

Material Histories and Ariadne's Thread

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Material histories of academic organizations and their journals are implicated with the personal histories of their members and contributors. Organizations articulate intellectual missions, set up research goals, and target particular audiences, thereby setting the stage for journal publications to unfold along the lines of defined trajectories. Through the prestige they earn, organizations and journals determine the value of the cultural capital that individual members and contributors gain. The names of journals alone in a list of publications on a CV tell the story of academic cultural capital accumulated. "This is money in the bank," my chairperson told me when I showed him the acceptance notice I had received for the essay I had written for *Critical Exchange*, my first publication as a graduate student.

Even as they shape the careers of individuals, material histories of organizations are themselves shaped by the narratives of their members. On the occasion of celebrating the thirty years' anniversary of the Society for Critical Exchange, I wish to recount my own personal narrative about it, adding to the narratives of many others, and thereby collectively contributing to its material history. Since the beginning of my graduate study at Miami University coincided with the beginnings of SCE, I will focus my narrative on that period and tell the story from an inside, albeit limited, point of view of a novice member. The difficulty in recounting this type of narrative comes with the realization that the language it requires for its telling falls in place and takes shape much later. Unlike most organizations, SCE was formed during a period of transition: within an era of great flux, neither its mission nor its goals could be fixed. Responsive to changes in the continuously shifting terrain of the academy, SCE could not target a specific, already formed audience. Its historical situation demanded instead that its efforts be directed toward the creation of a new audience as well as its ongoing transformation. Saying that the history of SCE is but the history of exchanges among its members is easy enough. But how to narrate such a history when the exchange of its members can only be apprehended through a language that crystallized into discursive formations much later and, as such, became understandable only retrospectively? A language from the inside can only reflect the discourse I heard spoken around

WORKS AND DAYS 49/50, Vol. 25, Nos. 1&2, 2007

me at the time, the very discourse SCE members were seeking to change. Hence, the difficulty I face in recounting my story.

My involvement with SCE did not start with the payment of my \$5.00 graduate student subscription dues—this happened much later. Long before that, I entered SCE through Jim Sosnoski's and Patty Harkin's living room. Oblivious to the fact that I had been invited to participate in the most important setting that staged the formation of a national organization, I was content to enjoy the pizzas I was making under Jim's supervision, the red wine, the lively discussions and interpersonal warmth. The people I met there, and the nature of conversations I participated in and tried to contribute to, were sharply different from those I encountered in the living rooms of my other professors. Jim was one of only two theorists among the fifty-plus faculty in the English Department of Miami University. The language spoken by his guests was unique, not always easy to follow or understand. Their talk seemed to revolve around texts, but not in ways I had been accustomed to—not what authors said inside texts, but how critics should speak about them. I felt much more comfortable, though not nearly as excited, in other living rooms, where social interaction seemed to be a seamless extension of classroom discussion. In those settings, everyone talked about scenes and characters in texts, their favorite passages and the lines they had memorized.

It seemed to me that I simultaneously belonged to two drastically different communities—a large and a tiny one. The difficulties I experienced in adjusting from one arena to another were telling of the contradictory positions I occupied as a graduate student. Having come to the PhD program in Miami University with a strong background in literature from San Jose State, I was the happy rider of a smooth transition: I read the same great books, had fairly similar discussions about interpretation, and carried out similar, though perhaps more rigorous, inquiries into already familiar universal themes. The transition to theory—my first introduction to which was Jim's course on Literary Criticism in my first semester at MU in the fall of 1977—was bumpy, filled with confusion, excitement, and trepidation.

Several years later, I came to realize that there was nothing personal about the dilemmas I faced and nothing private about the contradictions I experienced as I was moving from one classroom and one living room to another. I had been caught up in the beginnings of a historical shift away from formalism and toward theory that was shaking up the very foundations of the academy. Life, Kierkegaard said once, must be lived forward, but understood backward. I lived within a serene and content world that suddenly seemed torn apart by vehement debates. Without understanding back then that the widespread, far-reaching shift to theory was already taking place across the nation, I heard most of my English professors speak about theory as a fad—an ideologically motivated movement led by a few people set on subordinating literature to their own political agendas.

I was living forward within overt attacks against theory and alongside lectures on theory delivered by guest speakers to a small interdisciplinary group of MU professors and graduate students, most of whom I had met in Jim and Patty's living room. Graduate students

were having their own debates, intensified after each lecture we attended, over what a given guest speaker had talked about, as well as over the label that best captured the lecture—was the speaker a structuralist, a phenomenologist, or a Marxist? Sometimes we acted boldly and raised these kinds of questions inside the classroom. Was theory a mere extension of literary criticism? Was the interpretation of last week's reading compatible with structuralism? Our questions were politely dismissed: the value of literature, we were told again and again, lies inside the text not outside it. The more the debates continued, the more theory came to be associated with a threat to literature. At some point, Jim lost the departmental support he had previously received for editing *Critical Exchange*. He bought a personal computer, spent days trying to make it work, and started smoking again. Soon, he was printing the issues of his journal out of his computer in his home office.

The topics for these issues were the outcome of discussions that had taken place in his living room. Nothing about them seemed to be planned. As with all social gatherings, these too started with polite conversation and aimless chat. But suddenly, one remark would put an end to all of this, and serious discussion would settle in the room. It was always a mystery to me as to which particular remark would trigger the change. Though I anticipated it and tried to predict it, I never knew what would capture everyone's imagination and dominate the exchanges—I only knew it after the shift had already taken place. The one remark that had brought the idle, amicable conversation to a point of no return would be tossed around for hours, challenged, debated, expanded, and modified. When it had finally reached the form of a question, the question itself would in turn be tossed around, qualified, reformulated, changed again, and re-expressed. Finally, when the discussion turned toward people on campus and nationwide, who might be interested in addressing the issue identified, I knew that everyone would leave the question alone, that all were satisfied with it. People threw around names of scholars Jim should contact in the next few days, and I knew that business was over—the topic for the new journal issue had been pretty much decided on.

That's how SCE worked. Jim turned his house into a public forum for the exchange of ideas. To this exchange, he brought no agenda. It was evident to me that his sole criterion for judging the appropriateness of a theoretical question was the integrity of the inquiry conducted. It was also evident to me that the inquiry taken up in his living room was open-ended and future-oriented, entertaining not so much what insights about a text a given theoretical perspective enabled, as much as what made a particular perspective possible to begin with; what assumptions supported it; where these assumptions had come from; what orientation they gave to academic learning; and what set of interrogations might be in order.

Unfortunately for me, Jim treated me in a similarly democratic and theoretically rigorous manner. He waited for me to raise the questions and, once I did, wanted to know how I would go about addressing them. This did not help me at all, especially in a period of time during which I was drowning in narrative theory, looking desperately

to find an angle on James Joyce by learning on my own everything I could about Northrop Frye, Hayden White, Seymour Chatman, Michael Rifatterre, Paul de Man, Heidegger and Husserl. Frustrated with Jim, I turned to Patty for help and set up weekly lunches with her. She was done with her PhD at the time and had just returned from a summer seminar at the Institute of Literary Criticism and Theory at Irvine. She talked to me about new theorists and theories, Iser and Gadamer, reader reception and audience expectations. The labyrinth seemed to grow vaster and gloomier each week.

One evening, as I responded to the dreaded question by a newcomer to Jim's house, "what are you working on," I heard myself talk about *Bildungsroman*, and the horizon of continuity it could offer for assessing the generic innovations of *Great Expectations* and *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*. I said something brief about history and structure, change and continuity, tradition and innovation, only to realize much later that my remarks had set the intellectual agenda for that evening. People took up what I had said, turned it in directions I couldn't follow, and generously came back again and again to me. It was a few days following that evening that Jim approached me with a new set of questions. What if I took the ideas I had expressed about continuity and change and used them as a focal point to compare some of the theorists already featured in *Critical Exchange*? What if I wrote an essay on each theorist's position on literary continuity and change? I wrote the essay and Jim had me send it to the theorists I had included to receive their responses and re-write it.

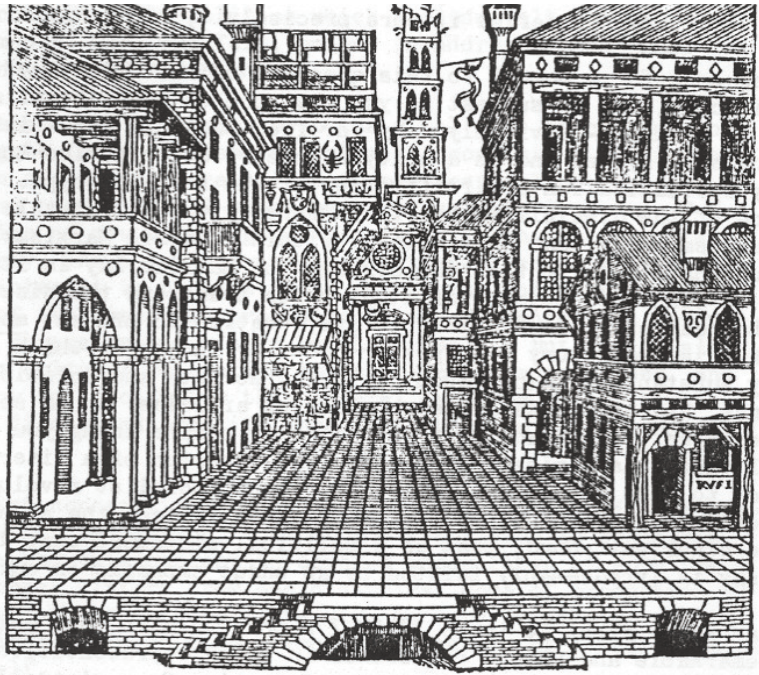
This was my first publication and my first lesson on how to turn an idea into an inquiry. It proved my chairperson wrong; it wasn't money in the bank; it was future options in an uncertain market. Worst yet, I had just discovered through my dissertation research that the *Portrait* had generated a "dissertation industry." How would I find a way to differentiate myself from an entire industry? Would I ever be able to say something important about the *Portrait*? Only after my move away from Oxford, Ohio did I come up with an answer to this question—two years and two chapters into my dissertation later. No, I couldn't say anything important at all, unless I knew the Irish culture and history. Somehow, what I had learned from Jim about narrative theory and from Patty about reader response theory jelled together and pointed me toward an inquiry that held culture to be both the context of and the audience to literature. I started reading narratives produced within a culture I was familiar with. I poured over myths by Plato and Sophocles, stories by Isocrates and the Sophists.

For the first time, I was able to read stories I had grown up with and to appreciate them anew as so many parts of a culture trying to come to terms with the tensions it was experiencing as it pushed forward with the democratic experiment and at the same time left unchallenged the hierarchies of society already in place. I saw the vast depository of Greek myths being artistically shaped by Isocrates into a history of the Athenians, a display of their heroic past reinforcing the display of status they encountered daily in the agora. I saw aspects of social and political struggles absorbed by narrative lines, altering the very structures that had absorbed them, and being symbolically re-expressed to adjust to the needs of the present. My old attachment

to the powerful influence of literature on readers situated my inquiry on the side of production. How were myths and stories tinkered with in ways that enabled them to reach members of classical Greek culture and give them new equipment for living their troubled lives? What rhetorical crafting made it possible for these familiar stories to enable their audiences find through them new ways of addressing the needs created by their own particular political and social predicaments?

To convince my dissertation committee that my new project was neither a passing whim nor the other, greener side of the James Joyce fence, I wrote an essay on Isocrates and sent it to each member of my committee along with a formal request to change my dissertation topic. I sent neither one to Jim, since I knew his answer in advance. I received flattering comments on my essay, kind advice about acting prudently and not causing my own marginalization by defecting to rhetoric, and many encouragements to stick with my project with the *Portrait*. I submitted the essay I had written to the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* and changed my committee. When the Society of the History of Rhetoric presented me with the year's best essay award one year later, Jim was in the audience. He beamed with pride, even as I was no longer a member of SCE, not even a member of his own discipline.

This past year, I received the prestigious collegiate teaching award at the University of Iowa. Over the years, I have developed a reputation here for being particularly good with helping students conduct their own research inquiries, especially those in Communication Studies, Classics, and English. I speak a different language with them now than the language that had been spoken in Jim's living room back then. I try to understand the nature of labyrinths that students are facing today and to wait patiently for them to make their own wings and, when they become excited about their flight, to remind them to take into account the distance they must keep from the sun and the sea. Until they reach such time, I help them weave together the different strings they bring me into one continuous thread. I also give them the supervision they need when they try their hand with making *spanakopita*.



Sebastiano Serlio. *Comic Scene*. Woodcut from *Libro primo . . . d'architettura*, Venice, 1551, fol. 28 v.

Image from *Critical Exchange* 14 (Fall 1983): ix