

Exchange Value

David Bleich

I admit it. The word “exchange” that I used in my 2001 essay on the materiality of language and the “pedagogy of exchange” definitely stayed with me from the late 1970’s turbulence in literary theory and from this unlikely organization, The Society for Critical Exchange. This word “exchange” is a contribution from this group of critics, perhaps from Jim Sosnoski, Patty Harkin, or Ralph Cohen, from this focus, from this collection of public thoughts to my ability to continue to think about our subject and our profession. At the time the society began, the word “exchange” was only humorously associated with a financial stock exchange. It was still rational to say that we exchanged thoughts without our being suspected of collaboration with corporate discourse. Now, I have my doubts, as the obsessional, hysterical corporate machineries continue to speak as if corporate Latin (OK, Corporatin, or “body Latin,” no relation to “body English”) were the only language of knowledge.

I admit it. I enjoyed my idealism. And I bet that is also part of what John Eakin and I shared when we worked together at Indiana in the early 1980’s. John did not actually own up to idealism in his very generous remarks about our collaboration, but we had it. Afterwards, I have taught myself to eschew idealism and to concentrate on “the real world.” If we do thus concentrate, I, at least, am led to wonder what our conferences, what the whole Society, was supposed to achieve. As John described, the NEH did not think we would achieve enough to support our efforts. And I wondered about the value of a series of events marked mainly by people who did not usually see one another coming together and talking in public and in private. In spite of Gerald Graff’s lofty claims, there is no such thing as “the life of the mind,” except for those who have no bodies. We only have what we say and write; we only have our relationships with one another. What are these good for?

The Society for Critical Exchange created new relationships among people thinking about language and literature. Like all academic attempts, this one was loaded with hot air and high winds. I cannot count how many times I expressed disgust to my neighboring paper-listener at our meetings at the enormous waste time at some people’s use of public forums. I imagine that continuing to listen represents “tolerance” and, in any event, “sharing the floor.” It was during those meetings that I found out what I now think is the case: the Western

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academy is a servile institution, and it has been so for the 850 years of its existence. It remains for us to understand why this has been so, and how do we think of the processes of critical exchange so as to oppose and change this tradition.

I left the Society for Critical Exchange because of my impatience with its inability to acknowledge, understand, and cope with its recursive androcentrism. My idealism about the Society for Critical Exchange was and is that conversation would count because every word we use counts, whether spoken or written. I left the Society because half of our population, the half which, for the most part, gave us men our language, did not really participate in our exchanges. Yes, we did try to hear, and we succeeded in balancing our conferences, and yes, it is on the record, and yes, it is an example for the future. Yet, our profession, and the society in general, honors only bland voices in the humanities and in the academy. For this reason, so little has changed, or will change in the foreseeable future. The momentum of men getting together and speaking to one another was never, in my experience of the SCE, addressed; perhaps most members did not even consider it a fact. If new voices were put up for consideration, they were men. If there was an objection to male overload, the only response was to ask the objector to name suitable female voices. If there were not enough, then male voices continued to be entertained. This was the extent of the address to androcentrism, while I was still affiliated with the SCE.

And I am not blaming individuals. The unfortunate fact is that anyone wanting to enter the academy, as I did, knew at varying levels of consciousness that it was a boy's game, and the exchange of texts and ideas amounted to an exchange of trading cards, one-upmanship, hierarchy, the obsession with being the best, with winning, with prestige, all among an all-male group. Sooner or later, men reduce themselves to comparing dick-size, or as it more gently put by feminists, to "pissing contests." So I claim no exemption from this tradition. And what confirms my lack of exemption is that I still found value in the word "exchange" just a few years ago, knowing full well how easily it affiliates me with those greedy bastards on Wall Street.

I am a bit sad that I will likely not live long enough to witness real change in the academy and in society. Recently the task of studying the humanities was characterized by our columnist colleague Stanley Fish as complete once we learn that the word "sunbeam" can mean more than one thing and to notice when someone is using that understanding. Stanley's opinion, like Graff's, is a very accurate gauge of how our subject of language and literature is now faring: it is in the hands of those who refuse to understand the subject of language and literature. It is an outrage that such accomplished figures as Stanley and Jerry refuse to honor our subject of language, while such other figures as Adrienne Rich, Linda Brodkey, and Richard Ohmann, go unrecognized for their revolutionary achievements.

Because of its androcentrism, the study of language has been taboo in the academy, off limits. Chomsky? Has anyone noticed how differently motivated his study of language is from his politics? The Pope himself would love it if Chomsky's theory of language were shown to be true. Robin Lakoff departed early from Chomsky's project,

but who has taken up her courageous and perspicacious studies of language? How much, even, of Deborah Tannen's more popular studies of language have made their way into academic discussion, their own honored positions in the academy notwithstanding?

The real study of both language and literature entails the political willingness to speak out. This trait is painfully absent from those now honored as our leaders, though they speak a lot, yet never out. Some even feel entitled to patronize students as "clueless" about the "life of the mind." These are the bishops who at one point authorized inquisitions to turn up the heretics who wanted the bible to appear in the vernacular. These are the bishops who oversaw the university disputations that accredited students with degrees. When Gerald Graff advocates for the "centrality of argumentation" in students' education, his sentiments are no different from those centuries ago who were training obedient clerics, servile nobility, and bureaucratic hacks. There is no reducing the androcentric feeling in Graff's writing. And he does not seem aware how fully he repeats a destructive tradition.

Because every word counts, close reading is, as John describes, part of our ordinary respect for those who have something to say. But to me "counts" means something like "meant for us readers to assimilate and re-use in new contexts," thus, in a sense, enlarging our old usages with additional ones. But how often is this done in the study of literature? Is it not true that, for the most part, criticism pays attention to "masterpieces" and "[male] genius," as Christine Battersby describes in *Gender and Genius* (1989), and not to how to overtake the language of all texts, ensconce it in our vocabularies, and use it in fresh ways with all those to whom we relate? Here is where the fallacy of critical exchange is most visible: when we "trade" words, we change ourselves and one another; we do not merely "exchange" thoughts. Over the past ten years or so, an original member of the Society for Critical Exchange, Ralph Cohen, has established temporarily and continues to advocate for an Institute for the Study of Change at the University of Virginia. Change is what happens to us as people and as a society; and the word does not sound all that different from "exchange." Yet unless our critical reading of texts assimilates its language and changes us, unless our collective study of texts promulgates its fresh language to all of us, unless we begin noticing the changes effected on us by our reading and other uses of language, we will have abided the suffocation of language and the false idolization of literature by the androcentric academic traditions.

Certainly, the Society for Critical Exchange was formed simply to facilitate increased discussion of new developments in literary and language theory coming from a variety of sources, feminist theory among them. Certainly the prospect of have a group of kindred voices in a disparate profession appealed to everyone. Certainly the longing for social growth among of traditional individualists, loners, iconoclasts, aesthetes, bookworms, and spaceheads motivated this initiative toward collective self-improvement. Well, it is like domestic relationships, often looking nice from far away, but when you get down to it, it is pretty challenging, the search for pecuniary support being to small part of it. And these challenges always interfere with the task of learning our subject, language and literature.

We did introduce issues for discussion at the Modern Language Association that, more or less, have remained: such a professionalization (and its discontents). But like the much greater membership of the MLA, we have failed to achieve standing for the fundamental role of our subject in social and political relations. The aesthetes, argument-geeks, and professional hacks still flourish in their fake rationality. Meanwhile millions of students we may reach each year can not find in us friends who will warn them about the structure of unfairness that is about to overtake their lives, and who will teach them that finding the right word is also the way to be a friend and a citizen. We do not teach that the language and literature we have come to respect and understand has no effect on the mendacity of the law, on the meaninglessness of the law, even, or on the responsibility of the lucky to care for and protect the less lucky. Rather, a few teachers, like Linda Brodkey, Pat Belanoff, or Tom Fox who almost reached that worthy goal, were abruptly censored by superior hierarchical force and hounded away from their own achievements. In place of their courage and intellectual imagination, there came the teaching of how to write arguments for essays in other subject matters, along with its hero, soon to be promoted to President of the MLA; there came a policy of omitting literature from the writing classroom from the exemplar of the NCTE.

The Society for Critical Exchange has indeed continued. But has it solved its own issues of social justice and address to all members of society? Has it become exemplary in the promotion of its subject as part of the path to collective social justice? Or has it been satisfied with cultivating its own garden? Has it participated in "Tikkun Olam," as Adrienne Rich and Linda Brodkey and Richard Ohmann have? I don't know. Individuals can not do it by themselves. But I'd like to be a member of a society that pursues such goals. Perhaps the Critical Society for Change? Only kidding. Why change the name, when it is us we should try to change?

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

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