Social and Ethical Criticism: A Contextualist Overview

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In the decade after World War II, literary criticism in America was dominated by the voices of the New Criticism: John Crowe Ransom at Kenyon College; R. P. Blackmur at Princeton; William Wimsatt, René Wellek, and Cleanth Brooks at Yale; and others. Their shared concern was for the integrity of the art work—its authority and uniqueness. They saw the business of criticism as the close analysis of the tone and texture of the given text; hence their label of contextualists. It is my view—and I was a student of Ransom’s at Kenyon in the fifties—that such contextual analysis is what should properly be called criticism; all other operations with or upon a literary text might better be called scholarship or metacriticism (i.e., beyond criticism). Metacriticism encompasses the enormous range of speculations, abstractions, and categorizations about life in general and the place of the arts in particular.

A metacritical position by definition is not focused on a given unique work of art; hence analysis of any work wherein that position is given primary attention is likely to be tangential and partial, however stimulating the metacritical position itself. Yet one cannot rest with accurate analysis of another's imaginative world; one naturally wants to live in one’s own. How then to satisfy, at least partially, both passions—the passion for accurate analysis and the passion for imaginative synthesis?

In previous books of mine on the poetry of Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound, I closely analyzed the difficult texts of these poets from the perspective of the New Criticism. In *The Rape of Cinderella* I attempted to establish the idea of continuity as a modest bridge between criticism and metacriticism, arguing that continuity is a fundamental law in works of art and a fundamental need in the human spirit. The literary essays in that work find their natural sequel in my recently completed *Essays: Critical and Metacritical*, from which the material in this paper is derived. The questions I asked myself in preparation for the *Essays* were these: To what extent can the principles of contextual
criticism be applied to the analysis of social and ethical contexts? and, How useful is the aesthetic idea of continuity in metacritical speculations that concern values in general?

What is apparent in a survey of the literature on social contexts—as in the literature on art—is a confusion of scholarship, criticism, and metacriticism. A writer may gather data competently or in a sloppy and inaccurate fashion and may, in either case, assume a contribution to sound social analysis or criticism. Yet very little skill may be exhibited in sensing the presence (or absence) of continuities implicit in the data. Finally, and as usually happens, the writer may have metacritical predilections—preconceptions concerning sociology, psychology, politics, economics, history, religion, what you will—that predispose the analysis of a social context. One’s ultimate metacritical positions need not hinder accurate and precise social scholarship and criticism, although they usually do. For all the brilliance in, say, William Graham Sumner’s exposition of the relativity of social values in his *Folkways*, his dislike for metaphysics slights the other side of the human dilemma: man’s need for values in which he can believe with some absoluteness.  

It is this other side of the equation—the response to experience by those whose thought touches on the metacritical need for faith—that deepens and enriches what seems to me the best sociological criticism of our time:

*The substance of all religion is... deeply rooted in human life; it grows out of the necessities of life. In other words, religion fulfils a definite cultural function in every human society. This is not a platitude. It contains a scientific refutation of the repeated attacks on religion by the less enlightened rationalists. If religion is indispensable to the integration of the community, just because it satisfies spiritual needs by giving man certain truths and teaching him how to use these truths, then it is impossible to regard religion as a trickery, as an “opiate for the masses,” as an invention of priests, capitalists, or any other servants of vested interests....*  

Let us work for the maintenance of the eternal truths which have guided mankind out of barbarism to culture, and the loss of which seems to threaten us with barbarism again. The rationalist and agnostic must admit that even if he himself cannot accept these truths, he must at least recognize them as indispensable pragmatic figments without which civilization cannot exist.  

*Any religion, while it lasts, and on its own level, gives an apparent meaning to life, provides the framework for a culture, and protects the mass of humanity from boredom and despair.*  

But though history may be capable either of assisting or of paralysing new religious experiences, it can never manage to abolish the need for religious experience.  

All three of these important voices in twentieth-century thought are theists of one sort or another. All focus, at least here, on the simple need for faith, belief, values, or at the very least “indispensable pragmatic figments.”  

A fourth voice:  

*To believe in God is to long for His existence and, further, it is to act as if He existed: it is to live by this longing and to make it the*  


inner spring of our action. This longing or hunger for divinity begets hope, hope begets faith, and faith and hope beget charity. Of this divine longing is born our sense of beauty, of finality, of goodness.  

But I have jumped too far too quickly; perhaps most readers are not willing to go so far at this point, or at any point. There are, however, wide areas of possible agreement on methodology and approach before we need part ways down separate meta-critical paths.

Ruth Benedict speaks of the integration of a culture and Malinowski of the integration of the community, both recognizing the simple necessity for order, coherence, and continuity upon which much mental and psychic activity may rest. Emile Durkheim depicts a man in a state of anomie — man in a nineteenth-century industrial landscape lacking a satisfying social context, living a life without meaningful continuity or significant coherence, man bewildered or lost in a chaotic and painful existence. This is an anticipation of Eliot’s Waste Land of twentieth-century industrial society. Eliot’s sense is that man lives in boredom or despair if he is deprived of a sense of belonging to some sort of order, communitas, or vital context. Charles Horton Cooley asserts that the individual self is in good measure defined by the richness or poverty of the immediate social context in which he has found himself:

The view here maintained is that human nature is not something existing separately in the individual. . . . It is the nature which is developed and expressed in those simple, face-to-face groups that are somewhat alike in all societies; groups of the family, the playground, and the neighborhood. In the essential similarity of these is to be found the basis, in experience, for similar ideas and sentiments in the human mind. In these, everywhere, human nature comes into existence. Man does not have it at birth; he cannot acquire it except through fellowship, and it decays in isolation.

What else can human nature be than a trait of primary groups? Surely not an attribute of the separate individual—supposing there were any such thing—since its typical characteristics, such as affection, ambition, vanity, and resentment, are inconceivable apart from society. If it belongs, then, to man in association, what kind or degree of association is required to develop it? Evidently nothing elaborate, because elaborate phases of society are transient and diverse, while human nature is comparatively stable and universal. In short the family and neighborhood life is essential to its genesis and nothing more is . . .

We must see and feel the communal life of family and local groups as immediate facts, not as combinations of something else. And perhaps we shall do this best by recalling our own experience and extending it through sympathetic observation.

Cooley’s view reinforces what my own experience in life and literature has taught me. As one moves from family to clan, to village, to country, and finally to a sense of internationalism, the passional ties become more and more vaporous, less and less subjectively meaningful, valuable, or loved. The possibility of living within a graceful, harmonious whole, consonant in all of its parts, diminishes with the increasing complexity of the diverse elements within the whole. The relativity, the purely
"normative" nature, of the values cherished within a given social context may be clear when different contexts are objectively compared. But no less clear should be the necessity for coherence and continuity of those same values within a specific culture—so that the values can provide a harmony that seems absolute enough to the large part of the citizenry living within the context.

The social critic must evaluate a given social framework not in terms of the values he brings extrinsically to the study but rather in terms of the continuity and coherence of the values which have developed within that milieu. He may later judge the context on a scale of metacritical value that is personal to him or to the group to which he belongs; however, he will not then be a social critic but rather a metacritical advocate, aware of doing something different and, it is hoped, honest about it. Being a social critic and being a citizen of a given society are likewise different actions; both are laudable, but the confusion of the two processes, compounded with a strong dose of arrogance, is an all too-familiar observed condition:

We can also learn to respect every other culture as a whole, however inferior to our own it may appear, or however unjustly we may disapprove of some features of it: the deliberate destruction of another culture as a whole is an irreparable wrong, almost as evil as to treat human beings like animals.9

The true social critic will have Keats’s “negative capability.” That is, he will have the ability to empathize with the mores, the folkways, the configurations, the tone of the culture he is investigating: the ability to feel its rhythms, its continuities, its beauties (however meager they may seem); the ability to assess whether the culture does in fact provide to the large majority of its citizens some depth, richness, and sense of joy in belonging. The critic must then be able to articulate these assessments. The process repeated will breed understanding and tolerance; it will also breed some skepticism about the possibility or desirability of the achievement of those millennial dreams of a society where all human values are present and all human evils excluded. It will affirm, in Eliot’s terms, a love of diversity, of local particularity:

For it must follow from what I have already pleaded about the value of local cultures, that a world culture which was simply a uniform culture would be no culture at all. We should have a humanity de-humanized. It would be a nightmare. But on the other hand, we cannot resign the idea of world-culture altogether.

We can only conceive it, as the logical term of relations between cultures. Just as we recognize that the parts of Britain must have in one sense, a common culture, though this common culture is only actual in diverse local manifestations, so we must aspire to a common world culture, which will not diminish the particularity of the constituent parts.10

As social critic and metacritic, T.S. Eliot has come in for some hard knocks; Ezra Pound, his friend and peer, much more so. They both felt, however, that they were fighting the good fight and, in most ways, the same fight:


10. Ibid., p. 156.
Another struggle has been the struggle to keep the value of a local and particular character, of a particular culture in this awful maelstrom, this awful avalanche toward uniformity. The whole fight is for the conservation of the individual soul.\(^{11}\)

Pound in The Cantos:

Earth and water dye the wind in your valley... 
...feeling have the colour of nature... 
Manners are from earth and from water 
They arise out of hills and streams 
The spirit of air is of the country 
Men's manners cannot be one 
(same, identical)...

Different each, different customs
but one root in the equities...
Hills and streams colour the air, 
vigour, tranquility, not one set of rules.
Vigour, quietude, are of place...
Different each, different customs
But one root in the equities...

Ancestral spring making breed, a pattern...
& with Chou rite at the root of it
The root is thru all of it...
One village in order,
one valley will reach the four seas.
...village usage
to see what style for the casting
Filiality and fraternity are the root,
Talents to be considered as branches.
Precise terminology is the first implement.
dish and container...

Unitas Charitatis
consuetudo diversa
[The unity of charity, the diversity of customs]...

Time mother of Manors
Nor can the King create a new custom...\(^{12}\)

Pound has “no dogma” but loves the local manifestations of man’s need to venerate—as in the ancient Chinese rituals of muan hpo, or the Li Ki, or the Confucian vision; or the Eleusinian rites of ancient Greece; or a priest’s first mass in a contemporary Italian village. “Art is local,” “temples, plural,” “all gates are holy,” are iterated motifs in the late Cantos. All of this may bring us to Yeat’s “Prayer for my Daughter” (lines 47–8, 73–80):

O may she live like some green laurel
Rooted in one dear perpetual place...

And may her bridgroom bring her to a house
Where all’s accustomed, ceremonious;
For arrogance and hatred are the wares
Peddled in the thoroughfares.
How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
Ceremony’s a name for the rich horn,
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

And to Simone Weil’s The Need for Roots:

The degree of respect owing to human collectivities is a very high one, for several reasons.

To start with, each is unique, and, if destroyed, cannot be replaced. One sack of corn can always be substituted for another sack of corn. The food that collectivity supplies, for the souls of
those who form part of it has no equivalent in the entire universe.

Secondly, because of its continuity, a collectivity is already moving forward into the future. It contains food, not only for the souls of the living, but also for the souls of beings yet unborn which are to come into the world during the immediately succeeding centuries.

Lastly, due to this same continuity, a collectivity has its roots in the past. It constitutes the sole agency for preserving the spiritual treasures accumulated by the dead, the sole transmitting agency by means of which the dead can speak to the living.

But it does not follow from this that collectivities are superior to human beings.

It very often happens that the roles are reversed. There are collectivities which, instead of serving as food, do just the opposite: they devour souls.13

One may label such articulations as conservative, which has often been done; but political labels never do for the intensely realized experiences of intensely realized imaginations. Yeats, Eliot, and Pound are among the handful of great poets of our century, and to dismiss their social meditations—and those of Simone Weil, to whom they are kin in both substance and realization—as crankish or conservative will not finally diminish them. The passages breathe an awareness of the evils of collectivities, of stagnant or tyrannical societies, upon which the great majority of social and political literature has focused since the romantic movement. But they all emphasize what needs now to be emphasized: the good, the blessings, the need of vital social contexts and continuities.

Further, the blessings are, for these observers, primarily found where Charles Cooley found them—in the family and the neighborhood or, if beyond, in a national or international unity based not on uniformity of culture but on the welcome diversity of local contexts. It is in the local or regional contexts that the citizen seems to flourish. And it is there too that the social critic can best function, where he can view the unique local context and its comprehensibility, as the critic in the arts can view the unique created aesthetic object.

In summary, the dilemma concerning the apparent relativity of values, the impermanence of things, set against the mind’s hunger for absoluteness of values and permanence of self, is most capable of resolution at the contextual level in art and in society. Hart Crane has effectively articulated the contextualist aesthetic in poetry and, by implication, the contextualist approach to cultures:

It may not be possible to say that there is, strictly speaking, any "absolute" experience. But it seems evident that certain aesthetic experience (and this may for a time engross the total faculties of the spectator) can be called absolute, inasmuch as it approximates a formally convincing statement of a conception or apprehension of life that gains our unquestioning assent, and under

the conditions of which our imagination is unable to suggest a further detail consistent with the design of the aesthetic whole….

Such a poem is at least a stab at a truth, and to such an extent may be differentiated from other kinds of poetry and called “absolute”….

I found that I was really building [in The Bridge] a bridge between so-called classic experience and many divergent realities of our seething, confused cosmos of today, which has no formulated mythology yet for classic poetic reference or for religious exploitation….

Plato doesn’t live today because of the intrinsic “truth” of his statements, their only living truth today consists in the “fact” of their harmonious relationship to each other. This grace is, or partakes of, poetry.  

The “assent” of paragraph 1 is emotional: the need of the will for absolutes is temporarily satisfied by the poem’s contextual harmony or intrinsic grace; so with social contexts. The fact that, abstractly considered, human values and truth seem merely relative does not deny the totally engrossing hold of a context and its “mythology” upon the responsive imagination. One can, for instance, hardly overestimate the pull of family, village, and local loves on the human spirit that has known them. This is partly so because for many, as Cooley asserts, to lose one’s context of local loves is to lose one’s sense of self.

The local context may be a place where family or friends or memories are; or a place in the mind, where a store of things loved is kept. In either case the local context provides a center, a focus, a place to come home to when the periphery—one’s life beyond the local loves, however good—is not sufficient to sustain one.

The center of one’s loves cannot by definition include all things worthy to love; it must of necessity be a selection from the myriad possibilities of living a good life: hence the possibility of many different centers (that is, pluralism); hence too the necessity of exclusion of much good from the center. It is very hard to give up good and beautiful things to love, other graceful patterns of life, so as to hold onto one’s center; but there will be no center at all if one does not do so.

Thus there must be a self-imposition of imperatives in one’s social and ethical being. Consistency of tone in life can be seen as a measure of ethical quality. As we use the word continuity in criticism, so we may use it in ethics. The flow of emotional logic would run something like this: One must stay loyal and faithful to one’s center to keep that center. No amount of peripheral joy can make up for the loss of continuity at the center of the soul. One is measured socially and ethically by continuity of actions, not only by others of some depth of insight but also, and more importantly, by one’s self. When a person acts in ways that do not form a continuum with the dreams by which he has chosen to be defined, there follows a gradual loss of his emotional center. The realization of this loss need not be rational; more likely it will be intuitive and emotional:
M'amour, m'amour
what do I love and
where are you?
That I lost my center
fighting the world,
The dreams clash
and are shattered—
and that I tried to make a paradiso terrestre.¹⁵

To act out the imperatives of one’s center is to be seen, then, not only as obligation but also as privilege, since it allows keeping what one “lovest well” as one’s “true heritage” (Canto 81). In this context, absolute freedom to do what one wants is clearly seen as a prison, for it will sooner or later lock a person from his center, as one dream context shatters another. If love between people is to have any continuity, it must be the love of a shared center, of a shared dream, of shared obligations. Freedom, then, is the opportunity, the privilege, of carrying out the obligations to what one loves. Thus we can say that life without obligations is meaningless.¹⁶

The continuity and quality of a social context, or the acts or an individual within it, can be assessed only if one has rightly understood the nature of the shared dreams, the central attitudes, that impel the social process or the individual who is part of that context. As the literary critic must judge the work of art by its continuity, by the inner harmony of both the structural principles and the smallest details of execution, so must the social critic respond both to the central attitudes toward life in a given social context and to the unique details of daily life within that context. Intuition, insight, and the artist’s gift of empathy with unique context are more necessary here than data gathering; these qualities of spirit are certainly more useful than any imposition upon the data of precut patterns of categories that relate to societies in general. It is the artist in the social or ethical critic that generates the true criticism; not the scholarship, not the metacritical position.


¹⁶. Without an appeal to the will of God in ethical discussion, we fall back to the will of man, to illusions of absolutism, to the logic of situations, to play principles, i.e., to the totally engrossing hold of a given aesthetic or social context. In such a diminished condition, we can abstractly examine the situation—as, for example, G. E. Moore does in his Ethics (London: Oxford University Press, 1912, 1949), especially in his last chapter, “Intrinsic Value”; or we can dramatize the ethical distinctions possible within a social context, as Henry Fielding does in Tom Jones.