

Text, Context, and Culture in Literary Studies

Øyunn Hestetun

University of Uppsala

In recent debates within criticism and theory terms like text, intertextuality, context, culture, and history keep recurring. These terms also signal issues of disagreement in literary scholarship, indicating what can be described as a conflict between textualizing and contextualizing approaches to the study of literature. In the following I will make the suggestion that critical strategies employed by certain critics propose what I choose to call a "third way," by which the troublesome contradiction between the two has been successfully overcome. Taking into account how the text is an inscription of culture, this "third way" is successful also in constructing the relationship between culture and text. Examples of a "third way" can be found for instance in various forms of cultural studies, Marxist criticism, and feminist studies. In order to illustrate my point, I will primarily refer to two influential studies that appeared around 1980, namely the Marxist hermeneutic of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* and the feminist criticism of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*.¹

The conflict between textualizing and contextualizing tendencies by no means is a new one in literary studies. Yet claims are made that we witness rupture and paradigm shift in literary scholarship. We may well wonder whether these claims are not in fact instances of what may be called "short-span memory" in literary criticism; that is, that the claims result from a tendency to oversimplify, homogenize, or simply forget

¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

history. In an attempt to counter the effect of "short-span memory," I will propose that critical strategies exemplifying a "third way" can be found even in earlier scholarship, for instance in studies by Henry Nash Smith associated with the "myth and symbol school" of American Studies.

As already suggested, in recent debates in criticism and theory it is possible to discern a conflict between those who privilege the text as opposed to those who argue for the relevance of *context* in literary study. One trend, which I here refer to as textualizing, tends to focus exclusively on text and intertextuality. This exclusive focus on texts can be found in much of poststructuralist criticism and in rhetorical studies intent on the analysis of the aesthetic quality or the "literariness" of literature. The critical strategies used generally involve a close analysis of texts, or what is traditionally understood as intrinsic, rhetorical, or formalist textual analysis. The other trend, which we can find for instance in different forms of cultural studies, tends to construct a wider context for literary study. The focus is here shifted so as to include the historical or social dimensions of texts or issues such as race, gender, ethnicity, and class in relation to cultural production. Contextualizing theories seek to establish links between individual texts and a historical-cultural context and systems of power, and they are inclined to employ strategies of ideological critique in order to explore the historical, social, cultural, and political grounds of literature.

Let me add that even if it is possible to construct a polarity of this kind, examples of literary study will, of course, display critical practices ranging all along the spectrum between the two polarized positions. I might add, also, that the polarity between these two current trends should not obscure shared critical concerns. In fact, in both cases there is a strong sense that criticism is a historically situated activity. That is to say that there is a growing awareness of how the questions put to the text have a decisive impact on what comes out in interpretation. Another shared concern is the problem of representation. The recent trend is that the notion of language as a transparent medium is questioned and most often rejected. An off-shoot of the doubting of language and representation is that the contingencies of values and the forces that constitute meaning have become important issues of concern.'

² For a nuanced discussion of the alleged apolitical nature of deconstruction see for instance John

However, in spite of such shared concerns, the two critical camps that I have referred to represent differences not only with regard to how they construe their own object of study. It is possible also to detect in each of them a repression of what may be called their "critical Other," in the sense that contextualizing studies tend to reject textualizing studies and *vice versa* Polemical confrontations between the two reveal also a lack of recognition that the opposing camp does not necessarily represent a simple return of old modes of literary scholarship. For instance, those who promote contextual studies tend to regard rhetorical studies or studies of the "literariness" of literature as a continuation of a purely aesthetic study in the mode of New Criticism. Conversely, those who favor the intrinsic study of literature tend to see the contextualizing gestures in cultural criticism as a return to outdated methods of extratextual studies, involving a revamping of biographical, mimetic, historical, and politicizing methods.

In order to illustrate the tension between contextualizing and textualizing tendencies in recent critical discourse, I will refer to comments made by Douglas Kellner and J. Hillis Miller in reaction to the renewed interest in cultural studies in the eighties. In 1989 Kellner says in his introduction to *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*: "Even the new critical methodologies—such as deconstruction—were becoming specialized tools of professional critics which provided some new excuses to avoid biographical, historical, and political study." What Kellner finds questionable in poststructuralist criticism and theory is the tendency towards "isolationism" that this "new formalism" involves. With special reference to Fredric Jameson's Marxist hermeneutic, he welcomes the renewed interest in "cultural" analysis in preference to a purely "literary" analysis, and in extension, the cultural-critical interventions of contextualizing and politicking discourses.³

The renewed interest in contextualizing and politicizing studies has also prompted Miller to comment on the return of critical approaches marginalized by poststructuralism. In his essay "The Function of Literary Theory at the Present Time," also from 1989, he displays a very

McGowan's *Postmodernism and Its Critics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 110-13; and Roy Boyne and Ali Rattansi's "The Theory and Politics of Postmodernism," in *Postmodernism and Society*, ed. Roy Boyne and Ali Rattansi (London: Macmillan, 1990).

³ Douglas Kellner, "Introduction: Jameson, Marxism, and Postmodernism," in *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Washington: Maiseonneuve, 1989), pp. 21-22.

different attitude to the change than Kellner, however. Miller registers what he calls "a massive shift of focus in literary study since 1979 away from the 'intrinsic,' rhetorical study of literature toward study of the 'extrinsic' relations of literature, its placement within psychological, historical, or sociological contexts," and he makes explicit reference to both feminist and Marxist criticism. He notes that an interest in what he refers to as "various forms of hermeneutic interpretation ... has been accompanied by a widespread return to old-fashioned biographical, thematic, and literary historical methods that antedate the New Criticism." In other words, he recognizes—and deplores—affinities between present-day and old-style scholarship. With considerable irony he thus characterizes the contemporary scene of literary study:

It is as if a great sigh of relief were rising up from all across the land. The era of "deconstruction" is over. It has had its day, and we can return with a clear conscience to the warmer, more human work of writing about power, history, ideology, the "institution" of the study of literature, the class struggle, the oppression of women, and the real lives of men and women in society as they exist in themselves and as they are "reflected" in literature. We can ask again pragmatic questions about the uses of literature in human life and in society. We can return, that is, to what the study of literature has always tended to be when it is not accompanied by serious reflection on the specificity of literature as a mode of language.⁴

Miller may well be right in saying that the change in critical climate—making it again legitimate to pursue extratextual studies—has been greeted with relief. However, when Miller deplores the turning away from the literary text and what he calls the "serious reflection on the specificity of literature as a mode of language," three things are notable. First, he objects to the politicizing of literary study, thus evincing a desire to keep the aesthetic as a separate realm. Second, he relates the various forms of "extrinsic" study to models of mediation and "reflection" in the sense of "passive mirroring." Miller does not, in other words, recognize that the static reflection theories of classical Marxism have generally been replaced in more recent scholarship with alternative models, as for instance the one offered by Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*. Third, Miller argues: "The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic, like most such binary oppositions, turns out to be false and misleading."⁵ Interestingly, Jameson makes essentially the same

⁴ J. Hillis Miller, "The Function of Literary Theory at the Present Time," *The Future of Literary Theory*, ed. Ralph Cohen (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 102–3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 104–5.

argument, and it is implicit in a number of other examples of cultural analysis.

What I have proposed to call "a third way" seems to me to present a way of escaping the conflict between the intrinsic and the extrinsic study of texts. In order to explore and exemplify the critical strategies of this "third way" I will now turn to Jameson's *Political Unconscious*. While this study foregrounds the social and historical dimensions of texts, it represents an alternative to a revamping of old-style modes of bringing an extratextual context to bear on the text in question. If texts are seen as cultural products, textual analysis means taking into account how the text is an inscription of the culture in question. The act of interpretation then involves a textual analysis where the cultural assumptions of the historical moment when the text was produced are reconstructed as subtext. Thus the strict distinction between text and context is blurred, and the opposition between the intrinsic and extrinsic study of texts is set aside.

Accordingly, Jameson says he wants to avoid contextual analysis of the kind that involves an "external" operation in the sense of bringing an "extrinsic" context to bear on the text in question. He proposes instead what he calls "a deductive operation," which means that what is generally referred to as contextual can be read as a subtext, integral to the text examined. The task for the critic then involves what Jameson calls "the hypothetical *reconstruction* of the materials—content, narrative paradigms, stylistic and linguistic practices—which had to have been given in advance in order for that particular text to be produced in its unique historical specificity."⁶

Just as Jameson recasts ideology as "the political unconscious" mediated through texts, so similar critical gestures can be found in feminist studies which do not make use of Marxist theory. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's influential study, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, can serve as an example. Through an analysis of imagery and themes in nineteenth-century women writers' texts, they seek to establish a distinctly female tradition in literature. The strategies they use involve a (re)construction of the ideology of patriarchal society from metaphors in the texts analyzed. At the same time, they find that these same metaphors have been subverted in women writers' texts, and that

⁶ Jameson, pp. 57-8.

they therefore allow for a (re)construction also of the coded messages of a women's subculture.

If *The Political Unconscious* and *The Madwoman* from around 1980 may be said to exemplify a "third way," through their reconstructing the cultural context as subtext in textual analysis, an interesting question is whether this kind of analysis has been done before. In my view, it is possible to see similar critical concerns and strategies in earlier forms of American Studies. What I have in mind is the "myth and symbol school" mode of criticism which Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* from 1950 exemplifies? In an interview in 1977 Smith in fact says that he cannot see why the close analysis of texts should be incompatible with the "the effort to place the work within a cultural setting." ♦ ♦ may add that David E. Nye says that Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden* represents a way of overcoming "a simple dichotomy between literary texts and their social context." This is achieved, in Nye's view—and it holds true also with regard to Smith's *Virgin Land* from 1950—because "Marx interposed a third term between them." Nye chooses to illustrate his point about "a third term" by referring to how Leo Marx focuses his discussion on what he calls "cultural symbols," which largely correspond to Smith's "symbols and myths."♦♦

Actually, it is a negotiation between a contextual and a textual analysis of texts that contributes to the critical achievement of *Virgin Land*. Where Jameson discusses the "political unconscious," and where Gilbert and Gubar discuss the metaphors of patriarchal society and of a women's subculture, Smith talks about "symbols and myths" as an expression of the shared assumptions of nineteenth-century American culture. Regarding texts as cultural products, Smith presupposes that the myths embraced in the culture at large can not only be found embedded in texts, but they can also provide useful keys for the interpretation of texts.

However, constructing the links between text and context poses the problem of how the contextual is constituted. Thus, for instance, the texts by Smith, Gilbert and Gubar, and Jameson which I have mentioned rely on generalizing accounts of culture, women's experience, and ide-

⁷ *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

⁸ Interviews on American Studies: Henry Nash Smith, *Amerikastudien* 22, 1 (1977), p. 196.

⁹ David E. Nye, "American Studies as a Set of Discourses," *American Studies in Scandinavia* (1985), p. 55.

ology. First, granting that Smith does account for conflicting mythic paradigms in his study, his reconstruction of nineteenth-century American myths involves a holistic conception of national culture. Second, Gilbert and Gubar's conception of dominant culture and subculture based on sex/gender is constructed on generalizations about patriarchal culture and women's experience. Third, Jameson's historicizing account of the "political unconscious" is done from a totalizing Marxist perspective.

The poststructuralist insistence on the problem of representation and the foregrounding of difference and heterogeneity involve a resistance to all generalizing accounts of culture, ideology, or experience. Such resistance has had great impact also within cultural studies, whether the focus be on the Western tradition, national or common culture, or on subcultural groups with reference to gender, race, or ethnicity. The question remains, however, whether an awareness of the problem of representation, together with a desire to acknowledge difference and accord it its due, should force us to give up the very possibility of talking about culture in generalizing terms. Posed differently, is it possible to negotiate a conception of culture that does not repress cultural diversity? It is in response to this dilemma that Werner Sollors recommends in *Beyond Ethnicity* that the question of ethnicity in American culture be studied in terms of a tension between what he refers to as "*consent and descent*." Sollors thus presupposes that it is possible to talk (in generalizing terms) about the cultural codes of "Americanness" and the codes of specific ethnic groups, while highlighting the process of tension and mediation between them, and at the same time retaining the notion that these cultural codes are constructions. ¹⁰

While both cultural studies and poststructuralist discourses have been instrumental in giving culture's Others a voice, it is possible now to register concern that a one-sided emphasis on cultural heterogeneity and difference risks reinforcing the exclusion of these groups from mainstream culture. In a recent essay (from 1990) Elizabeth FOX-Genovese, for example, warns about generalizing tendencies in feminist cultural criticism, involving a "submerging the experience of different groups of women under a single homogenizing model," where an

¹⁰ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 6-7.

image of male WASP culture is simply replaced with an image of a female WASP culture. However, she also calls into question a one-sided emphasis on cultural heterogeneity. More precisely, she fears that a one-sided celebration of difference with regard to ethnicity, race, and gender may serve to reinforce "exclusion" and "marginalization."¹¹

Highlighting the problem of representation and the constructionist nature of all cultural accounts, the ethnographer James Clifford says in *The Predicament of Culture*: "Culture is a deeply compromised idea I cannot yet do without." He explains that he is "straining for a concept that can preserve culture's differentiating functions while conceiving of collective identity as a hybrid, often discontinuous inventive process."¹² My inclination is to echo Clifford and say that I do not see how we can do without the concept of culture in literary studies. In other words, even while recognizing that all accounts of culture are provisional and not all-inclusive, I still find that we need to be able to talk not only about a Western cultural tradition, but also about a national or common culture and cultural nonhegemonic groups with reference to gender, ethnicity, or class as Smith, Gilbert and Gubar, and Jameson do in their different ways.

I opened my discussion by referring to textualizing as opposed to contextualizing trends and how both tend to identify the opposing trend with past scholarship. I have also suggested that it is possible to see examples both in recent and past scholarship of a "third way" of approaching literature. Since my focusing on continuity goes against the grain of much recent theorizing where the general tendency is to proclaim rupture with the past, I find it appropriate here to quote what the anthropologists George Marcus and Michael Fischer say in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*:

There is often a circular motion to intellectual history, a return with fresh perspectives to questions explored earlier. forgotten or temporarily resolved.... Yet, this history is better conceived as spiral rather than circular. Rather than mere repetition, there is cumulative growth in knowledge. through the creative rediscovery of older and persistent questions in response to keenly experienced moments of dissatisfaction with the state of a discipline's

¹¹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Between Individualism and Fragmentation: American Culture and the New Literary Studies of Race and Gender," *American Quarterly*, 42 (March 1990), pp. 20, 23-4.

¹² James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 10.

practice tied to perceptions of unprecedented changes in the world.¹³

Our remembering the past may teach us to be attentive both to continuity and difference. In spite of the difference in terminology, Smith's text prefigures concerns that are central in contemporary theorizing. Focusing on the cultural production of meaning, his contextualizing takes the form of a "third way" of restructuring context as subtext in the texts studied. It needs to be stressed, however, that by comparing the critical efforts of Smith, Gilbert and Gubar, and Jameson I do not mean to suggest a "circular" movement in the sense of "mere repetition" in literary scholarship over time. Rather, their studies illustrate what Marcus and Fischer call the "spiral" movement in history. When compared with Smith's text from 1950, Gilbert and Gubar's feminist critique and Jameson's Marxist hermeneutic from around 1980 bear evidence of new directions and concerns in literary scholarship. The two texts from around 1980 thus represent responses to what Marcus and Fischer call "keenly experienced moments of dissatisfaction with the state of a discipline's practice," for instance in introducing the question of cultural hegemony in terms of gender or class respectively, which Smith's cultural holism did not allow for.

Similarly, the return of formalist criticism's "Other" in recent cultural studies can be interpreted as a response to a feeling that literary study should be more than the study of the "literariness" of texts. Thus, for instance, Susan Stanford Friedman, in "Post/Poststructuralist Feminist Criticism," comments on how terminology that has been tabooed in poststructuralist discourse now reappears in scholarship. She says: "To use affirmatively the terms identity and agency breaks the silence post-structuralism has attempted to impose by declaring them illusory constructs of humanism." She lists a number of other terms also: "*self*, author, *work*, experience, expression, meaning, authority, origin, and *reference*."¹⁴ I would suggest that we add to the list the concepts of culture and context.

It is as if the history of critical theorizing were taking another turn on its spiral, responding to a concern that the study of literature should not

¹³ George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 9-10.

¹⁴ Susan Stanford Friedman, "Post/Poststructuralist Feminist Criticism: The Politics of Recuperation and Negotiation," *New Literary History*, 22 (1991), pp. 472-73.

be divorced from the study of the historical, social, and political dimensions. Moreover, within cultural studies, it is possible to see a concern that a discourse privileging only heterogeneity and difference may be counter-effective, risking to reinforce marginalization from mainstream culture rather than furthering the desired inclusion in a common culture. Thus I find that Sollors's recommendation for ethnic studies—to take account of the tension between "consent and descent"—can be extended and modified so as to apply to contextualizing studies in general. Given that all accounts of culture are our own constructions and that they will necessarily rely on generalizing gestures, Sollors's model may serve to account for cultural hegemony and the tensions and mediations between a common culture and cultural diversity. However provisional all accounts of culture may be, I find that seeing texts in relation to the cultural production of meaning is not a mere "addition" to the study of literature as some would like to see it, but it is in fact an inescapable dimension—implicit if not explicit—in all textual analysis.