

Context and Metacontext

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Words always exist within a context, and it is the context that ultimately makes the words intelligible. The totality of this context includes such elements as intonation, emphasis, facial expression, gestures (all this in face-to-face conversation), as well as the more obvious elements of general setting, background of the discussion, and cultural framework as a whole. Language, Pearce has stated, is «a system of symbols whereby, in great part, culture is historically transmitted. The values projected by a language (whether in a poem or any other form of expression) are not just initially and minimally, but also residually, the values of the culture whose language it is»¹.

The problem in literature is for the writer to define, as much as possible, the context in which the words occur. But beyond the immediate context of the literary work—which includes not only such elements as situation, motivation, and pacing, but also tone, rhythm, euphony, and many others—is what could be called the metacontext: the context of those words in the overall language system which extends beyond the framework of the literary work alone. That this metacontext is operating at all times is self-evident; without it no literary work would be comprehensible. Understanding the words that appear in literature is dependent upon knowledge of the language acquired within that metacontext, one of whose manifestations is the act of writing literary works and another the act of reading them.

The relationship between literary context and the metacontext is always playing within the reader's mind. However absorbing the work, it is not absorbing to the point that the reader forgets the knowledge of language he brings to the reading and sees the text as an assortment of oddly-shaped and recurring designs. Although the writer can, in an intricate variety of ways, manipulate the reader's response, his attempts to replace the metacontext with a literary context are necessarily limited, for the work depends upon a collective use and knowledge of language, which means language as an instrument of communication

representing a collectivity. But the challenge of literature lies precisely in effectively utilizing the intricate interplay between context and metacontext.

Writers and critics can, of course, overutilize the metacontext. This is what seems to happen in much literature that depends upon mythic and mythological elements to imbue it with meaning and import. But this represents a peculiar use of metacontext, with only one aspect—the cultural and literary tradition in which myth figures prominently—brought into play. The often vague language of myth criticism attests to the weight a work is thought to have acquired by introducing mythic elements either as structures or themes. What occurs is a process of abstracting from a specific historical situation—both the literary work's and the mythological model's—and settling for vague but traditional notions of meaningfulness projected from a supposedly timeless past. Much criticism, having denuded texts of meaning rooted in actuality, reintroduces the element of meaning at several removes, through the «timeless» and «universal» quality of myth. Implicit in this is a degradation of the value of everyday life and concerns, while «higher value» is imported into the work not through the writer's success in creating a literary context, but through overreliance on certain aspects of the metacontext whose importance is taken to be clearly established.

On the other hand, when writers claim for their works or (as is more frequently the case) theorists attribute to literary works a total autonomy, they seem to be displaying hubris: they are trying to appropriate for literature the power attributed in mythology to gods, of creating through speech (naming). In the mythical scene, however, this is depicted as true creation, and the naming creates a corresponding object, while writers are creating out of a common pool of ideas and words, and they are creating not a physical object (although that is one possible aspect of a literary work) but a particular sequence of words. This is true even of such writers as James Joyce, or his Brazilian counterpart João Guimarães Rosa, for their creation of new words, or of portmanteau words, depends upon analogies with pre-existing words and patterns from which they have borrowed bits and pieces. Words created out of nothing would be nonsense and, to the extent that they would suggest anything at all, they too would be dependent upon analogies with pre-existing words, sounds, and patterns².

The role of the metacontext in formulating aesthetic criteria needs to be explored. Janson has argued against the notion of an ideal disinterested «aesthetic attitude». He considers that our sense of the «beautiful» is itself socially conditioned: what is perceived as beautiful is necessarily related to other experiences of beauty and to our knowledge of beauty as a cultural norm in our society. Janson therefore suggests that our ability to find a painting or a piece of music beautiful is determined by cultural and historic factors³. How much more must this be the case in relation to literature since its medium, language, is rooted

in our social experience and is inconceivable in isolation. At its very base language necessarily involves a social situation, and by putting language within the covers of a book and calling it a poem or a novel we cannot remove traces of that social situation.

When critics refer to the irrelevancy of criteria of truth and falsity to literature, they are both stating the obvious and obscuring other important considerations. The problem is not in showing what is clear to all (e. g., that questions such as «Is Raskolnikov really a murderer?» cannot be answered by reference to the world outside the fiction), but rather in showing what kind of truth does inhere in fiction, and what is the relationship of this truth to our acts of interpretation and evaluation. Throwing a sop in the direction of verisimilitude does not resolve these issues—although the existence of this concept, its long history, and its important role as a dominant criterion of fiction point to the centrality of these questions. Perhaps more helpful is the observation that works of the imagination which systematically remove themselves from the setting of the real world are traditionally designated by a separate term—a term, in fact, which is often thought to militate against their claim to be serious literature. This term is science fiction, and what works of this genre have in common is precisely the absence of a clearly defined relationship to the real world, although in such works too, of course, the metacontext plays its part. The attitude toward science fiction is only one of the many conventions of criticism which undoubtedly needs to be examined more closely. Other works, which introduce elements of science fiction but do not make of this the dominant note of the work, have been accorded different treatment, and some have been admitted into the canon of serious fiction. This is the case, for example, of what in Latin American literature goes under the name of magical realism. In works such as Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, critical practice normally subjects the elements lacking verisimilitude to allegorical or metaphorical interpretation, or to formalistic analyses of their relation to the realistic elements in the fiction. This only shows that, one way or another, they meet the demands of realism (by which is meant recognition of the interplay of context and metacontext) in fiction. When they appear to evade these demands, when even discussion of their symbolism cannot be systematically followed through and the reader is subjected to the minutiae of imaginary worlds, then they are usually consigned to the category of science fiction, outside the interest of most serious critics. This is only an extreme illustration of the importance of the concept of relevance to reality which has been, since Plato's time, a central problem in literature. The serious treatment accorded to Jorge Luis Borges' fictions bears this out. However fantastic they may seem, they often focus precisely on the problem of what is real, and in this they differ fundamentally from other fantasy-fiction which does not call our understanding of reality into question.

Elaborate arguments have been developed in an effort to distinguish reality statements from literary ones. Ingarden, for example, uses the term «quasi-judgment» to describe the statements made about represented objects, i. e., about the world represented in a literary work, and argues that these must not be changed into «true judgments»⁴. Such ideas find their embodiment in practical criticism as well. Thus, for example, Sontag has written that Jean Genet, «in his writings, may seem to be asking us to approve of cruelty, treacherousness, licentiousness, and murder. But so far as he is making a work of art, Genet is not advocating anything at all. He is recording, devouring, transfiguring his experience»⁵. Sontag here incorporates into her definition of art the condition that it make no statement about reality.

Realism in literature in its broad sense clearly refers not to the adoption of a particular attitude toward reality, but to the inevitability of attitudes toward reality permeating literary works. This needs to be explicitly acknowledged. As Berthoff writes: «... 'reality' in literature has never been merely descriptive or reflective but moral and creative, a function of the writer's own essential behavior and not simply of policy decisions concerning the management of some stockpile of available subject matter»⁶. The attitude toward reality often emerges as implied assertions about reality --about human beings, society, life. But while a philosophical treatise or an essay may be examined and evaluated for the validity of its ideas, a literary work invites the reader's complicity in a way that a philosophical statement usually avoids. The resources of literature are such that the reader may be uncritically drawn into the images and perspectives of reality that it presents. Even the most subtle work —indeed, perhaps especially a subtle work— invites our assent to implied premises even before we are aware that there exist such premises within the work. Wayne Booth has traced this lack of «neutrality» as far back as the Book of Job and Homer. Booth points out that our attitudes are manipulated by the narrator —whether or not he is identified with the author. This no doubt results in part from our habitual acceptance of the literary situation as a given. We assent to it as part of the conditions upon which we approach literature to begin with. The institutional concept of art developed by Dickie⁸ can help us identify this as one of the conventions of literature. Our assent, however, is provisional and subject to withdrawal as we enter more fully into the literary work.

Acknowledgment of the importance of the metacontext in our experience of literature invariably leads to questions regarding the validity of the beliefs and attitudes embedded in literary works and affecting our experience of them. It is hard to find a character noble or tragic when his concerns or pursuits seem to us trivial or ridiculous, and this necessarily involves metacontextual judgments. Thus our judgments of literature depend in part upon our judgments of things outside of literature. It may simplify the theorist's task to deny the metacontext and

ignore the problems of truth and value it entails, but this is essentially an arbitrary act.

Ingarden engages in such an act when he writes: «It cannot be denied, of course, that authors often use their works to smuggle through their own opinions about various problems pertaining to the real world. But this only shows that they misunderstand the essence of a work of art and misuse works of art for extraartistic ends (political, religious, and so on)»⁷. On what possible grounds can this vital area of language be legislated out of consideration in literary works? Furthermore, the suggestion that opinions need to be smuggled in by inartistic writers implies that opinion *can* be wholly left out, i. e., that the writer by some magic is free of the subjectivity and grounding in one's own being that characterizes other mortals. In addition, to speak of «opinions» trivializes the issue; in fact, the writer's beliefs and attitudes are in play throughout the creative process, constantly affecting decision and choices. Ingarden's comments constitute another instance of the separation of art from life; moreover, what is being posited is a «true artist» different from the rest of humankind, and certainly distinguishable from the inartistic writer. Again, as in Sontag's comments, the terms «work of art» and «artist» are being used in an evaluative sense. It is clear in all this that if not the admission, then at least the denial of the importance of the metacontext plays a great role in what are considered to be aesthetic judgments.

It is noteworthy that Sontag and Ingarden do not present their perspectives as merely choices on the part of the critic or aesthete to examine those aspects of a work which are not directly related to problems of the metacontext. Rather, this attitude towards the metacontext becomes the very hallmark of an appropriate «aesthetic» attitude, i. e., it in turn becomes institutionalized as the necessary attitude not only for a «proper» appreciation and analysis of art, but also for its creation. The normative implications of this position are self-evident. How much more rigid need a view become before its own status as a claim is called into question, before its own history, development, and social origins are examined?

Is the only alternative to the autonomist position a vision of literature as simply a disguised statement about reality? By no means, but it is essential not to empty literature of its real-world implications. It is in and of society, and its implications, as part of the cultural life of society, have been far from exhausted. What then is one to make of arguments for the irrelevance of the metacontext and the autonomy of art, and the elevation of these arguments to a criterion for the proper approach to art?

Marxists view the separation of art from life as a consequence of alienation under capitalism. At the beginning of this century, Plekhanov wrote that «the tendency of artists, and of those who have a lively interest in art, towards art for art's sake, arises when they are in hope-

less disaccord with the social environment in which they live»¹⁰. Many rounds later, and with considerable refinement in vocabulary, the notion of art for art's sake is still with us. Formalists and other critics who insist on the gratuitous character of the aesthetic experience¹¹ may well be reacting to the total commercialization which occurs under capitalism, in which what in primitive society were use values, in the fullest sense of fulfilling human needs of all kinds, become reduced to a crass and immediate functionalism through the domination of the notion of exchange value. Consequently, what appears as pure to the alienated art consumer who may also be an art producer or critic is, above all, the denial of function as such to art —function other than «aesthetic function» characterized by its total autonomy. As if in rebellion against the commercial values of capitalism, art is to be appreciated in and of itself, without having any apparent utility, thus also rising above the fact that the production and distribution of works of art is embedded in the economy. The very notion of utility is often understood as a kind of prostitution of art, or a vulgarity in the consumer¹².

What is of interest here is that this insistence upon art's autonomy, while attempting to save art from commerce, in fact enforces an alienated and alienating view of our existence by insisting on its fragmented, compartmentalized nature. It thus suggests an effort to retreat from what is recognized as the domination of a system whose values cannot be made to accord with those of art. The very relevance of that system to the creation of works of art is thereby denied.

A complementary error is made by those writers who emphasize art's ideological function exclusively, or who study art only in terms of its sociological aspects. They too accept the capitalist notion of value and wish to claim art's utility, to rescue it from the irrelevance to which the formalist critics have consigned it. But in so doing they too labor under an alienated view of reality.

The two main foci of criticism in the twentieth century reflect this dichotomy. On the one hand the New Criticism, following the path of Russian Formalism, claims a status for art works which is *sui generis* and refuses to recognize art's ties to society, since these are seen as diminishing the art work (an unavoidable reflection, no doubt, of this school's view of society and its practical affairs); and, on the other hand, sociological criticism which apparently aims at wholeness, correctly viewed as endangered, but which conforms to the demands for utility of the dominant culture and thereby reveals that the sense of art as part of a cultural whole, enjoying an existence that need not be defended, has indeed been lost.

Both positions reflect the same basic premise: the separation of art activity from the rest of our activities (the rest also being fragmented), which the formalists insist on and the sociological critics protest against. And both positions, although offering some valid insights, become untenable as they take on a normative and prescriptive character.

In view of this, one can appreciate the irony of theories such as Beardsley's that insist on the unity of the aesthetic object or the aesthetic experience while separating art as a whole from human life. Dickie has criticized Beardsley for projecting on to aesthetic experiences characteristics which properly belong to the aesthetic object¹³, and Hancher has pointed out that «all objects have either an actual objective unity or at least a virtual, phenomenal unity»¹⁴. The criterion of unity may nonetheless be significant: perhaps it is the expression of the need for unity and integrity in human life and the difficulty of meeting this need in societies characterized by fragmentation; hence its projection on to a particular area of experience which must stand in for all the rest in terms of the satisfaction, meaning, and value it affords. But attributing to objects values whose proper place is in human life, or making those objects the last repository of such values, is a kind of fetishism.

While it is true, as Walter Benjamin has observed, that «the birth-place of the novel is the solitary individual»¹⁵ it is equally the case that no individual is solitary, for, as Garaudy points out, «the individual never becomes conscious of himself except within a culture, that is, a community»¹⁶. Saint-Exupéry wrote: «Man is no more than a knot of relationships; only relationships count for man»¹⁷. Hence it is useless for analysis to insist upon a fragmentation of experience that no confrontation with art can sustain, despite the fact that fragmentation may indeed characterize life in a particular society at a particular time. Such a fragmentation serves many functions, which must themselves be examined, but nonetheless it becomes a characteristic of a particular social whole. «The arts cannot cut themselves off from life», Nicolai Hartmann has written. «What they are in their essence they can only be in the framework of the historical reality which gave them birth, and not in some shadow realm outside it»¹⁸.

Admitting the importance of the metacontext, reintroducing the question of truth —not in terms of the propositional status of literary statements, but in terms of the views of reality embedded in a work —and bringing to consciousness the beliefs and presuppositions which give literature life and make it more than mere sounds, is thus an indispensable step. Dismissing this with an «of course, that's obvious» and then retreating into a critical practice which ignores it, or participating in the theoretical defense of such a practice, means submitting to the dominant paradigm of fragmentation. To provide a logical analysis of the inappropriateness of terms such as truth and falsity to literature, however useful in refining the argument, is merely to cut off discussion at its most interesting point, and to risk trivializing literature. In addition, the separation of context from metacontext is not borne out in the way we experience literary works. As is clear, literature is intelligible to us only through our sense of reality and knowledge of society. Its elements of fantasy are important and attractive as a contrast to and complement of our sense of reality. Reality is the ground on which our judgments take shape and ultimately are articulated.

NOTES

¹ Roy Harvey Pearce, «Historicism Once More», in *Twentieth Century Criticism: The Major Statements*, ed. William J. Handy and Max Westbrook (New York, 1974), p. 357.

² Benjamin Lee Whorf, «Language, Mind, and Reality», in *Language, Thought, and Reality*, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), pp. 256-257.

³ H. W. Janson, «Comments on Beardsley's "The Aesthetic Point of View"», *Metaphilosophy*, 1 (1970), pp. 60-61.

⁴ Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston, Ill., 1973), pp. 171-173.

⁵ Susan Sontag, «On Style», in *Against Interpretation* (New York, 1969), p. 35. This view has been cogently criticized by John Bayley, «Against a New Formalism», in *Word in the Desert*, ed. C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson (London, 1969), pp. 60-71.

⁶ Warner Berthoff, «Literature and the Measure of "Reality"», in *Fictions and Events: Essays in Criticism and Literary History* (New York, 1971), p. 58.

⁷ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961), p. 6.

⁸ George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1974).

⁹ Ingarden, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

¹⁰ Georgi Plekhanov, ««Art and Social Life», in *Marxism and Art*, ed. Maynard Solomon (New York, 1973), p. 138.

¹¹ On this point see Jerome Stolnitz, «On the Origins of "Aesthetic Disinterestedness"», *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 20:2 (Winter, 1961), pp. 131-143. In an interesting recent article, Hilde Hein argues that «for all their denials and pieties about "pure esthetic experience" most philosophers, as well as lay people, hold it in comparatively low regard and, ultimately, esteem it only as ancillary to the political art of human survival». She proceeds to examine the different types of political utility that aesthetic experience is made to serve in several critical approaches. Then, in an unusual reversal, she argues that «an aesthetic impulse toward the creation and appreciation of form is itself the basis upon which law, science, and all other human institutions are grounded». Hilde Hein, «Aesthetic Consciousness: the Ground of Political Experience», *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 35:2 (Winter, 1976), pp. 143-152. This view, however, may be hard to support in light of current research on the brain which indicates the vital functional role of synthesizing ability for human beings. A. R. Luria provides a stark description of what happens to a man who suffers cerebral cortex damage affecting his capacity to grasp intricate patterns, i.e., who has lost the capacity «as neurologists would say, to "simultaneously synthesize separate parts into a complete whole"». A. R. Luria, *The Man With a Shattered World: The History of a Brain Wound*, trans. Lynn Solotaroff (New York, 1972), p. 128. Current brain research may well revolutionize discussions of the perception of form and unity in art as well. See also fn. 14, below.

¹² As an illustration, one may mention Robert Escarpit who, after carefully examining the economic base of the production and consumption of literary works and perhaps in rebellion against these very conditions, states at the end of his book: «Real literary motivations respect the gratuitousness of the work and do not use the work as a means, but rather as an end». Robert Escarpit, *Sociology of Literature*, trans. Ernest Pick (London, 1971), pp. 90-91.

¹³ George Dickie, «Beardsley's Phantom Aesthetic Experience», *Journal of Philosophy*, 62:5 (1965), 129-136.

¹⁴ Michael Hancher, «Poems versus Trees: The Aesthetics of Monroe Beardsley», *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 31:2 (Winter, 1972), p. 186. See also David S. Miall, «Aesthetic Unity and the Role of the Brain», *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 35:1 (Fall, 1976), 57-67.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), p. 87.

¹⁶ Roger Garaudy, *Marxism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. René Hague (New York, 1970), p. 96.

¹⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁸ Nicolai Hartmann, *Aesthetik*, quoted in Walter H. Bruford, «Literary Criticism and Sociology», in *Literary Criticism and Sociology*, ed. Joseph P. Strelka (University Park, Pa., 1973), p. 40.