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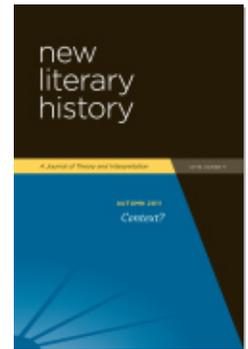
## Context, Idioculture, Invention

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# Context, Idioculture, Invention

Derek Attridge

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF context in the discursive practice to which we give the name literature (and cognate names in other European languages)? Taking the term to mean, in an admittedly imprecise way, the material and ideological conditions within which the acts of writing and reading occur,<sup>1</sup> there are three different, but related, moments to consider:

(1) In the creation of a work of literature, there is the question of the relation between the writer and his or her context;

(2) In the reading of a work of literature, there is the question of the relation between the reader and his or her immediate context;

(3) In the reading of a work of literature, there is the question of the relation between the reader and the original context of the writer.

We can explore these three moments separately. (There is also the question of the various contexts within which the work has been read *between* the moment of its original creation and the moment of its reading. I shall touch on this issue at the end of this essay.)<sup>2</sup>

## The Context of Creation

I argued in *The Singularity of Literature* that artistic creation (in contrast to mere production) takes place when an artist succeeds in exploiting the tensions, contradictions, or fissures in the cultural environment within which he or she is working in such a way that something—an object or a practice or a conceptual paradigm—hitherto nonexistent and apparently unthinkable comes into being.<sup>3</sup> (Creation understood in this way is not limited to artworks, but for the purposes of this essay I shall confine myself to the domain of art, as it is generally understood, and more particularly to literature.) It is evident that this new entity must have some relation to what already exists in the cultural field, since if it did not it would be entirely unperceivable, or perceivable only as an absurdity; the question to be asked, therefore, is: what is the nature of this relationship between, on the one hand, the acknowledged and,

on the other, the apparently unacknowledgeable to which the artist succeeds in gaining access? It cannot be one of reproduction or imitation or representation: even if a large part of what comes into being repeats or imitates or represents that which already exists, some element or principle must have been outside the realm of what can be known or felt for creation in the full sense to occur. To be outside that realm, but to have a relationship with it, the new—or the other, to use the language of *The Singularity of Literature*, borrowed from Levinas and Derrida—must be *excluded* in some way by the existing habits and norms that constitute the familiar or the same; that is to say, its nonexistence is not due to chance, to the contingent fact that no one has happened to bring it into being, but to its impossibility within those existing habits and norms.

This exclusion should not be understood as something that has happened as a historical event: it is rather that the relatively settled existence and degree of coherence of the cultural fabric depends on certain possibilities being kept outside the domain of the same. In order to bring the other into the realm of the same, the artist has to find a way of escaping the hold of those norms, in search of what we might call (unavoidably echoing Donald Rumsfeld) the unknown unknowns—unknown because the culture operates not only to exclude them but to exclude awareness of their exclusion. In order to achieve this, the artist takes advantage of the fact that culture is never seamless and monolithic: the result of a variety of historical forces often operating in conflict, it pulls in more than one direction at a time, it is constantly under pressure from alternative cultural formations (arising from differences in class, gender, generation, nation, and so on), and its efforts to occlude that which threatens it never wholly succeed. It is this fractured and turbulent character of culture that the artist exploits, heightening conflicts, prizing apart chinks in the fabric, pushing disruptive tendencies to the limit.

In this description, I've used "culture" as if it were an unproblematic concept. It is not, of course. To say that an artist works within, and upon, a particular culture (and that the reader reads within a particular culture) is to simplify a highly complex situation: any individual participates in a variety of overlapping cultures, none of which is stable, all of which are themselves internally divided. And "culture" here stands for many different kinds of entity, preference, and behavior, including habitual practices, mental frameworks, affective predispositions, and material conditions. Since the operation of the cultural context in the creation of an artwork initially takes place in the mind and body of an individual (working alone or with others in a group), what is relevant to our discussion is what I have called the "idioculture" of the artist: the singular, and constantly changing, combination of cultural materials and proclivities

that constitutes any individual subject, the product of a specific history of exposure to a variety of cultural phenomena. An idioculture is the internal, singular manifestation of the broader cultural field, registered as a complex of particular preferences, capabilities, memories, desires, physical habits, and emotional tendencies.<sup>4</sup> An important aspect of the artist's idioculture is the absorption of the appropriate *techné* governing, and providing resources for, the art form in question.<sup>5</sup>

This unique idioculture, in conjunction with the physical matter specific to the particular art form, constitutes the material out of which the artist creates the work. (It might be argued that the prospective audience's expectations and habits of mind are also part of this material, but in the creative process these are only hypotheses and thus part of the artist's idioculture.) Whatever degree of coherence an idioculture possesses at any given moment is the product of limitations on what can be thought and felt; and it is in challenging these limitations that creation occurs. Although it's tempting to think of the relation between artist and context as one that exists between a human individual on the one hand and an external field of objects and behaviors on the other, it's in fact the *internalized* context that provides the materials with which, and within (or against) which, creation occurs. While no one would deny that Yeats, for instance, engaged tirelessly with the external context of Irish politics, British publishing, existing poems, natural objects, human individuals, and so on, the creation of a poem was for him, as the creation of a literary work is for every writer, a matter of exploring and shaping the impress of that multifaceted and far from seamless external context upon his mind and body.

For the literary artist, the physical materials are usually of less importance than is the case in the other arts. Obvious exceptions are drama and, if we are including it among the literary arts, film. The history of poetry also provides examples of the creative exploitation of external materials, in this case the technologies of writing—one could cite the part played by the typewriter in opening up new possibilities in the development of modernist poetry, for instance.<sup>6</sup> (Here, as in all the arts, the material possibilities and limitations are significant only to the extent that the artist understands—or, more often, perhaps, discovers in practice—what can be done with them; and this understanding forms part of the artist's idioculture.) The most obvious material with which the writer works, language, is primarily a mental faculty, though some verbal arts—poetry and drama in particular—may treat the voice itself as a medium.<sup>7</sup> Creativity in the domain of language is usually manifested at the level of verbal collocations, syntax, or discursive connections, rather than at the level of the word—Carroll and Joyce being among the obvi-

ous exceptions. Generic conventions constitute another important set of contextual cultural materials, and beyond these are the conventions that govern the literary enterprise more generally. Beyond these again are broader conventions determining what may be said or written at a particular time in a particular place, what may be represented, even what may be thought. Then there is the field of what is known: historical knowledge, practical knowledge, scientific knowledge, and many more knowledges. Emotions, too, have a cultural dimension which the artist is likely to have absorbed. And one should not overlook the bodily dimension: rhythms, for instance, are learned at an early stage of life, and are lodged in the musculature as well as the brain. (Some aspects of rhythm are undoubtedly universal, but others are culture-specific, and are closely linked to the phonetic character of particular languages.<sup>8</sup>) In all these domains, opportunities for creativity lie in the operation of limits, the existence of boundaries to what may be thought, said, or felt; the creative writer uses what is allowable against itself in order to open up new areas, or exposes the existence of hitherto unrecognized boundaries in order to transcend them, or finds in the incommensurability of one domain with another the possibility of a fresh relationship between them. If the work has social consequences arising from its operation as literature (and it must always be remembered that literary texts can also function as historical documents, ethical examples, autobiographical revelations, psychological studies, and in many other nonliterary ways), this is the mechanism by means of which it happens.

Because the context within which a work of literature is created is largely a set of internalized materials, a large proportion of which are unconscious, and because creation is something different from the reorganization of what already exists (one might think here of the Coleridgean distinction between imagination and fancy), the phenomenon of creation is often portrayed as mysterious. Artists frequently describe the process as one in which the new configuration of language, sound, space, or color comes to them unexpectedly, from a source they cannot name. (The ancient idea of the Muse is no doubt a reflection of this experience.) This does not happen out of the blue, of course, but as the outcome of an intense engagement with existing materials; creation can therefore be described neither as wholly an act nor wholly an event, neither wholly something the artist does nor something that happens to the artist. I've used the compound term "act-event" elsewhere to refer to this hard-to-describe phenomenon. The artist's manipulation of the cultural materials constituting his or her idioculture, that is to say, is not done with a definite end in view—if the completed work could be known ahead of the process of creation it would not be creation of the

new or the other but simply a production within the framework of the old or the same.

Creation, then, is something an artist (or a group of artists working in conjunction) brings about, but also something that happens to the artist. It could also be said that creation happens to a culture: here we would be talking about the difference made by the new work of art to the culture at large. We need a new term for this event, however, as there is no guarantee that an individual's creation—which can only be the bringing into being of something new for that individual—will also bring something new into the culture. Two possible terms present themselves: we can say that the artist has produced an *original* work or, deploying a term more common outside the domain of art, that the new work is an *invention* (and, accordingly, that the artist has demonstrated either originality or inventiveness). Originality, in its most general sense, refers to the introduction into the culture of anything new, however fruitful or fruitless. The originality that is of importance in cultural history, however, is what Kant called “exemplary originality,” and it's this that I am equating with invention. In the third part of this essay, I shall make a distinction between the two terms, but for the moment, I want to keep both in play, as both are possible ways of referring to the relation of the historical event to its context that we are interested in. An invention or an original work, then, is an individual's creation that introduces into a culture a hitherto excluded possibility that will in turn open the door for further acts-events of creation, and these may themselves prove to be inventions. The creative manipulation of the cultural context as embodied in an artist's idioculture, that is, can modify the external context when the work of art is made public, and thus make possible shifts in the idiocultures of others that may bear fruit in further inventiveness. This will only happen, of course, when the new disposition of cultural materials brings with it new tensions and fractures that may be exploited in turn. Another indication that an invention has occurred is that it gives rise to imitations, its reconfiguration of cultural materials making possible further uncreative productions along the same lines. Although such works rank lower in the general estimation of art—we say that a novel is formulaic, we talk of genre films—they are an important contribution to the culture, helping to consolidate fertile new movements, often increasing the range of their influence and, not least, bringing pleasure to many.

To instantiate this argument by means of examples would require the detailed examination of moments in the history of literature, involving an account of both the cultural context and the individual artist's relation to it, as well as a detailed analysis of the work of art in question.

There is space only to offer some hints in the field of literature. Originality can be a matter of what content is imaginable in a fictional work: thus the appearance of Madame de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* in 1678 challenged the existing limits on subject-matter of the *roman* (that is, the romance) and the *nouvelle* (the novella)—in the former, unrealistic, often supernatural, events set in distant places and times; in the latter, plots involving accepted conventions of conduct in more familiar settings—by creating a heroine whose psychological interiority and challenge to moral codes opened a hugely fruitful new area for fictional exploration. To bring this new subject matter to light it was necessary to be inventive generically as well as in content: La Fayette combined the strangeness and length of the romance with the real-world setting of the novella (so that strangeness became not a matter of the supernatural but of unconventional behavior) in a genre that had never been imagined, or imaginable, before. (Initial readers were, inevitably, perplexed by the new form.)

In fact, inventive subject matter usually requires formal inventiveness, and it is impossible to say whether the formal breakthrough makes possible the incorporation of new subject matter, or the demands of the new subject matter produce formal inventiveness. Marlowe, in order to go beyond the boundaries of existing drama in the grand spectacle of *Tamburlaine*, needed a hitherto undiscovered flexible meter, and transformed Surrey's invention of blank verse into a heroic medium—or, alternatively, experimented with blank verse until he found he had at his fingertips a medium whose capabilities prompted him to imagine a new kind of drama. (The development of the English theater—both as an institution and as a building—provides a good example of material changes that facilitated literary inventiveness; the point again is that it was Marlowe's—and later Shakespeare's—understanding of the potential of the new material developments that led to the Elizabethan revolution in the writing of drama.) Wordsworth, reacting against the limitations on content that characterized the poetry of his predecessors, invented a new vehicle for his poems: the "lyrical ballad" utilizing a verse form hitherto excluded from serious poetry and a concreteness of language deemed unfit for it. At the same time, the possibilities of this form enabled him to appreciate how he could embrace hitherto untapped subject matter. In every instance of originality, the otherness of the new creation can be seen to be related to what was dominant in literary culture, both building on it and overcoming its exclusions; had a poet written lyrical ballads a hundred years earlier (and one might doubt whether this would even have been possible), it's likely that they would have made no impression on the reading public or on other poets.

Hindsight makes it difficult to appreciate the way in which certain cultural norms have dominated previous periods; and our own lack of creativity prevents us from recognizing that similar limits operate just as strongly today. Until Chaucer, at some time in the 1370s, wrote a poem using a five-beat, duple meter that came to be known as iambic pentameter and to seem one of the most natural metrical forms in English, it was beyond the aural imagination of speakers of the language. Until Defoe, some time before 1719, embarked on a fictional account of a castaway that mimicked authentic first-person narratives, the idea of such a work was unavailable to writers. Until Eliot wrote a poem that he published in 1922 as *The Waste Land*, it was difficult to conceive of a radical discontinuity of voice, subject, meter, and style in a single, highly effective work. We feel today that we are in an age in which there are few limits on what a writer can do; but it's unlikely that we are the first generation to feel this, and no doubt posterity will be able to discern—thanks to the work of future inventive artists—the very real exclusions on which our current artistic production (and reception) depends.

### The Context of Reading

Discussions of literary context pay much less attention to the context within which reading takes place than they do to the context of writing. Yet the reading process is just as dependent on the context in which it occurs, a context that, once again, can be thought of as the impress of the external culture upon an individual subjectivity—conscious and unconscious—that I'm calling an idioculture. How I go about reading—my choices of what to read, my assumptions about the purpose of reading, the habits I draw on when I read—are all imbibed from the culture, or cultures, which have formed me. And reading a literary work, like creating a literary work, is both an act and an event: something I do and something that happens to me. On the one hand, to the extent that it is an *act*, I can control many aspects of my reading, including the pace, the scrupulousness of attention (taking in every word, skipping occasional passages, skimming quickly), and the degree of concentration on the words I read. Different genres allow different possibilities: listening to an audiobook or watching a play, I can't control pace but I can, to a large extent, control concentration; reading poetry I can choose to read aloud, frame the words silently as if spoken, or read rapidly as I would do for extended prose. On the other hand, to the extent that reading is an *event*, I am affected by what I read, intellectually, emotionally, and sometimes physically, without having any control over this process. Mat-

ters are not quite so simple, however; just as a writer can manipulate existing cultural materials to allow that which is other—that which is excluded—to emerge, although there is never any guarantee that this will happen, so a reader can go some way toward achieving an openness to whatever the work may offer. This involves an effort to clear the mind of preconceptions, thus to some degree resisting the pressure of context, and, somewhat paradoxically, a willingness to be surprised, and a willingness to treat surprise as a reason for fresh engagement rather than for a mental closing down.<sup>9</sup> That this description could be equally applied to the act-event of creation is not fortuitous.

This account may sound like a prescription for a mode of reading found only in small and specialized pockets of the population such as university literature departments; but it shouldn't be taken to imply a highly conscious strategy that has to be learned in the classroom. There are plenty of good readers among the general populace, just as there are plenty of bad readers in literature departments. Nor is the matter of better and worse readings a question of a linear scale of value; context plays a part here too, in that one reads a particular type of work at a particular time for a particular purpose. A good reading of *Paradise Lost* obeys very different protocols from a good reading of *Dr. No*; reading a Yeats poem for the sheer pleasure of it demands different kinds of attention from reading it in order to write a critical article, neither of which is "better" than the other. One can, however, arrive at a general account of what the best reading in ideal circumstances would be, one that could be said to do justice to the work in question, or, more particularly, to its singularity, alterity, and inventiveness (if it possesses these qualities) and, at the same time, to the specificity of the time and place of reading. (In fact, whether or not a work is found to have these attributes will be in part dependent upon the time and place of reading.) Such a reading would be one that brings to bear on the work all the relevant cultural resources available to the reader, but at the same time does not allow those resources to limit what the work may do. A reading along these lines can be called *creative*, in the sense that it brings into being something hitherto excluded by the reader's idioculture, as well as *responsible*, in the sense that it welcomes the otherness of the other, and does justice to the inventiveness of the author. The idea of a creative reading as a response to alterity is not opposed to the experience of recognition, which may be part of the pleasurable response to a work of literature: the sense that one has gained an insight into oneself, or that a writer's words have captured what one thought was an entirely private concern or feeling. Here too there is an element of surprise, a

sense of unexpected intimacy with something experienced as other in the literary work.<sup>10</sup>

A creative reading may lead to an *inventive* reading: one that, as with an inventive creation, has an impact that is not just individual and internal; this will usually be either a reading enshrined in a new piece of writing or one that forms part of a pedagogical activity, formal or informal. In these cases, the question of context arises in a different way, which again may be understood in relation to a notion of responsibility. For a responsible reading, in the sense of a verbal response to a literary work, is one that takes into account not just the work being read but the context within which the new writing in response to it is undertaken and the context within which it will be received. Under these circumstances, the choice of the work to be read is not just a matter of personal preference but possesses wider cultural importance: it serves to endorse the work (unless it is being dismissed as worthless) and contribute to its continuing life within the culture. A responsible choice is one that is based not just on an estimation of the work's quality—"this work deserves to be better known," for example—but on its importance to one's place and time—"this work is particularly appropriate given current conditions and demands." And the reading offered, to be responsible as well as creative, will not only do justice to the singularity of the work but also be aware of the context within which it (and the work to which it is responding) will have effects.

Let me take just one example. I have written a little about the fiction of the South African-Scottish novelist Zoë Wicomb, and hope to write more in future. In choosing her work to engage with in print I am motivated by a sense both that it is worthy of greater notice than it has achieved up to now, and that it is of particular value at this moment in this culture (broadly speaking, "Western culture," and within it, Anglophone culture; although my idioculture is, of course, a particular inflection of these very general entities). Wicomb's ambitious and superbly written work *David's Story*, for instance, makes an important contribution to the genre of the novel, exploring notions of novelistic truth that are highly relevant to literary culture today, and at the same time invites a fresh understanding of national liberation struggles, and of the place of gender and racial equality within the movements engaged in such struggles.<sup>11</sup> To say this is not to take an instrumental view of the work: while it may be true that Wicomb's novel, if widely read, could have an effect on the criticism of the novel or on the historiography of liberation movements, and a critical response devoted to these ends would not be unjustified, to respond in words to the novel as a work of literature is, in some sense, to report on an experience, on the act-event of reading

(and rereading), as something valuable in itself—or, to be more precise, valuable in the changes it may effect in readers' attitudes and capacities, whether or not these are consciously registered, and whether or not they lead to action.

Wicomb's novel is important today, I would argue, because it offers readers a pleasurable journey into a terrain with which they will be unfamiliar, a journey during which they will encounter surprising representations of places, events, and people, unexpected turns of plot, and verbal originality. Through these and other inventive manipulations of literary resources the novel has the capacity to effect change, however slight, in its readers, quite apart from any historical knowledge that might be absorbed. By braiding together the checkered history of the Griqua people of South Africa and the difficult social reintegration of the guerilla army in the wake of apartheid, the novel crystallizes for the reader historical realities registered on the minds and—quite literally—the bodies of vividly imagined characters. By posing the question of the truth of historical and political narrative through an account given unwillingly by a former guerilla to a female narrator, it keeps that question alive in the very process of reading. By including scenes of immense power, such as the nightly torture of a woman member of the ANC's fighting force—scenes whose referential basis remains mysterious, and which would find no place in a history of the movement—it produces an affective response more telling and more memorable than any factual representation. Different readers—different idiocultures—will, of course, experience the novel differently; or, to put it another way, will read a different novel, since the novel, as a work of literature, is nothing other than its readings. Yet it remains the same novel to which all these readings respond, the same string of English (and a few Afrikaans) words: the same only because it is constantly open to change in new contexts, according to the principle that Derrida terms “iterability.”

### Present Reading and Historical Context

Reading a literary work with an openness to its singularity, and an attentiveness to the singularity of the time and place in which it is being read, is not, clearly, an exercise in historical reconstruction. The experience is not one of appreciating the originality of the work in the context within which it was created, but a pleasurable sense of moving, here and now, beyond the familiar and the habitual—provided that the work responds to this kind of reading, in this particular place and time. Many different ingredients may contribute to this sense: a new

understanding of aspects of the familiar world, an enjoyment of the surprising conjunctions of sounds and meanings, a satisfaction at the working out of an unexpected pattern, a pleasure (which may be mixed with darker responses) at the arousal of unfamiliar shades of emotion, a delight in the unexpected power of language to capture perceptions and emotions. The reader who has an experience of this kind may or may not be familiar with the facts surrounding the creation of the work; we need a different language from that of “historical context,” therefore, to talk about the encounter at the heart of the literary institution. The term I take from Derrida is “invention”<sup>12</sup>: the experience of new horizons, fresh perceptions, unexpected patterns, surprising linguistic power and precision that I’ve been describing is an experience of the *inventiveness* of the literary work.

In the first section of this essay, I made no distinction between the inventiveness and the (exemplary) originality of a work of art at the moment of its creation: both terms are appropriate for the effect of the work on its immediate context, registered culturally as a result of the experiences of contemporary readers. In changing the focus to readings taking place at some temporal remove from the moment of creation, it becomes necessary to distinguish between a historical fact accessed through scholarship—originality—and the experience here and now of a certain kind of newness—*inventiveness*. How is it, we need to ask, that following generations can continue to find a work inventive? If the range of possibilities opened up by the inventive work becomes part of the cultural landscape to be exploited by later artists, why do we still find that work conveying a sense of new opportunities for thought and feeling decades or centuries later?<sup>13</sup> It’s not sufficient to say that through an act of historical imagination we are able to reconstitute the original moment of creation, reliving the artistic breakthrough as if we shared the cultural field which it challenged, including its limitations and internal tensions, and thus can reexperience the *inventiveness* of the past moment. Such a feat might be possible for the scholar who has absorbed the particularities of a former culture to a high degree, though it remains unlikely that anyone could reinstate with sufficient completeness the mental world of, say, a Regency gentleman in order to be able to experience Byron’s *Don Juan* as one of its first readers would have done—and, in any case, it could never be proved that this had been achieved. Historical investigation of this sort is valuable in documenting originality, which is matter of comparing artistic works with their forerunners. But originality does not necessarily translate into *inventiveness* in the sense in which I am using it: the former is a historical fact, the latter a quality that remains important in current

reception. In any case, this kind of historical reimagining remains well beyond the capacities of most readers. Yet readers—and I should stress again that my interest is not limited to academics or students—continue to testify to the freshness, the surprisingness, the eye-opening novelty, the breathtaking emotional power of many works of the past, including the distant past of the ancient world.

It's necessary, then, to distinguish between the experience of inventiveness in a present reading and an appreciation, based on historical awareness, of a work's originality. There is certainly pleasure to be gained from the latter, if one possesses the appropriate historical knowledge. This knowledge is always subject, of course, to revision—what we think of as an original intervention in a cultural context can always turn out to be an imitation of an earlier, hitherto unacknowledged, work. In a strict sense, therefore, the original context remains irretrievable: what we have to go on are the best efforts of historians to reconstruct the past, and the best efforts of literary historians to judge which elements of that past are relevant to the work or the writer in question.

To acknowledge that that original context is irretrievable in any final and comprehensive manner is not to argue that awareness of it can never be relevant, however. For one thing, a reader cannot banish whatever knowledge he or she possesses about the original context (this may include "knowledge" that is in fact inaccurate), and can't prevent this knowledge from coloring the reading.<sup>14</sup> A reader who knows nothing about the context of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* will have a very different experience from one who does.<sup>15</sup> But there is no simple correlation between the amount of contextual knowledge and the quality of the reading: good readers are not necessarily those who are in possession of the greatest amount of information, though the ignorance of particular facts may in certain cases produce an inadequate reading, one that fails to register the work's potential inventiveness in the present. Once again, it's important to stress that different situations and different texts demand different kinds of reading: the particular context (composing the introduction to a scholarly edition, for instance) may require detailed historical knowledge, whereas another context (lying on the lawn on a sunny afternoon with an anthology of recent poems, say) will require very little.

The question of the original context is often discussed as though the reader accesses—or fails to access—something external to the internal reading process.<sup>16</sup> To clarify this question, we need to return to the notion of idioculture. That the identity of a work is the result of a process of creation within a historical and institutional context is indisputable; but our only access to that process, and the context within which it oc-

curred, is in the present, and in the course of reading the work (even if we turn to the notes and then back to the text) our only resource is the knowledge we bring to it. That is to say, awareness of the original context forms a possible part of one's idioculture, whether well- or ill-informed; and this awareness can contribute to our sense of the work's inventiveness. But the experience of the literary work's inventiveness involves far more than a sense of its originality in its original context: it is inventive in relation to the present context, as manifested in the complex cultural intersection that is the reader's idioculture. Just as the work at the time of its birth found possibilities for otherness within an apparently coherent cultural fabric, embodied in the artist's idioculture, so the work at the time of its reception can exploit the possibilities for otherness in the apparent coherence of the culture embodied in the reader's idioculture.

The puzzle remains, however. Why should the work that is inventive in a historical moment and cultural context long past and very different from our own still speak today in an inventive manner? Why does it often feel as if I am sharing, as I read, an earlier writer's breakthrough into new territory by means of the shaping of language and the testing of generic limits when I am the product of a cultural history so distinct from the cultural histories of his or her contemporaries?<sup>27</sup> It doesn't always work this way, of course: works that are highly original in their time can fall prey to cultural change and lose their inventiveness, appreciated only by cultural historians who are aware of their earlier importance. Klopstock's *Messias* took the German literary world by storm in 1748, but few readers now can experience the excitement it provided its audiences in the middle of the eighteenth century. And inventiveness can remain latent, until a later cultural moment provides the context within which it can exercise its estranging, clarifying, or intensifying powers. One of many examples of writers barely recognized in their lifetimes is Fernando Pessoa, whose constant self-reinvention (including the use of over seventy heteronyms) speaks to early twenty-first-century culture with a potency not only unappreciated by but in many respects unavailable to early twentieth-century readers (or potential readers). In spite of such counterexamples, however, it remains true that there is a significant correspondence between works which entered their original cultural contexts with the force of invention and works which provide the experience of inventiveness in today's contexts. The current roll call of the most rewarding writers in the history of literature is not very different from the list of those who introduced influential innovations into literary writing.

The traditional explanation for this fact is that certain writers explore universal human themes with consummate skill, so that their works are timeless, available to anyone who can appreciate good art. The question of context falls away, on the assumption that such works transcend both the conditions of their creation and the conditions of particular readings. What is wrong with this view is not that there are no human universals—it is surely correct that many literary works deal with fundamental human concerns as relevant to Aeschylus as they are to Ayckbourn—but that a much larger body of works dealing just as directly with such topics from across the centuries have little to offer today. Inventiveness lies in the handling of these topics, not in the fact of choosing them. And the question of what “good” writing is, as a slight acquaintance with literary history shows, very much a matter of context. My discussion of inventiveness is an attempt to articulate an evaluative category which acknowledges the context-boundedness of both creation and reception.

Part of the answer must lie in the contingencies of cultural history. The present cultural moment may echo an earlier one in certain respects without there being any historical connection between the two, so that what was inventive then seems inventive once again. (Fortuitous similarities can work in a similar way when an artifact from a different culture speaks to our own.) Or a work that was inventive in one way may, through the operation of pure chance, be inventive in a different way now. The work that we find inventive may even have been highly imitative when produced, but for some reason having nothing to do with its original contextual relation now has the power to engage fruitfully with the current context. A related phenomenon is the effect of sheer cultural difference: a work of the past (or another culture) can in its very strangeness push at the limits of contemporary culture. The potency of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* stems more, perhaps, from the weirdness of its narrative when seen from a modern perspective than from any sharing of cultural values or ethical norms.

Chance effects probably account for only a small part of the continuing liveliness of works of the past, however. We need to examine the possibility that the explanation lies in cultural continuities that bridge temporal distance. Although it is obvious that the idioculture of a Greek spectator in Athens witnessing the first performance of *Antigone* is vastly different from that of a reader engaging with a modern English translation today, the power of the work—even for a reader who has very little acquaintance with the cultural history of ancient Greece—suggests that there are sufficient similarities between the two for something of the play’s inventiveness to survive today. While many of the features of the play that would have been inventive to that original audience now have very little

purchase—the unprecedented use of a third actor, for example, is not a device that packs much of a punch today—but Sophocles' handling of the languages of politics, of personal dilemma, and of religious commitment, his evocation of character, and his treatment of narrative have remained both powerful and challenging, as numerous commentaries on the play over the centuries have testified.

It's one of the characteristics of inventiveness, experienced in the act-event of reading, that the passage of time has been neutralized, that we feel that we are directly in touch with the author's creative activity and that we are sharing the thoughts and emotions of the original readers. Though this is inevitably an illusion for much of the time, it's not one we are likely to be able to test: there is no infallible way of distinguishing between chance effects and historical continuity. What seems like pure fortuitousness to the critical mind may in fact be a hidden connection across the centuries. Historical knowledge can be a corrective here, though it may be at the expense of a certain amount of pleasure. To learn that Marvell's "vegetable love" would have had no suggestion of edible plants to his first readers might take away the possibility of enjoying an inventive metaphor. More often, historical knowledge (which includes familiarity with other works of literature), absorbed into the idioculture of the reader, is likely to increase the potential for enjoyment. If I read a Victorian pot-boiler before I have read Dickens, George Eliot, and Thackeray I might find it inventive; to read it after them would be a different, and less pleasurable, experience—but my engagement with the great novelists would have been all the more rewarding.

There is, then, no single answer to the question I have posed. The fact of art's ability to produce the experience of invention as an immediate, present unfolding of new possibilities depends on a combination of historical continuities, charted or obscure, and contextual coincidences. Furthermore, we should not overlook the role of the institutions of art, as they currently operate, in encouraging readers, listeners, and viewers to open themselves to this experience; this, too, is an important aspect of context. In a different cultural space, the reader of the literary work might be encouraged to approach it as a hermeneutic or historical puzzle, a guide to living, or a manifestation of the author's approach to the divine. In these cases, however, there would be grounds for withholding the appellations "literature" and "art."

We may end with the persistent question that comes up whenever there are competing interpretations of a work or passage: what counts as a relevant context? Differences in interpretation and evaluation are often the result of different answers to this question. By shifting attention to the acts-events of creation and reception, I have implied that the

question needs to be rethought as a matter of idioculture. If our concern is the experience of literature (rather than, say, the external history of an institution) we need to phrase the question slightly differently: what kind of contextual information is it valuable to have absorbed, when engaging with a literary work, in order to maximize the experience of invention (and along with invention the closely related qualities of alterity and singularity)? It will be clear, I hope, that there is no single answer; a reader who is responding fully to a literary work lives through it and sometimes lives with it, and he or she comes to the work, on each encounter, as a different idioculture, experiencing different aspects of its inventiveness at different times. The absorption of contextual information, the acquisition of a feeling for particular historical contexts, and the recognition of the pressures and predilections of the present ideological context will change the work's surprises and satisfactions, usually for the better—though there is always the possibility that an excess of contextual information may drown out the work's singularity. The critic and the teacher can enhance the capacity of others to experience and enjoy the inventiveness of a work by drawing attention to features of its original context and by pointing out its relevance to the present context; it can also be illuminating to consider the various contexts within which a work has been read since its creation, as a way of bringing to light otherwise occluded features. But much contextual information will turn out to be irrelevant to the best reading of the work; where the line is to be drawn, however, cannot be predicted and is not fixed for all readers, for all texts, or for all time. Because, in the reading of the literary work, context (past and present) is always put into play via a singular idioculture, general rules governing what is valuable in terms of contextual information are always subject to revision in the light of specific instances. And specific instances of responsible and creative reading, in response to specific instances of inventive writing, play a major role in determining the course of literary culture, constituting in themselves part of the context within which literary works continually come freshly into being.

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#### NOTES

1 By "ideology" I simply mean nonmaterial conditions such as patterns of thought, accumulations of knowledge, and emotional proclivities, whether these are acknowledged or, as in classical Marxist accounts of ideology or in Freudian accounts of the operations of the unconscious, unacknowledged. I am using "reading" to include all the modes in which literary works are received, including hearing and watching. And I am sidestepping the

obvious fact that there is no easy way to distinguish between “text” and “context,” inside and outside, and the related fact that context is inexhaustible. Derrida’s “Signature Event Context” remains the most important exploration of these aspects of context (in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff [Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1988], 1–23).

2 A related question arises from the different contexts constituted by different cultures around the globe, whether simultaneously or with a historical gap; for a discussion of this issue, see Derek Attridge, “Responsible Reading and Cultural Distance,” *New Formations* 73, “Reading after Empire,” (2011): 117–25; reprinted in *Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Viewers and Reception*, ed. Bethan Benwell, James Procter, and Gemma Robinson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 234–43.

3 Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 17–31.

4 The notion of idioculture, a term coined on the model of “idiolect” (the particular version of available dialects spoken by an individual), shares with Heidegger’s *Dasein* a resistance to conventional notions of individual, person, subject, and so on, but resists in turn the generalizing implications of *Dasein*. Cultural criticism of the past few decades has often used the term “subject position” to signal the individual’s occupation of a particular place within the circumambient culture, but this term has the disadvantage of implying that the subject is constituted as a particular perspective on a culture rather than as a rich and evolving component of it. My idioculture is not, of course, entirely accessible to me—many of its elements remain unconscious—but to the extent that it is conscious it includes processes of self-interpretation (processes that are themselves mediated by cultural norms, of course). Most histories of literature, and of culture more broadly, focus on general trends and material conditions rather than on the individual idiocultures of writers and readers which they constitute; literary biographies, however, often attempt to describe the singular mental and emotional worlds of their subjects at different stages of their lives.

5 See Henry Staten, “The Wrong Turn of Aesthetics,” in *Theory after “Theory,”* ed. Jane Elliott and Attridge (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 223–36 and “The Origin of the Work of Art in Material Practice” in the next issue of *New Literary History*. Institutional theories of art also stress the importance of the “artworld” within which the artist works and within which artworks are received. See, for example, George Dickie’s influential arguments in *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (New York: Haven, 1984).

6 There have been numerous studies of the changing technologies available to writers and readers; particularly influential has been the work of Friedrich Kittler. See Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990) and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999).

7 Strictly speaking, the material the writer is working with in these cases is only his or her *own* voice—or, occasionally, that of an assistant reading back the words. Besides this, the material being explored is once more an internalized representation, in this case a representation of other possible voices.

8 See Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982), 59–75, 80–82.

9 This resistance to the pressure of context toward conformity with existing habits of mind is foregrounded, under the term “self-binding,” in Dorothy J. Hale’s account of recent theoretical arguments that stress the alterity of the literary work (“Fiction as Restriction: Self-Binding in New Ethical Theory of the Novel,” *Narrative* 15, no. 2 [2007], 187–206). I would prefer to emphasize the self-opening, the readiness to be changed, the hospitality toward the other, involved in a responsible reading.

10 Rita Felski, in a chapter entitled “Recognition,” describes this fusion of familiarity and strangeness well; first, recognition: “I feel myself addressed, summoned, called to account:

I cannot help seeing traces of myself in the pages I am reading"; but at the same time, alterity: "Indisputably, something has changed; my perspective has shifted; I see something that I did not see before" (*Uses of Literature* [Malden: Blackwell, 2008], 23). She stresses that recognition does not imply a simple affirmation of the subject's self-understanding; it can "confound [readers'] sense of who and what they are" (23), produce both a "powerful cognitive readjustment" (35) and a "heightened awareness of the instabilities and opacities of personhood" (42), and be "discomfiting, even unpleasant, requiring a reckoning with one's own less appealing motivations and desires" (47). Given these and other similar descriptions, it is somewhat surprising that Felski sets up her discussion in opposition to theorists of literary alterity.

11 Zoë Wicomb, *David's Story* (New York: Feminist Press, 2001).

12 See Derrida, "Psyche: Invention of the Other," in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. 1, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2007), 1–47.

13 When related questions are asked about readings that take place at some distance from the original cultural context because of spatial rather than (or in addition to) temporal distance, the answers are very similar to those I suggest here; in both cases, the issue is one of an apparent transcendence of a material separation (see note 2 above). By "spatial" I mean cultural difference arising from disparities between contexts that cannot be understood as the result of changes over time within a single culture. Of course, the notion of a "single culture" is a simplification, and differences of a spatial kind are constantly operative in all cultures down to the level of idiocultures.

14 The degree to which other texts or utterances will color one's reading depends on the degree of authority one accords them, which is not a matter of conscious decision but depends on a host of (as yet insufficiently studied) institutional and psychological factors.

15 One area of debate in which this issue is particularly salient is that of fakes and forgeries: a reader who thought *Ossian* was a genuine medieval work and then discovered its real provenance would find it, on rereading, to be a different work. It might still give pleasure, but of a distinct kind, because it would be read in terms of a different context. Kant alludes to the effect upon aesthetic enjoyment of beliefs, accurate or not, about the object when he notes that listeners to a nightingale's song, on being told it is a "roguish youngster" imitating the bird, will cease to enjoy it; the perceived object must be nature, states Kant, "or we must consider it so" (*Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987], 169 [*Akademie* edition, 304]). The forged painting or statue that is an exact replica of an original raises the question in an even more extreme form. See Denis Dutton, ed., *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1983) and K. K. Ruthven, *Faking Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001).

16 Thus Peter Lamarque, in *The Philosophy of Literature* (Malden: Blackwell, 2009), argues against the theory that limits the meaning of a work to its original historical and institutional context but continues to hold that "work-identity is bounded by historical conditions of production (and institutional conventions)" (80)—rather than by the reader's conception of those conditions.

17 Accounts of literature which celebrate the changes wrought by the passage of time and by the cultural differences between context of creation and context of reception tend to overlook this experience of temporal transcendence. Thus Wai Chee Dimock, in "A Theory of Resonance" (*PMLA* 112 [1997]: 1060–71), argues for a "diachronic historicism" without acknowledging that synchronic historicism is an experiential feature of reading literary works—a feature that is part of the distinctiveness of literature. Dimock's account of "resonance" applies to the operation of all signs across time—she need only

have referred to Derrida's discussion of iterability in "Signature Event Context" for an economical explanation—while the special power of literature, or art, in relation to the passage of time has been the subject of a number of important interventions by, among many others, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Walter Benjamin, T. S. Eliot, Frank Kermode, J. M. Coetzee, and many more. A recent acknowledgment of this dimension of the experience of literature is Felski's use of the Freudian notion of *Nachträglichkeit* to comment on the "transtemporal movement of texts" (*Uses of Literature*, 119–20); by including this discussion in the chapter on "Shock," however, she implicitly limits what is a much wider phenomenon in literary reception.