Theory, David Bleich, and the Society for Critical Exchange

John Eakin

I was a late-comer to "theory," and a rather unlikely candidate to collaborate with David Bleich in putting on a series of literary theory conferences sponsored by the Society for Critical Exchange at Indiana in the 1980s. Nothing in my early training had promoted an interest of this sort. Literary studies at Harvard when I was a student there in the late 1950s and early 60s was largely New Critical in orientation, although the Americanists, notably Perry Miller, were historians at heart. Yes, you could take a course on the history of criticism—I didn't—but that was about the size of it. We were taught to practice "close reading," which—if I thought about it at all—I probably regarded more as a basic skill than as a distinct critical approach of any kind, something to be performed as a matter of course, no questions asked. I recall these simple beginnings to suggest why my first encounter with literary theory, in the form of French structuralism, gave me such a jolt a few years later on, when I spent a year in Paris as a Fulbright lecturer in American literature in 1972-73. This French episode was the prelude to my work with David Bleich and the SCE.

By this time, the early 1970s, I had certainly absorbed some basic, formative ideas about what kind of literary critical work was worth doing, but my thinking amounted to little more than unexamined assumptions. Now, in Paris, it seemed that everything having to do with literature was in question. My structuralist awakening began with the weekly lectures of Claude Lévi-Strauss at the Collège de France, which my wife and I attended in a dowdy amphitheater in the Latin Quarter. Even though his pronunciation of the term *potlatch* baffled us for a time, we were attentive as the celebrated anthropologist unveiled latent structures of meaning in the story of a Northwest Coast native named Asdiwal (Tlingit? Haida? I forget). Eager for more in this vein, I started to read the work of the leading structuralist critics—Claude Brémond, Algirdas Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov, and especially Roland Barthes. I loved the formalist rigor of Barthes's "L'analyse structurale du récit" and his *Système de la mode*. As for his *S/Z*, it seemed to carry "close reading" to an altogether new plane of understanding. For the first and only time, I was actually excited by literary criticism—at least in this French semiotic mode, which promised to open up the beating heart of culture for inspection. I admired the

French for asking the big questions. They might not know the answers, but they made Americanists of the sort I'd been trained to be look like pikers.

I had definitely caught the theory bug in Paris. The following year, when I returned to Bloomington, I became the English Department's first card-carrying structuralist, but not for long. I remember inflicting an elaborate structural analysis of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" on my students in a class on literary interpretation, only to realize that my laborious diagrams and charts confirmed what I thought I already knew in the first place—the game was not worth the candle. It was just then, in the mid-1970s, when I was nearly 40 and restless, that my colleague David Bleich invited me to attend a meeting of the "New Literary Theory" reading group at the home of Ingeborg Hoesterey, a specialist in Continental Modernism. Although I felt out of my depth at first—was I the only one unschooled in Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer?—I enjoyed hanging out with people who liked to talk about ideas, and I soon became a regular. The best part of this new development for me was my deepening friendship with David. We had come to Indiana together in 1966. It was flush times in the profession then, and the English Department was hiring by the carload—seven our year, six the next. David was the youngest of our cohort, and precocious—he had completed his degree at 25. The work he was doing on reading was daring and original, and I was mightily impressed. The idea that we largely invent the meanings that we say we find or discover in the books we read struck a "close reader" like me as quite radical, although it can hardly seem so today. I liked being stirred up—I had liked it in Paris, and I liked it now talking with David about his work on language and his interest in child development, work that culminated in his landmark book *Subjective Criticism*. So when David asked me if I would like to help him put on a series of theory conferences as a joint project of the English Department at Indiana and the Society for Critical Exchange, I agreed.

I had never heard of the SCE but I liked what David had to say about it, especially the notion of free-wheeling, uncanned intellectual exchange that is so often missing from academic life, at least on the humanities conference circuit. So we began a collaboration with Patty Harkin and Jim Sosnoski, the founders of the SCE, who were based then at Miami of Ohio. Our work together would eventually produce five conferences: "Theories of Reading" (1981), "Theories of Reference and Representation" (1982), "The Professional Authorization of Knowledge in the Humanities" (1983), "Teaching Theory" (1984), and "Empiricism and Hermeneutics" (1986). (I was not involved with the "Theories of Narrative" conference that David and the SCE sponsored in 1980.) It was a genuine and nourishing collaboration in which we all played an important part, but I think that the lion's share of credit for what we accomplished goes to David: it fell to Jim, Patty, and me to fine tune and execute the projects that David steered us to undertake. He had a nose for the new thing, and he was certainly our primary scout for the people we should invite to launch our chosen subjects. Assembling a working list of panelists became an increasingly intricate task, given our commitment to gender

balance, field diversity, and inclusion of younger, emerging critics. Then David and I would spend hours hammering out key questions to be addressed in the various sessions. Usually we met at my house, on quiet afternoons while my children were in school and my wife at work. David loved cigars then, and the children, returning home after he'd left, would sniff and say, accusingly, "You've been meeting with David Bleich again!" All that conceptual planning—in many ways this was the best part of the conference process.

Once we had come up with a working draft of our ideas for the conference, we would drive to Oxford, Ohio, to meet with Jim and Patty to talk the whole thing through. The trip took about three hours. David always had a nice car—good tapes and good talk. Surprisingly for a Clevelander, I had never been to Oxford, and I was very taken with the weathered red-brick look of the university, reminding me more of New England than the Midwest. Once installed at Jim and Patty's, the four of us wrestled with the format and sequence of the various sessions, trying to produce a program that would promote spontaneity and yet retain some sense of cumulative structure and development for the proceedings. The invited panelists were featured in panels of four and five and also in dialogues, and always had an important role to play—no surprise there, but the game plan also called for the conference participants to "caucus" and then "challenge" the views of these experts. The SCE was aggressively egalitarian. To give a taste of the drift of the programs we came up with, I quote here from the "Theories of Reading" conference program on "Phase Two: Critiques, Alternatives, Challenges":

> Caucus: Four discussion groups of at-large conference participants will evaluate the pertinence of the theories advanced to the proffered readings of the first phase. Groups will seek to formulate challenges to panelists' views. Challenges are to be duplicated and distributed to the conference. Each group will choose a representative to appear on Tuesday morning's panels. (3)

Given how eager the four of us were to implement the SCE's ideal of unscripted critical exchange, I'm struck by just how heavily scripted our programs were. There was certainly a template involved, and I remember that one of our guests from the UK took a playful poke at our careful protocols by scrambling all the chairs on the floor for one of the big panel sessions. We experimented with a variety of formats over the years, but the large-scale outline of the conferences didn't vary that much. Judging by good attendance each time, with many participants returning to Bloomington for another go, I'd say the general model for the conferences was effective.

Funding those conferences was a perennial problem even though we ran them on a shoestring. I took it as a vote of confidence in the value of what we were trying to accomplish that so many distinguished people accepted our invitation to participate on an expenses-only basis. To be sure, we weren't asking for a paper, but many of these people were used to commanding a substantial honorarium. I think we usually had to raise about $6,000 to cover

our costs, but there were only so many sources we could tap and we kept coming back year after year. We always did manage to pay the bills, but the money end could be stressful, even though we had a great ally in Janet Brady at the IU Conference Bureau. One year, the Dean of Research and Graduate Development prodded us to try for NEH funding. I was appalled that our conference budget more than tripled once we had put it through the grinder in the university grants office, but cheered on by the administration, David and I flew to Washington to meet with NEH officials to discuss our prospects. It was a pleasant trip with an overnight at the Dupont Plaza, but we struck out with the NEH. I think that ultimately the sticking point was "the product." Like most funding agencies, the NEH wanted to see some demonstrable result that could vouch for the value of our undertaking. But we weren't proposing a conference volume or even a proceedings document of some kind—our sights were set on process, not product.

So what *was* the value of the conferences? David wrote me in a recent message, "I learned that conferences provided good times but accomplished very little." I think that David sells the conferences short. Yes, there *were* good times (and good meals too, including one lovely conference dinner in a private home near campus, a houseful of elegant small tables). I'd say that the talk, the critical exchange we had targeted—both in the conference and at its margins—was certainly lively. Beyond the event itself, though, did the good of this exchange have an after-life? The likeliest place to look for evidence of the value of critical exchange is in the minds of the participants, not something easily displayed to the NEH, for example, and I can only point to my own case, which isn't necessarily typical in that I was one of the conference organizers. Working with David on the SCE project came at a formative time in my own development. I was beginning to explore autobiography in those years, a subject that would occupy me for the rest of my professional career, and my new interest in the nature of selfhood dovetailed with David's thinking about language acquisition. So I am grateful to the SCE conference initiative for placing us in close and productive relation.

I look at the five fanfolded conference flyers spread out on my desk: we chose our colored papers and our typeface with care, and the message is unmistakable: serious business. These are sober and earnest documents, almost touchingly high-minded, and they are packed with questions. That was the SCE project: we were going to answer a lot of important questions in an open forum of the best sort. And did the questions get answered? No. But, thinking back to my structuralist days in Paris, I have to say that the French didn't answer their questions either.

A CONFERENCE on THEORIES OF REFERENCE AND REPRESENTATION

20-22 October 1982
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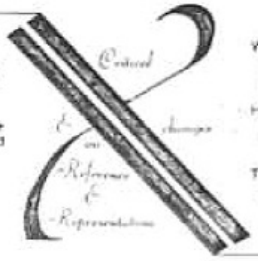
What is the difference between verbal and non-verbal self-representation & self-reference?

To what extent do political interests and ideology determine the conventions of reference and representation?



What is the role of theory in the understanding of reference and representation?

How do reference and representation function in dialogue?

To what extent do creative writers think they "refer" and "represent"?

This conference aims for a wide ranging exchange of opinion regarding the status and use of theories of reference and representation. Panelists will develop their perspectives in the course of four dialogues focused upon the issues listed above. No formal papers will be presented at this conference. Instead, we plan a structured sequence of exchanges among the invited panelists and the conference participants. The most important feature of this structure is that the audience will have an active role in the sequence of events. Conference participants will be invited to caucus during the proceedings in order to formulate challenges to the views presented by the panelists.

Those interested in attending are urged to contact David Bleich or John Eakin (Dept. of English, Indiana Univ., Bloomington, Ind. 47401) for a full description of the conference and a room reservation card in the Indiana Memorial Union.

The Lobby Entrance, Biddle Continuation Center *Indiana University*