

## Text and Context: Where Does a Text End?

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### ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses the nature of text and its relations with context. There are two arguments. The main argument is that it is no longer possible to draw the boundaries which separate text from context because recent definitions of text subsume much of what was traditionally seen as context. The second argument is that this new concept of a boundless text is nowhere more explicit than in literary texts.

**Key terms:** Text, context, multiplicity of meaning, self-referentiality

### ÖZET:

Bu makalede metnin özellikleri ve metin-bağlam ilişkileri ele alınmaktadır. Tartışılan konulardan biri, metnin sınırsızlığı ve eskiden bağlam olarak adlandırılan şeylerin çoğunun artık metnin kendi içinde görülmesidir. İkincisi ise metnin sınırsız olma özelliğinin en çok edebiyat metinlerinde ortaya çıktığı iddiasıdır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Metin, bağlam, anlam çokluğu, öz-göndergesel özellik

In any kind of discussion or argument it is necessary to define one's terms. Unless we make sure that we use certain terms to mean certain things, arguments don't go very far. The terms that need to be defined here are 'text' and 'context', but these are not easy terms to define. What is Text? What is Context? The answer depends whether they are meant to be taken as empirical or philosophical questions. Stanley Fish begins his famous essay titled "Is there a Text in This Class?" by telling an anecdote about one of his colleagues at Johns Hopkins University. On the first day of the term one of the students asks this professor whether or not there is a text in his course. "Yes," he replies confidently, "it is the *Norton*

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*Anthology of Literature*". "No, no," says the student, "I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?" (1989, 525).

Obviously, the student is more interested in the professor's position on the status of the text than whether or not there is a required textbook for that particular course. According to Fish, this confusion is caused by the fact that the same question is capable of being understood both ways, and both interpretations are equally legitimate. For "sentences emerge only in situations, and within those situations, the normative meaning of an utterance will always be obvious or at least accessible, although within another situation that same utterance, no longer the same, will have another normative meaning that will be no less obvious and accessible" (Fish, 526). If we take the student's question in Fish's example as the text, the "situation" he talks about is the context.

What goes wrong in the communication related in the anecdote is that the student and the professor assume different contexts for the same question, because they belong to different interpreting communities. Fish's "interpreting communities" are thus people who are accustomed to interpret things in similar contexts, which are themselves created by social and institutional power, i.e. the power to impose meaning.

According to this view, texts do not precede interpretation; on the contrary, they emerge from the interpretive strategies that various interpretive communities use to understand them. Context, on the other hand, comes to mean not just the immediate situation in which an utterance is heard, but something as large as all the social, political and ideological factors that shape an individual's interpretive strategies.

Although in Fish's view it is the context which creates the text, the text/context relationship on even a purely linguistic level suggests otherwise. Because the word "text" is embedded in the word "context", the text occupies a central position within it and becomes the center of attention. Thus, all discussions of context necessarily begin from the text.

This kind of study of text/context relationships, however, is possible only if we accept Mieke Bal's definition of texts as "finite, structured whole[s] composed of language signs" (1985, 5) and see everything that surrounds them as contexts. In its most basic sense this means the examination of the relationship between text and context by providing background information on cultural, socio-political, geographical and historical contexts to facilitate the understanding and interpretation of texts. But such analyses risk the danger of generating more talk on contexts than on the actual texts themselves.

Today, our understanding of both texts and contexts has changed considerably. Instead of assuming a clear demarcation between text and context, with the implication that the text is the kernel of our investigation with the context providing a frame, we now ask such questions as "Where does a text end?". As the interactions between text and context get more complex, texts themselves become more and more inclusive, usurping the space which is traditionally allocated to context. We no longer talk about a text but of many different types of text such as a subtext, a paratext, an architext, a hypertext, an hypotext, an

intertext, a metatext, a countertext and countless others. How much of the traditional idea of context is implicit in each of these categories? Is context something that really surrounds a text, or is it actually embedded in or subsumed by the text, deconstructing the binary and blurring the line of distinction between text and context? If context is an extension of the text *where indeed, if ever, does a text end?* Can we no longer think of context as the sum total of conditions that give rise to a given text? While traditional text/context studies have a tendency of concentrating more on the production history of works as external to texts, more recent understandings of context as a part or extension of text has shifted the attention to texts' engagements with this history, textual mediations and reception, so that what matters now in context studies is how and where a given text is placed, whom it is supposed to address and how it is heard. These concerns direct the critics' attention more to the text than to its supposedly surrounding context and enables readers to look for clues of these complex relationships within the text itself through a close reading, which is dramatically different from the close reading strategies of the New Criticism.

This new understanding of a boundless text and the notion of the primacy of the text began with post-structuralism in the second half of the 20th century. For Roland Barthes any text is an intertext because it is "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (1977, 146). Unlike Mieke Bal, Barthes refuses to demarcate the boundaries of text. Instead, he defines it as "a methodological field", where the interplay of signification extends ad infinitum (1981, 39). In Barthes's terminology, the finished computable object, which has a material existence and occupies a physical space (on the shelves of a library, for example) is not text but work. "The work is held in the hand, the text in language" (1990, 167). Thus, Barthes sees "everything from the format of the book to the socio-historical determinations which produced that book" 'heterogeneous' to language, while "the text remains homogeneous to language through and through" (1981, 39-40). And since, according to post-structuralism, language is characterized by free play and cannot be totalized in the absence of a "center which arrests and grounds" meaning, so does text defy any limits we would like to impose on it (J.Derrida, 1989, 161).

In Barthes's "Theory of Text", text is something which is felt in a work but it overflows finished structures and requires the active participation of the reader in order to be "produced"(40). No need to say, of course, that each different engagement with it produces a different text. Such an idea of text not only undermines the text's stability, but it also blurs the traditional division between subject and object.

Yet, even if we talk about "texts as works", their ontological status is not as clear as Barthes suggests. Roman Ingarden begins his famous inquiry about *The Literary Work of Art* by asking if it is a real or an ideal object. Following Ingarden, René Wellek and Austin Warren state that it is "neither real (physical, like a statue) nor mental (psychological, like the experience of light or pain) nor ideal (like a triangle)". Instead, they conclude, it is "an object of knowledge *sui generis* which has a special ontological status. It is a system of norms of ideal concepts which are intersubjective. They must be assumed to exist in

collective ideology, changing with it, accessible only through individual mental experiences, based on the sound structure of its sentences” ( 1978, 156). Although Wellek and Warren accept that a literary work resembles the system of language, that its life depends on its being actually experienced by a reader, and that over the course of its lifetime it constantly changes, they still think that there is something in it which remains the same throughout the ages (155). This is some “structure of determination” which prevents the act of cognition from being arbitrary and totally subjective (152).

This tendency to perceive objects as structured wholes is a human tendency which cannot be easily dispensed with. According to Gestalt Psychology human perception itself depends on this very basic impulse. Although we cannot clearly determine the ontological status of a literary text, justifying F.W. Bateson’s question “If the *Mona Lisa* is in the Louvre, where is *Hamlet*?”, and although we grant that text is something that overflows work, we still see texts as totalities “composed of language signs”. Our pattern-making faculty and our desire to fulfill its needs can thus be used to explain the appeal of art. Art organizes the raw material of life into carefully constructed gestalts and it is the recognition of these configurations which we find both satisfying and pleasurable. In *Feeling and Form* Susanne Langer maintains that we need to make even actual experience coherent before we begin to understand it. So “we ‘put it into words,’ tell it to ourselves, compose it in terms of ‘scenes’, so that in our minds we can enact all its important moments” (1953, 400). Literary texts as aesthetic wholes answer this need in humans to arrange and organize experience. If we go back to our original question about where texts end, according to this view, we are obliged to say that they end where the composition ends. But texts are actual events as well as material beings embodied in language. The language from which they are woven and the eventness of the production and actualization of texts by different readers make them subject to change. The presumed stability of text is a phenomenon that can be attributed to our inability to perceive anything beyond the gross forms of things. Nietzsche said:

We are not subtle enough to perceive the probably absolute *flow of becoming*; the *permanent* exists only thanks to our coarse organs which summarize things and reduce them to common levels, when in fact nothing exists in that form. The tree is at each instant a new thing; we assert *form* because we do not grasp the subtlety of an absolute movement.

Roland Barthes adds that “The text is likewise this tree to which we can provisionally give a name only because of the coarseness of our organs (1981, 45). This organic theory of text, which is very different from the organicism of the Romantics or the New Critics, sees the text as a dynamic space which resists fixation and formalization.

Much less it is “an object of knowledge”. Because the subject/object division is deconstructed at its root by this new theory of text, texts themselves become all inclusive, like black holes with a magnetic power which draws everything to itself, making escape

impossible. In this approach everything that is traditionally seen as context becomes an aspect of text. Thus textual studies must be aware of the eventness of any analysis and must take into consideration all contextual participations in a given text concerning its production, mediation and reception.

The boundlessness of text and the immensity of its gravitational field is nowhere more emphasized than in literary texts in general and poetic texts in particular. In Jerome J. McGann's words, while, as highly self-conscious constructions, they "turn their readers back upon themselves [and] make them attentive to what they are doing when they read" (1991, 11), they also turn inward and internalize anything that approaches them with the intention of breaking their code, for "Literary works do not know themselves and cannot be known, apart from their specific modes of existence/resistance" (11).

This can be illustrated by looking at a short poem by Tennyson, published when he was only 21. The poem is titled "The Kraken" and comes from the first solo collection of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* of 1830. The Kraken is an enormous sea monster found in Scandinavian myth and sea folklore and here is the poem:

#### **The Kraken**

Below the thunders of the upper deep;  
Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,  
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep  
The Kraken sleepeth: faintest sunlights flee  
About his shadowy sides: above him swell  
Huge sponges of millennial growth and height;  
And far away into the sickly light,  
From many a wondrous grot and secret cell  
Unnumbered and enormous polypi  
Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green.  
There had he lain for ages and will lie  
Battening upon huge sea worms in his sleep,  
Until the latter fire shall heat the deep;  
Then once by man and angels to be seen,  
In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.

Because we do not expect a 19<sup>th</sup> century poet to seriously write a poem about the Kraken, our first impulse is to read this as a symbolic poem. What was the appeal of this mythical figure for Tennyson? How can we break its code? However, by carefully *decontextualizing* his poem, i.e. by refraining from supplying any hints as to the symbolic meaning of the Kraken, Tennyson in fact tricks his readers into interpreting his poem in a

variety of ways, thereby multiplying meaning. The poem can indeed be interpreted as his response to the theories of extinction and catastrophe advanced by the natural sciences and to the decline of religion in early 19<sup>th</sup> century. "The Kraken" thus becomes a very powerful tool of talking back to scientists by advancing a romantic/religious view, uncontaminated by science. It can also be read as a poem which reflects as well as challenges Tennyson's (as well as his contemporaries') fear of living in a world where experience threatens to have no meaning beyond itself. In such interpretations the Kraken is a sublime figure, who will make its presence forcibly felt by those who create the tumult on the upper deep. But its wrath will be so great that, when urged to surface, it will destroy itself along with everything else. In this version of the poem, the sublime must be understood only as a felt presence, a matter of faith; if it sinks to human level it destroys itself. To understand the poem in these very broad terms does not only contradict textual evidence (because the Kraken rises to the surface instead of sinking to depths), but also significantly reduces the poem to its bare essentials. For this kind of interpretation can be sustained just as legitimately on a much shorter version of the poem as in the following lines:

Far, far beneath the abysmal sea,  
The Kraken sleepeth. . . .  
There had he lain for ages and will lie  
Until the latter fire shall heat the deep:  
Then once by man and angels to be seen,  
In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.

Yet even in this very short version, there are aspects of the poem which cannot be explained away by the traditional historical approach. For instance, the poem's unmistakable apocalyptic tone, with its reference to the abysmal sea, the latter fire, angels, the inverted resurrection motif (Jesus dies and rises, the Kraken rises and dies), all imply the evil nature of the Kraken, which shall be eliminated from the face of the earth with the Second Coming. Of course it is still possible to account for this apocalyptic faith in terms of the socio-historical conditions. Apocalyptic writers look upon their days as the worst of times hoping for a divine intervention in human history, as in Yeats's memorable poem: "Surely some revelation is at hand/ Surely the Second Coming is at hand". Yet, even if we see Tennyson's own time as a time of trouble prompting him to renew his faith in the redemptive power of God, what are we going to make of the Kraken's association with evil? The Kraken is not represented as the cause of evil in the poem. On the contrary, it sleeps peacefully on the ocean floor only to be awakened by the latter fire. In other words, the Kraken does not do anything to deserve the punishment promised in the apocalyptic prophecy.

Another way of reading this poem, as Paul Turner has done, is to understand the deep sea as "the recesses of the human mind" and the Kraken's submarine existence and sleep as a form of "extreme self-indulgence" (1976, 55). Thus, claims Turner, Tennyson seems to say

that “the stuff of poetry is internal, subjective experience” (54). Similarly, Timothy Peltason reads the poem as an allegory of psychic retreat and the ocean floor as the preconscious, the mind’s ineffable and fathomless depth prior to speech or meaning (1985, 143-70). Matthew Rowlinson also sees the Kraken as “a figure of repression” (1994, 58) and interprets the text as “an allegory of entry into Symbolic order, in which the Kraken’s sleep would figure as a deeply nostalgic representation of the body before its subjection to the logic of the signifier” (59).

All of these interpretations ignore, after a point, the materiality of the text, which says none of these things. It only gives us a very detailed, almost scientific description of the Kraken and its submarine existence. When we come back to the text, we still see it peacefully asleep, uninvaded by dreams. If the Kraken signifies anything beyond itself, its signified seems to have been lost in the oceanic depths.

This brings us to the last possibility: the possibility that the poem is really about the Kraken *as it is described in this poem*. The fact that there is indeed no external referent for this creature, who lives in a state of inertia at the bottom of the sea reinforces the poem’s self-referentiality. The object of representation can be found nowhere except in this poem. The poem’s way of leading each attempt at interpretation back to square one is remarkable. Each time the Kraken is brought to the surface to be seen by man and angels, it dies. The terrible circularity of its life is enacted through each reading when we plunge to depths to find it. Nothing can escape this circularity, because no reading can entirely exhaust the text. Like Poe’s purloined letter in Lacan’s analysis of the story, Tennyson’s Kraken is only an envelope which cannot be unsealed and made to reveal its content. But, as long as there is a free flow of signifiers, there will be endless attempts at finding their signifieds. As Jerome J. McGann asserts, every text has not only “variants of itself screaming to get out” but also a multiplicity of hidden readers and audiences “scripted [in them] at the most material levels” (1991, 10).

Thus, each attempt at interpretation is to wake the Kraken, only to put it back to sleep. For the next reader will again find it not as a dead body on the surface of the water, but still sleeping its uninvaded sleep in Tennyson’s lines, as it has done for ages.

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