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## Convention and Context

Steven J. Mailloux

*Loyola Marymount University*, [Steven.Mailloux@lmu.edu](mailto:Steven.Mailloux@lmu.edu)

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# Convention and Context

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CONVENTIONS refer to shared practices. I will use this simple claim as a starting point for examining how the concept of convention has been applied in recent accounts of action in general and interpretation in particular.<sup>1</sup> Three kinds of shared practices are relevant to these accounts: those covered by traditional conventions recognizing past regularities in action; prescriptive conventions regulating future action; and (combining special forms of the first two) constitutive conventions determining present meaning. My commentary will explore the nature of these conventions and their use as explanatory concepts.<sup>2</sup>

## I

Bert O. States and Paul Alpers examine traditional conventions relevant to literary practices: conventions of genre and mode which are based on precedents and refer to regularities constituting a tradition. States traces how such traditional conventions get established, observing that an innovative practice—such as using furniture on the nineteenth-century stage—possesses an initial “preconventional shock” value. Here States nicely exploits the ambiguity of *shock*: the new practice shocks (surprises) the audience and shocks (shakes up, potentially changes) the medium. The audience is shocked because traditional conventions function not only as options for the artist but also as expectations for his viewers or readers. Thus, when a new practice arises, audiences are surprised by the unexpected, the unconventional. The innovation also shocks the medium itself: if other artists adopt the practice and this adoption is not just a fad, then the unfamiliar becomes the conventional. The once-novel practice loses its preconventional shock value and becomes part of the tradition. Transformed into a traditional convention, the now-familiar practice helps form the new order out of which other unconventional practices emerge.

Paul Alpers reveals more about the nature of traditional conventions in his meditation upon pastoral poetry. His thesis about “convening” reminds us that conventions describe individuals “coming

together” in the sharing of practices based on precedent. Alpers especially emphasizes the way a writer convenes his precursor through the imitation of poetic actions. But we might also say that traditional conventions bring together succeeding poets in the shared techniques forming a tradition, and that poets come together with their readers in mutual recognition of these writing (and reading) traditions. In each of these convenings, *repetition* is an essential feature. Alpers focuses on this aspect of traditional conventions when, like States, he draws our attention to “a convention in the process of being established”: Virgil’s convening of Theocritus through his repetition of that predecessor’s poetic practices. If such repetition is only a step toward establishing a convention, what must follow for the process to be completed? The answer is obvious: repetition must become regularity. But regularity in action is not repetition without difference: since repetition is performed under “different poetic and cultural circumstances,” there will be “emphases and meanings” that are “new and specific” to the later poet.

Alpers does not develop this last point, but we can use it to underscore the *contextual* nature of performing and specifying traditional conventions. What counts as a repetition or similarity and what emerges as a modification or difference is always context-specific. Alpers shows how Marvell self-consciously employs traditional conventions he shares with Theocritus and Virgil, even though all three poets, because of their different poetic and cultural situations, do not completely share identical practices. Traditional conventions are repetitions that become regularities against which differences stand out. We can better understand the contextualized regularity of conventions by examining Margaret Gilbert’s rejection of “regularity” as an essential feature of convention.

The literary conventions Alpers explores seem to be manifestations of the social conventions Gilbert wants to discuss (see section II of her essay). In an attempt to analyze “the everyday concept of a social convention,” Gilbert first summarizes the influential account in David Lewis’s *Convention*.<sup>3</sup> She explains that for Lewis, “social conventions involve regularities in the behavior of members of a group, expectations about that behavior, and the occurrence of coordination problems among members of the group,” problems that are solved by the regularities in and expectations about the behavior in question. Gilbert rejects each of these major features in Lewis’s account and claims that none of them is part of our everyday notion of social convention. I will argue that Gilbert is at least partially mistaken here.

Regularity in behavior is an essential feature of our everyday concept of convention insofar as that concept involves what I have been

calling traditional conventions. The first objection Gilbert raises to the regularity feature begins with her claim that if conventions are regularities, they must involve “situations which occur fairly frequently and in which parties to the convention almost as frequently conform to the convention.” She then argues that conventions exist when no such frequency of occurrence exists, and thus there is no necessary conceptual relation between conventions and regularity. But what do we mean when we say that a conventional action occurs frequently? If what counts as a regularity is context-dependent, as I suggest above, then what counts as “frequently occurring” might also be seen as depending upon the situation that falls under the convention. For example, it is a convention to greet acquaintances when you meet them no matter how many such people you meet in a single day, but it is also a convention to have an athlete light the torch at the opening of the Olympic Games every four years. Even if the Olympics took place at less frequent and unpredictable intervals, torch-lighting could still be called a regularity in behavior, a traditional convention. Thus I also find unpersuasive Gilbert’s proposed counterexample about Festschriften. Even if there were eminent sixty-five-year-old professors retiring only once a decade at odd intervals, it would still be appropriate to say that there is a convention for honoring such people. Traditional conventions recognize past regularities in action, but what counts as a regularity or as a frequent occurrence depends on the context. Compared to daily greetings, once-a-decade Festschriften are not frequent events, but they are no less conventional for that fact.

Gilbert brings up the frequency issue only because she thinks it is important to Lewis’s notion of regularity. If we put the frequency issue aside, we still must contend with her more general rejection of the regularity condition for convention. Again, her Festschrift example is pertinent. If conventions are regularities, Gilbert asks, would neglecting to produce a Festschrift for an eminent sixty-five-year-old professor undermine the convention of Festschrift production? She answers that “each exception individually makes the regularity less of a regularity, but . . . a given exception may make a convention no less a convention *at all*.” Thus, she suggests, convention and regularity are not *necessarily* conceptually related. However, when she goes on to explain why the convention of Festschrift production might not be followed, what she ends up illustrating is that regularity is context-specific. In the context she describes—one in which the potential recipient hates Festschriften or is hated by his colleagues—the convention for producing Festschriften is ignored; but the recognition of regularity still remains precisely because the convention’s neglect in this context is seen as an exception.

My responses to Gilbert's other objections to the regularity condition would run along similar lines. In each case I would try to show how the concept of traditional conventions captures an essential aspect of our everyday notion of social convention, an aspect that Gilbert is not able to explain away. Nevertheless, I am not suggesting that our everyday notion is completely exhausted by the idea of traditional conventions. We also need a concept of prescriptive conventions, conventions that regulate future action, and it is here that Gilbert's essay becomes especially useful. The definition she presents for convention-in-general is really a definition of prescriptive convention. Traditional conventions describe regularities in action based on precedent, while prescriptive conventions are norms for action based (in Gilbert's terms) on "quasi agreements." Prescriptive conventions "are implicitly predicated upon their general endorsement by members of the society in question," and this endorsement puts pressure on other members to follow the convention. Parties to prescriptive conventions "believe that they ought to do certain things in certain situations." Examples of such conventions can include the prescription that a thank-you note be sent after receiving a present, and the proscription that blasphemy be avoided when writing literature in certain historical periods. Prescriptive conventions of censorship differ from traditional conventions of genre.<sup>4</sup> An essential aspect of the former is that they attempt to require specific behavior rather than simply offering options, and they are based on something like agreement or stipulation rather than precedent for their authority. Recognition of past regularities is essential to traditional conventions, but it is conceptually irrelevant to prescriptive conventions.

## II

Both Alpers in his discussion of traditional conventions and Gilbert in her analysis of prescriptive conventions strategically employ the notion of context in filling out their accounts of action. Alpers suggests that the use of literary conventions in different historical contexts results in different "emphases and meanings." As I pointed out above, this contextual qualification allows Alpers to acknowledge the presence of difference and uniqueness within conventional behavior. Gilbert argues that a social convention exists "when most people think that one ought to do such and such in a certain context." This contextual qualification puts constraints on the choice of appropriate prescriptive conventions, thus tethering those conventions to particular situations recognized by the parties to the convention. Both

Alpers's and Gilbert's notions of "convention in context" illustrate how traditional and prescriptive conventions are trans-situational in their employment yet context-specific in their relevance and meaning. For example, writing is an activity in which authors use *similar* genre and modal conventions in different historical contexts, at different moments in a literary tradition of *shared* practices. But how a particular author's practices relate to the tradition, how he uses the conventions according to his purposes, and what literary and extraliterary meaning his use of them produces are always *specific to his unique context of writing*.

That Alpers and Gilbert use "context" to supplement their conventionalist accounts certainly does not negate the value of traditional and prescriptive conventions as explanatory concepts. However, we might want to ask: What would happen if "context" was left out of such convention-based theories? Could an exhaustive account of action be provided in terms of conventions alone? Hilary Putnam suggests a negative answer in his essay, "Convention: A Theme in Philosophy." He first summarizes Quine's and Wittgenstein's "strategy of contrasting what we do *naturally* (either by virtue of our constitutions or by virtue of the particular cultural traditions that have become a part of our makeup) with what we do *conventionally* (i.e., by memorizing rules, reading signs, following instructions)."<sup>5</sup> Employing this strategy himself, Putnam shows that it is impossible to account fully for actions in terms of conventions (defined as descriptive or prescriptive rules for shared practices) because such rule-based accounts inevitably run up against an infinite regress of rules. As Putnam says, "When I am taught to obey a simple instruction, such as the instruction to *add one* over and over starting with a given number, the directions themselves cannot be understood by following explicit directions on pain of an infinite regress." That is, a rule-based account must provide rules for following the rules, then rules for following the metarules, and so on. The only way to avoid the infinite regress would be to discover directions that need no metarules, directions that are self-interpreting, but, as Putnam points out, "there are no such directions." In place of rule-based explanations, Quine and Wittgenstein offer an anticonventionalist account of action. They conclude that "in certain contexts we just 'go on' the way we do—perhaps as the result of having a certain number of examples or of having watched members of our community or interacted with them in 'language games'"—and that this fact "is more fundamental and in every way prior to such activities as giving and interpreting explicit directions." Therefore, we might say with Hubert Dreyfus that conventionalist theories cannot fully account for human behavior because

that behavior is orderly but not rule-governed; people simply proceed according to their sense of being in a situation and not necessarily by following rule-based conventions.<sup>6</sup>

Conventionalist theories of action thus have their explanatory limits, limits characteristically marked by the phrases “in certain contexts,” “under specific circumstances,” and “within particular situations.” More generally, in accounts like those of Alpers, Gilbert, and Putnam, theorists use the notion of context to draw a boundary around convention’s descriptive and explanatory coverage. “Context” points to *differences* not recognized by conventions (for Alpers) and refers to *features of a situation* not dealt with by conventions, both in the sense that certain contextual features not covered by conventions determine the appropriate practices in that situation (for Gilbert) and in the sense that certain contextualized behavior is simply nonconventional, not following rule-based conventions (for Putnam). In each case, “context” indicates what is left to be explained after conventions have been used to describe behavior. The delimiting function of “context” is further demonstrated by its use in conventionalist accounts of literary interpretation.

Interpretation is an action—the accomplishment of meaning—and can therefore be described in the same way as other human behaviors: in terms of shared practices. There are traditional conventions of interpretation—such as, in literary criticism, relating form to content or distinguishing literal and figurative semantic levels—and there are prescriptive conventions of interpretation—such as the proscriptions against the intentional and affective fallacies. We can call these shared hermeneutic practices constitutive or interpretive conventions, conventions that determine present meaning. In literary study, interpretive conventions are communal procedures for making sense of texts.

Recent literary theorists use interpretive conventions in two different ways in their accounts of reading and criticism. Some argue that readers possess a set of shared interpretive strategies which can be triggered by cues or signals in the text. For instance, in “Do Poets Ever Mean What They Say?” John Reichert claims that literary works *invite* readers to use particular conventions.<sup>7</sup> A reader recognizes signs in a text that indicate which interpretive conventions are appropriate for reading that text.<sup>8</sup> But the problem with such a minimally enabling view of conventions is that it leaves unexplained how a reader recognizes the signs in the first place. Is it through other conventions, and are these in turn triggered by still other textual signals? And how then are these signals recognized?

One way out of this vicious circle is offered by more “radical” conventionalist theories, ones that tend to see interpretive conventions as maximally constitutive of meaning. Such theories—like those of Stanley Fish and Jonathan Culler—argue that communal interpretive procedures are not cued by textual features but rather these features only come into view against a background of shared conventions. Fish puts the radical conventionalist position this way: “Rather than intention and its formal realization producing interpretation (the ‘normal’ picture), interpretation creates intention and its formal realization by creating the conditions in which it becomes possible to pick them out.” Thus interpretive conventions are procedures “not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties.”<sup>9</sup> In *Structuralist Poetics* Culler argues along similar lines: a poem is “an utterance that has meaning only with respect to a system of conventions which the reader has assimilated,” and a text “does not itself contain a meaning but involves the reader in the process of producing meaning according to a variety of appropriate procedures.”<sup>10</sup>

But again questions arise: What determines the “appropriate procedures” for interpreting a specific text? In answer, theorists of radical conventionalism do not usually point back to signals in the text. Nor can they appeal to metaconventions for using interpretive strategies; such an appeal would simply lead to an infinite regress of conventions. No, what these theorists do is cite *context* as the constraint on hermeneutic practices. Once again “context” serves as the boundary concept on the explanatory use of conventions in accounts of action (in this case interpretive action).

More specifically, what is the relationship between “context” and “convention” in reading theories like Fish’s and Culler’s? Both theorists suggest that interpretive conventions are part of context, but that contextual features functioning as hermeneutic constraints transcend formalizable conventions. For instance, in “Convention and Meaning: Derrida and Austin,” Culler now claims that the interpretive conventions on which he focused in *Structuralist Poetics* should be seen as part of “boundless context.”<sup>11</sup> The implication is that specifying the appropriate reading conventions for making sense of a particular text is only the first step toward describing all the contextual features relevant to this act of interpretation. These other features—material setting, ideologies and purposes of the interpreter, his political relationship to the text and to his audience, the historical circumstances of his action, and so on—all constrain the interpreter’s use of shared hermeneutic procedures.<sup>12</sup> Again, conventions appear



to be trans-situational—they are interpretive strategies carried over from previous contexts—but their specific use in any particular situation depends on other contextual features.

### III

What generalizations can we make about the use of “convention” and “context” in accounts of action? First, “context” functions as a limiting concept. Those aspects of human behavior that are nonconventional are often explained by citing the context-specific nature of action. Second, in theories of action in general, context is mentioned as a way of preserving differences within shared practices. Third, in theories of interpretation in particular, context serves as an explanation of convention use; nonconventional features of context determine the interpretive conventions employed. And finally, conventions (especially those for interpretation) are themselves a part of context. Culler and others claim that a particular context can never be completely specified: “[A]ny given context is always open to further description. There is no limit in principle to what might be included in a given context, to what might be shown relevant to the interpretation of a particular speech act.”<sup>13</sup> Then perhaps we should say that conventions (traditional, prescriptive, and constitutive) make up at least a part of context that *can* be specified. From this perspective, context consists of conventional and nonconventional features.

Culler suggests that even if contexts of action are not completely specifiable, it is still valuable to describe the conventional aspects of context.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, once we have given up the desire for an exhaustive account of action and a complete theory of interpretation in terms of conventions alone, we are still left with a concept that has important uses. Conventions refer to shared practices, and such practices can be the focus of our conversations in criticism and theory as we attempt to describe the writing and reading of literary texts. We can discuss conventions as ways of acting or as accomplishments of meaning, not only in literary and critical texts but also in discourses circulating in other cultural and social spheres. The concept helps us tackle such difficult questions as: How do groups within historical communities vie for interpretive power?<sup>15</sup> Questions about who will dominate are fundamentally questions about which conventional practices will win out in the political contests among disciplinary and more general social discourses. Furthermore, *how* specific practices come to dominate is also basically a matter of shared practices, strategies of coercion and persuasion. Despite its explanatory limitations, the concept of

convention provides a heuristic vocabulary for asking and answering such questions.

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

NOTES

1 I will discuss selected essays in this issue and in *New Literary History*, 13, No. 1 (1981). Essays in the present issue will be quoted without page references.

2 Also see my *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), esp. ch. 5.

3 David Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969).

4 Of course, the traditional can become the prescriptive, e.g., genre conventions being used as prescriptive standards in Roman classicism. See William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York, 1957), pp. 80–82.

5 Hilary Putnam, "Convention: A Theme in Philosophy," *New Literary History*, 13 (1981), 4; all the rest of the quotations in this paragraph are also taken from p. 4 of this essay.

6 Hubert L. Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do: The Limits of Artificial Intelligence*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1979), pp. 256–71.

7 John Reichert, "Do Poets Ever Mean What They Say?" *New Literary History*, 13 (1981), 67.

8 Reichert, p. 60. Cf. his *Making Sense of Literature* (Chicago, 1977), p. 125.

9 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), pp. 163, 14.

10 Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1975), pp. 116, 243.

11 Jonathan Culler, "Convention and Meaning: Derrida and Austin," *New Literary History*, 13 (1981), 30, n. 12.

12 Cf. Jay Schlessener, "Convention and the Context of Reading," *Critical Inquiry*, 6 (1980), 672–73.

13 Culler, "Convention and Meaning," p. 24. Also see Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1967), pp. 24–31, and Dreyfus, pp. 206–24, 287–90.

14 Culler, "Convention and Meaning," p. 28.

15 See Edward W. Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community," *Critical Inquiry*, 9 (1982), 1–26, and *Orientalism* (New York, 1978). Also see Jean E. Kennard, "Convention Coverage or How to Read Your Own Life," *New Literary History*, 13 (1981), 69–88.