Vorwort: Introduction

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Introduction

In May 1987, blessed by glorious weather, the contributors to this volume gathered beside the lake in the new quarters of the University of Neuchâtel for a symposium on "Reading Contexts." The organizers had left vague the scope and definition of these terms, calling attention only to the possible puns in the title. So the meaning of the word *context* posed a problem with which each contributor had to grapple, and in many cases it became an explicit focus for thought. The general result was as challenging and illuminating a set of papers as one has any right to expect.

Disputes in various academic disciplines over the last decades have turned on the problem of context. Among folklorists, for example, the term has been the standard bearer for a new kind of inquiry and the result has been to move the focus of discussion from the lore to the folk, or from the "text" to the performance. This strategy is used by one essay in the present collection for analysis of the shifts between oral and written narrative in the world of Irish storytelling. Other contributions make reference to the distinction, borrowed from pragmatics, between *context-sensitive* and *context-free* utterances, and the opening essay, which sets the tone for what follows, uses it as the basis of a comparison of *Dubliners* and *Winesburg, Ohio*.

In *context-free* literature, the reader is expected to bring little information with him about the antecedents, the characters or the images of a text, while in the opposite case, much is deliberately left unstated. This distinction between texts which are explicit or implicit about their contexts may in some cases be equivalent to older distinctions between closed or open texts, but the new terminology can help to clarify, as one writer shows, such issues as the definition of Modernism. Yet the refusal to supply necessary referents (according to one of our distinguished guests, John Carey), far from involving the reader in the production of

the text, may be a sign of the arrogance of high Modernist writers like Eliot toward their public, or toward the newly educated masses. In that case, the suppression of context will be seen as more sinister.

Of course, deciding where the text ends and the context begins has often proved troublesome. A key to several approaches represented here is to be found in the essay on Whitman, in which the writer, having recourse to the OED, notes that the older meanings of the word "context" refer to the structure of texts ("the weaving together of words and sentences"), and that the modern usage, dubbed "figurative" by the venerable authority of the Oxford Dictionary, dates only from the nineteenth century. And now, even this recently acquired possibility of opposing text and context is threatened, as the essay on *Gravity's Rainbow* points out, by the shift from text as object to text as field of activity, or "textuality," and so by the Derridean claim "il n'y a pas de hors-texte."

Within Anglo-American literary studies the contentiousness of the term *context* has most frequently turned on the relations between literature and history. American News Critics reacted against mindless or trivializing historicism with a strategy of attending only to the words on the page. A whole series of counter-reactions, some Marxist, some more generally sociological, culminating in the recent movement known as "neo-historicism," has exposed the ideological innocence of "New" or "Practical Criticism" and tried to construct a historical, social or political context for that otherwise homeless page.

The first five essays in the present collection deal in more or less complicated ways with the legacy of this quarrel. The lead essay poses the problem by showing how much two roughly contemporary texts (Joyce and Anderson) differ in their relation to social context. The next four papers take us from Whitman's nineteenth century celebration of the newly liberated self and the discovery of what the writer calls an inner context, through the Modernist inventions of hermetic literary forms, to the postmodern transformations of science and popular culture in Pynchon — three historical moments we may read as a sequence of reactions.

The last five essays place their chosen texts in the context of literary and cultural traditions — or of other texts. The degree of sympathy for Satan to be found in Old English poetry depends partly on whether the

narrative context is heroic or elegiac. Each of the *Canterbury Tales* finds a context in other tales within the same group, as well as in the reformulation, sometimes in parody, of well-known commonplaces or *topoi*. Scott, by contrast, tries to explain away some of the oddities of *Gulliver's Travels* by applying a typical reading context of the Romantic period: he invokes Swift's embittered character. Henry James takes his place in a "limited sequence" stretching from Poe to Nabokov which establishes a peculiarly American tradition. And in the final essay Ihab Hassan offers a survey of what, he claims, should be the real context of reading — literary theory. From this once again we learn to merge text and context, and so, perhaps, arrive at a properly conned text — or reader.

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