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NOTES TOWARDS A CONTEMPORARY POETICS OF COTEXT AND ITS CULTURAL LITERARY CONTEXTS

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Abstract: *The universal concept of context as well as the more specialized – linguistics or bible studies related – one of cotext can and to a certain extent have already proved quite useful in analyzing, assessing, and even writing contemporary poetry. The article comments on the poetics of Robert Duncan, Elizabeth Bishop, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Jay Parini, and David Baker in circumscribing the cultural and literary contexts for engaging with a proposed new definition of cotext in poetry and poetics, drawn on the acceptance it has in biblical studies. Cotext is thus redefined as a set of contexts for certain elements/themes/topics (including the topic of “context” itself) as they evolve within a oeuvre or poetics (Bishop’s, Rich’s, Baker’s, etc.) and/or develop in various sections (contexts) of the same text or versions of that text. Given its millennium-long background – under this definition – and the spectacular evolution towards a major element in writing poetry, a lyric mode, and even a genre (Eliot’s Waste Land, Pound’s Cantos, the profusion of contemporary renditions of Greco-Latin classics in English “original” versions, from Robert Hass to C.K. Stead to Dan Chiasson and onward) in modernism and postmodernism, poetic cotext has generated an enormous corpus of literature, and with the more recent flarf, google, and assemblage-like modes of “composition” and performance, it seems to gain more and more ground in wider and wider contexts that both poets and audiences come across and can draw on every day.*

“Context” and “cotext” sound so similar, but the sensible differences in meaning – while the former basically refers to the part of a text or statement that surrounds a particular word or passage, or the circumstances in which an event occur, the latter signifies in linguistics and in Bible studies the various specific phrases, wider fragments and self-contained instances of discourse in which a certain phrase or text occurs – often result in relevant interactions and conversions that, as I will try to prove in this article, have and shall affect most significant evolutions in modern and contemporary poetry. The art of poetry provides by its nature new contexts (“new and strange” in Shakespeare’s phrase) for everything it touches, transporting (as the etymological meaning of “metaphor” conveys) and translating – both as in languages and geometry – words, feelings, thought, perception, rhythm, characters, images, sounds, stories, etc., into new and often unexpected spaces and (re)configurations.

The main vehicle for reaching ever new contexts and providing alternative contexts is imagination. Adrienne Rich has spoken powerfully of the transformative power of the imagination by means of which “writing is renaming” (Rich 1978: 34). The radical and political power of arts thus translates a cultural text in a wider context in which access to power is not limited to only certain entries. This wider transformative context actually redefines power itself in a manner that purports the very dismantling of patriarchal structures, and thus “rename” the given “text” by denying it too. Power, apparently paradoxically residing now in poets and poetry, becomes therefore not the “power of domination, but just access to sources” (Rich, *On lies* 43; and Jay Parini’s discussion of her poetics, Parini 10-11).

Such sources are sometimes there in the culture, open to anyone, but access to them is not so much a matter of affordability or logistics but rather a personal asset in the seeker. In reading the correspondence of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov, Rich discovers how the latter was fascinated by the former’s “fearless appetite” and “zest for different things, different worlds really” (Rich, *On lies* 73). The “sources” for such power were, Rich determines, in the case of such poets their “freedom from the enclosures of academia; [for] these poets were each others’ workshops” (idem). Such freedom and openness actually go much further than that, as Duncan himself writes Levertov, “...I aim at keeping my consciousness open (my ideal would be an expanding awareness)” which would realize *the* (Romantic and modernist absolutism) actual plenitude of human existence by means of *some* (typically modernist, and then postmodern skepticism and awareness of artificiality) artifact – “We too if we are to realize some wide and generous risk, to let a poem go out that far to include (you say the whole man) – well some substitute – [...]” (Rich, *A Human Eye* 75)

It is more than relevant to follow such developments of (virtually) the same cultural context in its contrasting evolutions – Rich thoughtfully reads and validly analyzes Levertov and especially Duncan’s poetics and relevantly underscores stances like those in which the latter views culture and poetry not as fields of competing individualisms and inhibiting criticism, but rather as a geological concurrence of language agglomerates and accumulations. “What if poetry were not some realm of personal accomplishment, open field day race for critics to judge [...] but a record of what we are, like the record of what the earth is left in rocks, left in language?” (Rich, *A Human Eye* 74). Still, Rich counterpoints with remarks about how, in spite of this cosmically harmonizing vision, the poets under discussion did criticize. Beyond the commonsensical observation of the distance between stated (ideal) principles and every day practice (so natural not only) in these poets, Rich also adds a note closer to her own aesthetic – the one whereby language is inadequate if it runs in the old cycles (of nature, of minerals and geology as above) and remains revolutionary (in the etymological sense, just as for Duncan poetry ought to be *radical* etymologically as well, that is, recuperative of roots and thus genuinely innovative) and fails to be transformative.

Still, Duncan's romantically integrative vision paradoxically proves more relevant in certain cultural contexts nowadays than the (literally) radical one of Rich. Dana Gioia has showed in his 2004 *Disappearing Ink* title essay that a new literary and cultural context emerges in contemporary US and not only, where printed poetry loses ground to oral and performance ones and where the true surprises and innovations come not from "literary" poetry but from popular variants of it. In face of the great explosion of the latter and its overwhelming bearing on cultures and media, Gioia assesses that what we need now is not so much a critical appraisal of such works and phenomena but rather "an accurate description of what is happening [...] – an up-to-date road map of American poetry, not a Michelin dining guide" (Gioia 9). Besides, Gioia shrewdly argues, while literary poetry has grown seclusive and relevant to just the initiated few, and as innovation comes from the margins, literary criticism is so such much the more losing relevance as its main defining features presently are "invisible, incomprehensible, inaccessible, and insincere" (Gioia 26).

But for all the stress that he lays on new multimedia cultures and on the gradual decrease of the print ones, Gioia cannot but emphasize at the same time the great importance of local experience and values and how living in a certain particular place and being immersed in those specific realities and language(s) still influence our lives and mentalities more than a great deal. This is a notion of significant appeal to poets that are usually called regionalist, and among them, though his complexities and nuances cannot be easily contained by any univocal tag, David Baker is one who both illustrates and challenges the category, a writer that accepts being referred to as a Midwest poet while he also dismisses "any form of blunt parochialism and pride-of-place, be it local, regional, or national" (Baker *Show Me Your Environment* unpaginated). In a lecture he gave at the University of Bucharest in November 2009, "Show Me Your Environment," of which a shorter version has meanwhile appeared in *American Poet*, Baker subtly circumscribes a dialectic of the self and the surrounding environment and community in a way that can make poetry relevant as cultural text that aims at making various contexts perceivable, as polyvalent and concurrent. While acknowledging the adamant value of the person and the self – especially as asserted in certain feisty verse of Bishop, for instance – Baker typically qualifies that (as ever-shifting, questionable) with the complementary and wider interaction provided by the other and the environment, as in the title quote from Pasternak (whose relevant continuation is "...and I will tell you who you are") or one of Gluck's definitive verse-verdicts, "one's position determines one's feelings." Baker actually knows how to question and thoroughly scrutinize everything – his most familiar or allusively dear notions included – without falling for mere relativism or indeterminacy, but quite consistently (and only apparently paradoxically so) in search for what is most serious and "deep," even capital. While courageously examining, for instance, the perils of a full-hearted song-like lyricism of a major poetry such as that of Plumly's, he shrewdly uncovers there a wise employment of clichés and an unexpectedly exemplary postmodernism combined with deeply unsettling reflections on the condition of humans,

the environment, and language. To Baker, discerning such aspects is following a track beyond even the most difficult to answer concerns of the craft, towards assessing the possible fate and hopeful rescue of the species.

The accruing obituary [in a Plumly poem] is for friends and neighbors, memorial in its gravity and stunning in its detailing. But it serves as obituary also for the vanishing “swampy interior” and “dense scrub undergrowth” of the land, the place, the site of language but also of loss. Jonathan Bate argues forcefully in *The Song of the Earth* that this fragility and this essential beauty is the contemporary poet’s deepest task of attention and articulation. Let me say that again. It is—I contend—fundamental to our survival not just as artists but as a species. (Baker *Show Me Your Environment*, unpaginated, emphasis mine)

Baker points out such questions and their ultimate gravity without providing answers, or at least not univocal ones, but preferring to make room for complexities that could not be diagnosed or solved univocally. Not only does he refuse to choose any of the poles of possible options in contemporary poetry, but he also unmasks such bipolarities as fundamentally wrong or false and he seeks ways of reaching the truth that is beyond them. Regional, yes, but always drawing relations to other places (geographically, culturally); the self, yes, but in continuous concurrence with the other and with/as the environment. His poetics is thus his poetry and his poetry his poetics, as the essay itself becomes a way of defining and circumscribing an environment of poets and their poetries (of Midwest but not only) – among whom the protean and “furiously diverse” C.G. Waldrep is probably the most intriguing one – that works as a context for surrounding, making manifest, and defining his own voice and his own poetry, just as his own poetical vision and his voice are (as an a-priori context) those that pick and portray the poets we are presented with in this text. “This is precisely my point: To continue to imagine webs of relation, housed in place and self, that may extend to other places and other people. Not the erasure of either, but the extension and complication of both” (idem).

Such relations are there and work in establishing/ (re)defining the self also as referred to the other as language. And the self may not only be extending and complicating, but also forming and growing towards maturity. Louise Glück has written about “possibilities of context” in her essay “Education of a Poet” where she confesses about how in her early years she was fascinated by the relations between words on a page as an opportunity for them to develop surprisingly their own “selves” made of unsuspected meanings, denotations and connotations. “What I responded to, on the page was the way a poem could liberate, by means of a word’s setting, through subtleties of timing, of pacing, that world’s full and surprising range of meaning” (3-4). The relationship between a poet’s growth and their struggling with/learning from language goes in modern times as far back as Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, and it has created a context for poetry in which voice could appropriate registers previously inaccessible, since “unpoetical,” “prosaic.” The trend went on until stages where the concept of “voice” itself

(along with “self,” “person,” etc) was no longer acceptable, as in Language poetry, but even then (or, to some, even now, in post-Language or other parallel evolutions) a context would be present and affecting the poem and its life in one way or another. In a famous poem, “The Republic of Reality,” Charles Bernstein addresses, among other things, this very issue (a typically Language poem’s contextualism, to approach or pick as their “(lack of) subject” theoretical issues!) of the context. “This line is stripped of emotion./ This line is no more than an/ illustration of a European/ theory. This line is bereft/ of a subject. This line/ has *no reference apart/ from its context* in/ this line. This line/ is only about itself [etc]” (312, emphasis mine). All these harmless funny paradoxes (and no oxymorons) by denial of any context actually speak of a context, be it as impossible as it may be, namely the one in which such poetics deny or continuously questions the possibility of verse to represent reality.

Between these two poles – Glück’s one, where interactions between words make them bloom within a context of magical/mythological resplendence (a tinge of Emerson’s conviction that language is fossil poetry can definitely be sensed here) and Bernstein’s one, with its cruelly/ironically disenchanting view of no resounding connecting contexts at all – lies the territory of (in certain cases) modern will to literalness, precision, and non-ambiguity, Frost’s “momentary stay against confusion,” and, closer to our times, Elizabeth Bishop’s obsession with meanings and their multiplicities hopefully converging to unity. In what has been diagnosed as an untypical Bishop poem (cf. Dodd 136), the rather typical oscillation of the poet between unresolved states of mind (with indeed, an untypical lack of the usual land/sea/cityscapes and oneiric/effaced characters, and in this respect Dodd is perfectly right) sinuously approaches a presumed point of convergence somewhere beyond tormenting confusion.

The tumult in the heart
keeps asking questions.
And then it stops and undertakes to answer
in the same tone of voice.
No one could tell the difference.

Uninnocent, these conversations start,
and then engage the senses,
only half-meaning to.
And then there is no choice,
and there is no sense;

until a name
and all its connotation are the same.

(“Conversation,” Bishop 77)

While Dodd is again right in signaling the rhyme-scheme and the quasi-sonnet rhetorical development of the poem, as well as in, so significantly for our topic, referring understanding of this particular poem to the *context* of poems surrounding it in the

collection and the whole oeuvre, she misses the progress throughout the text towards clarity and convergence, while much of the pestering confusion and inexplicitness actually springs from difficulty, alterity, and even ineffability and not so much (definitely not exclusively) from moody obscure state of mind. Somewhat similarly to the earlier “Miracle for Breakfast,” this poem manages to accumulate and accommodate both negative perception and sarcastic critique on the one hand, and ardent (modernly secularized yet) spiritually intense experience, on the other. While “Conversation” can be indeed read as an ironical title for a troubled inconsistent and inconclusive soliloquy, it may also stand for spiritual exchanges – like in, for instance, St. John Cassian’s “conferences,” or, for that matter, conversations – and also, con-version, a word with ecstatic resonance that expresses here a “total” poetical practice that “engages the senses” in a *sense* beyond meaning (amazing sense distilled from ordinary meanings, as Dickinson would put it) and reaches a liberation from the senses and meanings towards the apparently absurd – “no sense” – and a conversion of arbitrary option into creative liberty as necessity – “no choice.” From this perspective, the conclusion of the poem fits better into place and comes up as a testimony of a unique experience, a quasi-mystical union, a unique inextricable marriage of vital content and formal constraint in poetry. Or, of name and connotation – since the mystical bend is present in the choice of “name” rather than “word,” a fundamental distinction in mystical practices, where sometimes (and for various reasons) “connotations” are used instead of the name proper, that is, cognomens, attributes, euphemisms, metonyms, etc, but their effectiveness is basically the same as they conjure one and the same presence; therefore, “a name and all its connotations are the same.”

This is, however, in no way saying that “Conversation” is a cryptically mystical (and so much the less religious) poem, but that Bishop masterfully uses the self-contained cotext of the poem to instill various and sometimes even contradictory possible ways of reading the text, while drawing wider and wider networks (Baker’s “web[s] of relation” realizing “the extension and complication of both”) within given or thus (re)generated contexts: the longer sequence (of which “Conversation” is only part one), the book/oeuvre as a totality, possible connective or connectable cultures (like the heterodox mysticism I tried to locate here, etc), politics and sexuality (read with her camouflaged yet edgy gay manifestos in mind, such as the wiry haywire meta-formal 1979 “Sonnet”, the poem also sheds an unexpected homoerotic light itself), etc.

Such potential mysticism is typically absent from Adrienne Rich’s poetry (although Bishop’s will to univocal convergence is also there, more powerful than ever) where, as David Baker comments in another essay – “Against Mastery,” from his book of prose *Heresy and the Ideal. On Contemporary Poetry* – although the Whitmanian theme of speaker’s obliteration (in the concluding section of “Song of Myself”) is still present, it is now bereft of any transcendental dimension and aims at locating and fixating the speaker on the earth. In, reviewing Rich’s *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, Baker finds social, political, racial, and, of course, feminist grounds for the poet’s anti-mastery

poetics. But what really caught my attention, as I was planning this article and trying to draw up a(n) (dis)order of poets and critics relevant in various ways to my subject, was a brief note that I would have otherwise enjoyed for the quick subtle distinction, but then would have just moved on to something else. “In ‘Two Arts,’ speaking directly to the occupation of the artist, and perhaps resisting the losses beautifully and ironically ‘mastered’ in Bishop’s ‘One Art,’ she clarifies the function as well as the formal property of her art: ‘you have a brutal thing to do.’” (Baker, *Heresy and the Ideal* 244) The parallel in this remark takes us back to Bishop and to her compulsive and multilayered both spiritual and profane tension in search for convergence and clarity, and to the fact that the latter goals are essential for Rich too, only without the metaphysical premise. Both such presumptions and their distinctive alternative developments come, as Baker states from the beginning of his essay, from Whitman, and we could add of course, in a slightly wider context, Emerson. To my mind and to the context I am (re)discovering here, the above mentioned observations are actually the marker of a gradually emerging thought (a graph that grows by linking discrete points within an expanding web of relations) that constitutes a context which comes back from the other and converges again onto the self, thus (re)generating cotext. Baker’s cotext will evolve from these web of relations to the self’s clarification of a cultural and poetical topos – in one of the essays contributed to *Radiant Lyre*, a book he would co-edit with Ann Townsend in 2007, this thought would find “a habitation and a name”. In “Elegy and Eros: Configuring Grief,” the image of heaven in the American psyche is identified, after closely reading certain poems of Whitman and Dickinson, not as otherworldly, celestial, or solely spiritual, but of this world and with a specific location – one will find it by going west and following the sun.

In these remarks I have totally altered the established acceptance “cotext” has in linguistics and have adapted the meaning it has in biblical studies for my own purpose. While in the former field it refers to words or language structures/constructions that occur most frequently in a language together with a certain word or phrase, the latter is about the words/sentences that appear in the Bible along with a certain statement/quote, the textual context, the texts that appear around a certain given text. In Bible studies it is in most cases more than relevant to look up the cotext of a text, as for instance one may come across the phrase “There is no God” not only once in the book, but the cotexts dramatically qualify that statement, as for instance in Psalm 14: 1, where we can read “Only a fool would say, “There is no God!” People like that are worthless; they are heartless and cruel and never do right.” My favorite example is a cotext that gets almost always overlooked, although it sheds an essentially revealing light on the fragment quoted so often in so many different contexts. “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s” (Matt. 22: 21) is a phrase one can hear now and then where it may make sense as well as where not so much so. But especially when it is meant as an encouragement to compromise or complacency it is used in a way that totally ignores and therefore contradicts the cotext: “...and unto God, the things that are God’s.”

In my comments above, though, I have employed cotext in the sense of contexts for certain elements/themes/topics (including the topic of “context” itself) as they evolve within a oeuvre or poetics (Bishop’s, Rich’s, Baker’s, etc) and/or develop in various sections (contexts) of the same text or versions of that text. As I have already focused above on the first part of this working definition, I will now focus on the second. As examples, one may consider for instance the motifs of the sun and the moon in *Anthony and Cleopatra* as equated with the protagonists, their dramatic evolution, and the alchemical/astrological treatment thereof, throughout the play; or, for versions of a text, the cotexts of love and loss in the traditional sixteenth-century rime “Western Wind,” its modern version “Blow West Wind” by Robert Penn Warren, and the more recently contemporary version of Warren’s version, “I Was There,” by Jay Parini, as detailed by the latter somewhere in his brilliant latest book, *Why Poetry Matters* (94-98), where the poet and critic opens an invaluable window on his own work and on the relationship between his and his mentor’s approach to writing, while shrewdly analyzing the tradition-versus-originality equation.

A very interesting version of this working concept of cotext was suggested to me by Helen Vendler’s book *Poets Thinking. Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats*, where, in the chapter dedicated to Whitman, while analyzing the poem “Sparkles from the Wheel” (42 et infra), the author uses a musical genre model, the reprise, to account for the structure of the poem, gradation of tone, and both enhancement and refining of vision. The poem presents in its first section a certain scene – a worker in the street, a knife-grinder sharpening a knife on a wheel – while in its second one it revisits the scene in a more personal, reflexive and passionate voice. In the terms of this article, the poet himself provides a cotext for his own text, a new version already included in the original, which therefore is already a duplicate. Duplicates invite duplicates, so I said to myself, let’s write a cotext for this cotext, or, a reprise of the reprise. And as always, a poem started in translation – I tried to translate it into Romanian and, as is so often the case with what I do, my translation started to also include improvisation (translations actually always include improvisation, the differences come from the degree and proportion of the latter only); just like in jazz or rock, I picked up the theme and played it “my way,” that is, in a way I found more suitable for my time and culture by also including a political-cultural critique from the standpoint of a partial (voyeuristic) accessory. I presented my Romanian version at a couple of poetry readings and a few Margento gigs, but before I got to publish it, it caught poet and translator Martin Woodside’s attention, who translated it back into English (and thus “betrayed” it, as the Italians would say, or “cheated on” it, as Romanian classic Caragiale would mock), coming up with a reprise of a reprise’s reprise, a cotext’s cotext’s cotext, a Whitmanesque reprise’s reprise hopefully relevant to the American reader (too). “After Walt Whitman:”

There where the world buzzes even late at night
I found myself between a group of boys and girls at a shop window.

There, on the TV screens lined up wall to wall, in every corner
a naked woman (German, Scandinavian?) keeps tugging
at a hard penis dangling above her eyes; apparently that clean
day time programming turns pornographic at night, the shop clerks
long gone; she pulls at it slowly, rubs it, strokes it, plays around this way
and that a rhythmic motion, fast then slow, squeezing with a firm
but gentle hand, until the silvery jets spurt out,
streaming white sparkles of sex.

The scene and the science behind it, how they can enthrall
and impress me, that woman done up in such
lurid vitality, perfect fake breasts, looking up at an invisible man,
I myself in full effusion, fluent, a curious phantasm set afloat by
the here and now absorbed and arrested,
group (the town's G-spot neglected a vast concrete expanse)
of boys and girls at attention, the infrequent blinking raspy wheezing of night
traffic subsiding, the man's scratchy groaning, light swish of the hand,
a silver shower squirting, splashing, powder and mascara running over :
streaming white sparkle of sex.

(Tănăsescu 168)

Given its millennium-long background and the spectacular evolution towards a major element in writing poetry, a lyric mode, and even a genre (Eliot's *Waste Land*, Pound's *Cantos*, the profusion of contemporary renditions of Greco-Latin classics in English "original" versions, from Robert Hass to C.K. Stead to Dan Chiasson and onward) in modernism and postmodernism, poetic context has generated an enormous corpus of literature, and with the more recent flarf, google, and assemblage-like modes of "composition" and performance, it seems to gain more and more ground in wider and wider contexts that both poets and audiences come across and can draw on each and every busy feverish day.

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