"Context Stinks!"

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My title is a none-too-subtle provocation, though not, I should point out, a self-authored one. What word could be more ubiquitous in literary and cultural studies: more earnestly invoked, more diligently defended, more devoutly kowtowed to? The once commonplace but now risible notion of "the work itself" has been endlessly dissected, dismembered, and dispatched into New Critical oblivion. Context is not optional. There are, to be sure, endless disputes between various subfields and splinter groups about what counts as a legitimate context: Marxist critics take umbrage at New Historicist anecdotes and styles of social description; queer theorists take issue with feminist explanations that assume a bipolar gender world. Context is, in this sense, an endlessly contested concept, subject to often rancorous rehashing and occasional bursts of sectarian sniper fire. But who, in their right mind—apart from a few die-hard aesthetes mumbling into their sherry glasses—could feasibly take issue with the idea of context as such?

"Context stinks" is, in fact, a double quotation: my title channels Bruno Latour, who is in turn citing architect Rem Koolhaas.[1] But to what end? Latour, after all, is one of the most visible proponents of science studies, a field that has scuttled the idea of science as a single-minded pursuit of truth by documenting, in exhaustive detail, its social embedding and its contamination by worldly factors. Meanwhile my own work owes much to feminist historicism as well as a cultural studies methodology that sees contextualization as the quintessential virtue. Larry Grossberg's statement, "for cultural studies context is everything and everything is contextual," succinctly summarizes the most heartfelt convictions of the field.[2] What lies, then, behind this abrupt excoriation of contemporary literary and cultural studies' favorite word?

The history of literary theory, admittedly, yields up a litany of complaints against contextualization, ranging from the Russian Formalist case for the autonomous development of literary form to Gadamer's insistence that the work of art is not just a historical artifact, but is newly actualized and brought to life in the hermeneutic encounter. More

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recently, deconstructive thinkers have vigorously assailed any notion of history or context as a stable ground and warned against the perils of an overcontextualization that wreaks violence on the distinctiveness of the literary object. That such arguments have done little to stop the current historicist tide stems, I hypothesize, from two main reasons. First, they sometimes rely on a division between "exceptional texts" that exceed their historical moment and "conventional" or "stereotypical" texts that remain determined by it, reinstating a high/low culture dichotomy that has come to seem ever less persuasive to many scholars. And second, the repudiation of context can result in a rarefied focus on poetic language, form, and textuality far removed from the messy, mundane, empirical details of how and why we read. That a questioning of context, done differently, might allow for a greater attention to such details is one of the counterintuitive claims of this essay. "Context," to continue with Latour, "is simply a way of stopping the description when you are tired or too lazy to go on."[3]

My own second thoughts about context are tied to a larger inquiry into the role of critical reading in the recent history of literary studies. The "hermeneutics of suspicion" is the name usually bestowed on this technique of reading texts against the grain and between the lines, of cataloging their omissions and laying bare their contradictions, of rubbing in what they fail to know and cannot represent. While suspicion can manifest itself in multiple ways, in the current intellectual climate it often pivots on a fealty to the clarifying power of historical context. What the literary text does not see, in this line of thought, are the larger circumstances that shape and sustain it and that are drawn into the light by the corrective force of the critic's own vigilant gaze. The critic probes for meanings inaccessible to authors as well as ordinary readers, and exposes the text's complicity in social conditions that it seeks to deny or disavow. Context, as the ampler, more expansive reference point, will invariably trump the claims of the individual text, knowing it far better than it can ever know itself.

Against the grain of such critical historicism, I want to articulate and defend two related propositions: 1) that history is not a box—that conventional models of historicizing and contextualizing prove deficient in accounting for the transtemporal movement and affective resonance of particular texts—and 2) that in doing better justice to this transtemporal impact, we might usefully think of texts as "nonhuman actors"—a claim that, as we'll see, requires us to revise prevailing views about the heroic, self-propelling, or oppositional nature of agency and to ponder the links between agency and attachment. Bruno Latour's recent work serves as a partial inspiration for what follows: less its explication of specific works

of literature—a subject on which Latour has so far said little—than its canny provocation to our entrenched ways of thinking about texts and time, things and persons, action and interaction. Highlighting the various relays between mood and method, Latour's exuberance of idiom blasts away the cobwebs of critique and shakes up a ubiquitous academic ethos of detachment, negativity, and doubt. Suspicious reading, I've argued elsewhere, is not just an intellectual exercise, but a distinctive disposition or sensibility that is infused with a mélange of affective and attitudinal components. Experimenting with other modes of reading and reasoning will require us not only to think differently but also, perhaps, to feel differently.[4]

History is Not a Box

After several decades of historically oriented scholarship, critics are turning anew to questions of aesthetics, beauty, and form, citing the failings of a historicism that treats works of art only as cultural symptoms of their own moment, as moribund matter buried in the past. Yet this new aestheticism conspicuously fails to answer the question of how texts resonate across time. Focusing on formal devices or the phenomenology of aesthetic experience, it brackets rather than resolves the problem of temporality. We cannot close our eyes to the historicity of art works, and yet we sorely need alternatives to seeing them as transcendentally timeless on the one hand, and imprisoned in their moment of origin on the other.

This paucity of temporal frameworks can be contrasted to the rich resources available for conceptualizing space. Postcolonial studies, especially, has transformed our ways of thinking about how ideas, texts, and images migrate and mutate. Challenging notions of the discrete, self-contained spaces of nation or ethnicity, scholars have developed a language of translation, creolization, syncreticism, and global flows. Similar models might help us explore the complexities of temporal transmission. Why is it that we can feel solicited, button-holed, stirred up, by words that were drafted eons ago? How do texts that are inert in one historical moment become newly revealing, eye-opening, even life-transforming, in another? And how do such moments of transtemporal connection call into question the progress narratives that drive conventional political histories and the rhetoric of artistic innovation?

Postcolonial studies, to be sure, troubles our models of time as well as space, messing up the tidiness of periodizing categories, elucidating the ways in which historical schemata often prop up the complacency

of a West-centered viewpoint. The task of "provincializing Europe," in Dipesh Chakrabarty's well-known phrase, invites us to rethink, from the ground up, how we historicize and contextualize, and to what end. A similar restiveness with historicism is beginning to make itself felt across the spectrum of literary studies. Though we cannot as yet speak of a posthistoricist school, a multitude of minor mutinies and small-scale revolts are underway, triggered by scholars mulling the question of "time after history." Queer theorists call for an "unhistoricism" open to the affinities between earlier times and our own that does not blanch at proximity and anachronism. Scholars of the Renaissance are reclaiming the term "presentist" as a badge of honor rather than a dismissive jibe, unabashedly confessing their interest in the present-day relevance rather than historical resonance of Shakespeare's plays. Literary critics advertise their conversion to the iconoclastic work of Michel Serres, who urges us to think of time not as an arrow, but as an undulating snake or even a crumpled handkerchief. And in the background, of course, hovers the beatific figure of Walter Benjamin, the patron saint of all those wary of periodizing schemes, chronological containment, and progressive histories.[5]

What are the consequences of this temporal turbulence for literary and cultural studies? The singular disadvantage of the "context concept" is that it inveigles us into endless reiterations of the same dichotomies: text versus context, word versus world, literature versus society and history, internalist versus externalist explanations of works of art. Literary studies seems doomed to swing between these two ends of the pendulum, with opposing sides endless and fruitlessly rehashing the same arguments. "How absurdly naïve and idealistic, you are!" cry the contextualizers. "Your myopic focus on the words on the page blinds you to the inescapable impact of social and ideological forces!" "How reductive and ham-fisted you are!" scold the formalists; "sermonize about social energies or patriarchal ideologies until you turn blue in the face, but your theories of context remain utterly tone-deaf to what makes a painting a painting, a poem a poem!" There are different historicisms and many types of politics, to be sure, but the task of doing justice to the distinctiveness and specificity of art works remains a recurring thorn in their flesh. Sartre's well-known quip that Valéry was a petit-bourgeois intellectual but that not every petit-bourgeois intellectual was Valéry retains much of its power to sting. And yet we also know perfectly well that artworks are not heaven sent, that they do not glide like angels over earthly terrain, that they cannot help getting their shoes wet and their hands dirty. How can we do justice to both their singularity and their worldliness?

One of the main obstacles lies in the prevailing picture of context as a kind of box or container in which individual texts are encased and held fast. The critic assigns to this box a list of attributes—economic structure, political ideology, cultural mentality—in order to finesse the details of how these attributes are echoed, modified, or undermined by a specific work of art. The macrolevel of sociohistorical context holds the cards, calls the tune, and specifies the rules of the game; the individual text, as a microunit encased within a larger whole, can only react or respond to these preestablished conditions. History, in this light, consists of a vertical pile of neatly stacked boxes—what we call periods—each of which surrounds, sustains, and subsumes a microculture. Understanding a text means clarifying the details of its placement in the box, highlighting the correlations, causalities, or homologies between text-as-object and context-as-container.

To be sure, New Historicism has struggled mightily against the iron grip of the text/context distinction. Testifying, in an oft-cited phrase, to the historicity of texts and the textuality of history, it muddies and muddles the boundaries between word and world. Works of art no longer loom like mighty monuments against a historical backdrop that is materially determining but semiotically inert. Instead, history itself is revealed as a buzzing multiplicity of texts—explorers' diaries, court records, child-rearing manuals, government documents, newspaper editorials—whose circulation underwrites the transmission of social energies. By the same token, the literary work does not transcend these humdrum circumstances, but remains haplessly and hopelessly entangled in fine-meshed filaments of power, one more social text among others.

And yet, while a key text of New Historicism famously proclaimed a desire to speak with the dead, most of the work produced under this rubric remains closer to diagnosis than dialogue, generating the sense of an unbridgeable distance between past texts and present lives, between "then" and "now." Historicism serves as the functional equivalent of cultural relativism, quarantining difference, denying relatedness, and suspending—or less kindly, evading—the question of why past texts still matter and how they speak to us now. Of course, it has become a theoretical commonplace that we cannot ever know the past as it really was, that history is always, at least in part, the history of the present. And in their introductions, preambles and afterwords, scholars often testify to their present-day passions and volunteer their political commitments. Yet these avowals rarely translate into transhistorical methodologies or the tracing of cross-temporal networks; rather, the literary object remains trapped in the conditions that preside over the moment of its birth, its meaning determined in relation to texts and objects of the same moment,

indelibly stamped as an early modern, eighteenth-century, or Victorian artifact. This is the domain of what Wai Chee Dimock calls "synchronic historicism," in which phenomena are related only to phenomena in the same slice of time.[6] We are inculcated, in the name of history, into a remarkably static model of meaning, where texts are corralled amidst long-gone contexts and obsolete intertexts, incarcerated in the past, with no hope of parole.

For Latour, by contrast, there is no historical box and indeed no society, if we mean by this term a distinctive, bounded totality governed by a predetermined set of structures and functions. Society does not stand behind, and covertly control, human practices, as if it were ontologically distinct from these practices, akin to a shadowy, all-seeing, puppet master. Rather, the social just is the act and the fact of association, the coming together of phenomena to create multiple assemblages, affinities, and networks. It exists only in its instantiations, in the sometimes foreseeable, sometimes unpredictable ways in which ideas, texts, images, people, and objects couple and uncouple, attach and break apart. To do actor-network theory is not to soar like an eagle, gazing down dispassionately at the distant multitudes below, but to trudge like an ANT, marveling at the intricate ecologies and diverse micro-organisms that lie hidden amongst thick blades of grass. It is to slow down at each step, to forego theoretical shortcuts and to attend to the words of our fellow actors rather than overriding them—and overwriting them—with our own. The social, in other words, is not a preformed being but a doing, not a hidden entity underlying the realm of appearance, but the ongoing connections, disconnections, and reconnections between countless actors.

These interconnections are temporal as well as spatial; woven out of threads criss-crossing through time, they connect us to what comes before, enmeshing us in extended webs of obligation and influence. Time is not a tidy sequence of partitioned units, but a profusion of whirlpools and rapids, eddies and flows, in which objects, ideas, images, and texts from different moments swirl, tumble, and collide in ever-changing combinations and constellations. New actors jostle alongside those with thousand-year histories; inventions and innovations exist alongside the very traditions they excoriate; the "past is not surpassed but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted, and reshuffled."[7] The trick is to think temporal interdependency without telos, movement without supersession: pastness is part of who we are, not an archaic residue, a regressive force, a source of nostalgia, or a return of the repressed. Latour's notorious assertion that we have never been modern does not dispute the fact that our lives differ from those of medieval peasants or Renaissance courtiers, but insists that these dif-

ferences can be absurdly overdrawn, thanks to our fondness for fables of rationalization, the disenchantment of the world, the sundering of subjects from objects, the radicalism of modern critique, and other testimonies to our own exceptional status.

Along similar lines, Jonathan Gil Harris takes issue with what he calls a "national sovereignty model of time" that is endemic in literary and cultural studies. Period, in other words, serves much the same function as nation; we assign texts and objects to a single moment of origin in much the same way as we tether them to a single place of birth. Both period and nation serve as a natural boundary, determining authority, and last court of appeal. The literary work can only be a citizen of only one historical period and one set of social relations; border guards work overtime and any movement across period boundaries is heavily policed. The past remains a foreign country, alien and inscrutable, its strangeness repeatedly underscored. "What do we do," Harris wonders, "with things that cross temporal borders—things that are illegal immigrants, double agents, or holders of multiple passports? How might such border crossings change our understanding of temporality?"[8] Cross-temporal networks mess up the tidiness of our periodizing schemes, forcing us to acknowledge affinity and proximity alongside difference, to grapple with the coevalness and connectedness of past and present.

This line of thought obviously jars with a Foucauldian model of criticism that conceives of the past as a series of disjunctive epistemes, that encourages the critic to scrutinize the exotic attitudes of earlier times with a scrupulous, self-denying dispassion. Instead of absolute temporal difference and distance, we have a messy hotchpotch and rich confusion, a spillage across period boundaries in which we are thoroughly implicated in the historical phenomena we describe. Actor-network theory is equally bemused by a modernist vision of time as a rupture that liberates us off from a benighted past. Not only is the classic model of revolution rendered incoherent by the ubiquity of cross-temporal networks, but so is the ethos of the vanguard—those anointed few, who by dint of their intellectual training, political convictions, or artistic sensibility propel themselves out of the mists of confusion and bad faith in which others are immersed. History is not moving forward and none of us are leading the way.

Why, in short, are we persuaded that we know more than the texts that precede us? The advantage of our hindsight is compensated for by their robustness, resilience, and continuing resonance. Their temporality is dynamic, not fixed or frozen; they speak to, but also beyond, their own moment, anticipating future affinities and conjuring up not yet imaginable connections. In a lucid reckoning with historicism, Jennifer

Fleissner invites us to read nineteenth-century novels as living thought rather than embodiments of past cultural work, as voices that speak back to our own explanatory frameworks and classificatory schemes.[9] Context does not automatically or inevitably trump text, because the very question of what counts as context, and the cogency of our causal and explanatory schemes, may be anticipated, explored, queried, relativized, expanded, or reimagined in the words we read (and not just "disrupted," as vulgarized versions of deconstruction would have it). The detachment of historical explanation is ruffled, even rattled, once we recognize that past texts have things to say on questions that matter to us, including the status of historical understanding itself.

This busy afterlife of the literary artifact refutes our efforts to box it into a moment of origin, to lock it up in a temporal container. To be sure, the moment of a text's birth places constraints on theme, form, or genre: we look in vain for signs of modernist spleen in Attic verse, for Dadaist decoupage in eighteenth-century landscapes. And yet these constraints do not rule out possibilities of transtemporal connection and comparison, allowing Karl Heinz Bohrer, for example, to expand on the multiple affinities between Baudelairean verse and Greek tragedy across the chasm of historical difference.[10] Texts are objects that do a lot of traveling; moving across time, they run into new semantic networks, new ways of imputing meaning. What Dimock calls resonance is a text's capacity to signify across time, to trigger unexpected echoes in new places.

Dimock, to be sure, does not expound on the role of institutions in influencing literary longevity. That certain texts survive, and others do not, is not just a matter of particular texts resonating with individual readers, but also of structures of gate-keeping and evaluation, of selection and omission. These screening processes, enacted daily in discussions over what to publish, where to allot marketing dollars, or how to revise the undergraduate curriculum, enable some works to circulate widely while overlooking others. From this point of view, transtemporal mobility is at least partly related to institutional inertia. Citations generate more citations; graduate students teach the texts they were themselves taught; canons—whether of fiction or of theory—reproduce themselves over time. Indeed, even as new texts filter into the classroom and ways of reading gradually shift over time, it is difficult to imagine how education might proceed without a base level of continuity, repetition, and transmission of prior knowledge. But this is only to reinforce what I take to be Latour's fundamental points: that we cannot, by sheer act of will, cut ourselves off from the influence of the past and that the impact of artworks—an argument I will turn to shortly—depends on their social embedding rather than being opposed to it.

Arguments about what counts as "real" context, moreover, spill well beyond the boundaries of theoretical disputes into the humdrum realities of what and how we teach. In English departments, especially, identification with period remains the defining marker of professional expertise, announced in the books that are footnoted, the conferences attended, the courses taught, the jobs advertised. Everything conspires to reinforce the idea that the original historical meaning of a text is its salient meaning and to devalue the credentials of scholars who wander across several periods rather than settling down in one. "The period," declares Bruce Robbins, ". . . should perhaps be seen as a sort of pseudo-anthropocentric norm that has been adopted for a long time out of laziness. It is one level of magnification among others, no less valid than any other, but also no less arbitrary."[11] Robbins proposes "genre" as an equally salient category around which to organize the teaching of literature, one that is much more hospitable to theorizing transtemporal connections, repetitions, and translations. There is, in short, no compelling intellectual or practical reason why original context should remain the final authority and the last court of appeal.

Artworks as Non-Human Actors

Much of what I've proposed so far seems quite consonant with Birmingham-style cultural studies and its model of articulation theory. In both cases, we see a wariness of theoretical shortcuts, a dissatisfaction with the model of explanation-as-reduction, and a sharply honed skepticism about any essential relation between aesthetics and politics, between formal and social structures. Cultural studies, moreover, puts the act of reception at the heart of its model of culture. In principle, if not always in practice, it encourages a polytemporal view of textual meaning as actively remade over time by new audiences, muting the force of a single moment of production in order to address the many moments of reception. In this light, the performance of Macbeth in early seventeenth-century London boasts no special priority or privilege compared to the play's many afterlives on the stages of New York or New Delhi, Sydney or Singapore. Doesn't this openness to the multitemporality of texts resolve—in one fell swoop—the difficulties I have identified? Shouldn't we fervently embrace this newly pluralized and capacious contextualism rather than continuing to harp, carp, and complain?

The difficulty of context, I propose, lies not just in its traditional bias toward historical origins, but also in the tacit beliefs about agency, causality, and control that steer acts of contextualization, in cultural studies

as elsewhere. Context is often wielded in punitive fashion to deprive the artwork of agency, to evacuate it of influence or impact, rendering it a puny, enfeebled, impoverished thing. We inflate context, in short, in order to deflate text; while newly magnified social conditions dispose and determine, the artwork flickers and grows dim. Why are the producers or recipients of culture afforded such exceptional powers and the individual text afforded little or none? How much light do such theories shed on why people are willing to drive five hundred miles to hear a band playing a certain song, or spend years in graduate school puzzling over a single novel? The terminology of "cultural capital," "the hegemonic media industry," or "interpretive communities" goes only so far in clarifying why it is this particular tune that plays over and over in our heads, why it is Virginia Woolf alone who becomes an object of obsession. We explicate the puzzle of our attachments by invoking veiled determinations and covert social interests, while paying scant attention to the ways in which texts may solicit our affections, court our emotions, and feed our obsessions.

Of course, the siren calls of *Mrs Dalloway* or "Brown Eyed Girl" do not echo in a void; no explanation of their appeal can omit the high-school clique that finally convinced you of the genius of Van Morrison; the ambitious parents whose rapturous praise of your second-grade assignments propelled you toward graduate school; the vocabularies propagated by *Critical Inquiry* or *Rolling Stone* that gave you a language through which to articulate and justify your obsession. But what exactly do we gain by stripping down the number of agents and influences at play, by boosting the plenipotentiary power of "context" at the expense of "text" in the name of some final reduction? Why do we need to downplay the role of artworks in enabling their own survival, to overlook the multifarious ways in which they weasel themselves into our hearts and minds, their dexterity in generating attachments?

Perhaps Latour's idea of the nonhuman actor can clear a path. What, first of all, are nonhuman actors? Speedbumps, microbes, mugs, ships, baboons, newspapers, unreliable narrators, soap, silk dresses, strawberries, floor plans, telescopes, lists, paintings, cats, can openers. To describe these radically disparate phenomena as actors is not at all to impute intentions, desires, or purposes to inanimate objects nor to ignore the salient differences between things, animals, texts, and people. An actor, in this schema, is anything that modifies a state of affairs by making a difference.[12] Nonhuman actors do not determine reality or single-handedly make things happen—let us steer well clear of technological or textual determinism. And yet, as Latour points out, there are "many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer

inexistence," between being the sole source of an action and being utterly inert and without influence.[13] The "actor" in actor-network theory is not a self-authorizing subject, an independent agent who summons up actions and orchestrates events. Rather, actors only become actors via their relations with other phenomena, as mediators and translators linked in extended constellations of cause and effect.

Nonhuman actors, then, help to modify states of affairs; they are participants in chains of events; they help shape outcomes and influence actions. To acknowledge the input of such actors is to circumvent, as far as possible, polarities of subject and object, nature and culture, word and world, to place people, animals, texts, and things on the same ontological footing and to acknowledge their interdependence. Speed bumps cannot prevent you from gunning your car down a suburban street, but their presence makes such behavior far less likely. The literary device of the unreliable narrator can always be overlooked or misunderstood, but it has nevertheless schooled countless readers to read against the grain and between the lines. The salience of speed bumps or story-telling techniques derives from their distinctive properties, their nonsubstitutable qualities—all of which go by the board if they are dissolved into a larger theory of the social, seen only as bearers of predetermined functions. If a single cause is used to explain a thousand different effects, we are left no wiser about the distinctiveness of these effects. To treat the relationship between silk and nylon merely as an allegory for divisions between upper and lower-class taste, as Latour comments in a tacit dig at Bourdieu, is to reduce these phenomena to illustrations of an already established scheme, to bypass the indefinite yet fundamental nuances of color, texture, shimmer, and feel that inspire attachments to one fabric or the other.[14] Silk and nylon, in other words, are not passive intermediaries but active mediators; they are not just channels for conveying predetermined meanings, but configure and refigure these meanings in specific ways.

What would it mean for literary and cultural studies to acknowledge poems and paintings, fictional characters and narrative devices, as actors?[15] How might our thinking change? Clearly, the bogeyman in the closet is aesthetic idealism, the fear that acknowledging the agency of texts will tip us into the abyss of a retrograde religion of art and allow a thousand Blooms to flower. If we start talking about the power of art to make us think and feel differently, can the language of transcendence and the timeless canon be far behind? "Every sculpture, painting, haute cuisine dish, techno-rave and novel," remarks Latour, "has been explained to nothingness by the social factors 'hidden behind' them. . . . And here again, as always, some people, infuriated by the barbarous irreverence

of 'social explanations,' come forth and defend the 'inner sanctity' of the work against barbarians."[16] From the standpoint of actor-network theory, as we are starting to see, neither perspective holds water. The glory of the "text" is not to be defended by rescuing it from the slavering jaws of "context." There is no zero-sum game in which one side must be conclusively crushed so that the other can triumph. We are no longer held captive by the vision—sentimental and blood-stirring, but hopelessly off-target!—of a no-holds-barred battle between David and Goliath in which poems and paintings valiantly resist the social order, or, if we lean toward melancholy, are co-opted by the nefarious forces that surround them.

Our viewpoint, then, is rather different: that art's autonomy—if by autonomy we mean its distinctiveness and specialness—does not rule out connectedness but is the very reason that connections are forged and sustained. There never was an isolated self-contained aesthetic object to begin with, because any such object would have long since sunk into a black hole of oblivion rather than coming to our attention. Artworks can only survive and thrive by making friends, creating allies, attracting disciples, inciting attachments, latching on to receptive hosts. If they are not to fade quickly from view, they must persuade people to hang them on walls, watch them in movie theaters, purchase them on Amazon, dissect them in reviews, debate them with their friends. These networks of alliances, relations, and translations are just as vital to the life of experimental art as to blockbuster fiction, even if the networks vary in kind and what counts as success looks radically different.

The number and breadth of these networks prove far more salient to a text's survival than matters of ideological agreement. If you're an unrepentant avantgardist creating installations out of soiled diapers and statues of the Virgin Mary, your allies are not just the respectful review in the pages of *ArtForum*, but the conservative pundit who invokes your example to lambast the state of contemporary art, amping up its visibility and talked-aboutness and generating a flurry of commentary, a slot on National Public Radio, and, a few years down the road, an edited collection of essays. Romantic visions of solitary subversion make it easy to forget that rupture vanishes without trace if it is not registered and acknowledged, that is to say, made the object of new attachments, connections, and translations between actors. Artworks must be sociable to survive, whatever their attitude to "society." Or, more pithily: no negation without relation.

An indispensable element of this sociability—whatever other factors come into play—is a work's dexterity in attracting readers or viewers, in soliciting and sustaining attachments. When we join an endlessly snak-

ing line at the movie theater, when we devour page after page of James Joyce or James Patterson deep into the night, it is because a certain text—rather than countless possible others—matters to us in some way. Of course, how it matters will differ, and modes of appreciation as well as vocabularies of interpretation vary widely; the "questions for discussion" appended to the typical book club novel may trigger howls of mirth in an English Department faculty lounge. But no fan, no enthusiast, no aficionado—whatever their education or class background—is indifferent to the specialness of the texts they admire. And it is here that critical vocabularies with their emphasis on exemplarity and abstraction, on the logic of "the" realist novel, or women's poetry, or Hollywood movies offer little traction in explaining practices of discrimination *within* such generic groupings, our marked preference for certain texts over others and the intensity and passion with which such discriminations are often made.

"If you are listening to what people are saying," remarks Latour, "they will explain at length how and why they are deeply attached, moved, affected by the works of art which 'make them' feel things."[17] Latour's work is, among other things, a sustained polemic against the modern urge to purify: to separate rationality from emotion, to safeguard critique from faith, to distinguish fact from fetish. In this light, the experience of the artwork—like Latour's examples of religious language or love talk—is not just a matter of conveying information but also of experiencing transformation.[18] The significance of a text is not exhausted by what it reveals or conceals about the social conditions that surround it. Rather, it is also a matter of what it makes possible in the viewer or reader—what kind of emotions it elicits, what perceptual changes it triggers, what affective bonds it calls into being. What would it mean to do justice to these responses rather than treating them as naïve, rudimentary, or defective? To be less shame-faced about being shaken or stirred, absorbed or enchanted? To forge a language of attachment as intellectually robust and refined as our rhetoric of detachment?

One possible consequence of ANT for the classroom, then, is a perspective less censorious of ordinary experiences of reading, including their stubborn persistence in the margins of professional criticism. It is no longer a matter of looking through such experiences to the hidden laws that determine them, but of looking squarely at them, in order to investigate the mysteries of what is in plain sight. Of course, feelings have histories and individual sensations of sublimity or self-loss connect up to larger pictures and cultural frames, but underscoring the social construction of emotion is often a matter of announcing the critic's own detachment and immunity from the illusions of others. Could we conceivably come to terms with the implications of our attachments to

particular objects? Can we wean ourselves of the longstanding impulse to discount or empty out such attachments in order to discover, yet again, the subterranean structures that determine them?

This impulse has a tendency to reassert itself in even the most sophisticated renderings of reception. For example, Tony Bennett's well-known concept of the "reading formation" strives to mediate between internalist and externalist theories of meaning, between text-centered theories of reader response and the reductiveness of conventional sociological explanation. Instead, Bennett draws attention to the "discursive and intertextual determinations that organize and animate the practice of reading."[19] How we respond to works of art, in other words, is governed neither by the internal structures of the text nor by the raw social demographics of race, gender, or class, but by the cultural frameworks and interpretative vocabularies we have unconsciously absorbed. Indeed, this idea of the reading formation captures crucial aspects of mediation, underscored by Bennett's insistence that meaning is inherently relational and texts exist only in their use. Repudiating any notion of the "text itself" as the last gasp of Kantian idealism, Bennett stoutly declares that texts have no existence "prior to or independently of the varying 'reading formations' in which they have been constituted as objects-to-be read."[20]

Yet the use of the passive voice and the choice of noun ("objects-to-read") is revealing, underscoring a view of texts as acted upon rather than acting. Films and novels dissolve into the cultural assumptions and interpretative frameworks of their audiences; as described here by Bennett, they seem to possess no independent existence, no distinctive properties, no force, or presence of their own. We fumble to account for the often unforeseen impact of texts: the song on the radio that unexpectedly reduces you to tears; the horror movie gorefest that continues to haunt your dreams; the novel that finally persuaded you to take up Buddhism or to get divorced. As in Stanley Fish's discussion of interpretative communities, the text is reduced to a blank screen on which groups of readers project their preexisting ideas and beliefs. In consequence, we are hard- pressed to explain why any text should matter more than any other, why we register the differences between individual texts so strongly, or how we can be aroused, disturbed, surprised, or brought to act by such texts in ways that we did not expect and may find it hard to explain. As Bennett himself admits, context trumps and transcends text.

And yet, if Bennett's contexts are themselves textual—namely critical vocabularies and interpretative frameworks—it is hard to see why this should be the case, why these frameworks should have exclusive power to determine meaning, while films and novels are afforded none. Why freeze a single relationship between figure and ground, object and

frame, why not acknowledge that works of art can function as vehicles of knowing as well as objects to be known, why not make room for a multiplicity of mediators? While we indisputably learn to read literary texts by internalizing particular interpretative vocabularies, by the same token we learn to read and make sense of our lives by referencing fictional or imaginary worlds. What counts as text and what serves as frame is more mutable and fluid than Bennett allows; works of art occupy both categories rather than only one; they are not just objects to be interpreted, but also reference points and guides to interpretation, in both predictable and less foreseeable ways.

In fact, Bennett's own critical practice is more flexible than some of his theoretical pronouncements might suggest. Evacuating fictional texts of agency would drastically impede the task that Bennett sets himself in a coauthored book with Janet Woollacott: clarifying why the James Bond novels and films swept to worldwide success, why they became participants in so many networks, attracting ever more intermediaries, generating ever more attachments, until the entire globe seemed saturated with Bond films, paperbacks, advertisements, posters, t-shirts, toys, and paraphernalia. The Bond phenomenon was indisputably shaped by the vagaries of reception; Ian Fleming's novels, we discover, were associated with a tradition of hard-boiled crime fiction in the United States, while piggybacking on the popularity of the imperial spy thriller in the United Kingdom. But such explanations alone do not clarify why this particular series of novels marched toward world-wide visibility and prominence while countless others works of spy fiction languished like wallflowers in the cut-price piles and remainder bins. What was it about the James Bond novels in particular that attracted so many allies, fans, enthusiasts, fantasists, translators, dreamers, advertisers, entrepreneurs, and parodists? Surely their presence made a difference; they attracted co-actors; they helped make things happen.

The Latourian model of the nonhuman actor, moreover, presumes no necessary measure of scale, size, or complexity. It includes not only individual novels or films, but also characters, plot devices, cinematography, literary styles, and other formal devices that travel beyond the boundaries of their home texts to attract allies, generate attachments, trigger translations, and inspire copies, spin-offs, and clones. We are far removed, in other words, from an aestheticism in which art works are chastely sequestered from the worldly hustle and bustle, their individual parts relating only to each other. The appeal of Fleming's texts, as Bennett and Woolacott plausibly hypothesize, had much to do with their creation of a charismatic protagonist who moved easily into multiple media, times, and spaces, and proved adaptable to the interests and

emotions of different audiences. Characters from more rarefied milieus can be just as lively, triggering new connections as they travel across place and time: think of the worldwide enactment of Bloomsday or the afterlife of Emma Bovary as a still resonant touchstone for a particular kind of reader.

Most fictional characters, of course, are born only to expire with an almost unseemly haste. In "The Slaughterhouse of Literature," Franco Moretti conjures up the desolate expanses of the literary graveyard: even while some works prove remarkably energetic, leapfrogging across time and space, the vast majority is soon lost from sight—ninety-nine and a half percent, according to Moretti, even within the relatively restrained publishing milieu of Victorian England. Why do some texts survive and so many vanish? For Moretti, the answer lies in the force of form. Tracing the evolution of detective fiction, he argues that the invention of a formal device—namely the technique of the clue—helps explain the durability of Sherlock Holmes and the rapid obsolescence of most of his fictional peers.[21] The clue, in other words, functioned as an actor, in Latour's terms, and the reasons for the survival of Holmes were neither arbitrary nor purely ideological (if Arthur Conan Doyle was an apologist for patriarchal rationality, so were many of his compatriots whose works vanished without trace). Whether our sample consists of Renaissance plays, modernist poems, or Hollywood blockbusters, some examples will prove more mobile, portable, and adaptable to the interests of different audiences than others.

And yet the social make-up, buying power, and beliefs of audiences also remain more central to the equation than Moretti seems ready to concede. A text's formal properties, after all, cannot single-handedly decide or determine its cross-temporal reach, which also pivots on the vagaries and contingencies of its relations with many other actors—humans, other texts, institutions. Literary works go in and out of vogue; what was once indispensable come to seem obsolete and old-hat, while works overlooked on their first publication can acquire an energetic, even frenetic, afterlife. The reasons for these shifts are thematic and political as well as formal; that Hemingway's stock has gone down, while Kate Chopin steadily accumulates visibility and prestige, is hardly a matter explicable by literary devices alone. Texts do not act by themselves, but only in tandem with countless other, often unpredictable, co-actors.

Conclusion

Digesting the implications of this idea demands, I've been suggesting, a swerve away from more familiar ways of apportioning agency and

power via a text/context distinction. Of course, one possibility would be redefine this distinction rather than abandon it, revising the concept of context in order to render it more fragrant. And yet the remorseless pressure of context's prior usage, I wager, is likely to coax us back into the familiar mindset of container versus contained, of coercion versus resistance. In this regard, the preceding pages have looked askance at the conviction that the texts we study are permanently engaged in coercing, mystifying, and hoodwinking their readers. In such scenarios, texts are munificently awarded supermanlike powers with the one hand, only to have them immediately whisked away with the other. A novel is charged and found guilty of manufacturing docile bourgeois subjects but this jaw-dropping achievement—how remarkable, if true!—turns out to be the mere reflex of systems of power steering the action behind the scenes, occult contextual forces that fully determine without themselves being determined. In such a scenario, texts turn out to be passive intermediaries rather than active mediators, servile henchmen and bully boys entirely at the beck and call of their shadowy, omnipotent, and all-seeing masters.[22]

The insufficiencies of this scenario, however, should not drive us into the arms of an equally favored idiom of subversion, resistance, negation, transgression, and rupture. Literary works, I've been arguing, are not actors in this rugged, individualist sense, not lonely rebels pitted against the implacable forces of the contextual status quo. If they make a difference, they do so only as co-actors and codependents, enmeshed in a motley array of attachments and associations. They gain strength and vitality from their alliances; "emancipation," remarks Latour, "does not mean 'freed from bonds', but *well*-attached."[23] Theory's affinity for a rhetoric of marginality and negativity prevents us from seeing that a text's sociability—that is, its embedding in numerous networks and its reliance on multiple mediators—is not an attrition, diminution, or co-option of its agency, but the very precondition of it. The works that we study and teach—including the most antinomian texts of Beckett or Blanchot, Brecht or Butler—could never have come to our attention without the input of countless co-actors: publishers, advertisers, critics, prize committees, reviews, word-of-mouth recommendations, departmental decisions, old syllabi, new syllabi, textbooks and anthologies, changing critical tastes and scholarly vocabularies, and last, but not least, the desires and attachments of ourselves and our students. Some of these mediators, to be sure, will prove more helpful, desirable, generous, or respectful of their object than others, but the fact of mediation is not a regrettable lapse into complicity or collusion but a fundamental precondition of being known. Unbought, unread, uncriticized, untaught, these literary and critical texts would languish in limbo, forever invisible and impotent.

Meanwhile, our conventional models of context take these multidirectional linkages and cast them into coffinlike containers called periods. Instead of swarms of actors moving toward each other, we imagine an immobile textual object enclosed within an all-determining contextual frame. Frozen in time and in space, the literary work is deprived of the very mobility that forms the precondition of our own experience of it. Impaled on the pin of our historical categories and coordinates, it exists only as an object-to-be-explained rather than a fellow actor and cocreator of relations, attitudes, and attachments. Of course, everything said that has been said so far underscores the impossibility of simply abolishing, overcoming, or cancelling out the categories of our own intellectual history. The context concept is itself an actor, one that has enjoyed a remarkable long and successful run. But if we put context temporarily in abeyance, as we surely can, if we orient ourselves to ask other kinds of questions and to puzzle over other kinds of problems, how might our thinking change?

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NOTES

1 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 148.

2 Lawrence Grossberg, *Bringing It All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 255.

3 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 148.

4 Rita Felski, "Suspicious Minds," *Poetics Today* 32, no. 2 (2011): 215–34.

5 See, for example, Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, "Queering History," *PMLA* 120, no. 5 (2005): 1608–17; Carolyn Dinshaw et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ* 13, nos. 2–3 (2007): 177–95; Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, eds., *Presentist Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2006); Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003); Jennifer Summit and David Wallace, "Rethinking Periodization," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2007), Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); John Bowen, "Time for Victorian Studies?" *Journal of Victorian Culture* 14, no. 2 (2009): 282–93; Ed Cohen, "Confessions of a Pseudo-Victorianist, Or How I fell Ass-Backwards and Landed in a Period (a Screed)," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27, no. 2 (1999): 487–94.

6 Wai Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA* 112, no. 5 (1997): 1061. For an interesting recent example of cross-temporal comparison, see Lauren M. E. Goodlad, "Trollopian 'Foreign Policy': Rootedness and Cosmopolitanism in the Mid-Victorian Global Imaginary," *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (2009): 437–54.

7 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 75.

8 Harris, *Untimely Matter*, 2.

9 Jennifer Fleissner, "Is Feminism a Historicism?" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 21, no. 1 (2002): 45–66.

10 Karl Heinz Bohrer, "The Tragic: A Question of Art, not Philosophy of History," *New Literary History* 41, no. 1 (2010): 35–51.
11 Bruce Robbins, "Afterword," *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (2007): 1650.
12 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 71.
13 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 72.
14 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 40.
15 A separate model of the agency of artworks—though with intriguing parallels—is developed by Alfred Gell in *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). See also Eduardo de la Fuente's pertinent discussion, drawing on both Gell and Latour, in "The Artwork Made Me Do It: Introduction to the New Sociology of Art," *Thesis Eleven* 103, no. 1 (2010): 3–9.
16 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 236.
17 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 236.
18 My thinking on this issue has benefited from Thom Dancer's paper "Between Knowledge and Belief: J. M. Coetzee, Gilles Deleuze and the Present of Reading" and Cristina Vischer Bruns, *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What it Means for Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 2011).
19 Tony Bennett, "Texts in History: The Determination of Readings and their Texts," *The Journal of the Mid-West Modern Language Association* 18, no. 1 (1985): 7.
20 Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 64.
21 Franco Moretti, "The Slaughter House of Literature," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000): 207–27.
22 I should point out that rejecting this scenario does not prevent us from objecting to what a text is saying, on political or any other grounds, only from buttressing our claims by relying on a particular ontology of fiction or a theology of power.
23 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 21.