Reading SCE Reading

Patricia Harkin

From its inception, The Society for Critical Exchange has had a vexed set of relations with social and political hierarchies. Like many academics of our age and class, we four founders—Leroy and Annie Searle, Jim Sosnoski and I—aspired to the prestige, and what looked to us at the time like the power, of the professoriate. At the same time, though, we were suspicious of that prestige and ambivalent about those aspirations. Our degrees were from state universities; those of us who were employed tended to work at state universities as well. Those of us who were unemployed believed, sometimes accurately, that it was a system of academic hierarchy keeping us out.

We believed in meritocracy, for the most part. And we tended to think of ourselves as persons of merit. We held prestigious fellowships—Woodrow Wilson's and NDEA's—and we knew that without them we could not have attended graduate school. Sons and (in a few cases) daughters of the post-World War II professional-managerial class, we were not well-born, but we were nonetheless willing and intellectually able to do the difficult reading that theory required. In a sense, our hope was that theory would level the field. Perhaps we hadn't learned taste at prep school, but we had read Derrida, Lyotard, Jameson, Deleuze, Spivak, Foucault, Said. These texts were—are—complex and demanding. To read them required knowledge of other texts—continental idealism, Marx, Freud. I'll add (somewhat wistfully) that we also believed that theory (especially in its breaking with the new criticism's tacit privileging of taste) would help us to make the world a better place for women, minorities, and persons who did not hold Ivy League degrees. For example, insofar as theory offered not merely new readings, but rather accounts of the conditions and processes of reading, we (or at least I) believed that theory could help us to break though the class ceiling.

As Jim Sosnoski explains elsewhere in this volume, our concerns were not only with the topics for literary studies to consider, but also with the hierarchical structure of those considerations. Among the most important of our attempts to change those structures were a series of conferences we organized at Indiana University, with the energetic co-operation of David Bleich and the financial support of IU's Department of English chairs, Paul Strohm, and (later) John Eakin.

The design of these conferences became a kind of trademark for SCE. For each of them, we chose a topic and invited major speakers *not* to present a paper in the rhetoric of the definitive, but rather to speak extemporaneously about a set of questions we posed. The notion was that if a person "wrote a paper," she or he would then be firmly committed to defending the thesis of that paper and to publishing it as written. We wanted *exchange*—a willingness to listen to other points of view and to explain and argue differing *readings* of theoretical questions. Often, we invited speakers whose works were not specifically identified with the topic but who (we thought) might have interesting things to say.

There were usually three or four plenary sessions (which we called "phases") at which major speakers presented their own point of view and addressed those of others. Our efforts to get the speakers to make those positions explicit were sincere, though often unsuccessful. For example, at a conference on narrative at which I chaired a general phase, I copied the chronology from the inside cover of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (1800-present) and asked each speaker to declare whether (in his view) that list of dates and events *constituted* a narrative, and/or to *make the list into* a narrative and/or to say why he declined to answer. One speaker said that he could not comment in the time allotted because it would first be necessary to address the logically prior question "what is an event?" One audience member objected to the questions on the grounds that its source—the Norton chronology was slanted toward male authors (1814 having been identified in the Norton as the publication date for *Waverley* with no mention whatever of *Emma*.)

Caucuses followed the plenary sessions. They were designed to allow and foster discussions of the issues that the plenary sessions had brought forward. Caucuses formulated questions and challenges to the keynote speakers' positions. The notion of caucuses, too, was directed at diminishing both the rhetoric of the definitive and hierarchies of academic class. At most academic conferences, we thought, international luminaries gave papers and the audience listened. It was easy for a speaker to ignore, ridicule, or circumnavigate questions from the audience. Our objective was to make such exercises of power a bit more difficult than they usually were. The caucus sessions gave non-internationally-luminous conferees a chance to formulate challenges carefully and present them in a forum in which the luminaries sat in the audience and the caucus members took the stage. Caucuses were divided by topic: some attendees addressed conceptual issues, others political ones.

Still other caucuses were devoted to dissemination. In the days before the Internet, it was difficult for persons who did not teach on the East coast, and/or whose libraries did not subscribe to *NLH*, *Critical Inquiry* and *Diacritics*, to find out what "cutting edge" theorists had to say. MLA (although Dick Ohmann and his fellow radicals were energetically democratizing it) still tended to meet primarily in New York and Chicago. Even if people *could* get to New York and listen, or subscribe to NLH and read, it was hard to enter the Theoretical Parlor *in medias res*. SCE helped to disseminate the theory boom. At one conference, for example, John Paul Riquelme offered an

overview that carefully pinpointed differences among all of the conference speakers.

These efforts at "dissemination" were not limited, of course, to SCE. Ralph Cohen's work on *New Literary History*, as well as the work of the School of Criticism and Theory (new in 1977) were efforts, not so much to bring theory to the hinterlands (or the masses) but rather to make sure that English studies properly professionalized itself by raising its questions and answering them in a disciplined, logical and well-informed way. Notwithstanding our need to insist that one need not have gone to Yale to read Derrida, nonetheless we wanted to maintain intellectual standards—standards of discourse, standards of argument, standards of definition. We wanted everyone to *have access* to a not-yet-institutionalized place where he (and even she) would be required to read and argue "well." From this perspective, we were already professionalizing.

Finally, each conference ended with a phase entitled "Research Proposals" in which both panelists and caucus members discussed priorities for future projects and evaluated both the design and the content of the conference as a whole.

The Conference on Theories of Reading, 1981

Our choice of topics for SCE conferences and publications were usually spot on. That is, the issues and bodies of work that we chose to discuss—narrative, the subaltern, influence, dissemination, Foucault, Said, Derrida, and so forth—even after thirty years, tend still to be part of the discussion. In 1981, the notion that "meaning" is appropriately construed as a function of reading (rather than as a function of intention) was still quite fervently contested. "Reading theory," "reception aesthetics," "reader-response criticism," and "reader-response theory" were terms that variously pointed to the work of such thinkers as David Bleich, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Inge Crosman, Susan Sulieman, Jane Tompkins, Steven Mailloux, Hans Robert Jauss, Norman Holland, Louise Rosenblatt, Rob Crosman, John Paul Riquelme, and many others.

I suspect that not all of these names will be familiar today. The dissertations that we now direct still make use of conceptions that we associate with Derrida and Foucault, but it has been a long time since I've encountered a graduate student who wants to work on Wolfgang Iser. And although Stanley Fish and David Bleich are often cited, those citations do not usually come from *Is There a Text in This Class?* or *Subjective Criticism*. A few years ago, as we served together on a committee to write the PhD exam in theory at Purdue, Vince Leitch suggested the question, "Whatever happened to Reader Response Theory?" The candidate, unsurprisingly, chose to write about one of his other options, but I've been brooding about that question for some time. With thanks to Vince, I'll suggest that certain aspects of the SCE Conference on Theories of Reading can offer a window into the processes that might provide at least a partial answer.

Our choice of Theories of Reading was an easy one; the issues were current and the conference drew a large crowd. Usually, I only helped to organize the conference, but this time I also participated

as one of the speakers. It was my first major presentation, and it came thanks to David Bleich, because he knew that I had recently returned from a summer (1978) at The School of Criticism and Theory (located then at the University of California, Irvine), where I had studied with Wolfgang Iser and Fredric Jameson. It had been (even by School of Criticism and Theory standards) an amazing summer. Iser's *Der Akt des Lesens* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink: 1976), which he was in the process of translating into *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978) served as the text for his seminar. Jameson taught from his working manuscript of *The Political Unconscious* (Cornell, 1980). In California, over teeming ashtrays and empty bottles of Inglenook, we talked about meaning and tried to pinpoint the political differences between Iser (the liberal who taught at an East German university) and Jameson (the Marxist from Yale).

Returning from Irvine to my ordinary life as a faculty wife and part-time instructor in first year writing (3-5 sections a semester at $800.00 each), I continued to think about theory. Whereas, as virtually every contributor to this volume has noted, the "New Criticism" no longer dominated literary studies, it certainly did still dominate the second semester of "Freshman Comp": the semester devoted to "Writing about Literature." The New Critical practice that trickled down to Midwest state universities tended to rely on notions of "letting the poem come to you." And the poem tended to "come" more readily to students whose prep school English teachers had already told them what the poem would say when it arrived. Typical writing assignments in our department's standard syllabus asked students to provide accounts of the several formal properties (plot, theme, character, metaphor) that comprise new critical readings. I found these assignments unsatisfactory, not only theoretically but also pedagogically. The notions of meaning perpetrated by these syllabi (as practiced) seemed to be a particularly cruel mystification. On the one hand, there exists something called organic form; it is available in the "text." The author, of course, put the meaning in the text, but auto-biographical and historical inquiries into authorial intention are at best unnecessary and at worst gauche. Meaning as organic form is to be apprehended by readers. If a (student) reader should fail to perceive organic unity, then she is a bad reader. If she perceives the wrong unity, she is also a bad reader. The standard against which to discriminate good from bad readings, however, cannot be authorial intention. In practice, that standard tended to be the teacher's reading.

My students tended not to be interested in the formal properties of texts; they were even less interested in learning to enhance their "appreciation of literature." Nevertheless, these aspiring accountants, entrepreneurs and real estate agents tended to be very interested in processes of all kinds. At the time, the process movement in what we began to call "composition studies" was offering both empirical and theoretical accounts of acts of writing. I was quite taken by the notion that readers make meaning through processes that could also be described and analyzed. It occurred to me that (given the work of reading theorists, especially, in my case, Wolfgang Iser) reading could be *taught* as a *process* in much the same way as Linda Flower and John Hayes were analyzing and teaching writing.

Iser showed how consciousness (interacting with a text) produces something like what we called (at the time) a formal reading. Further, his names for the activities of reading—consistency building, closing gaps, etc.— moments in his "functionalist model of the literary text" were in fact, quite teachable. It seemed to me that Iser's "moments" were pedagogically preferable to the new critically inflected "properties of texts." If, for example, instead of teaching "simile," one taught "consistency building" as, in Iser's view, a set of instructions for creating meaning, then one could encourage students to ask, not "what does rose mean?" (and despise themselves for not knowing or us for expecting them to know) but rather "*how* is a woman *like* a rose?" Of course, such a project would inevitably *impose* a theory of reading on unsuspecting first year students. But that imposition seemed to me no worse than imposing the New Criticism, especially as it was practiced at the time.

Although we've come to think of the theory movement as a kind of rarefied discourse designed in part to exclude non-initiates, nonetheless, at this time, I saw reading theory as a kind of democratizing gesture. If it were possible to describe what happens when human beings encounter literary texts, then one could teach those processes to students. Differing theories would suit differing pedagogical purposes. In some instances, David Bleich's psychoanalytic understandings might be most useful; in others, Stanley Fish's linguistic *tours de force*, and so forth.

What Iser's terms could not help me explain and teach, however, was what to do when the students' answers differed from one another. But Jameson could. My extrapolations from *The Political Unconscious* explained differences in readings in ways that Fish's term "interpretive communities" could not. I realized that *The Political Unconscious* is, in effect, a theory of reading. Whereas Iser looked to (universalized) accounts of consciousness; Jameson studied historical changes in authors, texts, contexts, codes, and readings—(even though he was himself accused of idealism). At about this time, Karlis Racevskis paid me the immense compliment of calling me an organic intellectual of freshman comp. I'm sure that he no longer remembers the moment, (so we can't get at his intention) but I *read* him to have said that I was beginning to theorize (and politicize) reading and writing "up" from the practice of teaching rather than "down" from a series of abstractions. In other words, I was beginning to see reading as a function of class.

It was on the basis of this work that David Bleich asked me to be a plenary speaker at the SCE Conference on theories of reading. Also, I was inexpensive. (Iser himself could not make the trip from Constance for what SCE had to offer—which, if I recall correctly, was basically nothing.)

The Speakers

In addition to such economic considerations as the ones I've just described, our selection of plenary speakers addressed other issues. We wanted scope—in the sense that we sought persons who could address reading theory from several perspectives that we later (in the GRIP group) called "disciplinary." Thus it was that the participants at the Conference on Theories of Reading included:

Barbara Herrnstein Smith
In 1981, Smith was a member of the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania. It seemed to us that her (at the time) most recent book, *On the Margins of Discourse*, was, in effect, a book about reading theory. She sympathized with our fledgling group and she was willing to use her own personal travel budget to attend.

Inge Crosman
Along with Susan Sulieman, Crosman had compiled *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: 1980), one of the first anthologies of reading theory. Crosman's talk covered the panoply of reading theorists; she had no particular theory of her own to promote.

Rob Crosman
At that time, or shortly thereafter, Rob Crosman began to edit a small journal (not unlike *SCE Reports*). It was to be called Reader, and it concerned itself, in part, with teaching through the use of reader-response theory.

Louise Rosenblatt
In the 1930's, as a professor of Education at Columbia who had studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, Rosenblatt had written *Literature as Exploration*. In it, her distinction between efferent and aesthetic readings among secondary school students had helped her readers to understand that differing purposes for reading resulted in and accounted for differing readings. Rosenblatt's work was unknown outside schools of education until Susan Sulieman and Inge Crosman (on a hint from David Bleich) rediscovered it. In her afterword to *The Reader in the Text*, Sulieman thanked Bleich for bringing Rosenblatt to their attention and explained that the older woman's work would be useful to persons who thought about teaching.

And me.

In my plenary talk, I said nothing about teaching. Instead, I remember asking "what is a theory of reading a theory of?" And which discipline, therefore, would have the task/power of revealing its secrets? We could speak of reading as a kind of problem solving behavior, as psychologists do; or as an exercise of consciousness, using the tenets of phenomenology; or as the expression of a psyche; or as decoding, or as semiosis, etc.

The plenary exchanges involved both theory and pedagogy. Some attendees, in other words, debated the extent to which Iser's conception of "gap" was an accurate account of Ingaarden's points of indeterminacy. Some people thought that "reader response" was at the top of a slippery slope that would eventuate in permitting any reading, no matter how ignorant, barbarian, or bizarre. For the most part, the plenary sessions were informed and cordial. In spite of our efforts, they were not significantly dissimilar from an ordinary academic conference. (These talks do not survive. There were no hard drives on which to save them.)

The post-caucus exchanges, though, were memorable, even without hard drives. In his account of the conference written for *SCE Reports 11*, Rick Barney wrote that the

> exchange between panelists and caucus members proved to be the most lively and fruitful and significantly, the discussion was sparked to its greatest intensity by questions from the caucus on politics [. . .] One of the questions [brought forward by the political caucus] is example enough: "Why weren't the political implications of reader-response theory—for instance, the freedom of the reader, the formation of interpretive communities and their selective inclusion and exclusion of readings, etc.—explored? What are the implications of this evasion?" (100- 01)

Such questions about pedagogy and power, Barney continued, while important, nonetheless "prevented" theoretical elaborations of the conceptions at issue. And so they did. Some participants thought that was okay. Others did not.

Looking back, I remember one particularly sharp post-caucus "exchange" that involved Barbara Herrnstein Smith—one that opened up a discussion whose effects are visible, and still problematic, today. The topic, as I recall it, was David Bleich's *Readings and Feelings*. In that book, Bleich describes classes that he taught at Indiana in which students read Frost's "A Drumlin Woodchuck," D.H. Lawrence's "The Rocking Horse Winner," and Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw." Bleich's assignments asked students to write "affective" and "associative" responses to Frost, to suggest "the most important word" in Lawrence's "The Rocking Horse Winner", and the most important "aspect" of James's "The Turn of the Screw." The ensuing writing provided data on which Bleich built to find psychoanalytic accounts of students' readings, accounts that, he said, could illuminate "subjective criticism." The questioner described such an assignment. He had asked his students to read and write about Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." One student, a young woman, wrote that she sympathized with Emily because Faulkner's protagonist evoked memories of her grandmother. Specifically, the student recalled, she once saw a grey hair on her grandmother's pillow. That grey hair reminded the student of the one on Emily's pillow that the Yoknapatawpha townspeople found beside the skeletal remains of her husband. As teacher/particpant expatiated upon the pedagogical usefulness of the student's "identification" with Emily, Barbara Herrnstein Smith asserted with her accustomed wit and logic that the identification was theoretically useless. That is to say, such an idiosyncratic response could do nothing to construct or illuminate a general theory of reading. The questioner persisted, explaining the importance of fostering the student's authentic voice as a precondition for the confidence she would need to learn to develop her writing in an academic environment that she perceived as hostile. The teacher's purpose was in part to "empower" his students to construe themselves as entitled to read.

Smith's students, she admitted, already considered themselves entitled readers. Her students would not, in general, either discuss their memories of family members or perceive the simple datum of a strand of hair as capable of warranting an argument about an interpretation of Faulkner. But if such an interpretation were to present itself, she would say not that the reading was wrong but that it was uninteresting. Moreover, she continued, the question before us was not about teaching, but rather about the definition of reading: what, she asked, is the *phenomenon*? The profession of English Studies, she asserted, needed to debate it. The questioner, it was implied, was welcome to be in the debate about theoretical issues, but not to talk about teaching.

In the heated exchanges that followed, Barney writes

> The underlying political nature of the discussion, especially as it bore on economics of the profession, also became particularly clear when Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Peter Brooks, representatives of the nation's more prominent institutions—the University of Pennsylvania and Yale—were repeatedly singled out by heated criticism for their view that studying students was not necessarily important for developing a theory of reading. (One political caucus question to them read: "Does a disinterest in student 'readings' of literature imply a political unwillingness to share power with the young?' (*SCE Reports 11* 101.)

That particular exchange has stayed with me. In retrospect, it seems worth "reading" with all the tools that we worked so hard to develop. First, the challenge: in reproducing Rick Barney's account, I was at first inclined to put a [sic.] after "disinterest" just to show that I know the distinction between disinterest and lack of interest. But of course, this unidentified caucus-member's usage reveals contradictions that we continue to experience. There were efforts (in 1981 and earlier) to maintain a kind of disinterestedness in our own inquiry—even as the named objects of those inquiries shifted from "intention" to "form" to "reading," to "meaning," and so forth. I think it fair to say that we tried to constitute "exchange" as a kind of disinterestedness that would be subject (like disciplines) to the conventions of logic and debate.

But the caucus-members' use of "disinterest" revealed *differance* within the Society for Critical Exchange. Strong and angry emotions—about class and power—had entered our carefully choreographed "exchanges" about theory. There was resentment in the caucus-members' accusation that the powerful panelists *lacked interest* in class conflict and in the relative powerlessness of teachers and students at "lesser" institutions. There was resentment as well in the response from the "authorized" panelists. A *disinterested* inquiry into the multifarious processes that go by the name of "reading" seemed, after all, to be precisely what had been called for. And that disinterested inquiry, so it was thought, had the best shot at leveling class differences—*eventually*. There was indeed a lack of interest among these speakers (myself, still, then, included) in idiosyncratic student responses.

Prompted by David Downing's Preface, let me now look at the Big History (in Richard Ohmann's apt locution) in which this exchange took place. Our Conference on Theories of Reading occurred at the beginning of the Reagan era. Not long after this conference, "A Nation at Risk" was published. Among the "risks" that the report enumerated was this one:

> Business and military leaders complain that they are required to spend millions of dollars on costly remedial education and training programs in such basic skills as reading, writing, spelling, and computation. The Department of the Navy, for example, reported to the Commission that one-quarter of its recent recruits cannot read at the ninth grade level, the minimum needed simply to understand written safety instructions. Without remedialwork they cannot even begin, much less complete, the sophisticated training essential in much of the modern military. (n. pag).

Patty in 1976

Soon thereafter, William Bennett (widely understood to be the principal author of "A Nation at Risk") was appointed Secretary of Education. Bennett and the Department of Education focused on reading skills in primary and secondary schools. Bennett's agenda was to make sure that business and military leaders would have no cause for future complaint about soldiers and workers who could not follow instructions. The economy required workers who could find stable meaning in those "written safety instructions" (at least while OSHA regulations were in force). The military, too, needed soldiers who could read and follow instructions (just in case there should be a war). Both (insofar as they are separable) required persons who would not raise questions about the extra-textual context of what they read. The Reagan/Bush policies, up to and including No Child Left Behind, create an atmosphere for the construction of such subjects.

So whatever happened to reader response? Reading theory has been anomalous insofar as it belonged both to the elitist theory boom and to the populist movement. Conditions in the Thatcher/Reagan era, and in the quickly corporatizing academy, were such that only one aspect was capable of surviving. With reading theory providing the warranting assumption that readers make meaning, the theory industry energetically produced multifarious "readings" soon to be commodified into books and articles. By and large, these commodified readings omit accounts of the processes through which they are produced. The several process theories that flourished in the early eighties were eventually conflated and reduced to "reader-response," connected with teaching, and relegated to the adjuncts who teach introductory courses.

And the society? Several years after the Reading conference, the agenda for a meeting of the SCE Board Meeting included a proposal for the Society to take over the sponsorship of the journal *Reader*. The board outvoted me to decline. My sense was that my fellow board members did not perceive the journal's prestige to be adequate for SCE sponsorship. Moreover, (again in my view) the other board members felt that the journal's questions were insufficiently complex for SCE to address.

Now, in the corporate university, various cognitive "disciplines," engage in empirical studies of the ways in which student readers "succeed" or "fail" to produce "correct" readings of stable meaning. Schools of Education teach their undergraduates how to teach phonics, and occasionally stage debates about the relative merits of phonics and whole language. Cultural studies explains "meaning" as a function of class, race, and gender. Within English studies, scholars compete to offer multifarious readings of literary and non-literary texts.

There would seem to be concurrence that "reading" is worthy of study. Wouldn't this be a great idea for the Society for Critical Exchange to look into?

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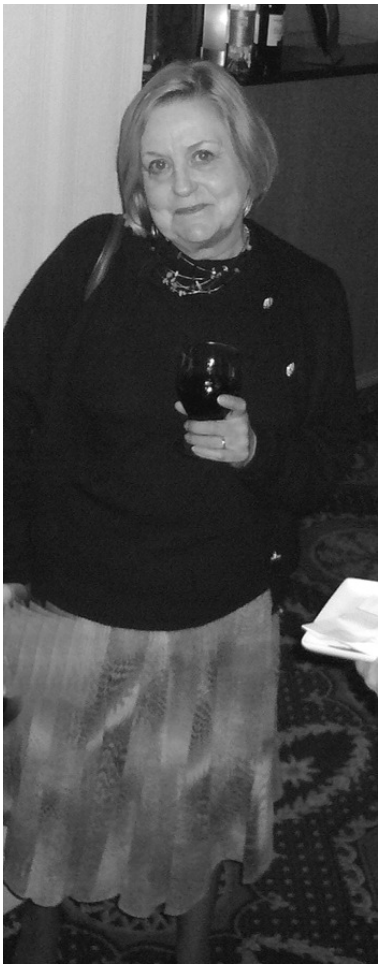

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