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What Is the ›Cultural Context‹ of a Literary Text?

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1. Introduction

There is no interpretation without contextualisation. Few scholars would question this statement, not least because including information provided by the context (broadly construed) is pervasive in interpretations across theories as divergent as New Criticism and New Historicism. Whereas there can be no doubt as to the importance of ›context‹, some rather crucial issues concerning text and context have prompted disagreement, if they have been addressed at all. The term ›context‹ itself requires clarification since it is often used rather differently and with a meaning that remains vague. It is a matter of debate which contexts are relevant to interpretation. Various models of how text and context interact have been suggested in different theories of literature. Taken together, issues such as these constitute a fundamental problem of literary theory today.

The contributions to the edited collection *Text or Context. Reflections on Literary and Cultural Criticism* »provide some new clues for reconsidering the relationship between text and cultural context« (4), as co-editor Stephan Mussil writes in the volume's introduction. One can take it that this intention implies two interrelated, yet clearly distinguishable questions, also reflected in the volume's title: (i) How is ›context‹ to be understood within the frame of a theory of culture? (ii) How can literary criticism with its core competence of interpreting *texts* benefit from cultural criticism which has also, according to some scholars, opened up new vistas on *context*? The papers can be conveniently assigned to three groups, depending on whether their take on literature is predominantly cognitive (cf. 2.), semiotic (cf. 3.), or pragmatic (cf. 4.) in nature. Admittedly, this does not yield clear-cut distinctions, since intersections and borderline cases are possible, but perhaps it can serve as an orientation for the reader.

2. Schemata, Figures of Thought, and Other Minds

Peter Hühn in »Narration as Textual Practice – the Sequentiality and Eventfulness of Stories« shows how the readers' understanding and appreciation of the ›eventfulness‹ of a narrative text involves specific knowledge of the world. An ›event‹ in the narratological sense identifies a »decisive change« in the narrative that ensures its ›tellability‹ (24). In order to describe eventfulness, Hühn makes use of schema theory and Lotman's structuralist notion of *sujet*. According to schema theory, the knowledge required in language processing comes in two forms: static ›frames‹, i.e. »thematic or situational contexts«, and dynamical ›scripts‹, i.e. »stereotypical or established sequential or procedural patterns« (25). With regard to the question of eventfulness this means that the lesser a text is in accordance with the frames and scripts it evokes, the greater the narrative's eventfulness turns out (and *vice versa*; cf. ibid.).

Hühn emphasizes two important points about schemata. Firstly, readers have to actively apply the required knowledge to the text because frames and scripts are not inherent to the text, and

secondly, what counts as a relevant schema depends on the historical, cultural, and social circumstances (cf. 25f.). In addition to this ›top-down‹-processing by means of schemata, there is also ›bottom-up‹-processing for which Hühn refers to Lotman's conception of ›event‹ (cf. 26). For Lotman a narrative contains an event, if one of the characters (usually the protagonist) deviates from the text's basic normative order. He conceives of the literary text as a ›semantic field‹ that consists of two sub-fields, each of them characterised by particular norms. These opposite norms constitute a boundary between the two sub-fields that none but the protagonist can pass, thereby violating the prevailing norms and bringing about the decisive ›event‹.

In the main part of his article Hühn discusses three examples – Richardson's *Pamela*, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, and Joyce's short story »Grace« – which represent different types of eventfulness. The examples are meant to illustrate how eventfulness is »conditioned by different contexts« (27). The analysis of *Pamela*, for instance, leads him to the conclusion that fully grasping the decisive event of the novel (the heroine's marriage with an aristocrat) requires a good deal of contextual knowledge on behalf of the reader:

> Central contextual features are, firstly, the hierarchical class system in Britain and the practically impermeable boundary between middle class and aristocracy; secondly, the high level of ethos on which the middle classes based their dignity and self-respect, the norms of honesty, working for one's living and, especially with regard to women, sexual ›virtue‹, in contradistinction to the aristocratic values of rank, wealth, leisure, pleasure and, with respect to men, loose sexual morals; and thirdly, the ban on female initiative in pursuing love and marriage and the repression of female self-awareness with regard to feelings towards men, which delimits the agency of women as protagonists, confining their scope of action to re-activity and submissiveness.
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> (30)

Hühn's examples very aptly illustrate his convincing (but not altogether new) approach that combines structuralist and more recent cognitivist theories. His article also, and maybe most importantly, offers a very promising solution to the question of how text and (›cultural‹) context are related to each other. It is the reader who connects text and context, the textual information and the contextual knowledge that is.

This tendency to explain the relationship between text and context, literature and culture, with reference to cognitive approaches also becomes apparent in Jens Martin Gurr's »›Without contraries is no progression‹ – Emplotted Figures of Thought in Negotiating Oppositions, *Funktionsgeschichte* and Literature as ›Cultural Diagnosis‹«. It starts out from the observation that binary oppositions are an important and pervasive cultural phenomenon. They govern human thinking in general and structure literary texts. Binary thinking, Gurr claims, results in particular figures of thought such as dichotomies or antonyms (cf. 62–64) which are also ›emplotted‹ in literary narratives. Because of this, literary texts fulfil an important function for the culture they belong to. They enable humans »to make sense of the world« (59) or, more specifically, they are a means of »cultural diagnosis« (cf. 69f.). Investigating literary texts with a focus on how they encode oppositions thus can further the scholar's understanding of the production and reception of literary texts in their cultural environment. Additionally, it can help to describe the relation between literature and culture by revealing the functions literary texts perform. Since this aim of interpretation involves detailed textual analysis as well as the study of culture, it offers a profitable opportunity of cooperation between literary criticism and cultural studies (cf. 69 and 73).

The advantages of Gurr's approach would have become even more apparent, if he had more thoroughly selected and explained the theories he employs. From Lévi-Strauss's anthropology to Luhmann's systems theory, from Ricœur's concept of ›emplotment‹ to Hayden White's

›metahistorical‹ analysis of 19th-century historiography, from structuralists like Greimas and Todorov to cognitive linguists like Lakoff and Turner, he discusses an impressive number of approaches. However, it is not always clear whether all these theories are ultimately necessary to explain the phenomenon at hand and whether they can be so easily combined.

Rüdiger Kunow's inquiry into literature's potential to represent intense sensations like pain can also be said to be in line with cognitive approaches to the production and reception of literature. In »The Pain of Representation«, he offers a way of describing »[r]elations between the somatic and the semantic« (81) that is neither affected by poststructuralist scepticism of the representational function of language nor by Adorno's concern that art cannot adequately express pain and suffering. He follows the philosopher Stanley Cavell instead who »authorizes us to think that the representation of pain, however inchoate, is not just a representation but at one and the same time also a request, a solicitation for behavior appropriate to the demand inherent in the representation of pain« (89). Rephrased in terms of Bach and Harnish's speech act theory, Kunow's solution seems to be that representations of pain in literary texts do not belong to the category of *constatives* in the first place, but are often meant as *directives* (›request‹, ›solicitation‹).

This »interactional understanding« (91) of pain representation can be viewed as entailing a shift of focus from mimesis to empathy. Depictions of pain and other intense sensations across the arts and media require a recipient who responds emotionally in the required sense. If this is true, then Kunow's reflections on »the important and multiform cultural work performed by moments of extreme anguish and distress« (ibid.) could be fruitfully combined with recent discoveries in the neurosciences (mirror neurons) and the philosophy of mind (theory of mind).

3. Texture, Allegory, and Semantic Relations

In »›Texture‹ as a Key Term in Literary and Cultural Studies«, **Christoph Reinfandt** draws attention to the fact that literary texts are affected by an ongoing media evolution. From the invention of letterpress printing to the internet the »media-historical conditioning« (7) is crucial to our understanding of literature. Reinfandt tries to capture this point by calling to mind the notion of ›texture‹ which was first introduced by John Crowe Ransom, a representative of the New Criticism. Following Ransom he seems to understand ›texture‹ as something like the surface structure of a text. The reader, however, is not provided with a detailed definition of this ›key term‹, its meaning being apparently taken for granted in the ensuing discussion of ›texture‹. Reinfandt makes it very clear that his proposal is not meant as a call for a »return to philology« (10) bypassing the various developments of literary theory in the 20th century (cf. 8–14). Rather it is his contention that »modern culture has to be theorized as a texture which hides the cumulative sedimentations of media evolution in which it is grounded« (15). This makes it necessary to combine literary criticism's key competence in analysing texts, the preoccupation of some theories of literature with »matters of material and political conditioning« (14), and the competences of cultural studies (cf. also Reinfandt's initial reference to Jörg Schönert's *Medienkulturwissenschaft* [7]).

The argument, however, remains a bit sketchy, but the reader is referred to other publications of the author instead. One may wonder whether some claims serve the author's overall purpose well. In developing his notion of ›texture‹ Reinfandt writes:

> In the light of the argument introduced in this essay, it is clear that Ransom's modern(ist) description of a poem makes it obvious what in principle applies to all texts but is systematically elided in hermeneutical readings: a text ›is‹ only texture, once you paraphrase it, a new text evolves. If a text resists ›normal‹

hermeneutical readings which are directed ›through‹ the text at a transcendental signified ›behind‹ the text, as modernist poems in particular, with their notorious difficulty, tend to do, the reader's attention will automatically be directed towards the texture at hand.

(15)

While there can be no denying that the material qualities of a literary text and the related conditions of media history are important aspects which have not always received the attention they deserve, Reinfandt runs the risk of overemphasizing their relevance. Reducing texts to ›texture‹ may seem a *non sequitur* since an appropriate« conception of text should be able to include the fact that texts consist of meaningful utterances. Moreover, it comes a bit as a surprise that Reinfandt frames his discussion of ›texture‹ with anti-hermeneutic polemics. At least his above statement does not do justice to more sophisticated hermeneutic approaches that neither require nor advocate what his spatial metaphors suggest. What is more, it is not entirely clear why this criticism of other approaches should be necessary in order to establish the importance of ›texture‹ and it is not readily evident whether a generalisation from modernist poems to all literary texts is warranted. Given the diversity of literary genres, styles, and artistic movements this might be fallacious. It should be noted that this criticism does not, of course, diminish the merits of Reinfandt's claim that considering literature's ›texture‹ is an important aim of interpretation which invites cooperation between literary studies and cultural studies.

Discussing positions advocated by Alain Badiou, Derek Attridge, Frederic Jameson, Edward Said and Jacques Rancière, **Dirk Wiemann** in »Eventalism – Singularity and the *sensus communis*« offers a way of accounting for the view that literary texts are not simply objects but also ›events‹. Literary texts, Wiemann claims, are endowed with a potential of meaning that can be subjected to different readings corresponding to the four levels of exegesis known from medieval theology. The *sensus literalis et historicus* (verbal meaning) corresponds to textual analysis, the *sensus allegoricus* (allegorical meaning) is equivalent to »all kinds of procedures that colloquially go by the name of ›interpretation‹ proper«, the *sensus moralis* (pertaining to edification) has as its secular counterpart »the manifold psychological modes of inquiry that focus on the effect of the text on the reader« (51). Of course, it is the *sensus communis* (referring to the eschatological or ›anagogical‹ meaning of the scripture) that is the most difficult to transfer to literary texts. Wiemann discusses two such proposals: Frye's psychological approach according to which literature's *sensus communis* refers to »an anthropologically constant libidinal fantasy of a completely humanised world«, and Jameson's, where anagogy is replaced by a reading informed by political interest that tries to ascribe an overall meaning to the course of history (52). His own suggestion includes a certain conception of a particular function of (literary) language, namely its special capacity of representation. In this view, language figures as the »very medium whose capacity it […] is to represent anything and thereby make it accessible to the *sensus communis*« (55).

Wiemann's approach is certainly very interesting. But instead of trying to follow his line of reasoning any further, which it certainly deserves, another aspect deserves some attention as well. A position that advocates the practice of allegorical reading should have something to say about a well-known problem that arises from this method. Such readings presuppose a predefined set of attitudes (ideas, beliefs, convictions etc.) which is applied to the text. As a result, allegorical readings are more often than not arbitrarily imposed on a text. It should be noted that, generally speaking, the *sensus communis* is as ›allegorical‹ as the *sensus moralis* and the *sensus allegoricus* in the narrow sense. Therefore, this age-old criticism also applies to Wiemann's (or Frye's or Jameson's) readings of texts for the *sensus communis*. If Wiemann had discussed this point, he would have considerably strengthened his position.

A particular notion of ›difference‹ is central to many theories of the humanities in the 20th century. This is true of, for instance, Saussure's theory of language, Derrida's deconstructive philosophy, or theories of society (e.g. Luhmann's systems theory). In »Identity vs. Difference – Sameness as a Concept of Identity Formation in Medieval Literature«, **Silke Winst** shows that these theories do not all too easily square with medieval literary texts. Following Jauß's assumption of the ›alterity‹ of the Middle Ages and Foucault's insight that »the order of things in pre-modern cultures […] is not predicated on the notion of difference, but on the similarity and sameness« (130) she shows that and how »[t]his specific ›order of the Same‹ is to be taken into account as a cultural context of literary texts« (131). In order to do so she offers interpretations of two medieval German texts, the »Amici«-story in the *Historia septem sapientum* and *Flore und Blancheflur*, but also of the pictures that were included in the respective manuscripts, with regard to the conceptions of difference and sameness these works contain. Winst's case study is well-taken. She demonstrates how all-encompassing theories (of literature) can fail to account for the specificities of some literary texts, particularly when these texts are pre-modern. Since literary texts are historical artefacts this is evidently a crucial point.

4. Performances, Uses, and Social Conditions

Literary texts are written, read, and performed in particular situations. This ›context of situation‹, as one can label it for convenience's sake, can become very important when it comes to assessing a literary text's impact on recipients, as **Lars Eckstein** shows in »Monk Lewis's *Timour the Tartar*, Grand Romantic Orientalism and Imperial Melancholy«. Submitting the *text* of the play to a postcolonial reading yields results very much in line with Edward Said's notion of ›orientalism‹: The protagonist appears to be »a typical representative of the east, corrupted by sensuous decadence and lust for power and cruelty« (117). Hence the play can serve as another example for »Britain's discursive construction and, thereby, unambiguous domination of an allegedly inferior Oriental Other« (119). However, an investigation of the play's *performances* at Covent Garden in 1809, the debates surrounding the reopening of this stage, and the conflict between the ›National Theatres‹ (Covent Garden and Drury Lane) and ›illegitimate stages‹ (cf. 119–121), brings to the fore certain effects of the play that an Orientalist reading of the text along Saidian lines cannot easily account for:

> Even while celebrating the superiority of imperial Britain over an inferior and corrupt orient, the public performances of spectacular Orientalist plays within the sanctity of National Theatres clearly triggered a sustained sense of nationalist nostalgia. Despite being huge popular successes, they elicited a furious craving for a theatre culture that is as yet uncorrupted by the exploits of Empire and the infatuation with graphic exoticism which had its supposedly rightful place in the exhibitions in Piccadilly and The Strand, yet not in the sanctioned spaces of theatrical Englishness. In other words, there was a sustained popular sentiment in Romantic London that the excessive mimicry of Oriental despotism, degradation and sensuous degeneration – in the patent theatres at least – would eventually also degenerate England's very own cultural identity, that it would corrupt and inevitably hybridise its purportedly native traditions. Evidently, the very triumphant and apparently unambiguous Orientalism of *Timour the Tartar* has been at the same time capable of triggering a widely-felt ›melancholy‹ not entirely unlike the one which Paul Gilroy assesses in later Victorian discourses.
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> (123)

Eckstein concludes that taking into consideration the cultural practices connected to literary texts can considerably further and partly reorient one's understanding of literary history, in this case by providing new insights into the functions of literary texts in a (post-)colonial discourse. Moreover, his article is a call for reassessing the role of popular culture in this discourse. It is not the case that Lewis's *Timour* and the like are invariably »simple jingoistic

affirmations of Empire« (126). Viewed »in their respective contexts of performance«, they can also fulfil the subversive functions Said and others would only attribute to the great ›works‹ of the canon (ibid.). Taken together, Eckstein's insightful findings therefore strongly suggest the importance of an approach to literature that considers the texts' situational contexts.

The history of literary theory in the 20th century shows that scholars in literary or cultural studies have, as a rule, considered semiotic theories (e.g. Saussure) or continental philosophy (e.g. Derrida), if they have devoted attention to linguistic theories at all. The ordinary language philosophy (Wittgenstein, Austin, and Searle, among others) has largely gone unnoticed, perhaps because it is not apparent how pragmatic theories of this sort can have important implications for the study of literature. **Stephan Mussil** in »Literary Uses and the Method of Intuition«, however, shows how literary theory can benefit considerably from analytic philosophy. He draws on Wittgenstein's concept of ›use‹ in order to describe literary texts as a particular form of linguistic action that involves reference to conventions, rules, and institutions. According to Mussil, this approach offers a non-reductive perspective on literature because it ensures that literary practice is accounted for on its own terms (›through itself‹).

Within the limited scope of this review it is unfortunately not possible to describe Mussil's sophisticated approach in greater detail. Instead, it might be observed that he does not really provide the reader with an idea of how his conception of literary use along Wittgensteinian lines offers a solution to the problem of situating a text in its (›cultural‹) context. Elaborating his understanding of literary uses, he desists from discussing its implications for a theory of text and context. This is very regrettable, because Mussil's pragmatic approach indeed appears to have all the potential for a very promising model of text and context.

In the wake of poststructuralism a rather radical conception of ›intertextuality‹ has been established. **Helga Schwalm** in »Investigating Processes of Transition in Early Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Autobiography – Theoretical and Methodological Considerations of Textual Practices and the Empirical«, while also taking into consideration intertextual contexts, shows that something more is required in order to account for the practices of writing and reading literary texts, namely empirical evidence concerning social conditions. Her analysis of working-class life writing around 1800 therefore opens with the observation that there is an »interplay between individual textual practices, intertextual relations, and the material conditions concerning literary texts and their readers« (153, cf. also 156). Using empirical research that supplies quantitative data concerning »the availability of certain biographical master narratives to specific socio-economic groups« (159) she can answer the question which literary texts influenced the writing of working-class biographies and also account for changes in the way these biographies were written (cf. 157f. and 159–162). Her promising findings can be viewed as a reminder that a comprehensive understanding of literary history involves reference to aspects of social history. What is more, some scholars will perhaps welcome her empirical approach to questions of literary history.

5. Conclusion

There seems to be a widespread agreement – explicitly (but often cursorily) discussed in some contributions and implicitly presupposed in others – that literary criticism can profit from cultural criticism, particularly when it comes to contextualising literary texts. The second question mentioned at the beginning of this review does not seem to invite much dissent. Thus, Kunow's general observation made in the »Postscript« to this edited collection, namely

that there is »an overall *shift from text to context*« (168, emphasis in original; cf., in a similar vein, 3) in the wake of the cultural turn appears to be true. Although this is only a minor point, still it might be observed that the volume's title is slightly misleading, since none of the contributors advocates a view according to which the relationship between text and context is to be conceptualised as a viable alternative – »text *or* context«. On the contrary, they share a tendency to »focus on features that connect literary texts with cultural contexts without reducing one side to the other« (4).

Regrettably, the important notion of ›context‹ is not defined in the contributions. It appears that what is meant by it can differ, even though there is agreement concerning the basic assumption that context is to be understood as ›cultural‹ context. Context can refer to e.g. the knowledge of readers, to other texts, or to the situation, in which a text is performed; it must be studied with reference to social conditions, media history, or rule-governed actions, amongst others. Therefore, answers to the first question mentioned in the introductory paragraph concerning a definition of context in terms of a theory of culture remain rather abstract and they considerably differ from each other. In a similar way, questions that pertain to a theory of context are more often than not only touched upon in passing. Most contributors do not specify in greater detail how their interesting findings can help to further our understanding of how literary texts relate to their cultural context.

It should have become clear from the preceding discussion, however, that the contributions to this volume certainly provide clues concerning the relationship between text and context. Perhaps the most important achievement of this collection lies in the fact that it draws attention to the need of clarification concerning text and context, and takes stock of current approaches (prevalent in contemporary English and American Studies in Germany) that have the potential to offer promising solutions. In view of the fact that questions relating to text and context are rarely discussed in theories of literature to a greater extend, important though they are, this is indeed a relevant step in the right direction.

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