the idea that a theme means variety in uniqueness, while gathering all meanings under various shades of interpretation.

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