

# SCE REPORTS 7

SUMMER , 1980

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The papers (and note) published in this issue of *SCE Reports* represents a somewhat fragmentary response to the MLA Session, "Beyond Interpretation," that provoked them. The issues raised at that session were indeed provocative, as are the responses published here. It seems quite clear that the exchange on this topic is by no means over.

I take the liberty to remark what will be obvious upon reading these responses: there is not much clarity or even common ground for deciding what the issues *are*. Eugene Goodheart continues to take Jonathan Culler to task for insisting on a ". . . well, insidious" research program that appears to be *science* (!); while Michael Finney points out that in a debate that appears to be stubbornly political, one may very well question the kind and quality of "science" at stake. The complexity of motives, political and otherwise, that inform questions of interpretation should not, perhaps, surprise us; and Susan Elliott's plea that we not obscure the practical and pedagogical consequences of our interpretive postures is very much to the purpose.

Yet these responses, in the manner of polemic, argument, and plea, do exhibit some of the surprise of critical exigency when the interpretive practices we learn have not themselves been submitted to reflective scrutiny. That, it appears, is the central issue; and if that is at least part of Jonathan Culler's insistence that we go "beyond" interpretation, there seems little alternative to doing so, if only to understand why this issue persists as a source of provocation and uneasiness. It may be useful to note that "*Interpretation*" has been as much a code word or slogan among American critics at least since the late 1940's, as it has been a term of description for well identified practices. Veterans of earlier critical wars may think that if one does not "Interpret," one must do "Philology" or "Scholarship"--as if interpreting could somehow be avoided in any intellectual enterprise. Now, it appears, the fighting word is "Theory" or "Science," and with the passing of time, older radicals may find themselves

accused of being the new reactionaries. Still, interpreting is unavoidable; and the persisting issue is whether we can really afford, professionally or politically, to go on beating each other with codes *qua* clubs, when the motives that inform our intellectual practices arise from vital concerns that cannot be left to take care of themselves.

In any case, the task of interpreting "Interpretation" is by no means concluded in these responses--just as it continues, in its many guises, in other SCE activities. Included in this issue are notices of other projects--most notably, a conference on theories of narrative, jointly sponsored by the English Department at Indiana University and by SCE.

In *SCE Reports 8*, containing papers for the 1980 MLA Session, "Deconstructive Criticism: Directions," there will be a fuller report of other on-going projects and plans.

Leroy Searle  
Secretary, SCE

## Response to other papers on Interpretation

Eugene Goodheart

Everyone on this panel seems to agree that interpretation should not be banished from the terminology of literary discourse. There is disagreement about the circumstances in which the activity is useful. Jonathan Culler and Barbara Smith concede that interpretation is necessary in teaching the young. Barbara Smith says that there is even a sense in which we can never or should never go beyond interpretation: "The very process by which we perceive and comprehend the universe--not only the speech, texts and other objects and events produced by our fellow creatures, but everything that exists for us." In giving up interpretation in this sense, we would abdicate our humanity.

In what sense then is interpretation "insidious"? I must confess that apart from Culler's justified criticism of the New Critical habit of interpreting texts *in vacuo* (as self-enclosed structures without reference to history or other texts), I still do not see the force of his critique --though I believe I understand its motive. Barbara Smith speaks scornfully of "the set of activities that have been regularly performed by numerous professors of literature and their students within the walls of academic institutions and upon pages of associated professional journals for roughly the past fifty years . . ." But this is a description of an activity, not a characterization of its principle. I have little doubt that if Jonathan Culler's research program (or anybody else's, for that matter), became the rule of the profession, the proliferation of repetitious and

trivial studies would invite similar description. The question remains: why is interpretation in principle insidious? As a monopoly, interpretation or any research program would be oppressive. The study of literature as an institution or as a mode of discourse, Culler's perfectly good proposals of topics for study, need not cancel interpretation as a continuing legitimate activity of literary criticism.

Polemics tend to exaggerate, distort and harden oppositions. Paul Hernadi's unjustified imputation that if my "case for interpretation" were the law of the land, I would make it "hard to obtain travel permits to the perilous frontier of literary theory this side of unauthorized inventiveness . . . and appropriative reading" is surely a piece of polemical distortion. I don't see how I could have made myself clearer. I said that theory can be stimulating to literature and its study, but I challenged its recent overweening ambition to achieve a comprehensive systematic understanding of a whole field. I share Ihab Hassan's modest sense of what is possible in the way of developing a comprehensive theory or a research program for a whole profession. I also praised the brilliance of Roland Barthes' appropriative readings but cautioned against his form of deconstruction as a model for ordinary readers. I confess to serious misgivings about Barthes' kind of unauthorized inventiveness, which I will shortly make clear, but appropriation in varying degrees is a natural tendency of interpretation, with which I have no quarrel in principle. Kierkegaard's reading of the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is a superb example of a writer appropriating an ancient text to a modern personal interest, without violating the text. I wonder what anxiety Paul Hernadi is repressing when a cautionary argument is perceived as the Berlin Wall.

It would be a misrepresentation of the real differences among us however, simply to correct the polemical distortions, as I have tried to do, in

order to show how we all really agree at bottom, though our emphases are different. Culler's attack on interpretation is, I think, more fundamental than Barbara Smith and Paul Hernadi allow--perhaps more fundamental than Culler himself would admit.

I do not think that Culler's rhetoric is simply part of a strategy of dramatization--though it may be partly that. Culler wants to compel a change of attention and focus. But the reason is not, as it is for E. D. Hirsch, that interpretation has already accomplished its purposes and that we now need to refresh our relation to the discipline. Nor is it that Culler is asking for change or novelty for its own sake. Interpretation is insidious, in his view, because it is an obstacle to scientific advance and understanding. In the spirit of the scientist Culler approaches the subject matter of the discipline and finds it wanting in purpose, direction and rigorously defined assumptions. When he laments that his critics offer no alternatives to interpretation, his implicit assumption is that interpretation is an error that must be combated if literary study is to achieve the condition of science.

What is the character of Culler's commitment to science? When Northrop Frye speaks of his ambition to put literary study on a scientific basis, his model is evolutionary biology. Or so he says. I am not sure that biology is in practice Frye's model. The evocation of biology is, however, significant because it reflects the spirit of Frye's commitment to literature. For all his scientism, Frye remains true to his romantic or Blakean heritage. Literary study, for Frye, continues to be very much a life science. Not so, I believe, for Culler, who like Roland Barthes mistrusts the language of organicism and naturalism. Culler's (and Barthes') model is mechanism, which in the particular application he makes of it, is inimical to interpretation.

I think Barbara Smith is generous but misleading in trying to protect Culler from the potential charge

that he is repudiating interpretation as the perception and comprehension of "the speech, texts and other objects and events produced by our fellow creatures." Interpretation in that sense is also the enemy for Culler. By disintegrating the text into sentences, the production of which becomes the object of inquiry, Culler effectively destroys the text as an organic unity--with a voice, a point of view. The text or work is no longer seen as the expression of a fellow creature. With the deauthorization of the text, the disintegration of its unity, all efforts to interpret become meaningless. An understanding of the production of sentences or lexical phrases does not depend upon interpretation, in which the reader tries to discover the patterns that give continuity to the work. In reading Balzac's Sarrasine through Barthes, one reads vertically, disruptively against the horizontal demands of the narrative. The horizontality of the narrative, which demands interpretation, is an error that must be combatted, if literary study is to achieve scientific status.

Like any mechanist, Culler does not believe that the sum is greater than the parts. Deconstructive rather than constructive mechanist, he is more interested in the parts than the whole. Culler's mechanistic bias reveals itself in his reply to his critics when he speaks of the possibility of producing "a compelling account of the mechanism of catharsis" in King Lear while holding the view that Lear is "a silly old fool." Catharsis is a "mechanism" independent of the investigator's experience of the play. The investigator accounts for the catharsis, which he himself could hardly be expected to experience, since for him Lear is a fool. The term mechanism is, of course, appropriate to Culler's understanding of what constitutes a text: it is a constellation of codes, a cybernetic creation. Sarrasine, or

for that matter The Brothers Karamazov, could have been produced by a committee or by a computer. I should add that Culler's mechanistic bias is also manifest in the separation he makes between understanding and experience.

Barbara Smith says that she is arguing for the spirit, not the letter of Jonathan Culler's observations. Her affection for the systematic, for comprehensiveness, for clearly articulated goals, for the intellectual as opposed to the humanistic makes her allegiances clear. (It should be noted, however, that her observations are devoid of the mechanistic implications that one finds in Culler and Barthes.) It is, of course, no argument against Culler or Smith to raise the banner of the humanist against the demons of scientific intellect, system-building and computer programming. Such a response invites the counter response that banner waving of this kind is romantic sentimentality. I don't mean to wave the banner as much as to focus on the assumptions of Culler's view, which I think the discussion has tended to mute if not conceal.

There is, I think, an odd polarity in the views of those who wish to make literary study more scientific and systematic than it presently is. Science and system suggest impersonality, detachment, objectivity. Yet at the same time this science is supposed to account for the subjectivity of the reader's response, since the text has lost its integrity, its objective character. A science of subjectivity is perhaps not impossible. It remains, however, to be asked what it could accomplish, if it were possible of realization.

One can never insure oneself against being misunderstood and mistaken. But I want to make clear again where I stand on the main issue. 1) I believe that theoretical speculation is necessary and valuable in any field of study, but I also believe with Aristotle that the possibility of comprehensiveness and precision varies from

subject matter to subject matter. What is possible in physics is not possible in poetics. The resistance to a science of literature is, moreover, not simply a matter of the degree of precision possible in the formulation of statements about a subject matter. It proceeds from a view expressed by Ihab Hassan that literary works and the reading of them are the expressions of individual, subjective experience or desire. A theoretical ambition at once impersonal, comprehensive and systematic may falsify this situation. (Incidentally, one could write an essay "Barthes against Barthes" in which one counterpointed his view of writing as desire to his ambition to turn literary study into semiotics.) 2) I believe that texts are at once determinate and indeterminate. Arguments about the meaning of a text cannot be settled by simply pointing to the text. Evidence itself may be a product of interpretation--as Hernadi points out. But most texts have a topography, salient and less salient features: there are constraints, which every responsible critic should observe. 3) I believe in the possibility of a kind of dialogue between reader and text (presupposed by my belief that the text can be allowed or made to speak for itself) and that such a dialogue has not been exhausted by the interpretations of the past. 4) There is a space in literary study for the creative, powerful reader, who appropriates texts for his own purposes. My quarrel with Barthes and with Culler when he follows him is that the model for appropriation is the cybernetic model: the text is simply conceived as a constellation of arbitrarily chosen codes. Call me a humanist (who incidentally is not opposed to the intellect), but the cybernetic model as the dominant model for a whole profession seems to me--well, insidious.

Michael Finney  
Youngstown State University

## BEYOND JONATHAN CULLER

It makes me slightly uncomfortable to find myself in agreement with Jonathan Culler about much of anything, but his critique (in Society for Critical Exchange Reports #6) of the critiques (in SCER #6) of his article "Beyond Interpretation" (in Comparative Literature 28) seems to me, in spite of the slightly injured adolescent tone Culler takes, right on the mark. That is, as Culler points out, what is at issue is not whether people can, do, will and should interpret literary texts. Obviously people can, do and will interpret literary texts, and, since they can, do and will interpret literary texts, it is I think (and I think Culler thinks so too) moot whether they should interpret literary texts. The issue which Culler raises is not epistemological, but professional (in the trivial sense we have all come to use that term) and political. The question Culler raises is whether or not the publication of interpretations should count as scholarly and professional activity. That that is the case is evident in Culler's observation "that our tenure system creates a need for theories and methods that generate numerous small projects which can be completed in less than six years and listed on curriculum vitae. Since interpretation can generate an endless series of twenty-page articles, it suits our system much better than theories whose projects would take years to complete." (SCER #6, 83) What Culler is trying to do, although he is too polite to say so

(in print at least), is to reconstitute what counts as legitimate professional scholarly activity in order to put all of those Midwestern second-rate state university interpreters who are incapable of doing theory out of business.

I am not suggesting, of course, that Culler's arguments are not open to attack or criticism. One thing to do is to attack his political position. Again, I find myself uncomfortably in agreement with Culler. I don't see any point in publishing interpretations either. I never read them myself and don't much associate, socially or intellectually, with people who do. However, if I were an untenured assistant professor at a second-rate Midwestern University who really cared about getting tenure, I might find it possible to launch a fairly detailed and nasty attack on Culler's obviously snobbish conception of literary professionalism.

I would certainly begin such an attack by pointing out that "Beyond Interpretation" is not a substantive essay but a polemic of the easiest kind; I would also point out that, like all his predecessors who have tried to reconstitute the profession in their own images, Culler first has to kill off the principle competition, in his case, Frye, Fish and the psychoanalytic people (who are apparently too numerous to enumerate). I would point out that Culler's murder of Fish is so sloppy and ineffectual that he (Culler) has to immediately apotheosize him (Fish) as the source and inspiration of his (Culler's) ideas. And so on.

But Culler is, I believe, vulnerable in a more significant way. After all, he does suggest an alternative project to interpretation. As we all know, that project is described most fully in

Culler's Structuralist Poetics and involves, essentially, a thorough explication of what Culler calls "literary competence." At another time and in another place, I will argue that Culler's notion of "literary competence" is a product of his rather narrow educational experience and is constituted by nothing more (nor, I suppose I should add, less) profound than the set of interpretive strategies and rhetorical devices one would pick up in the process of getting a degree in English at a good Eastern or, better, English University. Meanwhile, Barbara Herrnstein Smith has already--not in her rather polite critique of Culler in SCER #6 where she simply points out, after agreeing that we should get beyond interpretation, that she does not agree with Culler about what we should do when we get there, but rather--in On Margins of Discourse (Chicago, 1978) done a pretty nice job of pointing out the fundamental absurdity of Culler's analogy between literary competence and linguistic competence and of clarifying some of the implications of that fundamental absurdity for Culler's project. (To be fair, Barbara Smith does praise Culler for his insights into narrative, and merely laments his enslavement to linguistics.) And in a really remarkable essay (in Diacritics, Winter, 1979) Marie-Laure Ryan exposes the superficiality and illogicality of Culler's, in fact of the whole French structuralist and post-structuralist movement's, reading, interpretation and use of Saussure.

However, I am not, here, particularly interested in detailing Culler's linguistic incompetence (I use the phrase in its non-technical sense). I merely want to note it in order to expose a duplicity in the project he poses as an alternative to interpretation. In order to do that, I also need to turn to a different characterization of the

project, the one he attributes, unjustly--I will return to the injustice later--to Stanley Fish in "Beyond Interpretation." Culler says, "The task of the critic, as it seems to emerge from Fish's enterprise, would be to describe the procedures and conventions of reading so as to offer a comprehensive theory of the way we go about making sense of texts." ("Beyond Interpretation," Comparative Literature, 28, 252) And later--in case any readers are skeptical about this being Culler's enterprise and not Fish's--"The future lies . . . in the theoretical enterprise which Fish sketches then flees." (252) (Why Fish flees is a question I will return to in the context of the injustice mentioned earlier.)

Now Culler's project appears to have two parts: (1) to list literary conventions, all of them, presumably; and (2) to construct a theory of how we make sense of things. Now, taken separately, each of the projects has at least some merit. It seems to me a comprehensive list of literary conventions characterized as conventions of reading is a perfectly appropriate task for literary scholars and critics. And, of course, we all would like to know more about how the mind works in the process of making sense of things. The problem is that for Culler these are not two different projects, but the same project. He apparently assumes that a comprehensive list of conventions will constitute a description of how the mind makes sense of literature. And that is simply nonsense. A list of conventions is just that: a list of conventions. A list of conventions does not even account for what a convention is, let alone the function of convention in mental processes. Only the most naive of semiologists, only the most superficial reader of Saussure and the other semiologists, could possibly assume that the articulation of conventions

constitutes a description or theory of mental process. There is simply no connection between the two enterprises.

I think it is fair to assume that Jonathan Culler is not stupid. In that case, it is also fair to ask why he is attempting to link a relatively trivial enterprise to a powerful theoretical goal. I think the answer is relatively simple. It is just another political ploy. If the knowledge of, if the ability to read, interpret, make sense of, understand, and teach literature depends upon having a knowledge of a particular set of conventions, and if the more respectable institutions of higher learning are the repository and disseminators of those conventions, then only those people to whom the conventions have been transmitted will belong to that elite that is capable of making the right sense of literature. Culler's whole enterprise is not only conservative, but elitist. It not only denies the right of the man in the street to interpret literature, but denies the possibility that he can even do so.

Arrogant as he may be, Stanley Fish knows perfectly well that the articulation of the conventions of reading will not constitute a theory of anything. That is why Culler is unjust in attributing his enterprise to Fish and unjust in criticizing Fish for fleeing from a theoretical enterprise which is, in fact, political and not theoretical at all. I am not, of course, denying the possibility of constructing a theory of how we make sense of things. I am simply suggesting that such a theory would be a very complex matter and that the construction of such a theory is as much beyond the abilities of Jonathan Culler as it is beyond the abilities of anyone whose training has

been primarily in letters, modern or otherwise.

But I don't have any interest in putting Culler out of business. I don't want to put anybody out of business. Let Culler--and his disciples, should he attract any--put together a monumental list of literary conventions. I look forward to joining the Book-of-the-Month Club in 2020 in order to get the Oxford University Press Micro-edition of it for my great-grandson at a considerably reduced rate. But, then, let us also forgive our untenured assistant professors their interpretations.

Beyond the Academy  
Susan Elliott (Clark University)

Sometimes when researchers lose their focus on themselves temporarily and become interested instead in the material that they are analyzing, they mistake themselves for "disinterested observers" of the phenomena that they study. Though they believe, as Alfred Schutz has argued, that theoretical thinkers can suspend their subjectivity, such thinkers only appear to do so. They are not "disinterested observers." To disguise our personal and collective quests for knowledge as "disinterested" and "dispassionate" is a common professional defense. We are not dispassionate about literature or what we do with it. Failure to admit personal involvement in what we proclaim to be engaging holds back the development of our discipline.

Most importantly, it holds us back as teachers, people whose personal involvement in our studies could serve as the impetus to motivate the growing mass of students who presently perceive that they have little in common with us because they cannot understand our goals and values. Part of the important task before us is to make these goals and values clearer to such students, to relate our concerns to theirs. Abdicating this responsibility will get us nowhere.

We too seek, attain, and enjoy professional rewards, as most students wish to do. To recognize our common ground in the pursuit of knowledge and in the wish for the various kinds of rewards resulting from its "possession" unites us with one another as people. The inclusion of students in our professional circle keeps us--endangered species that we are rapidly becoming--from dying out. And I am

referring to psychological and social as well as economic factors. One of the rewards offered to teachers is the satisfaction of knowing that we have helped other people to learn what we know.

In my own educational experience, teachers able to communicate the practical value of their knowledge stimulated my present values and concerns as a scholar/teacher. Most valuable to me now are those scholars who can show freshmen as well as graduate students and "peers" the practical consequences that their apparently esoteric theoretical inquiries can have for "ordinary" people.

As a recent novel by Judith Guest may suggest, the concept of "ordinary" people devalues them. Yet this commonplace concept underlies critical assumptions observable, for example, in Goodheart's contrast of "gifted" (extraordinary) and "ordinary" readers and in Hassan's remarks. Despite the deference of both Goodheart and Hassan to Barthes, who is for them a "gifted" and an "inspired" reader, respectively, their admiration suggests that they feel more of a common bond with Barthes than they do with their "ordinary" students. This is hardly surprising; an often-heard distinction between college teachers of literature and most college students (generally not our majors) is that the former are "extraordinary" readers while the latter are just "ordinary" ones. The teachers remember themselves as "gifted" students in contrast to the "types" they have before them in the classroom. In earlier levels of education, we hear of "gifted" or "exceptional" learners and "remedial" or (now) "developmental" studies, of "special needs." Though many of us may be too old to have been identified in grammar school in any of these terms, as, say, "gifted" students, we did develop our "gifts,"

our talents. Our teachers may have guided us in this development, but we did develop them ourselves.

Giving students the opportunity to develop whatever talents and skills they possess is an essential part of our job as teachers. Seeing how criticism relates to other learning activities would help students at all levels to understand how reading and writing relate to their other experiences. If educators from grade school on would give them more confidence in abilities that they are discovering, these students would be encouraged to develop them. They would feel more like examining their own experiences and more like learning from both teachers and books.

Perceiving the links between so-called "ordinary" or non-professional readers and writers and more accomplished ones would promote the future study of literature. Scholar/teachers would understand the reading and writing abilities of their students and other colleagues in relation to their own abilities. They would use this understanding in teaching older students too, whose professional reading habits may be more fully formed than those of most younger people and quite different in some respects from the reading habits of the professional teacher of literature.

The widespread emphasis on the reader and on readers in contemporary literary criticism reflects these concerns. Iser's attempt to understand "the act of reading" and Culler's formulation of "literary competence" may be seen in this larger context. But to assume that "ordinary" readers/students are not so worthy of attention as professional readers is contrary to current goals. In studying reading "conventions," "strategies,"

and the methods of "gifted" readers, we may be able to gain insights about how to make "gifted" readers out of "ordinary" ones. (Metaphors like making wheat out of chaff, wine out of water, gold out of flax, suggest the sense that this feat is miraculous!) I continue to place these words in quotation marks because there are no generally accepted definitions of the terms as they are currently being used. To use other terms, we can try to teach what we know about how we read literature to those who would like to learn how we read it, to those who would like to enjoy reading it too. If our goal is not to interpret individual literary works, we will not be teaching our students our interpretations; we will be teaching them our understanding of how we arrived at these interpretations in a way that will enable them to understand how they read. Such self-examination of their reading habits can lead to their development as readers, thinkers, and writers.

When we can show how our theoretical investigations are of importance to more practical concerns with teaching and learning, we will feel freer in the classroom, not "boxed into" it. Addressing such issues will fortunately not move us "out of the classroom"; but it may move us "beyond the academy."

Speaking of a confusion of values in the profession as a whole, Smith seems to be generalizing her personal sense of confusion of roles (scholar versus teacher). Culler's remarks about the tenure system of rewards are perhaps to the point in this regard too. If we were to compare what European scholars produce with what American scholars do, I expect that we would find both a greater preponderance of textbooks in this country and a greater number of theoretical writings. The form-

er is not surprising given the alliance between our curricula and the publishing industry and given the link between scholarship and professional advancement. This link also sustains the increasing number of theoretical writings emerging in this country. Culler observes that younger people generally do the practical criticism; the corollary is that associate and full professors generally do the theoretical projects. The system of rewards operates on all levels. Sabbaticals and grants permitting extended inquiry without teaching responsibilities begin after six years of apprenticeship in the classroom. They go with the territory. Unfortunately, after some explore it, they no longer want to return to the classroom.

A recent phenomenon accompanying the tenure squeeze is that a greater number of younger scholars are attempting to do the kinds of "larger" inquiries that senior scholars tended to do more naturally. Sometimes young people must do these projects now in order to achieve tenure instead of after they have achieved it. (First they publish practical criticism in graduate school before their dissertations are finished; then they publish pieces of a more theoretically oriented dissertation; next they contract with a university press to publish the whole [perhaps revised] dissertation; finally, they engage grants and fellowships to enable them to pursue extended research projects unrelated to teaching, as they see these projects sometimes.)

In some cases, we may be uncorking our wines before their time, so to speak. We are "boxing" our youthful talents "into" research projects before they have had an opportunity to range fully within the academy and to develop and mature. A certain wisdom of choice underlies great or even worthwhile projects that younger professionals, students still,

may not yet have attained. Our more experienced mentors (also still students as well as teachers) need to guide us carefully so that we can develop our talents in practical ways, moving beyond the academy without landing entirely outside of it.

Hassan observes the "theoretical concerns latent in every interpretation." Similarly, teaching is a practical application of theory, even when it is teaching about theory. The goal of programs like the NEH Summer Seminars for College Teachers and the NEH year-long Seminars in Residence is to give senior professors opportunities to demonstrate the relation between theory and practice for those who will be teaching primarily undergraduates. When senior professors who share this goal take part in such programs, they inspire others to emulation.

But "emulation" is not "devotion." When Smith speaks of devotion to literary studies, she presents these studies as a kind of religion. Like Joyce's young hero's worship of Mangan's sister in "Araby," this attitude toward literary studies can lead to disillusionment with the "fair." And it cannot attract the student whose current values are far more materialistic than either spiritualistic or idealistic. Yet, given this person's own intellectual and emotional capabilities for growth, he or she is the one who stands to gain so much personally from understanding what we enjoy about reading and writing. We stand to gain personally and professionally from sharing both understanding and enjoyment, what we know about learning through literature, with anyone who wants to learn too. It would be self-defeating to keep it to ourselves.

"Interpretation Beyond Interpretation: Semiotic Chain as Hermeneutic Spiral"

Outline of article in progress by Paul Hernadi  
University of Iowa

Three Axioms of Interpretation

1. Authors communicate
2. Texts conceal
3. Readings disclose

Three Modes of Meaning

1. Language as Signal: Communication by (inspired?) author
2. Language as Symptom: Concealment within (problematic?) text
3. Language as Experience: Disclosure through (congenial?) reader

Three Phases of Interpretation

1. Explicate what is said and how (cf. Peirce on symbol)
2. Explain what is concealed and why (cf. Peirce on index)
3. Explore what is disclosed and through whom (cf. Peirce on icon)

Explication, Explanation, Exploration: Procedures and Proponents

1. Re-construction or "objective interpretation" (Schleiermacher, Betti, Hirsch)
2. Deconstruction or the "hermeneutics of suspicion"

Hernadi--2

(Marx, Nietzsche, Freud; or, if you prefer  
soufflé to Sauerbraten, Althusser, Derrida,  
Lacan)

3. Participation or the "fusion of horizons"  
(Humboldt, Wittgenstein, Gadamer)

The Hermeneutic Spiral (cf. Peirce on "unlimited  
semiosis")

Signals and symptoms disclose meaning

Each statement of what has been disclosed awaits  
further explication as signal and further explana-  
tion as symptom

Such explications and explanations in turn await  
explorations of what they disclose as signals and  
symptoms

And so on

And so forth

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THEORIES OF NARRATIVE

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What is a narrative &  
are narrative theories  
needed?

Why choose one narrative  
theory over another?

How is narrative theory  
related to the literary  
history of narratives?

What is the pertinence of  
narrative theory outside  
the study of the novel?

Persuasion  
gothic romance  
science fiction

"Little Red Riding Hood"  
"Araby"

The World According to Garp  
historiography  
autobiography  
case history

THIS CONFERENCE AIMS FOR A WIDE RANGING EXCHANGE OF OPINION REGARDING THE STATUS AND USE OF NARRATIVE THEORY TODAY. INDIVIDUAL PANELISTS WILL DEVELOP THEIR PERSPECTIVES IN THE COURSE OF FOUR PANEL DISCUSSIONS ON THE ISSUES LISTED ABOVE. RESPONSE TO THESE DISCUSSIONS, IN SMALL GROUP MEETINGS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE PANELS, WILL TEST THE PUBLIC PERSPECTIVES OF THE PANELISTS THROUGH ATTENTION TO INDIVIDUAL TEXTS, SOME OF WHICH ARE LISTED ABOVE. PANELS AND DISCUSSION GROUPS WILL BE MODERATED BY MEMBERS OF THE LITERATURE DEPARTMENTS AT INDIANA UNIVERSITY AND OF THE SOCIETY FOR CRITICAL EXCHANGE.

Those interested in attending are urged to contact Patricia Harkin Sosnoski (Society for Critical Exchange, % Department of English, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio 45056) or David Bleich (Department of English, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47401) for a full description of the conference and a room reservation card in the Indiana Memorial Union.

## PROGRAM

Friday, 24 October

9 - 10:30 Panel I: What is a narrative and what is a theory of narrative?

Why do people create narrative theories? Are theories judged in terms of practical value or intrinsic coherence or both or neither? Is any discourse on narrative also a theory? Is a theory a model? paradigm? a set of hypotheses? concepts? rules? or what?

Panelists: Jonathan Arac, Ralph Cohen, Paul Hernadi, Eric Rabkin

Chair: David Bleich

11 - 12:15 Small Group Discussions: Do these texts need a theory of narrative?

- (1) John Irving, The World According to Garp; Discussion Leader: Kathe Finney, Kent State University
- (2) Jane Austen, Persuasion; Discussion Leader: Michael Rosenblum, Indiana University
- (3) Herman Melville, The Confidence Man; Discussion Leader: Michael Finney, Youngstown State University
- (4) Robert Penn Warren, All the King's Men; Discussion Leader: Ingeborg Hoesterey, Indiana University

Friday, 24 October, cont'd

## LUNCH

- 2 - 3:30 Panel II: Why Choose One Narrative Theory Over Another?
- Can a taxonomic narrative poetics produce more than trivial results? Must narrative theory be related to a theory of text-production or text-reception?
- Panelists: Jonathan Culler, Wladyslaw Godzich, Mary Louise Pratt, Gerald Prince
- Chair: James Sosnoski
- 4 - 5:15 Small Group Discussions: How have particular narrative theories illuminated the following sorts of narrative?
- (1) Science Fiction; Text: Eric Rabkin, The Fantastic in Literature; Discussion Leader: Scott Sanders, Indiana Univ.
  - (2) The Short Story; Texts: James Joyce's "Araby," Seymour Chatman, Story and Discourse; Discussion Leader: Wallace Martin, University of Toledo
  - (3) The Folk or Fairy Tale; Texts: "Little Red Riding Hood," Gerald Prince, A Grammar of Stories; Discussion Leader: Eugene R. Kintgen, Indiana Univ.

## DINNER

Friday, 24 October, cont'd

- 8 - 9:30 Small Group Discussions: How are individual narrative theories socially and professionally authorized?
- (1) By men; Text: Judith Fetterley, The Resisting Reader; Discussion Leader: Wendy Deutelbaum, University of Iowa
  - (2) By individual claims of authority; Text: Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology; Discussion Leader: Armine Kotin, University of Illinois
  - (3) By the university curriculum; Discussion Leader, Susan M. Elliott, Clark University
  - (4) By linkage with thought from other disciplines; Texts: Pierre Machery, Theory of Literary Production, Georg Lukacs, The Theory of the Novel; Discussion Leader: Leroy Searle, University of Washington

Saturday, 25 October

- 9 - 10:30 Panel III: How is Narrative Theory Related to the Literary History of Narratives?

What is literary history and is it itself a narrative? Does the idea of literary history imply a theory of narrative? How does narrative theory account for changes in narrative forms? Must a narrative poetics be synchronic?

Saturday, 25 October, cont'd

Panelists: Jonathan Arac, Ralph Cohen,  
Wladyslaw Godzich, Gerald  
Prince

Chair: Patricia Harkin Sosnoski

- 11 - 12:15 Small Group Discussion: How have narra-  
tive theories illuminated the following  
historical phenomena?
- (1) Different conventions in the same  
period; Texts: Milton, Paradise  
Lost, Dryden, Absalom and Achitophel;  
Discussion Leader: Marshall Grossman,  
Blackburn College
  - (2) The same genre in different periods  
--gothic romance; Texts: Mary  
Shelley, Frankenstein; Joseph Conrad,  
The Heart of Darkness; Discussion  
Leader: Patrick Brantlinger, Indiana  
University
  - (3) The recurrent theme; "Cupid and  
Psyche" from The Golden Ass of Lucius  
Apuleius, "Beauty and the Beast,"  
"Little Red Riding Hood"; Discussion  
Leader: Linda Degh, Indiana University

## L U N C H

- 2 - 3:30 Panel IV: What is the Scope of Narrative  
Theory?

Does narrative theory apply only to the  
novel? only to aesthetic phenomena, but  
including art, music, and dance? What

Saturday, 25 October, cont'd

forms can not be construed as narrative?  
Can any "natural" boundaries for  
narrative theory be determined?

Panelists: Jonathan Culler, Paul Hernadi,  
Mary Louise Pratt, Eric Rabkin

Chair: Matei Calinescu

- 4 - 5:15 Small Group Discussions: How can narrative  
theory illuminate the following narrative  
forms?
- (1) Myths of Origin; Texts: Mircea Eliade,  
Myth and Reality, Rene Girard,  
"Violence and Representation in the  
Mythical Text"; Discussion Leader:  
Oscar Kenshur, Indiana University
  - (2) Autobiography; Text: Jean-Paul Sartre,  
Words; Discussion Leader: John Eakin,  
Indiana University
  - (3) Informal Personal Narrative; Text:  
to be distributed; Discussion Leader:  
Sandra K. D. Stahl, Indiana Univ.
  - (4) History; Text: to be announced;  
Discussion Leader: Lee Sterrenburg,  
Indiana University

Sunday, 26 October

- 9 - 11:00 Informal Discussion

Sunday, 26 October, cont'd

- (1) Who at this conference agrees with others at the conference, and do those in agreement need to meet to establish their common assent?
- (2) Can one characterize any unified knowledge deriving from this conference? Is it worthwhile reporting the proceedings, and if so, to whom?

MLA SPECIAL SESSION

Houston, Texas  
December 27-30, 1980

"DECONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM: DIRECTIONS"  
(Organized by SCE)

Chair: Vincent B. Leitch, Mercer University

Panel: Barbara Johnson, Yale University  
Joseph N. Riddel, UCLA  
William V. Spanos, SUNY, at Binghamton

Commentators:

Jerry Aline Flieger, Rutgers University  
Jerrold Hogle, University of Arizona  
Andrew Parker, University of Chicago

A Selected Bibliography:

Richard A. Barney, Miami University (Ohio)

For further information, contact:

Professor Vincent B. Leitch  
Department of English  
Mercer University  
Macon, Georgia 31207

MLA SPECIAL SESSION

Houston, Texas  
December 27-30, 1980

"DESIGNING COURSES IN CRITICISM:  
A WORKSHOP"

Discussion Leaders:

Leroy Searle, University of Washington  
Jeffrey Peck, University of Washington  
Jeffrey Plank, Georgia Institute of  
Technology

This workshop will consist of close examinations of several sample course descriptions, and discussions of pedagogical problems in designing and teaching courses in criticism.

For further information, contact:

Professor Leroy Searle  
English Department GN-30  
University of Washington  
Seattle, WA 98195

MLA SPECIAL SESSION

"NEW DIRECTIONS IN LITERARY STUDY:  
POLITICAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF  
INSTITUTIONALIZING LITERATURE THROUGH TEXTBOOKS"

Chair: Susan Elliott, Clark University

Papers: "Contemporary Poetry in the Classroom," Evan  
Watkins, Michigan State University  
"Shelley and the Myth of Linear Narrative,"  
Stewart Peterfreund, Northeastern University  
"Setting Standards for Socialization Through  
Fairy Tales: Charles Perrault and His  
Followers," Jack Zipes, University of  
Wisconsin at Milwaukee  
"Why are Introductory Texts to Literature Un-  
theoretical?" James J. Sosnoski, Miami  
University (Ohio)

Note: This special session focuses on the consequences of using textbooks in presenting literature in academic institutions. An aim of the session is to define ways in which the use of textbooks in classroom teaching controls and shapes the reading and teaching of books, and even the formation of social and political attitudes. It aims to answer the question "How do textbooks which make use of literature affect responses to it?"

For copies of papers, send \$2 to:

Professor Susan Elliott  
19 Sorrento Street  
Worcester, MA 01602

Note: Susan Elliott has begun negotiations for affiliation of SCE with NEMLA, and there may be a special session sponsored by the Society at the 1981

convention in Quebec, to be held April 9-11, under the sponsorship of L'University Laval at le Chateau Frontenac. Prof. Elliott has left the topic open, and will wait to develop a specific program until she knows if any SCE members are interested. Anyone who would like to participate should write Professor Elliott at the above address.

MMLA SPECIAL SESSION

Minneapolis, Minnesota  
November 6-8, 1980

"THE WORK OF WOLFGANG ISER"  
(Organized by SCE)

Session Organizer: Patricia Harkin Sosnoski, Miami  
University (Ohio)

Panel: Rudolf Kuenzli, University of Iowa  
Michael Finney, University of Youngstown  
John Paul Riquelme, Southern Methodist Univ.

Respondent: Wallace Martin, University of Toledo

For further information, contact:

Professor Patricia Harkin Sosnoski  
Department of English  
Miami University  
Oxford, Ohio 45056

MMLA SPECIAL SESSION

WORKSHOP: THE CONCEPT OF "LITERARY COMPETENCE"  
(Organized by SCE)

Chair: James J. Sosnoski, Miami University (Ohio)

Topic: Is the concept of "literary competence" as  
delineated by Jonathan Culler in Structuralist  
Poetics heuristic?

Panel: David Bleich, Indiana University  
Richard Bjornson, Ohio State University  
John Brenkman, University of Wisconsin  
Susan Elliott, Clark University  
Wladyslaw Godzich, University of Minnesota  
Tom Lewis, University of Iowa

For further information, contact:

Professor James J. Sosnoski  
Department of English  
Miami University  
Oxford, Ohio 45056

SAMLA SPECIAL SESSION

Atlanta, Georgia, Peachtree Plaza  
November 6-8, 1980

"POST-STRUCTURALISM: ASSESSMENT AND NEW DIRECTIONS"  
(Organized by SCE)

Chair: Vincent B. Leitch, Mercer University

Panel: John P. Leavey, Jr., University of Florida  
Victor Kramer, Georgia State University  
Julie Ann Lepick, Texas A&M University

For further information, contact:

Professor Vincent B. Leitch  
Department of English  
Mercer University  
Macon, Georgia 31207

SCE REPORTS

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SCMLA SPECIAL SESSION

Memphis, Tennessee  
October 30-November 1, 1980

"THE PROBLEMATICS OF THE SELF IN  
CONTEMPORARY LITERARY THEORY"  
(Organized by SCE)

Chair: Julie Ann Lepick, Texas A&M University

Papers: "The Self as Story," James J. Sosnoski, Miami  
University (Ohio)

"Hélène Sixoux and the Deconstruction of the  
Propre," Bryan Duren, University of Texas  
at Austin

"Self-Objectivication: The Origin of the Self  
in Interpretation," David R. Shumway, Miami  
University (Ohio)

For further information, contact:

Professor Julie Ann Lepick  
Department of English  
Texas A&M University  
College Station, TX 77843

Note: This year marks the first time in SCMLA's history  
that a special session has been devoted specifically  
to literary theory. In 1981, the special session  
will be elevated to special section status. Prof.  
Lepick is working to provide a regular forum for  
discussion of theoretical issues in coming years,  
and encourages those interested in participating to  
contact her at the above address.