Powerful Emotions Recollected in Tranquility

Patricia Harkin

> And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
> With many recognitions dim and faint,
> And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
> The picture of the mind revives again;
> While here I stand, not only with the sense
> Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
> That in this moment there is life and food
> For future years.
> . . . "Tintern Abbey"—William Wordsworth, 1798

Perhaps it's a bit presumptuous to evoke Wordsworth as we remember the founding of the Society for Critical Exchange. But even after thirty long winters, the essays that follow call to mind occasions and sentiments that resonate beyond simple nostalgia to offer understanding of a moment of humanistic inquiry in the late twentieth century. We think it important to try to understand this moment. This volume of *Works and Days* presents both an account and an accounting of the Society for Critical Exchange from its founding at Miami University of Ohio in 1976 until its move to Case Western Reserve University in 1987. In 1976, Leroy Searle, James Sosnoski, Annie Searle and I incorporated the Society for Critical Exchange as a professional organization devoted to exchange among critics. We founders believed that the proliferation of theoretical discourses made it difficult for humanists to communicate with one another, and sought to ameliorate that situation. Over the years, the society published *SCE Reports* and *Critical Exchange*, hosted conferences on theoretical issues, and affiliated with the Modern Language Association and several regional MLA's. Our recollections include short narratives that, in various ways, encapsulate the society's early ideals as well as longer analyses that address those ideals in the larger context of the professionalization of theory in the academy. John Eakin, Steve Nimis, Takis Poulakis, Karlis Racevskis, Victor J. Vitanza and I recall single events that stand for us as representative anecdotes of the Society's early days. In an extended professional and personal narrative, Susan Merritt interweaves her own history with that of the Society. David Bleich, David Shumway, James Sosnoski and I describe ways in which the society's original mission inevitably became enmeshed in

professionalization. James Sosnoski and Leroy Searle, however, in differing ways, find strength in what remains behind. Searle notes that the Society has maintained fidelity to its original aim, to provide venues for authentic critical exchange. Sosnoski, too, sees new opportunities and venues for exchange in collaborative work across disciplines.

To recall the Society's beginnings is to re-engage the ambitions, the hopes, the embarrassing moments, the abiding friendships and the occasional rancor that characterized the planning meetings, the conferences, the sessions at MLA and its affiliates, the parties and, most of all, the arguments. Together, the contributors to this volume try to say who we were thirty years ago, what we thought we were doing, and why (to a person) we thought those hopes and ambitions more important than conventional paths of career management. We also try to say what those events and sentiments mean to us now, and what they might suggest about the future of our profession. (And, of course, because the Society for Critical Exchange bows to no one in self-reflexivity, we acknowledge that all of these narratives are fictive.)

First, of course, we are nostalgic: they were good times. As Victor J. Vitanza attests, the events that these essays recall were enjoyable perhaps (but not only) because they were a bit surprising. The cacophony of assumptions and voices led one early conferee to observe that we "got all the issues on the table—but in a heap." And that was true. The Society's commitment to "exchange among critics" precluded privileging any one discourse. As John Eakin notes, that commitment also precluded the commodified results—books, journals, etc.—that granting agencies sought. What that commitment produced, as Victor Vitanza remembers, was "*bare* honesty like [he] had never seen before." Some of us, as Takis Poulakos notes, found the multiple "Languages of Criticism" confusing and intimidating. John Eakin, for example, describes himself as unfamiliar with the discourses of theory. But it didn't take long for even the most timid of us to enter the discussion.

To manage this cacophony, the Society devised elaborate protocols to make sure that everyone was heard. These procedures were designed to complicate what we called "the rhetoric of the definitive," the notion that an author, having written a paper, would become so invested in his or her conclusions as to refuse "exchange." On one occasion, as Jim Sosnoski recalls, those procedures were so anarchically invoked as to silence the internationally luminous speaker whom everyone had come to hear. These protocols confused and exasperated more than one member. Exchanges often became heated. Karlis Racevskis narrates an energetic exchange with David Bleich about the "self" as a construction of language. In the late 70s, the two scholars sharply (but cordially) agreed to disagree in an exchange that Jim Sosnoski would call a concurrence. In Racevskis' account, he attended to the ways in which "language manages to reject the author and evacuate the subject," while Bleich strove to "bring out the primacy of the individual self in the dual process of reading and interpretation." They concurred that discussions about the "self" are important, but remained unpersuaded by their interlocutor's position. Both men seem to have continued to think about the "self" over the last three decades. In his essay in this volume, Racevskis concludes

(with Jean-Luc Nancy) that "we are ourselves the meaning of our being and, as we change, as our world evolves, so does the meaning of who and what we are." Meanwhile, David Bleich expresses "outrage" at the profession's failure to "honor our subject of language" even as we are constructed by the discourse of capital.

Another sharp exchange, mentioned by Victor J. Vitanza, John Eakin and me, occurred at the 1981 SCE Conference on Theories of Reading at Indiana University. While there was certainly concurrence on the importance of theorizing reading, the disagreements emerged in the context of questions of pedagogy and power. These disagreements continue to concern us today, as "research, teaching and service" are ever more sharply demarcated even as their actual activities come together. The early members of the Society for Critical Exchange were persons for whom these questions mattered. Even when there was more heat than light, the Society's early meetings had little in common with the elaborate corporate politeness that characterizes academic conferences today. We are nostalgic then, not only for the parties and the laughs, but also—and more—for the intensity and passion that characterized those heated exchanges.

Nothing, of course, can bring back those hours. And so, it is important, thirty years later, to assess the effect of the society—to say what, if anything, we have learned since that time. The disparity between the society's aspirations and its achievements are thoroughly and thoughtfully described in the pages that follow by James Sosnoski, Leroy Searle, David Shumway, David Bleich, Vincent Leitch, and me. For each of us, these differences are spurs for what Wordsworth would have called "thought." Jim Sosnoski asserts that the Society's efforts to differentiate itself from MLA—to be a counter institution—though unsuccessful, nonetheless generated useful reflections on the notions of exchange and concurrence. Leroy Searle sees the society's tradition of careful analysis of the terms of discussion among its most important legacies. His subtle essay stresses that "it is the irreplaceable social function of art to provide for us the imaginative occasions wherein reflective judgment can be fully and fairly engaged." David Shumway locates the Society's "failure" to see that the profession was more interested in producing commodifiable new readings than in analyzing the conditions under which reading occurs and the processes reading involves. Vincent B. Leitch suggests several futures for theory.

Several motifs recur throughout these essays. Many of the contributors remember the Society as a kind of Burkean Parlor in which everyone could speak—but no one had to. Takis Poulakis recalls that persons who were unfamiliar with the discourses were welcome to listen—and when those persons felt ready to speak, they were heard. In my case, it was the Society's own elaborate protocols that taught me to "theorize." Let me explain: as Vincent B. Leitch notes, the early exchanges at MLA sessions, including his own, "were taped and printed in *SCE Reports*." The absent agent in that passive construction would have been me. For the first several years of the Society's existence, I transcribed those tapes (recorded on cheap equipment with a microphone that picked up all the ambient noise in a Manhattan hotel meeting room), typed them, and sent them off

to Annie and Leroy Searle to be printed on their press. As I listened (again and again), I grew thoughtful about the positions under consideration. I began to understand why a speaker paused mid-sentence to change an articulation, why the use of a term was so energetically contested—and, as I thought about those questions, I began to "get it." I saw the distinctions and came to know why they were important. So although, as David Shumway notes, the founding "spouses were not [. . .] significant intellectual influences at the time," nonetheless, we provided labor that, over time, became less and less alienated. Like Takis, when I felt myself ready to speak, I found myself heard.

Another recurring theme is that the Society provided a community for persons who were in some sense isolated: unemployed, under-employed, untenured, part-time, or visiting members of the profession. That the society gave a platform and an audience to vulnerable persons is for me one of its most important contributions.

We were young, naïve, arrogant, and very energetic in 1976. Now, as many of us approach retirement, we recollect in tranquility the beginning of a long journey of understanding pedagogies, practices, and politics.

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