

“A More Adequate Explanation”: Profession’s Reception of Theory and the Failure of the Society’s Original Mission¹

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When the Society for Critical Exchange (SCE) was founded in the mid-1970s, its founders hoped to do more than merely create a learned society devoted to another specialty within literary studies. They saw theory as a means to change the practice of literary studies, by establishing intellectual governance of the discipline. Such governance would not be imposed by fiat or force, but would emerge precisely from dialogue and cooperation. The founders’ conception of the state of literary theory at the time is revealed in essays they published within a year or two of the organization’s birth. SCE was founded to regulate criticism, a scheme imagined not necessarily to reduce the number of competing theories, but to allow them to speak coherently to one another. These ambitions reflect an aspect of the movement we call theory that was already in decline.

It is doubtless the case that one of the reasons for the rise of theory was a sense of a disordered discipline. While the New Criticism provided the paradigm for most research and teaching done in literature departments, the proliferation of competing interpretations had left many dissatisfied. Moreover, many tenets of New Critical theory had been under serious attack since the early 1950s and were now widely in doubt. Thus, the discipline’s practice—its normal science—was no longer supported by a widely shared theory. In direct defiance of the New Critical stricture against extrinsic criticism, the search for a new theory focused on other disciplines—especially philosophy, but also psychoanalysis, linguistics, and anthropology. But there was disagreement about what exactly theory should do. While a minority wanted to replace the New Critical government with one organized on a new platform, the majority was more interested in being able to produce new readings. It is that project that theory finally served, and thus, through no fault of its own, SCE’s original mission barely got started before it became apparent that relatively few scholars were interested. In the first section below, I trace the profession’s reception of theory as a context for the emergence of SCE. In the second, I look at the emergence of SCE in the late 1970s and its conception of its mission at that moment. The conclusion discusses how SCE developed in the face of the failure of its original mission.

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The Rise of Theory

My concern in this section is to chart what many people in the profession take to be a major shift in its intellectual framework and dominant practice. I name the new paradigm and practice “theory,” even though I am well aware that literary theory was practiced in the US prior to 1966. Indeed, one can find evidence of it in *PMLA* as early as 1930, before the New Criticism, but literary theory became much more significant after criticism replaced literary history as the dominant practice in literary studies. This occurred only partly because many of the original New Critics were themselves literary theorists. The more important consideration is that in leaving behind the positivism of literary historical scholarship, the discipline found itself newly in need of literary theory. Previously it could assume that it shared assumptions about knowledge with other academic disciplines, all of which took themselves to be sciences. This then is my explanation for what Jeffrey Williams considers “the theory generation,” a group of scholars whose graduate training occurred in the post-World War II period when the New Criticism was newly ascendant in literature departments (85). During that period, some rival literary theories began to appear, probably the most influential of which was Northrop Frye’s taxonomic project.² However, with the New Criticism dominant, literary theory remained a relatively minor activity in terms of both influence and quantity until the later 1970s or 1980s. Moreover, *theory* during this period came to mean something new: by the end of it, *theory* was no longer mainly a matter of how literary knowledge could be explained and justified; rather, *theory* now designated a new project with its own assumptions and research questions. In what follows, I will use the name *literary theory* when referring to the older project (which anthologies trace back at least to Aristotle), and let the unmodified word *theory* stand for the new practice.

Of course, I’ve left out an important fact about the rise of theory: that it didn’t just appear out of nowhere all of a sudden, but came from somewhere. That somewhere was Europe. Prior to the 1960s, the importation of literary theory from non-English-speaking Europe was not common. Few readers of René Wellek were aware of his connections to Eastern European theorists such as Roman Jakobson. John Crowe Ransom was already well beyond the usual limits of literary training when he invoked Kant in his attempts to argue for the special character of literary language that demanded a method of study distinct from those of other disciplines. Literary theory did not typically make explicit appeal to philosophers, and the Europeans who were cited were older figures like Taine. This lack of familiarity is demonstrated by the reviewer who felt it necessary to warn his professional audience about the background knowledge the new theory required: “the reader would do well [. . .] to familiarize himself with the writings of Hegel, Merleau-Ponty, Levi-Strauss, Freud, Jakobson, Chomsky, Benveniste, and Radcliffe-Brown” (Kolbert 279).

Still, it is not quite right to say that the rise of theory is simply a matter of the embrace of European theory in the United States, though it is partly that. What happened was not merely that certain Europeans became newly influential, but that their work became the

occasion for a new practice that cannot be found in the original. One of the effects of the importation of European theorists was to make homegrown ones such as Frye, Chomsky, Peirce, Dewey, and others, newly significant. It was not just national boundaries that were being crossed, but disciplinary ones as well. Suddenly, the work of philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, linguists, and sociologists seemed indispensable to the study of literature.

The moment when the wholesale importation of European theory began was the International Symposium on Structuralism at Johns Hopkins University, 18-21 Oct. 1966. The conference, the proceedings of which were published four years later in *The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: the Structuralist Controversy*, was dominated by the French, who were represented by Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan among others.³ While not all of the French who participated would be among those later designated as poststructuralists, it is clear that from the start this group made the greatest impact in the US. It is worth noting the site of the conference. While Yale will become by 1980 the institution most associated with theory, Johns Hopkins was the place that first welcomed European theorists to its faculty. In an essay tellingly titled "English Literary History at the Johns Hopkins University," Ronald Paulson gave a brief history of literary studies at the institution, emphasizing a long and diverse list of leading scholars who had practiced there. He notes the arrival of Leo Spitzer from Europe in the wake of World War II. A bit later, in the early 1950s, George Poulet arrived from Geneva. He would influence J. Hillis Miller, then a beginning assistant professor at Hopkins. Both Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida would be visiting professors during the 1960s, when Paul de Man was also on the faculty. Yet Paulson recognized no single distinctive Hopkins theory or method, but rather "pluralism and a commitment to interdisciplinary exploration" (559). Moreover, the continued influence of the literary historical conception of the discipline is revealed not only in the title of the essay, but also in the assertions that "most dissertations and books coming out of the department in recent years have been historical studies," and that "historicism is still central." Only the observation of "explicit attention to methodological issues" forecasts the change to come (564).

The relatively long delay in the Structuralism conference's proceedings reaching the public may account in part for the fact that impact of the conference is not immediately registered in the profession's journals. Of course, it would take time for scholars to become familiar with the new theories before evidence of their influence would appear in their publications. In any event, references to the French theorists are not much in evidence until the mid 1970s. In older journals such as *PMLA*, *ELH*, and *American Literature*, the reception of theory proceeds even more slowly. Perhaps not surprisingly, European theory is taken up more quickly in journals devoted to French and, to a lesser extent, German literature. The journal where theory made its impact first was *New Literary History*, though it is important to understand that the journal was started as venue for the older, literary theory. Its editor, Ralph Cohen, was a literary historian whose own work most often theorizes that practice. Early issues of

the journal, which was first published in 1969, reflect the editor's effort to bring news of foreign literary theory to America, but they do not especially privilege what was then still called structuralism. Yet the advent of this journal and the emergence of *Critical Inquiry* five years later constitute evidence of the growing importance of theory, literary and otherwise.

Early invocations of French theorists often reveal what seems today to be a limited understanding of their work. In reviews of *The Structuralist Controversy*, for example, there are not only misreadings of individual essays (e.g., "Derrida is [. . .] concerned with geometrical concepts" [Kolbert 280]), but also a more significant failure to grasp the issues that divide the participants. Still, one review forecasts the way in which theory's questions will often be framed, "If there is any general movement throughout the book, it is a shift from theories with a value system and given referent to theories that discern only the "freeplay" of structures in a world where meaning itself has no meaning" (Lawall 128). Through the early 1970s, there is little sense of the French theorists constituting a movement or coherent approach, with citations tending to be to individual theorists.

But there are exceptions. J. Hillis Miller writing in *New Literary History* in 1971 clearly reveals the influence of Derrida when he asserts, "The so-called 'deconstruction of metaphysics' has always been a part of metaphysics, a shadow within its light [. . .] Nevertheless, the putting in question of metaphysics has taken a novel turn in modern times with new concepts of language, new ideas of structure, and new notions of interpretation." A footnote tells us that "Good discussions of these changes may be found in" Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, Play," and in Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx" (298). While Miller's covering statement is broad enough that we can't determine how closely he is linking Derrida and Foucault, the effect of their conjuncture here is to make it seem as if the latter were also engaged in the "deconstruction of metaphysics." Miller thus seems to foster a kind of syncretism that obliterates important distinctions. Here we have evidence of the emergence of "theory," an enterprise that takes for granted that these special modern concepts have rendered all previous theories—dismissed by Miller as metaphysics—obsolete. Previously, work in literary theory had challenged this or that concept or assumption, but nothing so large as the character of reason itself. Miller's paradigmatically modernist gesture is an act of ground clearing, a sweeping away of the familiar that will allow for an entirely new set of assumptions.

Miller's essay is of interest for two other reasons. One is his mention of Foucault, which brings in the least cited of the four figures who will by the 1980s be most associated with poststructuralism. While Foucault was cited in *New Literary History* before Derrida, he is in these early days less often associated with structuralism than the other three. Surprisingly to me, Derrida was not cited as often as Lacan, and less surprisingly, Barthes, the only professional literary critic of the group and the most frequently cited. The subject of citation brings to mind the other point of interest in Miller's essay, that it is not ostensibly a contribution in literary theory, but rather to the study of Wordsworth. Much theory will be written in the form of

essays that seem to be primarily exercises in literary interpretation. When theorists are cited in literary journals, it is relatively seldom in articles that claim to be primarily theoretical. This is all the more true of articles that represent theory rather than literary theory.

We can tell that theory has become an established institution by 1980 by *PMLA* editor Joel Conarroe's column. He observes that among a sample of essays recently considered for publication, the two most cited authors were Derrida and Barthes. Lacan, Saussure, Poulet, and Merleau-Ponty were cited in more than one paper. But, a group of Americans, here named "the Connecticut theorists" (Miller, de Man, Harold Bloom, and Geoffrey Hartman) were cited more than this second group of French speakers. Somewhat less frequent were citations to M. H. Abrams, Edward Said, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Jonathan Culler, Stanley Fish, Wayne Booth, and E. D. Hirsch. A letter written in response to the column cited a study of citations in 950 journals in the Arts and Humanities Index that found all four French theorists among the top 100 (Kelly). My research suggests that this practice of citing theorists outside of explicitly literary-theoretical contexts develops during the 1970s. One might argue that this practice is the logical outgrowth of the ground-clearing I discussed a moment ago. Once all previous assumptions are called into question, one's argument can no longer be authorized by an appeal to shared beliefs. Now authority rests with those whose work either supports this skepticism, or those who offer a complete system that can serve as a bulwark against it.

The profession gave its imprimatur to structuralism in 1975, when the MLA awarded Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* its James Russell Lowell Prize for the best book of the year. Two points need to be made about this. One is that though Culler's book is rooted in Barthes and others who contributed to theory, it is itself a work of literary theory. (Culler won't produce a work definitively in the new mode until *On Deconstruction* in 1982.) The other is that MLA has not awarded the prize to any other work of literary theory, though a number of prizes have gone to critics working in the mode of theory. Thus while there is good evidence to suggest that purely theoretical writing becomes more common in the discipline during the 1970s and after, it never challenges literary interpretation as the dominant practice. Rather, literary interpretation becomes theoretical. This is true not only in the sense that theorists become necessary to authorize interpretations, but also in that interpretations increasingly make theoretical claims. Often these claims are meant to bolster some point said to be taken from one of the poststructuralists. Because theory tended to deny that any fundamental distinctions could be made among different types of language, literary texts become potential sources of theory.

The growing use of the term "poststructuralism" toward the end of the 1970s is a strong signal that the discipline had tended to lump Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan together, and that it understood their project to be now different from—and often at odds with—structuralism. Structuralism, as Culler demonstrated, lent itself to literary theory, while poststructuralism did not. The first reference I've found to poststructuralism (or its variants -ist or -al) was in 1973 where it appears in description of approaches acceptable in particular

professional journal (Pell). This suggests, as does a 1975 *Yale French Studies* essay, which invokes the term only to disavow it, that the term already had some currency (Logan). The term begins to occur with much greater frequency after '75, though it is still used more often by opponents than by those who identify with it.

I've been arguing that what came to be called poststructuralism was at the heart of the shift to theory. But theory cannot be reduced to poststructuralism. Rather poststructuralism allowed for other non-literary theories to be attended to within the discipline. Most obviously, these include Marxism and psychoanalysis, which did have some currency in literary studies prior to advent of theory. But it also includes all of the other theories deriving from identity politics—feminist, queer, African American—that will ultimately go in to making up cultural studies. The new practice of theory made literary studies into a discipline in which literature was increasingly viewed as a means to some other end. Moreover, the importance of history, which as we saw, persisted to some extent in literary training despite the New Criticism, was further diminished as suspicion of anything “empirical” grew.

None of this is meant to contend that theory ever completely dominated the profession. Probably the majority of its members never fully embraced it. Since humanities disciplines don't have paradigm shifts in which older practices are thrown out as illegitimate, New Critical and even old-historical scholarship continued to be practiced right alongside theory, often in the same departments—in many in less than peaceful coexistence. The negative response to theory is partly reflected in what came to be called the “culture wars” of the early 1990s. There were, of course, critiques of the new theory, Gerald Graff's *Literature Against Itself* being the most prominent. But within the discipline's own journals, there seems never to have been a real debate over the new theory, perhaps because the theory itself seemed to make such debate moot.

The Emergence of SCE

This lack of debate was what SCE was meant to remedy. SCE was founded in 1975 by two relatively junior scholars: James Sosnoski, then Associate Professor of English at Miami University, and Leroy Searle, Assistant Professor of English, at the University of Rochester.⁴ Neither Sosnoski nor Searle fits the pattern of what one might expect from the founder of an organization devoted to literary theory founded in the mid-1970s. Given the rising influence of French structuralism and poststructuralism within literary studies, one might expect that SCE would have been formed in response to it. In a sense, it was, but only negatively. For Sosnoski and Searle, French theory was of interest mainly for the ways in which it exacerbated the problem they fervently hoped to solve, the anarchic proliferation of critical systems and languages.

The society's bylaws, which were written in part to enable it to achieve recognition as a not-for-profit corporation, provide little evidence of the specific goals its founders had in mind. But when SCE's initial application for 501(c)3 status was rejected by the Internal

Revenue service, an appeal letter, written by Searle provides some guidance. According to the letter, "The Society was conceived and organized for the advancement of research in literary criticism, specifically, theory of criticism." The letter notes that this enterprise is "by nature [. . .] interdisciplinary," but that it is also among the most important research areas for teachers of language and literature. Because of the wide interest in the topic and because of its interdisciplinary nature, "critical theory is particularly affected by [. . .] over-specialization of research and what is often termed the 'information explosion' of modern research [. . .] These two considerations join to create an immense difficulty in communication [. . .] In simple terms, specialized scholars in different fields have no common language and no organized way of making 'translations' of research from different points of view that converges on a common problem" (Searle, letter). Here we understand that SCE was conceived to facilitate communication among literary theorists, and we have the strong suggestion that this goal will be achieved through the development of a common terminology.

This "dream of a common language" is more explicit in publications by the two founders. Within two years, both had published in high-profile journals articles addressing what Searle calls "the dramatic rise of 'movements,' 'methods,' and 'approaches' and the seeming babble that has followed in their wake, which have made it "easy to be wary, if not a little weary, about any claims or a more adequate explanation of literature" ("Tradition" 393). Searle had attacked theoretical pluralism, a position maintained by the Chicago neo-Aristoteans, in his doctoral dissertation. His position demands instead the identification of a "theoretical center of literary study," which would allow a "multiplicity of techniques of inquiry" ("Tradition" 411, n. 11, emphasis in original). This point makes it clear that SCE was not started to impose a single method or theory of criticism. The assumption was rather that different approaches would persist, and that the problem was therefore to provide a way to regulate their discourses. What Searle wants is to clarify the project of theory:

The most immediate peril of 'theory' appears to be embarking on a Quest without a Grail. Precisely what kind of thing is it that criticism has been, apparently, unable to find? By what signs would we know an *adequate* theory, and what should it be able to do? In the present circumstances, with an abundance of speculative positions and postures, it is quite remarkable that discussion continues without a credible and acceptable *model* for an explanation of literature to establish a context in which alternatives could be compared and evaluated (393-94, emphasis in original).

Searle hopes that criticism will be able solve this problem and move from being a "traditional discipline" to a "theoretical discipline" (396). Drawing on then recent *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas Kuhn, he contrasts the clear pattern of revolutionary change in the sciences with the situation in literature where, "it is hard to tell if anything has even 'happened' in a traditional crisis, since one of

few credible responses is to look outside one's tradition for some new or 'advanced' concept or method" (397). Such a process enables the discipline to continue, but it does not resolve the core problem of its own "theoretical poverty." Searle thinks that criticism is on the verge, however, of a shift to the theoretical. The ultimate point of his article is to offer "A Model for Critical Theory," as he titles the final section of the essay. As he describes it, this model "outlines a series of interconnected distinctions, corresponding to a set of ordered questions that can be posed of literary texts. As such, it offers a credible way for criticism to examine contemporary practice for the purpose of clarifying disputes, examining claims, and distinguishing between valid techniques of inquiry and philosophical justifications that may be implicit in them" (407). Of course, while such a model claims not to be itself a method or approach, or to exclude a priori any technique, that claim would be called into question by the assumptions of poststructuralism. Indeed, "Tradition and Intelligibility," while eschewing an explicit confrontation, seems to be a response to Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight*, which argues, drawing on Derrida, that literary theory is inherently limited because any critical insight entails a corresponding blindness. This book is cited multiple times, and Searle concludes his essay, "In the clearer formulation of theory, there is no reason for criticism to be blind, either to itself or to the light from which insights come" (409).

Sosnoski's article, "The Use of the Word 'Text' in Critical Discourse," appeared in *College English* in 1977. Its argument is "that we, as literary critics, should make explicit rules for the use of critical terms" (135). If Searle's goals seem quite grandiose, at least in retrospect, Sosnoski's seem rather modest. His essay succeeds in illustrating the difficulties posed by the multiple languages of criticism through the device of imagined examination which English professors would be forced to take to hold their positions. Five questions (three of which must be answered in three hours) are posed about the *Canterbury Tales*, and each assumes the knowledge of several heterogeneous theories. The point, of course, is that no one could be reasonably expected to pass this exam, and not merely because of the vast knowledge of different theories presupposed. But more importantly, because of the terminological confusion of literary theory, the questions are virtually unanswerable. Sosnoski's solution is to distinguish between the Text, "the recorded system of signs" from its texts, which are in effect readings or systems of reading of the Text. This is meant as an example of the larger project of making explicit terminological rules, but one can easily see just how it would be unpersuasive to adherents of poststructuralism. Derrida's maxim, "there is nothing outside the text," would be grounds for the immediate rejection of a distinction between Text and texts.

The Society's early MLA sessions show that the interest in regulating critical discourse went beyond its founders. These sessions were conceived as a continuing "seminar" on "The Language of Criticism," and papers were not read at the sessions but rather were distributed in advance in *SCE Reports*, and discussed at the meeting. The first of these was held in 1976 on the topic, "Critical Languages and Theory Choice: Perspectives for an Integrated Critical Perspective." In intro-

ducing the papers in *SCE Reports*, it is observed, "we were impressed by an attitude approaching consensus, that existing critical theory is marked (if not marred) by uncertainties of purpose, mystifications, and deeply ingrained pre-occupations that may or may not be well motivated" (*Language* 2). Papers were written by Jerome McGann, Paul Miers, and Robert Matthews, in response to a call for papers that stated: "A major premise for this seminar is that the rapid proliferation of theoretical and speculative proposals in recent criticism has created serious problems in the conduct of professional dialogue. In the most direct terms, it has become questionable whether critics from different traditions, even when they employ the same vocabulary, can sustain communication beyond the superficial level of approximations" (qtd. in Sosnoski, "In Retrospect" 5-6). The call listed questions for consideration, such as "What is the relation of the language and rhetoric of criticism to its intended audience" (qtd. in McGann 4). Each of the papers in its own way takes issue with the framing SCE's questions provided, but each also expresses in its own way sympathy with its regulative project. McGann, for example, asserts "Much contemporary theory suffers from what appears to be a lack of awareness about the status of hypotheses and theories *per se*" (7). Miers says that he hopes to use "system theory" to "outline the operational limits of various theories, to define the range and domain of their applications, and finally to show that conflicts which arise between different models are complementary and not contradictory ones" (15). Matthews is the most critical of the assumptions embodied in the call—and in the ideology of SCE's founders. He asks, in italics, "*Why should we value effective communication among critics?*" (39). But Matthews also believes that current criticism is radically misguided in its almost exclusive concern with the meaning of texts, an issue that will be the focus of the SCE session in 1979.

The topic for the 1977 MLA session was "The Function of Controversy." Here the call for papers specified the following questions:

1. Are the disagreements from which controversies in criticism arise adequately represented in the manifest terms of argument in specific critical controversies?
2. When critics disagree, under what conditions (and by what means) can disagreements be resolved?
3. Under what conditions are critical disagreements significant?
4. What are the historical, political, social, or other commitments which render critical proposals or suggestions controversial? (Announcement n. pag.)

The two papers featured in this seminar, by Wallace Martin and N. W. Visser, both dismiss the surface features of contemporary critical controversies. Martin's argument is "that controversies are no longer substantive or even (in the older meaning of the term) rhetorical, but rather dramatic" (8). He then lists a series of assumptions that guarantee that no one can lose a current controversy. These assumptions include "criticism is literature" and "there are no metalanguages," and they entail the impossibility of theory as a regulative discourse (8). Visser proposes that theoretical controversies in literary studies need to

be understood in terms of the personal, social, and ideological commitments that scholars hold, and that they cannot be resolved by reference to “purely logical criteria” (15). Visser anticipates the work of the early 1980s SCE project, GRIP, in that he looks to extrinsic explanations for the current state of criticism. These essays are both dismissive of most contemporary theory, as neither Martin nor Visser suggests that contemporary controversies are in themselves useful or even interesting on their own terms.

What is striking in retrospect about these early manifestations of SCE is that the rise of theory then underway is greeted with much skepticism and little celebration. That rise is apparent in the list of “MLA Sessions on Criticism” appended in News and Notes section of *SCE Reports* 3, and it is clearly what provided not only the impetus for the founding of the organization, but also an interest in joining and participating in the group. And yet this moment in which literary theory seemed to mean a plethora of competing theories was quickly drawing to a close. SCE’s next two MLA sessions and the associated *SCE Reports* continued to address similar issues. In 1978, the topic was “If ‘Uses’ Then Misuses of Criticism?” The 1979 session was focused on Jonathan Culler’s essay, “Beyond Interpretation”, and it took up the issue of criticism’s concern with the meaning of literary texts that Matthews had raised in SCE’s first MLA session. By the early 1980s, theory had replaced literary theory as the dominant conception, and one must therefore conclude that these early interventions by SCE seem to have had rather little effect. Even Sosnoski, though without giving up the view that criticism is a “rational enterprise,” conceded in 1979 that criticism inherently lacked the logical grounding he and Searle had sought to provide for it (“In Retrospect” 7-8).

Conclusion

It seems to me that the emergence of the GRIP (Group for Research into the Institutionalization and Professionalization of literary studies) and other projects beginning in 1980 reflect the awareness of the failure of these interventions. Sosnoski mentioned his interest in forming “a research group on the history of 20th century American criticism” in the same piece where he admits a lack of logic in criticism (“In Retrospect” 3). Changes in SCE’s conception of itself are reflected in new topics for its journal. In 1980, one issue of *SCE Reports* was devoted to Deconstructive Criticism, and in 1982, there was an issue on Foucault.

In 1982 SCE’s headquarters moved from the University of Washington (where Searle had moved in 1977) to Miami University. While it was in Seattle, Searle had largely administered the organization by himself. In Oxford, SCE was administered by a committee that included scholars of many different interests and commitments, and the influence of this group certainly helped to shift the Society’s direction away from the older conception of literary theory.⁵ But it could be argued that GRIP reflected a continuation of the old concerns by new means. Instead of seeking to reform the discipline by finding a new theory, the new project was to reform it by exposing its history. Though GRIP began with the involvement of five members of the

SCE Oxford Circle, its origin lay in the idea for the research group Sosnoski had announced in 1979.⁶ Before it acquired the name “GRIP,” we referred to it as a project on “authority in the profession.”

While the original essays that comprised the group’s first efforts (*GRIP Report*, vol. 1) were all historical in conception—and therefore distinct from earlier work SCE had sponsored—at least one essay that came out of GRIP continued the earlier critique of contemporary theory. “Critical Protocols,” argued that literary studies had been operating under a protocol of disagreement, and that that should be replaced with a protocol of agreement (Shumway and Sosnoski). Where disagreement was once thought to result from miscommunication, it was now suggested that disagreement has become the tradition, and which, since it is merely a tradition, could be replaced at will. Most GRIP essays, however, though critical, were not prescriptive.

When SCE moved to Miami, it began to advertise itself as “the only professional organization in the United States devoted to literary theory” as I wrote in a press release announcing the Society’s relocation. At least some of us imagined that we might become the equivalent of the Milton Society or other learned societies that had strong influence over scholarship in certain subfields of literary studies. Had literary theory not been replaced by theory, that future might have been possible.⁷ But since theory increasingly meant simply new forms of interpretation, especially those based on imported concepts, theory no longer seemed to most people a subfield. It was rather a new canon that everyone needed to know in order to read the old one.

NOTES

¹ I want to thank Ginger Jurecka for research assistance. SCE documents cited below are part of an archive I have held since my days on the administrative committee. It is my hope that these files will eventually find their way into a library’s collection or other public location.

² *PMLA* editor William Schaefer observed in 1977, “it seems that authors feel their articles would not be given serious consideration without a quotation from Frye, preferably in the opening paragraph” (qtd. in Conarroe 3). Leroy Searle, however, suggests that theorists were skeptical of Frye’s project: “bolder attempts, such as Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, have if anything been less successful, by arousing strong resistance and antagonism without providing any sufficient response to cogent objections” (394). These two reports reveal the disconnect between literary theory and critical practice.

³ Wallace Martin notes that the paperback edition, published in 1972, was retitled *The Structuralist Controversy*, which gave the false impression that the book as a whole consisted of arguments over structuralism. Martin sees this as an instance of a “journalistic process” whereby “critical discussion has been turned into institutionalized confrontation” (6).

⁴ The two scholars’ spouses were also involved in SCE’s founding, but they were not, in so far as I can tell, significant intellectual influences at that time. Patricia Harkin Sosnoski would become such an influence within in a few years.

⁵ Besides Sosnoski, the Administrative Committee consisted of Steve Nimis, a classicist with Marxist influences, James Creech, a deconstructionist, Patricia Harkin, then a reader-response theorist, and myself, who at time was finishing a dissertation based in the hermeneutics of Ricoeur and Gadamer. Pluralism seems to have burrowed from within SCE and to have triumphed.

⁶ The five were Sosnoski, Steve Nimis, James Fanto, Larysa Mykyta, and myself.

⁷ Though it must be added that James Sosnoski, whatever his desire to logically regulate criticism, never aspired to political control over it. We might say that he was a humanist in Foucault's sense of term, refusing to seek power by any means other than rational persuasion.

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