

# Do Contexts Matter?<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Sometimes we need to reflect on what we are doing. This paper is an attempt to do just that. I do not pretend to provide Solutions with a capital S to the problem of context, but I intend to present the problem with specific examples from various fields to demonstrate that the problem is basic to all kinds of historical research, as well as to describe shortly the opinions of several authors on historical theory with regard to it. The question of context involves necessarily the question of meaning, and though both topics are enormous, I want to demonstrate exactly this interaction. Therefore I treat them both, though it might look foolhardy to do so.

## The Word and the Idea

The concept of *context* has been developed through work with literary texts, involving epistemology, hermeneutics and logic. The word *textus* means something which is woven together. A text is woven together with other texts, and the word *context* emphasizes this. However, it is also used about what is hidden, the historical frame.<sup>2</sup> I would say that the two concepts *context* and *coherence* must be seen together, as they denominate two sides of the same matter: the background and what logically and organically belongs together.

Expressions like "context permitting" or "the context determines which is best"<sup>3</sup> are frequent regarding textual criticism. They concern the internal context of the text, the context of the individual word or expression, the language and style of the author. What I am going to talk about here is "context" in a broader sense, the cultural and historical context of the author. What these two kinds of "context" have in common is that they are appealed to in interpretation. The basic reason for this is that the past is gone, historical texts belong to a life which is no longer in existence; the picture of history which we possess is a construction by the historians, which does not mean that it is unrelated to what happened "in reality". It means, however, that historians cannot write history without some larger narrative in which to

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<sup>1</sup> This is an extended version of a paper I read at the Plutarch conference *Sage and Emperor: Plutarch and Trajan* held at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill June 24-27 2000. My thanks to various participants in the conference for fruitful discussion. My thanks to various participants in the conference for fruitful discussion. - I want to thank dr.phil. Svend Gissel, Denmark, Professor Kenneth Reckford, Chapel Hill, and Ph.D. Nicolai Techow, as well as cand.mag. Mads Mordhorst, and mag.art. Søren Wassberg, Ph.D. Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, Denmark, all of whom have read and commented upon the paper. They are in no way, however, responsible for the content.

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Olsen, *Kristus i tropisk Afrika i spændingsfeltet mellem identitet og relevans*, diss. University of Copenhagen 1999 (Uppsala: Svenska institutet for missionsforskning, 2001) 118.

<sup>3</sup> I have taken the examples from W. MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary* (Nashville, 1995) 1815. They apply to textual criticism in general.

place the particular history they are writing about.<sup>4</sup> This larger history, which may be larger on several levels, is the context, the syntesis to which the individual history belongs, but it is also a tool for analysis, for interpretation. Modern theorists generally consider context or "milieu" to be very important for the understanding of the past and its texts, to the extent that it becomes the very basis of interpretation, the idea of life and times; e.g. a recent biography has been praised for setting the portrayed person "firmly in the contexts of his turbulent time"<sup>5</sup>. Postmodernists have stressed the importance of the individual and local context in order to fight the objectivizing understanding of rationality from the Enlightenment<sup>6</sup>.

The problem addressed here is then the part played by the concept of "context" within the area designated by the question "what does it mean to understand a text?". This part can be described as being a tool of inspiration, in such a way as to make text analysis more than detail-seeking analysis. Therefore it involves primarily intuition and only secondarily argumentation. One can argue for placing the given text in a larger context once one has got the idea, but one cannot argue oneself into getting the idea. So "context" is an intuitive rather than a rational element in interpretation. Of course the observation of repeated phenomena are important here as everywhere else, but one cannot establish rules for "context" the same way one can for grammar. One has to be able to see unique relations also. This goes both for the internal structure in the text, and for the "structure" we would like to see the text as a part of. Large part of this is obviously training in seeing likenesses and differences, the getting to know a literary convention, but there is also some small fragment needed of something mystical, call it literary sense, call it general knowledge, culture, or imagination, but it has to be there. So "context" is a more un-concept-like concept than some would like it to be, and analytical tools and concepts are not enough. There has to be something more. It is not sufficient to train a "critical ability" so much in vogue a couple of decades ago, one must also have insight in the cultural tradition, to which a text belongs.<sup>7</sup> Of course, it is *possible* to "interpret" a, say, Medieval or other Christian text without recognizing the Biblical references, e.g. in a "socio-economical" interpretation, but the result will have much more to do with the ideology of the interpreter than with the text.

### Quotations Demonstrating a Fairly Traditional View

In 1960, R.J. Forbes put the matter succinctly: "It is impossible to judge the character and spirit of an ancient text from extracts only; these are apt to be a mirror of the translator's views rather than the essence of what the ancient author wanted to transmit to his readers. Anyone comparing well-known quotations from the classics with the original context will be convinced of the fact that we need the complete texts, not the most important passages only."<sup>8</sup> Forbes wrote this in a context treating the History of Science and Technology, and commenting on the lack of good translations of oriental texts. The point is that the context of the whole text is important to the historian trying to establish a context outside the text. The

<sup>4</sup> On this topic, see Jens Bruun Kofoed, *Text and History* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2005) 11. On pp. 11-18 there is an important presentation of postmodern criticism of modernism's use of the term objectivity.

<sup>5</sup> M. Cambell, *Henry Purcell: Glory of His Age* (Oxford: 1995) quotation on the back cover.

<sup>6</sup> J. H. Olsen, *Kristus*, 115.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. A. Schnack: "Fri os fra tekstbeskrivelsen," *RIDS* 27 (1975).

<sup>8</sup> R. J. Forbes, "History of Science and Technology." In *Rapports I*, XI Congrès International des Sciences Historiques (Stockholm: 1960) 59-73, esp. 67.

message of the author is important, therefore it is important not to let the translator make the choices for you. The historiographer H. Butterfield wrote in that same year:

Where historical writing of the first magnitude is in question, it seems clear that contemporaries do not exhaust the meaning of the author, if indeed they adequately grasp his intellectual system at all; and the teaching of a man like Ranke seems to have been narrowed and perverted even by his successors in his own school. In such cases, irrespective of the survival of manuscript material, justice is done to the historian only in the researches and controversies that come later, that is to say, in the history of historiography. Here the advantage lies in the much greater care that is taken to see the whole of the man's work together, to know where each of his contributions stands in the series, and to collate the various parts of his thinking with one another.<sup>9</sup>

I think there are some fruitful points here, both the explicit one that contemporaries do not always get the whole of the author's meaning, and the implicit one that the author's, the historian's meaning is important. Moreover, Butterfield points to the context of the work of a single historian as an important tool of interpretation; his expressions might be read so as to take this context in a rather narrow, material sense; I take it that that is not his meaning as he elsewhere talks about the ideas put into the narrative. The scholarly debate ("controversies that come later") can bring aspects to the fore, which have hitherto not been paid attention to. This emphasizes the importance of the content, the picture of a complicated interaction between content and context emerges.

### **Fiction and Non-fiction**

Moreover, the difference between fictional and non-fictional texts must be taken into consideration. A fictional text creates a fictional universe, and refers only indirectly to what is commonly called "reality". References to localities, historical persons and events in a fictional text have an internal function in the text. The context, to which the text somehow belongs, as well as the intended reader become parts of this universe. The non-fictional text relates more directly to a context or part of a context with some kind of intention towards the reader, references have an external function. The text has a function with regard both to context and reader. Text, author and reader belong to the same world. In order to provide meaning, non-fictional texts necessitates more knowledge about the area of reference of the text on part of the reader, than does fictional ones. This is an ideal description, and there are all sorts of differentiations, but nevertheless the distinction is important. Historiography consists (we hope) of non-fictional texts, but the speeches in ancient historiography have often been considered mostly, if not entirely fictional. When reading historiography it is obviously important both to take the values and presuppositions of the text and its relation to the events it describes into account. More on the problems in this later. But it is important to note here that the problem of "context" is related both to the intention and means of the author and to the ability and will of the reader to understand the text as it was intended.<sup>10</sup> Recent linguistic research points out the importance of context in conversations, how people use contexts inside the texts and consequently how contexts operate in the narrative. This does not prove that the

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<sup>9</sup> H. Butterfield, "The History of the Writing of History." In *ibidem*,. 25-39, esp. 36f.

<sup>10</sup> B. Melchior, "Sagprosa-analyse" *RIDS* 88 (1981).

events are real, but proves the close ties of the text to an existing world.<sup>11</sup>

### **Hermeneutic**

The difficulties involved in the role of context in interpretation have been debated particularly among theologians, the hermeneutic tradition providing the establishment of principles for Exegesis<sup>12</sup>, the interpretation of the Biblical texts. From this vast field I shall pick only a few authors whose points seem particularly relevant to and fruitful for historical work. Recent important contributions have been made by Kevin Vanhoozer and G. R. Osborne, both of them conservative theologians. But the term hermeneutics is also used more generally about an art of interpretation, without the relativistic tendencies of historicism. In the 19th century, F. Schleiermacher and in the 20th century, R. G. Collingwood have represented a historical hermeneutics emphasizing on one hand the text as a psychological entity, and on the other the artistic aspect of the historian's work, whereas H. G. Gadamer has represented an existentialist hermeneutic<sup>13</sup>. Basic to hermeneutic thought is the notion of a circular movement, between text and reader<sup>14</sup>, between the parts and the whole, between historical and philological activities<sup>15</sup>. The questions of the interpreter drive the movement forward. Osborne<sup>16</sup> has argued that this movement in scholarly work should be described instead as a spiral, moving towards greater understanding, and from text to context. He considers the closed circle dangerous, because the priority of the text is lost.

The title of a recent conference, *Sage and Emperor: Plutarch and Trajan*, suggests seeing Plutarch in the context of Trajan's reign. The expressions in the flyer "the interaction of Plutarch with the contemporary elite of the Roman empire, and their mutual efforts to understand and control the world of their day"; and "How did imperial demands shape Plutarch's works, and how did his philosophical convictions influence the administration of the empire or the lives of its elites?" both presuppose a context and that we are able to explore it. They point to an interpretation of the individual in his relationship with something general. The question is then, how can we think about the context of Plutarch's work? What does "context" mean for our reading, our interpretation of the text? What should it mean? How dependant is the text on its original context? Does it reflect anything else?<sup>17</sup> And how dependant are we on our own context and on the picture of Plutarch's context, which we have made?

Part of the historian's work with context is regarding the date, the necessity of determining what specific part of the past, the text belongs to. For instance, scholars have searched desperately for a date for Quintus Curtius Rufus<sup>18</sup>; Roman Imperial times, yes, but

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<sup>11</sup> Nicolai Winther-Nielsen, "Tracking the World of Judges: The Use of Contextual Resources in Narration and Conversation", *Hiphil* 2 [<http://www.see-j.net/hiphil>] (2005). Accessed August 25, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> J. Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World* (Concordia, 1995) 13.

<sup>13</sup> J. B. Kofoed, *Israels historie som teologisk disciplin* (Copenhagen: Dansk Bibel-Institut, 1998) 29.

<sup>14</sup> G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: 1991).

<sup>15</sup> J. Steenstrup, *Historieskrivningen. Dens Udvikling gennem Tiderne, dens Væsen og Formaal* (Copenhagen: 1915) 197, 203.

<sup>16</sup> Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Olsen, *Kristus*, 115 and 116.

<sup>18</sup> The latest survey is that of J. E. Atkinson: "Q. Curtius Rufus' 'Historiae Alexandri Magni'" *ANRW* 34/4 (New York 1998) 3447-3483.

when was it exactly? This is important because if we do not know when he wrote, we do not know what circumstances might possibly have influenced his treatment of the material, the sources, that he had at his disposal, but which we lack; and if we do not know this, we are at a loss about the value of his account. Similarly, archaeologists and art historians cling<sup>19</sup> to the written sources, because these are their only way of deciding the date and the context of their object. Then we must ask ourselves the question, if a date is always a prerequisite for context or for interpretation in a context? Do other forms of context exist? It should be possible to interpret Curtius within the Alexander tradition, at least to a certain extent, without having any fixed date. It should be possible to compare that author with other people's attitude to Alexander without certainty of his date: e.g., comparison of Curtius and Plutarch.

### Collingwood

The concern with an author's date partly originates in an attitude forcefully pursued in the 19th century about insight in the author's thinking. In the first half of the 20th century, the philosopher R. G. Collingwood, who himself belongs to a hermeneutic tradition and resembles Schleiermacher in his attempt to reconstruct the original author's thinking, writes about the historian, and it will be seen that his argumentation presupposes a fixed date:

Suppose, for example, he is reading the Theodosian Code, and has before him a certain edict of an emperor. Merely reading the words and being able to translate them does not amount to knowing their historical significance. In order to do that he must envisage the situation with which the emperor was trying to deal, and he must envisage it as that emperor envisaged it. Then he must see for himself, just as if the emperor's situation were his own, how such a situation might be dealt with; he must see the possible alternatives, and the reasons for choosing one rather than another; and thus he must go through the process which the emperor went through in deciding on this particular course. Thus he is re-enacting in his own mind the experience of the emperor; and only in so far as he does this has he any historical knowledge, as distinct from merely philological, of the meaning of the edict.<sup>20</sup>

This is a very understanding kind of interpretation of texts, in which the historian goes into the mind of the historical person; historical significance and historical knowledge become inseparably related to the experiencing of a situation, and this re-enactment is again intimately connected with the person who is the author. Thus, text, author, and context constitute a unity in interpretation. For Collingwood, then, context matters with regard to the understanding of the purpose of the author. The question is then: do we know enough of the conditions of the emperor? Collingwood does not go into the problems in interpretation. And in the quotation above we do not go beyond the comprehension of the historical situation by the historical person himself; we do not see the event from the outside. Psychologically, it is an intellectualistic interpretation, it concerns itself with the thought, rather than the will. Then again, the example of the edict serves Collingwood's purpose very well, because the laws provide a kind of direct access to a mind and a context, they are relics of the historical situation in question, the acting historical character is identical with the author, but what about topics, where this is not the case? We haven't got anything Alexander the Great has written himself, with the possible exception of some coins, what would Collingwood then do to re-

<sup>19</sup> This expression was used by the Danish art historian Jens Fleischer in a private conversation with me.

<sup>20</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: 1993).

enact his experience? When our sources are exclusively accounts, even centuries later accounts, we have only very indirectly access to a mind and a situation. Then we must ask what, e.g., Curtius wants to use Alexander for, and this can be more difficult to answer than it seems from the outset, especially as we do not know when he lived. Is hermeneutics then only relevant for certain types of sources? I do not think so, but in Collingwood's interpretation it might be the case. There is also a more subtle kind of problem: in life, also with regard to texts, and especially in politics there are always circumstances which are not known by more than two or three persons, and which do not leave any trace in writing or otherwise, because they must not be known; they constitute a context to which the later historian has no possibility of access. What if we have two versions of an edict, an early draft and the final version, but have no knowledge whatsoever about what private motives, what secret negotiations have triggered the latter? In that case, the historian can certainly make many *interesting* theories about influence from various contexts or considerations in order to explain the difference, all of which may contain fragments of the truth, but he has no chance of reaching *the truth*. Quite apart from that, the emperor probably had a staff of lawyers working along his major guidelines; so there remains the problem, whose mind is it we reenact? So it is understandable that criticisms could arise against this kind of position, though one might disagree with the way it was done.<sup>21</sup>

### Gadamer

This ideal of psychological insight in the author as a prerequisite for interpretation has been severely criticized for being impossible. The German hermeneutic theorist Hans-Georg Gadamer admits the justification of this criticism. The quotation above demonstrates that Collingwood has a great deal to say about what the historian *does*, but very little to say about who the historian *is*. With Gadamer this is very different; in his way of thinking, the interpreter and the interpreter's background, prejudices, his context are always part of the process of interpretation, the reader, the human being of the present, enters the hermeneutical circle. The "fusion of horizons," by which term he describes understanding, is also a fusion of contexts. The hermeneutical problem does not concern the knowledge of the languages, but the matter treated in language. The distance between the languages makes every translator an interpreter. For him, the hermeneutical circle means that understanding is dependent on pre-understanding, it emerges from a hermeneutical conversation as a reconstruction of the question to which the text is an answer. In his view, the task consists in understanding the text itself, not its emergence. This must mean that a fixed date is not absolutely necessary. When talking about the contemporary horizon, he must mean the interpreter's context, but he does not seem to say directly that we translate from one context to another. Gadamer's views break in an important way with the notion of Enlightenment that all prejudice is negative, but they introduce a problem of their own. The truth is not universal, but only exists in the individual tradition,<sup>22</sup> it is never-ending, so do we come any closer at all? The circle here appears to be a closed one, where the search for truth disappears.<sup>23</sup> Gadamer still thinks, however, that there is

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<sup>21</sup> I want to thank Søren Wassberg for very fruitful discussion of Collingwood.

<sup>22</sup> Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 371.

<sup>23</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: 1972) esp. 289, 356, 362ff. For criticism of Gadamer's position, see Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 371.

something in the text, which is important for interpretation.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Gadamer took a step away from concern with the author towards exclusive concern with the text. Similar steps were taken in France by Structuralism and in England and America by the New Criticism, both stressing literary form rather than the historical dimensions of the text, including the author.<sup>25</sup> The New Criticism embodied a change in literary studies from the historical interest in the development of literature of the 19th century towards a new ahistorical approach, in which literary works are seen as autonomous. This approach, then, is not postmodern in itself, but a child of modernity, and has put its mark on the 20th. century at large. *Theory of Literature* by R. Wellek and A. Warren from 1949<sup>26</sup> was an essential work in that trend. The authors write in their "Preface to the first Edition" about themselves: "Though of differing backgrounds and training, both had followed a similar pattern of development, passing through historical research and work in the 'history of ideas,' to the position that literary study should be specifically literary." This is a very interesting statement: they put their own text into a context, the context of their own personal development; so there seems to be some kind of historical circumstances, which are relevant to the meaning of a text. Because the statement implies that there is a meaning, a message, an essence in the text, something which is relevant to the study of literature outside the book itself, that is, to a kind of context. Later in the book, the two authors describe the form of research that they oppose under the headline "The extrinsic Approach," and they denounce - rightly, in my opinion - deterministic causal methods in the study of literature. They admit the importance of biographical evidence to a certain extent, but denies that it "can change or influence critical evaluation." They claim that there "is great literature which has little or no social relevance... 'Literature' ... has its own justification and aims."

Where does this place the question of context? The positivistic search for laws was abandoned and so was the biographical interest in the author; The New Criticism deamed the historical connection between author and work to be without interest and equally the intention of the author in writing his text. The only context relevant to interpretation, according to this view, is the internal one within the text. While this is no doubt important, it is easy to see that history will have an obvious problem in justifying itself in such a climate. Can the intention of the author be dismissed without history losing all or some of its importance? Defenders of this position will say that the intention of the author is not the same as the meaning of the text, that method is the way to find the meaning, not the author as an oracle outside the text, and that interpretation cannot be separated from the text. The New Criticism probably represented a healthy reaction to a collecting of material, which had lost all perspective, but serious objections can be made against it: literary theory does not have any monopoly on the interpretation of texts; history, for instance, must also have a word to say. If the text is autonomous, where are then the criteria for interpretation? Why should we make everything fictional? And fictional is any text, which does not refer to anything outside itself. Moreover, how much can we really demand from "method"? I would say that reading is something far more chaotical and dynamical than it is often made to in the academic world, where a method is produced, on the basis of which one continues. And the New Criticism is itself a historical

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24. Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning in this Text?* (Grand Rapids: 1998) 107.

25. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 369, 371-374.

<sup>26</sup> Quote from the third edition, 1963.

phenomenon; though many of the fathers of the movement were conservatives, it is hard not to see a copy of the rootless human being of modernity in the rootless text of its ideas. Most important of all: if one adopts this approach, one must be consistent, it will not do to dismiss source-criticism and put the author outside the text and then after all want to pronounce an opinion as to, for instance, who can be or cannot be the author. How many scholars can really avoid this temptation, if it suits their ideas to give an opinion about something outside the text itself?<sup>27</sup>

### Kevin Vanhoozer

Later again, postmodernism has questioned our ability to understand any cultural environment other than our own. This debate has been analysed in the important book published in 1998 by Kevin Vanhoozer: *Is there a Meaning in this Text?*<sup>28</sup> The context or location helps us to determine a text's historical as well as its literary place, its genre. The reader also has a context. For the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, however, texts are independent of their authors and their original contexts and indeed of any single determining context. A text drifts away from its origin, and thus "meaning" is no longer anchored to a stabilising context. There is only a repetition of signs in a non-identical way. Deconstruction and other recent trends recognise meaning as being only historically situated ways of reading, a context of convention.<sup>29</sup> The problem raised here, which has of course been debated earlier also, is that of subjectivity. Deconstructionists themselves would say individuality; can we know how another human being sees reality? I agree that the establishment of theories in the academic world is often a very subjective affair, but I cannot accept that this should always be so, or that the only context we can understand is our own. The fact that a text can be quoted outside its context and against its author's intention does not in any way imply that the author's meaning and the original context is without importance. To me, if this attitude is accepted, it seems to mean the end of historical knowledge.

Vanhoozer's alternative to Derrida's position is based partly on his definition of "context," and on his interest in the text as a communicative act. Context identifies the circumstances relevant to something under consideration. In interpretation, this is the nature of communicative action. "Context," then, includes the various factors one has to take into consideration together with the text in order to understand the author's intention. Authorial intention is always located in a network of beliefs and practices that form the background for communicative action, the mind-set. The reader must therefore strive to share the context of the author. The context is then as broad or as narrow as it needs to be in order to make sense of the author's communicative act.<sup>30</sup> Vanhoozer uses the expression "thick description"<sup>31</sup> to describe an interpretation which takes into account the context to find the intention, the direction in what is said, the matter and energy of the text. The thick description is an interpretation that takes into account the complex context of the author's communicative act. In a certain sense we return to Collingwood's position, but on a much more reflective level.

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<sup>27</sup> On The New Criticism, see J. Fjord Jensen, *Den ny Kritik* (Copenhagen: 1962). I have also profited greatly from a seminar on *The Bible as Literature* at Copenhagen Lutherans School of Theology March 2-3, 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Grand Rapids 1998.

<sup>29</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning*, 112.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 250f.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 284-285, referring to the philosopher Gilbert Ryle.



There is another very important difference between Derrida's and Vanhoozer's theories; a difference which concerns the question, how certain something has to be, before we can say that we know it: Derrida demands that a context should be "absolutely determinable" and that there should be "a rigorous and scientific concept of *context*."<sup>32</sup> In this aspect, he is a modernist, and therefore he is an enemy of hermeneutics and its search for a meaning in the text.<sup>33</sup> This point probably needs a further explanation: I consider hermeneutics to have been in a certain sense an opposition to modernity, for instance the positivism of modernity, but hermeneutics can be defined in two different ways:

1. As a part of scholarship, a fundamental meta-discipline within literature, theology etc., which treats the way(s) in which we handle the data, our discipline works with; the question, how can we organize them meaningfully.
2. "The hermeneutical project," the idea of searching positively for meaning and finding it. Derrida is an antagonist of hermeneutics in the second sense, but would probably say himself that he is a hermeneutic in the first sense, investigating the basics of knowledge. I myself would say that his rejection of hermeneutics in the second sense also presents him with a problem with it in the first sense, that he is undermining the kind of investigation which is his particular field.

Derrida wants certain knowledge of a mathematical kind, and when he cannot get that, he claims that there is no knowledge at all. So he combines a modern demand for certain knowledge with a postmodern criticism of the possibility of the same. In my view, he is right in this criticism, but he does not admit that the concept of "knowledge" is wrongly defined. That is his problem.

### **And What does the Historian Do with All This?**

This is particularly hard for the historians who must admit in their quiet hours that historical knowledge is certainly not certain. Vanhoozer, on the other hand, has coined the phrase "adequate knowledge";<sup>34</sup> we cannot know everything about a given text, but we can know enough. My favourite Danish historian, Johannes Steenstrup, who was firmly placed in the hermeneutic tradition, used in the beginning of the 20th century the expression "probable knowledge";<sup>35</sup> another attempt to strike a middle ground between the demand for certain knowledge and the absolute scepticism, which so often results from it. I think it is an essential point that knowledge about historical context or knowledge deduced from historical context is always probable, never certain in a mathematical sense. This point then stresses the importance of argumentation.

For the historian, there are two elements in interpretation: firstly, the text interpretation proper, to search for the meaning of the text, the author's meaning, and secondly, the historian's use of the text as a source for something else, something outside the

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<sup>32</sup> J. Derrida, "Signature Event Context." In P. Bizzell and B. Herzberg, *The Rhetorical Tradition* (Boston: 1990) 1169f.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 1183.

<sup>34</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning*, 139.

<sup>35</sup> J. Steenstrup, *Historieskrivningen. Dens Udvikling gennem Tiderne, dens Væsen og Formaal* (Copenhagen: 1915) 184.

text. I do not mean that the two elements form "steps" in a method in any rigorous sense, only that the historian's use of the text must take the author's intention into consideration. This may be as narrative or as relic, but relic must also be interpreted. Vanhoozer's concern is with the first of these elements. With regard to the second, the ability to become puzzled is very important.<sup>36</sup> When we meet something strange, something which we cannot quite explain, something which points to a context which is different from our own or from the picture of the past that we have formed in our heads, something which we cannot translate, when we meet all this, we become puzzled. And the ability to become puzzled is one of the most fruitful aspects of scholarly work, as was pointed out by the historian Johannes Steenstrup. Moreover, and I think this is very important, this puzzlement is a sign that we do meet something outside ourselves, we do not only create the past out of our own context, as Jacques Derrida would have us believe. This experience indicates that we allow the text to challenge our interpretation, our pre-understanding; and this challenge is a point which has been developed especially by G. R. Osborne.<sup>37</sup>

A question which puzzles me is this: why does Plutarch end his biography of Alexander in such a sinister way? In chapter 77, he proceeds beyond the death of the portrayed person to tell about the cruelty of Olympias and Roxana brought together from very different points in time; even though the thought of Alexander being poisoned is more denied than confirmed. What is the author's "intended meaning"<sup>38</sup> in finishing this way? Is this procedure after all a contribution to the purpose of characterisation, so clearly stated in the beginning of that biography, in such a way that these events cast a shadow backwards on the figure of Alexander? Or, can we here detect an influence of Plutarch's context, of the delicate stability and the hidden dangers in the Empire, so that Plutarch has chosen from among a wealth of material, certain issues which reflect a feeling of insecurity and danger in his contemporaries? Does it simply reflect an antiquarian interest? Or is it that Plutarch after all is not oblivious to the entertaining effect of cruelty in narrative? It is difficult to see how these events could anticipate the *other text*, the second biography of the pair, that of Caesar, a historical figure much closer to the situation in Plutarch's own day, but the possibility should not be dismissed in advance. The ending of "Caesar" is probably not possible to use in an argumentation about this; still it might be informative to consider, how Plutarch finishes his other biographies, as well as how the other Alexander-historians end their work. It has been argued that the end of the "Alexander" is missing together with the beginning of the "Caesar"<sup>39</sup>; on the other hand the fates of Roxane and Olympias would not change the sinister character of the ending. We must also distinguish between the intention of the author and the effect of the text. Thus, we can ask many questions of our text, questions which are somehow related to a context, but answering them is much harder. However, the process must drive us back to the text,<sup>40</sup> must make us consider again and again what Plutarch writes, must make us try to read the well-known text as if we saw it for the first time.<sup>41</sup> We may enrich our argumentation by considering what each generation have been puzzled about in a given text, that is the tradition

<sup>36</sup> J. Steenstrup, *Nogle Omrids af min Virksomhed som Universitetslærer* (Copenhagen: 1934).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 412f.

<sup>38</sup> Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 408.

<sup>39</sup> See J. R. Hamilton, *Plutarch. Alexander. A Commentary* (Oxford: 1969) 217.

<sup>40</sup> Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 408.

<sup>41</sup> J. Steenstrup, *Historieskrivningen*, 220.

of the interpretation of the text. The ability to get puzzled is also important to textual interpretation proper: the text offers resistance, and we learn in our attempt to conquer it or rather to come closer to the text.

Of course, there is an immense difference between the historian's situation when confronted with modern texts, and when confronted with ancient ones. Regarding Ancient History, the situation is very often that we have the text, but lack the context: the sources for Plutarch's life are predominantly his own writings.<sup>42</sup> If we read an obituary from the first decades of the 20th century, we will often know something from other sources about both the writing and the portrayed person; we may even know of some third party whose existence might influence the wording. In ancient history, we can rarely use context that way, often we do not know the precise details of the situation, and even in modern examples we do not have access to the actual thinking of an author. On the other hand, interpretation necessitates historical knowledge,<sup>43</sup> and historical knowledge needs both the texts and our interpretation of them. This makes us enter the whole problem of commentaries: A kind of "local context" might be to confront Curtius' description of Babylon with other evidence. In such an attempt one might introduce other material in the interpretation without being bound to the problem of the date. Commentaries do not necessarily represent context, but they are often used in interpretation. A commentary might be related to the original context or to the present one; without discarding the last type altogether, I must emphasize the first one as the historically important. But the same kind of question has been raised in later years with regard to commentaries as with other genres: Does a commentary invent or does it discover?<sup>44</sup>

### Fragmentation and Context

It is very important to be able to study the individual subject and to try to enter it thoroughly, but we must also be able to think in larger entities, in whole units. Modernity has promoted fragmentation as well as an illusion that the truth rests in the fragments. In the classical field, Jacobi's *Fragmente* is a work of enormous scope and scholarly achievement, a principal work in 20th century historiography, but the orientation of this achievement is problematic: it aims at fragments, and the *testimonia* about the authors are fragments themselves. The effect of this is that the text, which has been handed down, is shattered and lost from sight. This attitude leads, not surprisingly, to a work like Lionel Pearson's *The lost Histories of Alexander the Great*, in which the lost accounts have become the real object of scholarship, which the author tries to describe on often very shaky ground, instead of studying in depth the texts, we have. The effort also tends to end in a circular argument, because the lost account end up looking very much like the extant one. The later work, *Achaemenid History*, by many authors, which in principle is about history, not historiography, has fragmentation in its very basis; in spite of its title, it is no unified work of history. This character derives partly from its background in a workshop. The aim is centrifugal, the periphery is consistently preferred. There might be some idea of relating to context in this attitude, but the result is the disappearance of both context and coherence. In the end, one of the authors ask: "Was there any Achaemenid History?" In this sense it is a very postmodern work. I think these examples illustrate, how much

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<sup>42</sup> K. Ziegler, "Plutarchos," in *R.E.*, 639.

<sup>43</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning*, 233.

<sup>44</sup> For the problem of commentaries see *ibidem*, 284-287.

Postmodernism is a child of Modernity. P. Briant has in this series written a work, which is an attempt to write a synthesis, and which has also been translated into English: *From Cyrus to Alexander*. He uses, as his first minor headline, the question: "Was there any Achaemenid History?" and his book answers it in the affirmative. He seeks to write a coherent history. Like the whole series, his book is based in an expressed wish to contradict the Greek sources, to present a different view. This means that he rejects their testimony but tries to use their data, especially Curtius. On p. 829 he calls Curtius' information totally reliable, on p. 830 he rejects what Curtius says altogether. It is hard to see that the different approach is based in anything but the general attitude of Briant. His work is far more of a continued narrative than the rest of "Achaemenid History", and the coherent narrative is based on a certain level of traditional chronological history, where the kings are restored to a large degree in their parts as key figures of history. For this reason the book, in spite of its attack on Greek-centered historiography, represents a return to a fairly traditional way of writing history, in which the center of the Empire including its personal center is in focus. This is not strange, but deserves to be noted, as the point of departure of the work is opposition to traditional historiography. The history of the Kings, the imperial history provides the necessary frame for the author to organize his narrative. An important part of traditional narrative structure thus proves indispensable for the author to organize a synthetic structure: only by this texture can he bind together information from all sorts of contexts into one composition. Implicitly, Briant recognizes traditional history as the inevitable frame for interpretation of context.

Context is often appealed to in interpretation, but we should be aware that arguments from context can become a bar to interpretation or a vehicle for superficial interpretation. This is particularly the case if the dominating way of thinking of our own age becomes the dominating factor in interpretation. In the 20th century, the concept of "context" has often been used from a deterministic point of view, about an exclusively material-political context. This could lead to the disappearance of the author as a person.<sup>45</sup> We should not let the text drown in our search for context. With an author, as with any individual human being, there is besides the circumstances also an X, which is not determined by circumstances. The human being of the past is not a consciousness floating freely in the air, nor is it completely determined by its context. In the same way, the individual text is clearly part of the author's entire work, but is also an entity in itself.

We may think of Plutarch as a subject of a state, the Roman Empire, but there is already a problem, as this state was not a state in the modern sense of the word. We may think of Plutarch as being a part of the culture of his own day, but apart from the fact that he will be a major witness to what this culture was about, we are faced with the problem that the thinking about "culture" in the 20th century has made "change" into a value in itself, whereas in earlier ages "repetition" was much more of a constructive force. I think that the many quotations Plutarch included of authors centuries older than himself might indicate a far greater awareness of belonging to a tradition, than we find with many people today. Then again, Marxists might think of Plutarch as belonging to the elite of a very class-divided society. However, that raises the question whether "class" had the same meaning as it has been given in the 19th and 20th centuries, or if the institutions, the structures worked in a different way. All these are important problems of translation.

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. Vanhoozer, *passim*.

## Conclusion

To conclude, our idea of context influences our reading of Plutarch and any other author. It is hard to see how it could be otherwise, but we should be aware of that. We all agree (I think) that the author has existed historically, but does he also exist for us, with his intention? I think he does, but he exists for us through the text, and in my opinion it must be important and interesting for us to try to reach the author's intention through the text. The uses of context in interpretation is connected with the problem of the questions that the historian asks, and of course the historian is entitled to ask questions not posed by his sources. But if he only does that, if he does not constantly keep in mind that the contemporaries brought up matters which were important to them, if he consider his own questions more important than theirs, then he is in danger of developing an arrogancy towards the past: It is a pity they didn't meet me, then I could have told them what their situation was *really* all about.

Moreover, the attempt to understand the author's intention is in itself an important training for us, it is significant as a kind of spiritual exercise. The wonder which is expressed in puzzlement, and the attempt to approach a solution is a fruitful process, important to our lives. The restraint involved in refraining from subduing the text under contemporary thinking in the interpreter's own time, and the expansion of mind associated with the attempt to reach the author's meaning, are both a training which can be valuable for us as persons. Why read historical texts at all, if one does not want to transcend the narrow horizon of contemporary thinking? If one only wants to see oneself, why not just look into a mirror? Most of us are better at talking ourselves than at listening to others, perhaps it is necessary for us as *humans* to try to listen to a voice from another age? The author wanted to describe something, to reach out, and we should be willing to do the same when reading his text. An important part of our attitude is receptiveness, we should be willing to let the other influence us. This does not at all mean that we should be afraid of expressing ourselves, but that interpretation should be a process of appreciation rather than of action and control. The question of the influence of the topic on the author, instead of vice versa, is very intriguing: the subject can influence the author in such a way that his own remarks about his own text do not describe accurately, what he does. On the other hand the possibility can't be excluded beforehand that this discrepancy can be made consciously, given that, i.e., Plutarch was a consciously writing author. Then again, the intention of the author must in some way or another be measured against a context, as we cannot grasp it in any other way.

Postmodernists have recognized the importance of subjectivism, which is positive. As is apparent in my remarks, I do not agree with postmodernism. However, I do think that the way we react to postmodernism will influence the development of scholarship in the future. Pronounced practitioners may not agree with this, but if one is practitioner in a theoretically conscious way, one will probably agree. It is important that we consider what we mean, when we say "context" and that we reflect on how many different kinds of context there are. We should also be aware that a historical context is to a large extent the interpreter's construction, influenced both by the choice of material and the lack of material. The search for a context in which to place the text conducted by both the literary interpreter, and the historian is founded in a wish to find explanations, an endeavour which is in itself a praiseworthy intellectual enterprise. There are often many reasons, however, for what happens, and explanations always come after the event and after the text. Historiography is entirely the

historian's construction, a vision of the past which he presents at his own responsibility, but that does not mean that the context(s) which he uses as an inspiration and as an interpretive tool do not correspond to anything in the historical situation in question. The kind of context I am advocating is a probable, an argued one. The way to interpretation must go through the text, and the intention of the text must have something to do with what the author wished to do, as there would be no work if nobody wanted to write it. We must be willing to listen to the text, to co-operate with it. And if we do that, we might, just might, faintly see the shadow of a context.

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