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Interpreting Contextualities

If, as so often demanded, the context of a literary work should be considered in interpreting it, which context is that? Is it the past context within which the work was created, or, rather, the different context in which the book and interpreter presently are located? In this paper, I consider theories of interpretation that disagree on the answers to these questions. To appropriate terms that have become fashionable, one presents a model for interpretation that is "readerly" in being restrained and backward-looking, while the second allows for interpretations that are "writerly" in being creative and forward-looking. Both kinds of interpretation are used in literary criticism, with the first paying homage to the efforts of the work's creator and the second showing respect for meanings the work presents to the critic's contemporary audience. I argue that, despite appearances to the contrary, the first theory is no less capable than the second of accounting for actual critical practice. If not by seeing which account better matches the practice, how might we adjudicate between them? This is to be done by considering whether the creation and appreciation of literature answers primarily to an interest in works alone, or to works as the product of human authors. I prefer the second alternative and suggest that an interest in works as of their authors can be consistent with the widely held view that literary works admit of multiple interpretations.

I

I call the first account of interpretation the Original Context Theory. It holds that the meaning of a literary work is fixed by factors holding at the time of the work's creation. (A work might be revolutionary in style, of course, but in that case it will be apparent that standard literary practices are invoked only to be challenged or repudiated.) The original context theory comes in at least three versions, depending on which of the factors present at the work's creation is given primacy.

Actual intentionalism maintains that the author's successfully realized intentions determine the work's meaning.¹ This variant of the original context

¹ Some such view has been presented recently by Gary Iseminger, "Art Intentional Demonstration?" in *Interpretation, Intention, and Truth*, ed. G. Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 76-96; by Noël Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," in Iseminger (1992), pp. 97-131 and "Anglo-American Aesthetics and Contemporary Criticism: Intention and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 245-52; and by Robert Stecker, "The Role of Intention and Convention in Interpreting Artworks," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 31 (1994): 471-89. Also see Denis Dutton, "Why Intentionalism Won't Go Away," in

theory holds that a literary work has the meaning that its author intends, provided that the author carries through the relevant intentions in appropriately employing the language of the day, as well as the then recognized conventions of the given genre and artistic practice. The artist's intentions, if successfully executed, are publicly manifest in the work but will be recognized only by those familiar with the linguistic and artistic practices by which their expression is facilitated. The meaning of a work can be ambiguous or multi-layered, but usually this is because it is created to be so. The intentions need not be present to the author's mind; they need not be self-consciously formulated as he works. Moreover, the author might have difficulty in articulating or formulating his intentions if asked, just as one often has difficulty in describing what one does in performing a familiar yet complex action. But they are not the less his intentions, nor are they the more difficult to discern in the product of those actions, for these facts.

Hypothetical intentionalism holds that the work's meaning is determined by inferences made by a suitably placed audience to the intentions of a hypothetical author, where these inferences are founded on a grasp of the linguistic conventions and artistic practices of the day, as well as publicly available knowledge concerning the creation of the given work.² Here the meaning of the work is generated by hypothesizing intentions the author might have had, given the context of creation, rather than relying on her actual intentions. Such inferences must have interpersonal validity if they are to reveal a meaning that can be attributed legitimately to the work. Because more than one set of inferences can be justifiable, a work might possess or display a multiplicity of meanings, even if the actual author intended only one of these.

Conventionalism maintains that the conventions of language and art in place when the work was created are sufficient to secure the work's meaning.³ This

Literature and the Question of Philosophy, ed. Anthony J. Cascardi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 194-209. All allow that a work might contain unintended meanings, as revealed by the conventions applying to the artwork, but insist that these must be consistent with such meaning as is intended.

² See William E. Tolhurst, "On What a Text Is and How It Means," British Journal of Aesthetics 19 (1979): 3-14; Alexander Nehamas, "The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal," Critical Inquiry 8 (1981): 133-49 and "What An Author Is," Journal of Philosophy 83 (1986): 685-91; Gregory Currie, The Nature of Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Jerrold Levinson, "Intention and Interpretation: a Last Look," in Iseminger (1992), pp. 221-56. Daniel O. Nathan comes close to such a view in "Irony, Metaphor, and the Problem of Intention," in Iseminger (1992), pp. 183-202. Hypothetical intentionalists differ about the manner in which the hypothesizing audience is to be identified. For instance, whereas Tolhurst sees the audience as the one intended by the author, Levinson prefers to speak of an appropriate or ideal audience. For criticism of Tolhurst's position on this matter, see Daniel O. Nathan, "Irony and the Artist's Intention," British Journal of Aesthetics 22 (1982): 245-56. For a more general attack, see Robert Stecker, "Apparent, Implied, and Postulated Authors," PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE 11 (1987): 258-71, "Art Interpretation," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 52 (1994): 193-206, and "The Role of Intention and Convention in Interpreting Artworks."

³ See my Definitions of Art (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), chapter 8. Alan H. Goldman comes close to the same view in characterizing interpretation as a form of inference to the best explanation, where the "best explanation" is one maximizing the

last variant focuses on “utterance” rather than “utterer’s” meaning, while recognizing that the meaning intended by the actual author usually identifies at least one of the meanings the work will sustain. Typically, more than one meaning can be put upon a work within the limits set by the relevant conventions and practices, but meanings that cannot be reconciled to these cannot be attributed legitimately to the work.

My concern lies with the shared commitments of these views, rather than with their differences. They are united in holding that the meaning of a work is determined by circumstances obtaining at its creation. I return now to a general account of the original context theory.

Because a literary work is more than an inscription and more also than a text employing a “timeless” version of the language used, there is a connection of intimacy between a work’s meaning and its identity. In establishing the meaning of the work, the artist also fixes its identity. If the meaning of the work is unchanging, so too is its identity. Two lexically identical texts would instance different literary works, each with its own meaning, if they were written independently by different authors, or in different genres, or in significantly different cultural or literary environments (such as might result from the spatial or temporal separation of the authors concerned).⁴

Once completed, the literary work has a life independent of its author’s. At that stage, the meaning of the work is fixed and can no more be changed by interpretations offered by its author than by critics. The author’s pronouncements about the work’s contents are bound to be of interest as indicating its most likely meaning provided his memory is reliable and his reports are sincere. But authors can be and sometimes are mistaken in the interpretations they offer; they might have more difficulty in reporting their intentions clearly than they had initially in expressing those intentions in the work.

Interpretation should concern itself with the meaning of the author’s work. In discovering the work’s meaning, the interpreter must refer and confine herself to the conventions and practices, both of language and of literature, within or against which the author worked. Readings invoking uses of language, theories, ideas, events, and artistic conventions that could not have been used or referred to by the author or others of the time do not interpret his (or any other) work.

aesthetic value of the work whether or not this is the interpretation intended by the author. But Goldman is less inclined than am I to see interpretation constrained by conventions, facts, and attitudes holding at the time of the work’s creation, though he does believe that the text sets limits on the acceptability of possible interpretations. See his “Interpreting Art and Literature,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48 (1990): 205-14; “Response to Stecker,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49 (1991): 246-7; “Representation and Make-believe,” *Inquiry* 36 (1993): 335-50.

⁴ Jorge Luis Borges’s story of 1939, “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote,” in *Fictions*, ed. Anthony Kerrigan, trans. Anthony Bonner (London: Calder Publications, 1991), pp. 42-51, often is cited as establishing the point. For relevant discussion, see Gregory Currie, “Work and Text,” *Mind* 100 (1991): 325-40.

I call the second approach to interpretation the Modern Context Theory.⁵ Its advocates can accept the original context theory's account of the manner in which the work first receives its identity and content, but they argue that both these change subsequently. Just as the work at its creation must be considered in relation to its times, so it must be seen later against the evolving cultural context, for it continues to be affected in its identity and meaning by this. Works are reshaped, renewed, and reconstituted by their later reception and interpretation. The process of interpretation is open-ended because the work can be affected as a result of being interpreted. Like any cultural artifact, the work is changed by its social environment. Its identity and meaning are not indifferent to the passage of time. The work does possess a public identity and can be located and re-identified through history, but the individual thereby picked out has no unalterable essence. It has, to adopt a term used by Joseph Margolis, "unicity," so that, like a person, its present character might share little with the versions found at earlier time-slices of its existence. Like a living thing, the work changes from time to time while remaining self-identical.

Following its entry into the world, a work acquires many incidental, relational properties; for example, that of being written 87 years before the invention of velcro. Countless numbers of these properties will be irrelevant to its artistic status. Others, though, will affect the way in which the work is regarded. For example, a work written long ago, one featuring resistance to tyranny, might become a symbol and rallying cry for those living under occupation during a bitter, contemporary war. Another might be revealed as the first of a new and distinguished genre. A third might fall out of favour with the literary establishment because it contains expressions of views that now are rejected as racist or sexist. A fourth goes out of print and then is ignored. And a fifth is seen with the advantage of hindsight as the high point of a style that was soon to be superseded, or as influencing much later works. Changes of these kinds alter a work's standing, accessibility, and marketability; they also can transform the work's artistically important properties, properties that an interpretation must take into account.

5 A view of this kind is defended under the title of historical retroactivism by Graham McFee in "The Historicity of Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 38 (1980): 307-24 and "The Historical Character of Art: A Reappraisal," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (1992): 307-19, and under the rubric of pragmatism by Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) and "Interpreting with Pragmatist Intentions," in Iseminger (1992), pp. 167-82. A related position is presented by Michael Krausz in "Intention and Interpretation: Hirsch and Margolis," in Iseminger (1992), pp. 152-66 and *Rightness and Reasons: Interpretation in Cultural Practices* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). Though he has bigger metaphysical fish to fry in defending a broad notion of relativism, Joseph Margolis has presented views with affinities to the modern context theory - see especially "Reinterpreting Interpretation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47 (1989): 237-51 and "Plain Talk About Interpretation on a Relativistic Model," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 1-7. For the broader picture, see *The New Puzzle of Interpretation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), *The Flux of History and the Flux of Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), and *Interpreting Radical But Not Unruly* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). For recent discussion of Margolis's position, see my "Relativism in Interpretation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 8-13 and Robert Stecker, "Relativism About Interpretation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 14-8. For comment on McFee's position, see R.A. Sharpe, "Making the Past: McFee's Forward Retroactivism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34 (1994): 170-3.

Take Leonardo's Mona Lisa, for instance. For us, the work cannot but be viewed through the prism created by the history of its reception: it is a cultural icon, the most reproduced artwork image in history, a masterpiece, incalculably valuable, protected by bullet proof glass in the Louvre, smaller in reality than might have been expected. Or, to return to the literary theme, consider Moby Dick. It may be The Great American Novel. It is a text widely studied in schools and universities. Its first sentence, "Call me Ishmael," has been referred to often. The present status of whales and our current attitude to them provides a poignant counterpoint to the story. Many who read Melville's description of Captain Ahab find the features of a surly Gregory Peck coming to mind. Obviously, these pieces could not have answered to such descriptions at the time of their creation. They have acquired their new identities and contents while remaining self-identical with the very different works painted by Leonardo and written by Melville.

What is the interpreter's role according to the modern context theory? The interpreter might concern herself with what was meant by the work at the time of its creation. (The theory need not require that, in being socially embedded in the present, we are incapable of understanding how those who lived formerly viewed their world, though some of its proponents might give it this slant.) Alternatively, the interpreter can explore what the work means for us in the present, taking account not only of the circumstances of its creation but of our different social context, of discoveries and theories that post-date the work's origin, of current concerns. She might apply feminist theory, or deconstruction, or psychoanalytic models, or postmodern playfulness and irony to the work's interpretation. She might consider how the work would have been different had it been created in awareness of literary minimalism, or of the writings of Kafka, or of whatever other art movements and authors followed it. She could look to it as alluding to social attitudes and events that could not have been known to its creator. Unless she makes a special effort to do otherwise, she will approach it not as the artist's coevals would have done but in terms of its present status, its place in the canon, in light of credentials acquired long after its arrival in the world.

It is worth noting that these different models of interpretation have their equivalents in other areas where textual interpretation is practiced. The significance of laws and foundational documents, such as constitutions, bills of rights, and treaties, are debated in similar terms. One view regards the meaning of the law as fixed at the time of enactment by the legislators' intentions or the conventions and practices of meaning, both general and more specifically legislative, in place at the time. In applying the law in a later period, the judge must attempt to discover its fixed and unchanging meaning. By contrast, a second approach regards the meanings of the laws as mutable, so that one can discover what a law means for us now only by considering yesterday's high court ruling on the matter, just as that ruling depended on yet earlier precedents, and so on. The intentions of the original legislators or the context of legislation determine the identity and meaning of the law in the first instance, but that original deposition of meaning is added to and overlaid as the law is applied subsequently. Where we are at a historical and social remove from the original legislators, their intended meaning is far less relevant than is the meaning the law since has taken on, for we act in the present, not the past.

The law is a living force responsive to changing circumstances and the particularities of the present situation, not a command from beyond the grave. The meaning of the law evolves through time and is open-ended with respect to the future.

To return to the topic in hand: These two theories of literary works and their interpretation display obvious differences but it is worth noting their common commitments. Each regards the artwork and its meaning as public and determinable, not as private, subjective, or idiosyncratic. The intentions, conventions, and practices appealed to by the original context theory are publicly manifest in the work or in the setting within which it is created. The pursuit is not of shadowy, private ephemera, but of meanings successfully carried through to, and revealed in, public action. Meanwhile, the modern context theory allows that the meaning of an artwork changes through time, but need not also hold that its content at a specified place and time is subjective or radically indeterminable. The meaning of a work is a function of its original content and, subsequently, the place and significance accorded to it in social history. Even if, as an artifact of culture and history, the meaning of an artwork is unstable and alters arbitrarily sometimes, it is not the case that its meaning at any given moment must be vague or unspecifiable.

In addition, each of the two accounts of interpretation regards the object of interpretation, the piece in question, as identifiable independently of any particular critic's interpretation. The various interpretations brought forward at different times are of one and the same artwork. That work has a fixed essence and meaning on the first account and a developing character and changing meaning on the second, but it remains a single, re-identifiable individual according to both.

II

Which of the two accounts of work meaning and of interpretation is to be preferred? On the face of it, the nod should go to the modern context theory, because it accords more closely with the full range of interpretive practices. It allows not only for readerly interpretations, such as are advocated by the original context theory, but also for a writerly interest in the present status of the work and with novel readings that reflect current concerns and situations that did not obtain when the work first saw the light of day.⁶ Interpreters show themselves through their practices to be as much concerned with the latter as with the former. An attempt to take the high ground of philosophy by dismissing the majority of interpretations as not really concerned with the artist's work is bound to seem unacceptably narrow-minded, given the diversity of interpretive strategies and interests regarded as legitimate in literary criticism.

⁶ In "Reinterpreting Interpretation," Margolis represents one advantage of his own account as residing in its inclusiveness. Note that, for him, it is inclusive in a more radical fashion than I have indicated. In his view, the metaphysical and ontic presuppositions of what I have called the modern context theory of literary interpretation encompass not only the interpretations allowed by the original context theory but also that theory itself. Margolis would hold that the author's work and intentions are no less an historicized artifact of our modern context than is the work's current standing.

The appearance of incompatibility between critical practice and the original context theory can be called into question, though, in which case it is not obvious that the modern context theory better accords with the interpretive strategies followed by critics. In the remainder of this section I suggest that the modern context theory cannot take the original context theory under its umbrella so readily as one might suppose. Then I indicate four ways in which original contextualists might argue for the legitimacy of critical practices that they seem to exclude at first glance.

To begin, one can question whether, as claimed, the modern context theory encompasses the interpretations permitted by the original context theory. While it is true that the readerly method of interpretation recognized in the modern context theory will produce interpretations similar to those generated under the original context theory, there are crucial differences in the descriptions that apply to these two. For the original contextualist, the meaning of the work at the time of its creation is the meaning the work has now; an interest in the one is an interest in the other. By contrast, the modern contextualist can allow a readerly interest in a work created in the past only as an interest in a meaning the work had once upon a time. It cannot accept that a readerly interest will reveal the work's present meaning, for the readerly interest is one concerned with, depending on its focus, what the author intended the work to mean or what her contemporaries would have taken the work to mean, not with the meaning the work has for us here and now. The relevant difference between the two positions comes to this: The original context theory sees no gap between the past and present meanings of the work, so it can represent the interpretation as about the work's current meaning as readily as offering it as concerned with the content of the work at its creation. The modern context theory, in relativizing meanings and identities to changing historical times, cannot close the gap between the meaning of the work in the past and in the present, so it can accommodate the readerly approach to interpretation only by accepting that this cannot deliver the work's present meaning. Given this difference, it is not entirely accurate to regard the second approach as including the first, to treat the modern context theory as providing everything offered by the original context theory and more as well. (In reply, a contextualist of Margolis's stamp might reject the possibility of a distinction between what the author intended and our historical reconstruction of this, holding instead that the conditions governing the truth of currently made claims concerning what the author intended are themselves historicized artifacts of the present.)

Turning now to the original contextualist, she can allow that some of the properties possessed by the work at its creation are such that they could not be recognized by the author's contemporaries for what they are, thereby accepting that it is only with the passage of time that critics can interpret the work in its fullest detail. For example, Jerrold Levinson argues that the originality of a work, or its artistically prescient character, or its revolutionary style, belong to it at the outset.⁷ The Arietta of Beethoven's Op. 111 was "jazzy" when

⁷ See "Artworks and the Future," in *Aesthetic Distinction*, ed. T. Anderberg, T. Nilstun and I. Persson (Sweden: Lund University Press, 1988), pp. 56-84; reprinted in his *Music, Art, and Metaphysics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). Levinson qualifies the claim

Beethoven wrote it, though the appropriateness of this description depended on subsequent developments in Afro-American popular music. In these cases, properties of considerable relevance to the work's artistic interpretation are revealed only with the passage of time. The artist's contemporaries could not have recognized the properties under the relevant descriptions. But these properties belong to the work from its genesis. They are not created in the work by later developments but, rather, are thereby exposed as having been present all along. With this move the original contextualist can explain how the work's having a stable and unchanging identity from the time of its creation is consistent with the fact that history and artistic change make available readings that could not have been given earlier. Moreover, original contextualism now can show why the history of a work's critical reception can be of relevance to the current critic, for it is conceded that critics from later generations might achieve insights or uncover properties of the work where the artist and her contemporaries could not have done so. (To accommodate the point that a work's artistically important properties sometimes could not have been intended, or, at least, could not have been intended under the descriptions in terms of which that importance later is expressed, intentionalists should allow that texts can possess unintended meanings. Many do so, of course.)

A second strategy for closing the gap between the past and present, where this deals in modern theories of psychology or society, is available to the original contextualist. Psychoanalytic theory, for instance, represents itself as dealing with patterns of personal development and mental economy that apply timelessly to members of societies in which various arrangements (for raising children within nuclear families) are standard. If these theories are true, then they capture insights that might have been appreciated by authors at earlier times, even if the terminology of the theories would then have been foreign. (Note that Freud drew on the earlier insights of artists, such as Sophocles, in developing his theory.) So, a Freudian reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* might be appropriate, despite the fact that the articulation of this theory post-dated the writing of the play, because the theory deals with ideas that might have been appreciated by Shakespeare, notwithstanding his ignorance of the theory Freud was to develop. So long as the theory in question both is true (or contains true elements) and is applicable to the society in which the artist worked, there need be no objection to its apparently anachronistic application by critics, despite the fact that the theory was developed after the work's creation.

The move made here is no more debatable than is the claim that Mozart wrote in sonata form, though the specification of this formal type post-dated Mozart's life. Mozart understood the structural functions of the musical ideas he combined even if he lacked the vocabulary that later scholars codified. Similarly, Defoe and Cervantes knew what a picaresque novel was, though an account of the form as a literary type followed their efforts.

The points made above go some way to showing how the account of interpretation provided by original contextualism allows for a wider notion of work-meaning than one might have supposed, thereby admitting as legitimate some interpretations it might have been thought to exclude. But the original

with respect to artistic prescience, suggesting that this quality is not subject to alteration once acquired, even if it does not belong to the work at the outset.

contextualist can go much further if she allows factors other than work-meaning to feature in literary criticism. The argument begins with this observation: It is true that properties of the work, including ones important in its artistic appreciation and evaluation, are affected by the history of its reception and interpretation, and by other social and cultural changes post-dating the work's completion. These alterations do not affect the work's identity or meaning, which are fixed at the time of its creation; instead, they affect the work's significance and standing. Even if identity or meaning do not shift, the work's significance can change through time. For example, if Huckleberry Finn now is difficult to approach because it contains terms that have come to be regarded as racist, what has changed is our attitude to the work's meaning, not its meaning or identity as such. Even if the identity and meaning of a work do not change, its significance frequently does.

By accepting that interpretation legitimately covers a spread of interests, including matters affecting the significance or standing of works and the impact this has on their current relevance and appreciation, the original contextualist now can allow for many of those critical practices that, initially, she might have seemed to proscribe. (And, to turn the coin over, those who would concentrate on a work's unintended consequences or meanings in deconstructing it must, nevertheless, acknowledge the original context as establishing the primary content that is to be deconstructed.) While the original contextualist distinguishes a work's meaning from its acquired significance, she can accept that the literary critic might deal with both. The original contextualist can admit, that is, that criticism can focus legitimately on a work's significance, where this changes as its meaning does not. Work-meaning and work-significance are distinct, but the work's interpreter might quite properly concern herself with either.

A fourth argument, one drawing a parallel between performance and interpretation, might explain the legitimacy of interpretive practices that seem tangential to the work's meaning as this is characterized by the original contextualist. The idea is this: Even if the performer (of a play, musical piece, etc.) owes a duty of faithfulness to the artist's work where the performance is represented as of that work, the requirement this places on the performer depends in practice on the history of prior performances and on the expertise of the audience. If the audience already is familiar with conservative, typical performances of works of the relevant kind, and perhaps also with staid renditions of the given work, then the present performer might approach her role with more interpretive licence, looking to produce an unusual or exciting version for the sake of the new perspective it opens on the familiar piece. The demands that can be made of the performer, it is claimed, depend not only on features of the work but also on the history of its performances, since this latter establishes the interpretive context for the current presentation. Now, assuming that literary interpretation is analogous to performance, we might make a similar point about the critic's role. Even if the critic is constrained by the work's identity and meaning, these being established with its creation, criticism should also take account of the history of critical writing. Where there is an established body of commentaries and the obvious readings have been explored, it is quite proper that the process of interpretation becomes freer, that the critic looks to exotic, more speculative and tenuous interpretations. Criticism takes place against a context established by the efforts of prior critics.

This setting can be no less important than is the historical context that establishes the identity and meaning of the object of interpretation.

This last argument needs careful treatment, however. Public criticism is not internal to the presentation and appreciation of literature as public performance is internal to the presentation and appreciation of the performing arts, such as music and drama. The mediation of the performer between the work and its audience is expected by the artist who produces a work for performance, and by her audience. By contrast, the interventions of the literary critic are neither necessary nor automatically invited, even if the reader herself takes an interpretive stance in understanding and appreciating the novel she reads. Symphonies are written for performance, but novels are not written for criticism. Moreover, performances often are directed to specific audiences with known or easily predicted knowledge and experience, whereas the literary critic need be no more intimately familiar with, or closer to, the work's audience than is its author. The critic cannot reasonably anticipate that the reader of a work is familiar with the history of its criticism and with the context of thought that this produces.

III

Had it been obvious that the original context theory could not account for the legitimacy of practices that are widely regarded as acceptable within literary criticism, whereas the modern context theory could do so, we might have taken that as providing strong evidence in favour of the latter theory. It sometimes is implied that philosophical theories of literary interpretation can be tested empirically in this way and that such a test settles the result of the contest between them. But in the previous section I tried to show that matters are not so straightforward. This is not to say, though, that the argument reveals the difference between the theories to be trivially verbal, to display no more than a preference for one terminology over another. For it is equally apparent that the theories contrasted above involve very different views about the ontic character and content-makers of literary works. Should the debate be continued and, if so, how?

One way in which one might attempt to dissolve the dispute between the theories was hinted at in the last paragraph. If literary works belong to a spread of ontic types (some of which involve fixed identities and others of which allow for identities that evolve through time and cultural change) it could be that the original context theory applies to one kind of work whereas the modern context theory applies to another. There is no reason, after all, to assume ontic uniformity within the works common to any particular artform. In that case, the theories are not opposed, provided each is relativized to the appropriate object-class.

This proposal is ultimately unhelpful. The novel is comparatively new as an art type and shows broad consistency both of form and function, so it would not be easy to demonstrate significant ontic discontinuities between such works. But even if one accepted that there are radically different ontic literary types - not only between the saga and the sonnet, but between novels, say - I suspect that advocates of both theories could agree on a list of literary works, with each

claiming against the other that the members of the list illustrate her theory. So let us not pursue this hare, interesting though the chase would be.

The difference between the original context and modern context theories is one of substance, I have implied. As I see it, the former insists that our primary aesthetic concern lies with literary works as of their authors. The work exists independently of its author but is fashioned to be what it is by that person. The latter maintains, by contrast, that we are mainly interested in literary works simpliciter. Just as one cannot understand an adult person by considering only what goes on at their conception, so one cannot understand a literary work if one confines oneself to its context of creation. Though advocates of each theory might tolerate the interpretive strategies consistent with the other's view, they differ about the motivation that gives heart to literary creation and interpretation. While both accept that the concerns highlighted by their opponents could come into play once works and interpretation are in place, their disagreement is about the kind of interest that is central or foundational to the business of literature. Were it not for the possibility of a concern with literary works as the works of their authors, there would have been no place for literature as we know it, says the original contextualist. (This position can be advanced by the conventionalist as well as by the intentionalist. The former can maintain that it is only through the consistent and successful use of the conventions and practices that they remain alive; also, that we would not be interested in literature as we are were it not for the fact that authors' intentions typically make possible worthwhile readings of their works, even if our interest in those works is not confined to meanings intended by the author.) The modern contextualist, by contrast, maintains that the existence of literature as an art depends on the flexibility of identity and meaning made possible by the interaction between the work and its changing environment.

As an aside, one might consider the very different motivations for the creation of literature implied by the currently fashionable theories that post-date structuralism. For instance, it could be maintained that our primary concern lies not with works but with texts, viewed as context-less chunks of language lacking an inherent narrative structure. Such a text might be read by any person at any place or time in any way consistent with all possible literal or non-literal uses of the given language. Or, to go yet further, it could be held that our primary interest is in an inscription, construed merely as a set of marks. An inscription could receive any reading at all, for it might be approached in terms of hypothetical symbol-systems that map it onto any part of any possible or actual world.

It would be a consequence of the first of these post-modern views that there is no distinction in kind between literary and other texts; that is, that there is no interest distinctive to literature as such. And it would follow from the second that our interest in literature pays no special regard to its being the product of human creation, since the provenance of the marks to be interpreted does not constrain the meanings that can be put on them. Both these post-modern approaches see the identity of the material object of interpretation, in the one case given by a lexical ordering and in the other by the shapes and dispositions of various marks, as preserved quite independently of the meanings generated through the process of interpretation. In neither case is there a close relation

between the identity of the material object of interpretation and the meanings put upon it.

Now, I regard these post-modern theories as counter-intuitive. I cannot see how one might explain the place of literature in our lives, or the fact that the artform developed where formerly it did not exist, if such concerns are the primary ones. My point, remember, is neither to deny that critics sometimes write as if they are dealing with a text or inscription, not a work, nor is it to suggest that such an approach always will be illegitimate. It is, rather, that the position mischaracterizes the central, motivating purpose of literary production and interpretation; pieces are not written mainly for the purpose of furnishing unstructured slabs of text or inscriptions for critics to play with. (The critics and theorists in question apparently do not expect their own writings to be approached in this way.)

Why do the theorists of deconstruction and its post-structural variants dispense with works? Perhaps they do so out of a deeply rooted cynicism concerning philosophical essentialism, transcendental arguments, and grand theory, so that they doubt that there is any objective basis for the consistent identification and re-identification of items construed as bearers of meaning. In that case one might object that Platonic ontologies are not the only ones available, though that is a topic I cannot pursue here. But if the concern is the more modest one of accommodating a multiplicity of interpretations (as I suspect it often is), it is worth pointing out that the result is achieved at a cost. Room is made for a variety of interpretations only by allowing that the intentional object of each interpretation differs. Even if each interpreter begins from the same bare text or inscription, there is no common bearer of meaning such that differing interpretations can be said to be of it. Now, if the interpretation of literature is philosophically intriguing, this seems to arise both from the fact that a single piece can receive different, even contrary, interpretations, each of which is equally plausible, and also from the impression that interpretations are discrete in not inviting synthesis within an all-encompassing conjunction. But the views that dispense with works deprive the multiplicity of interpretations of these features. There is nothing philosophically controversial about the idea that different intentional objects elicit different interpretations.

To return to the question raised earlier and the two theories with which I started: is the interest in works primary or, rather, are we motivated by a concern with works as the works of their artists? The question is not answered on behalf of the author merely by noting that libraries typically catalogue books alphabetically by authors' last names (within broad subject groups). The way in which we label books for ease of reference need not reflect the nature of our concern with their contents. Anyway, the treatment of literary works is not distinct from other kinds on this score, so we would not expect the cataloguing procedure to reveal what is distinctive to our interest in literary works as against scientific treatises, say. Nor would the question be answered in favour of the alternative if a survey showed that most critics now adopt the writerly rather than the readerly approach to their craft. There is no reason to think that, once the activity is in place, the primary motivation always will be the one most commonly exercised. Finally, the question cannot be settled by a historical survey of the practice for, even if the primary motivation should be

present at its outset, secondary concerns might also have been evident from the beginning.

Despite these caveats, the question does not strike me as difficult to answer - the primary concern lies with works as the products of their authors. We note the marks of individual style within a work and relate it to others in the artist's oeuvre; that is, we search actively for continuity and development within the author's overall output and place individual works accordingly. Moreover, we are interested in the relations that hold between the works of different authors, looking for references, influences, elements of originality. Again, these suggest a concern with the work as authored, for it is the writer, not the work alone, that is influenced, or achieves reference or originality. Further, we seek out the works of particular authors once we have found their books artistically rewarding. We revere great novelists - Sterne, Melville, Austen, Dickens, James, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Proust, Conrad, Joyce, Faulkner, Kafka - for their artistic achievements.

All this suggests that, in general, literary works interest us as art because they are designed to be rewarding when approached for their own sake as such. Considerable skill and talent are required of writers if they are to produce objects that repay such an interest. We recognize and respect this not only in distinguishing literature from newspaper articles, telephone books, shopping lists, and the like, but also in evaluating works presented as literature. This is not to say that all works succeed or that all authors should be revered. The claim is that, in general, the interest we take in literature as art and, following this, our attitude to making and appreciating literature, is sustained only because we recognize that authors more often than not succeed in producing works that are enjoyable when approached for the sake of following, understanding, and exploring the narratives they contain.

An interest in particular works that is indifferent to their authorship presupposes, I claim, the presence of literature, social practices for the presentation and discussion of works, and our interest in such works as art. These presuppositions would not be satisfied, I maintain, were we not generally interested in works as of their authors. An interest in the work as authored is neither necessary for all cases, nor required for any particular case, but unless it were the "default" option, the circumstances making possible a wide spread of concerns focussing on works simpliciter would not arise.

It might be objected that the question I posed mobilizes only one set of intuitions, while there is another, in tension with the first, that is ignored. Suppose I had asked: do we seek a single, composite interpretation or, instead, do we tolerate and look for multiple, even conflicting, interpretations of literary works? If we prefer the second alternative it might be thought that this question engages a different set of intuitions, one pointing us away from a concern with works as the creations of their authors by emphasizing the autonomy of the work from the intentions of its maker. Indeed, it might be said that both the original and the modern context theories are appealing precisely because each taps different sets of widely held intuitions and that the conflict between the theories derives from the tension between these.

I do not think, though, that this new question undermines the previous argument. An original contextualist who allows that interpretation might concern itself with a work's significance, as well as its meaning, can accept that many interpretations of a work are legitimate, even if these are not all of work-meaning. Moreover, if we confine ourselves to work-meaning as construed by the original contextualist, nothing need be lost in allowing that multiple interpretations can be and are offered of this. The actual intentionalist can admit that a work possesses multiple, even contrary, meanings where it is made to do so, as often it will be. If it also is accepted that a work might possess unintended meanings, further scope for interpretation is permitted. Versions of original contextualism going beyond narrow intentionalism can allow that the constraint on legitimate interpretations provided by the work's context is likely to tolerate a yet wider spread of interpretations of work-meaning. For instance, if the goal of interpretation is to consider the meanings a work will sustain when approached in terms of the conventions of literature and language within and against which it is created, then many interpretations of work-meaning will be available to the critic, for all that is required is compatibility. I conclude that the original context theory can allow for the multiplicity of interpretations no less readily than can its rival, though it might countenance fewer. So, the original context theory can take on board the intuitions to which the new question appeals.

A main aim of the various theories of interpretation, as I see it, is to explain the multiple interpretability of literary works. The more radical theories dispense with the work as such, concentrating on the multiplicity. The two theories I have been considering offer accounts of the work designed to show how it might persist as the single object of different interpretations. I maintain that the original context theory is preferable to the modern context theory in that it locates the object of interpretation in a fashion paying regard to those concerns without which literature would not be created and presented as it is, even if, once the artworld practice is in place, subsidiary interpretive strategies come into play. Moreover, the original context theory also can match the intuition that the meaning of a literary work lends itself to autonomous, multiple interpretations, even conflicting ones.

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