

Trust and Risk in Literature, Meeting 2

Kofu, September 2016

Provisional Summary of Points Discussed

1. General features of our discussions

- This second meeting focused on ‘institutional’ trust, but *what did we mean by institutions?* The definitions or assumptions made in our papers ranged widely: businesses and the commercial or educational institutions with which we’re all familiar in our daily lives; the social and political structures of authority, sovereignty, order and hierarchy; the institutions that regulate society and individual behaviour, such as the law and the church (trust being potentially a civic, personal and spiritual virtue); the often unwritten social rules of gendered expectations and bodily experience; relationships such as marriage and friendship; the institutions of cultural life and the literary field, and of literary criticism itself.
- The *contexts* of our discussions were very broad and varied: in addition to many papers on English texts, there were presentations dealing with works and institutions from Denmark, France, Japan and the West Indies, and the settings for these works included the theatre and other sites of institutional ritual, even cannibalism – which, rather unusually, featured twice! The spectrum of literary *genres* was well-nigh complete, taking in drama, screenplay, poetry, journals / travel writing, metaphysical and theological essays, the futuristic novel, parody and graphic art.
- New *aspects* of trust were introduced in this meeting: these included the helpful approaches to the issue of trust and risk offered by theology and ethics; the material, the sensory and particularly the visual aspects of trust; the concept of personal or institutional accountability and its relation to financial practices of book-keeping; the risks taken with professional reputation (and sometimes with their lives) by writers, actors, theatrical audiences, commercial printers, and critics in academic and literary institutions.

2. Some questions raised

- We considered texts from a range of historical moments (particularly the early modern period but also the twentieth and twenty-first centuries), though the question of the relationship of trust and risk to *time* itself was frequently raised. Does trust have a past, traditions or precedents? Is trust a feature of the present, but one which in fact always

relates to the future? Trust in the present seems impossible in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* – though is it ever actually possible? Is there such a thing as a 'post-trust' society?

- The fundamental question continues to be, *what is trust?* It is a paradox, an enigma – intangible, invisible, yet sometimes experienced in sensual and material ways. But we also began to ask, When is it necessary, how does it work, and how can it be maintained once it has been brought into play? To what extent is it brought into being through our own volition? It seems not to be a conscious decision, but if it is not a rational choice, then what is it – an impulse, an instinct, an inherent virtue? Or, rather than being an act of commitment, is it perhaps a sort of abandonment, a deliberate loss of control?
- Upon what does trust *depend?* Does it need to be surrounded by unpredictability, imbalance, inequality or flux in order to function? Is its opposite perhaps not risk, betrayal or even blame, but certainty? Though convincing, this view would appear nowadays to be counter-intuitive, as contemporary social norms tend to assume that risk is the certain thing, while trust can seem to involve only uncertainty. We also explored the *relationship* of trust to other phenomena, such as knowledge, faith, tyranny, and adventure (which can be seen as a conscious balancing of trust and risk).
- Are there times and places where trust is fundamentally *dangerous?* Trust involves making oneself vulnerable, opening oneself to hazard, and may (as Shakespeare implied in *The Winter's Tale*) turn out to be a close relative of folly. Can comedy, for example, take too many liberties with the trust of its characters and its audience in the use of edgy laughter, even as it attempts to restore trust in the 'happy ending'? Or is risk sometimes an equally foolish enterprise, especially when deliberately sought by (for example) religious martyrs?
- How can trust be *discerned* and *represented?* We talked of the literary exploitation of the dangers of counterfeit trust, and the dramatic uses of Machiavellian dissembling. Is trust ever well founded and, if so, how can we (or the characters in a text) really be sure of that in which trust is placed? How can trust be symbolised? It can be enacted, or expressed in words and pledges, in kinds of literary style associated with trustful honesty such as the pastoral, or through metonymy as in the exchange of rings. But we were struck by the large number of words (in English at least) which suggest the absence of trust – distrust, mistrust, untrustworthiness, and so on – and by how much easier those states are to represent than trust itself.
- When considering institutional trust, we found ourselves asking whether we have simply *lost* trust in institutions. Although this may be a symptom of the modern condition, most of the early modern texts also bore witness to this failure of trust – in political institutions such as monarchy, in fellow human beings and, at times, in the pact between authors and their readers / audiences. The tension between ontological

security (trust what you see) and epistemological uncertainty (doubt what you know) may well be a fundamental feature of the human condition regardless of historical period or literary mode.

3. Tentative generalisations / conclusions

- One recurring reference point was *sovereignty*: the sovereign figure in any society can only function with the support offered by trust in the institution of sovereignty; trust itself is 'soveraigne' (Shakespeare again); and the Danish theologian Løgstrup argued that trust is one of the 'sovereign expressions of life'.
- Our discussions repeatedly referred to trust as *relational*: it is expressed through transactional rhetoric and the language of accountability; experienced emotionally and materially; and established through dialogue, negotiation and the (metaphorical) signing of contracts. These ideas emerged from (and led to) an awareness of the *meta*-level of texts, as sites of necessary trust (and related risk) between several parties in the production, circulation, performance and reception of literary works.
- Trust was importantly perceived as a *liminal* phenomenon: it is often located in a space between fact and fiction in drama, film and other texts; it may be situated midway between love and enmity ('Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none' as the Countess advises in Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*); it exists somewhere between reason and emotion, not in an 'either/or' but a 'both/ and' relationship to these human capacities.