Interview with David Bleich

Rory Ryan

The following interview was recorded at Indiana University (Bloomington).

Ryan: It is common, in recent commentaries of reading theory, to establish strong links between the work of David Bleich, Stanley Fish and Norman Holland. Can you situate yourself, and comment on this apparent correlation between theories?

Bleich: Several areas of work have, at the same time, begun looking at readers. I know that Fish has long been familiar with Holland's work. I had been working on that myself, and Fish had been working on it, so all three of these people know one another's work. Fish originally had not started out talking about the reader, but when he did start talking about the reader, it was in a very abstract way and gradually his interest intensified. What happened subsequently is that the work of everyone involved developed just by spontaneous means and so everything gradually built to a head in the 70's. The difference that I see between my own work, and Holland's and Fish's, is that Holland's work is an unsocial theory and Fish's work is an unprogrammatic theory. Holland's work depends completely on his own interpretations of readers. Fish, while acknowledging the importance of the interpretive community, does not really function, or propose to function, in the academy as if these communites existed. He merely uses that concept to describe what, he feels, is the case. He makes no active use of the 'interpretive community'.

Ryan: Do you think perhaps that the notion of the interpretive community is a kind of theoretical gesture that he is forced to make?

Bleich: I don't know. I can't tell why Fish brought up that particular topic given his whole style of functioning. It seems that his own role is usually to oppose the major thoughts of a particular community, and one could interpret what he does, but let me not do that. I really can't say why he came up with that idea, except as a function of justifying things that already exist. There is no utilization of sources about collective work or collective thinking and no inquiry into the psychology of collective thinking, and that goes double for Holland – there is no inquiry at all in his work. In fact, his own approach to any given reader completely dominates the reader, and makes the reader a servant to a particular theory. Holland's theory, also, regarding the identity theme, is a theory that cannot deal with such ordinary things as growth and change, and is completely grounded in individual psychology as if that were the final theory. He does not seem to have any capability of dealing with the complex things, the group, nor does he seem to have any idea or sense of balance or reciprocity between people, and so it does not appear in his theory. Fish is capable of doing that, but he has not done it. He may – I don't quite know what direction he's going in now. He's certainly capable of

handling that, but I don't know what his inclination to handle it is. He's an individual performer himself, a very attractive one, so he may continue doing that but I can't say. The distinction I make between those two and myself is that I feel I have taken several concrete steps in teaching in the academy to inquire into the nature of collective work and collective reading and feeling, and the whole social groundedness of any kind of language activity and language inquiry, and I feel that Holland certainly hasn't. Fish, I would grant, hasn't yet but could do if he wanted to.

Ryan: Shall we move on? I'd like to know, briefly, your attitudes to the recent upsurge, and even institutionalization of reading theory in the 80's, or the attempt to relax the grip of objectivist epistemologies in literary studies, bearing in mind that your work may prefigure, I think, a lot of this activity in *Readings and Feelings,* and even more so, in *Subjective Criticism.*

Bleich: First of all if you take a picture of the whole field and the actual social forms and how literature and language is taught, there's virtually no relaxation of the interest in objectivity. Curricula, classrooms, the changes that are required by a shift towards subjectivist epistemology have not been made whatsoever, and probably because of increased conservatism in our society and in England certainly – I don't know about France, the academy there is quite conservative – virtually no change has taken place in the nature of institutions in consequence of the interest in subjective epistemology, and that holds true even if you count Derrida and Heidegger and all of that deconstructionist thought. Even if you count that, there still has been no change. There have been pockets of experimentation here and there, but in the teaching of literature there's been virtually no change on a large scale. I know that in both Holland's and Fish's cases, their own pedagogical practice shows no change at all – the same situation, the same grades are given, the same classroom structure, the same basic ignorance of what it is to have a class working in groups. Oddly enough, the place where changes can be seen is among people who by and large have no contact with the theoretical community – that is, in school and writing programs, often programs administered by women. Writing programs at Brooklyn College, the writing program at Minnesota, black colleges, the University of District Columbia, *those* are the places where you will see some interest in reading theory, but notably from Louise Rosenblatt, whom I have not mentioned yet. It would be correct, in your initial question, to include the work of Louise Rosenblatt, rather than Holland, Fish and Bleich, because she came before any of these people. Her book, *Literature as Exploration,* came out in 1938, and as a Deweyite treatise nobody paid any attention to it. She's a Professor of Education – Emeritus – she's 78 now, but she's quite active and is a very interesting woman. She wrote another book called *The Reader, the Text and the Poem* (1978). She should be declared as the earliest figure in any of this reading stuff. And then in Europe you have phenomenology, which is also a kind of discussion about the meaning of real experience. A lot of the reading stuff, like Poulet's phenomenology of reading, comes out of phenomenology, because it's an experience and that's the path for reading theory if you look at the roots of

European philosophy. I think Rosenblatt's roots are in American philosophy, which is still different from English philosophy, because it is so rooted in experience, but there is more in common between the American and the English, than between the American and the continental. In any event, she comes out of that kind of philosophy, but it would be wrong to trace the roots of her work to just philosophy. It would be correct, in my opinion, to understand her work as coming out of the needs of the classroom, and that is the source: her responsiveness to the social character of the classroom, and the personal character of the classroom is what actually brought her to propose her interest in the reader and the psychology of reading. And then it was drowned by the academic New Critical establishment in the 40's. So, her interest in and experience from American pragmatism, Deweyism, and a certain humane attitude towards the interpersonal situation of the classroom, that, I would consider is the most important path in the development of the interest of reading theory and the epistemology you mentioned. This movement, if it is to be traced to anything real, to any real human situation, it is to the enlarging of the classrooms in the 30's and 40's, which got bigger and bigger and more important. More and more people went to school; literature became widespread, and that crush of people into the classroom, (as well as the growth of the academy in the 50's and 60's, when the academy really got a big push), that presence of students and the responsiveness of teachers to that is probably more responsible for the interest in reading theory. And the proof of it is that the masculine handling of reading theory is not very human in my judgement; it is very abstact, very ministerial and preachy, whereby the minister has access to 'great ideas', and that's the theorist! And in fact, reading theory is a very pragmatic and socially oriented interest. So, I would be very loath to say that this is a purely epistemological change as if epistemology were some kind of doctrine written in a holy book which it really is – in the hands of masculine theorists it becomes something like a holy book). That would be going back to the first question that you asked – I would want my work to be understood as something intrinsically proposed (even the word 'designed' is a problem) in the spirit that it should be altered, used and inquired into by interaction and experience in a classroom.

Ryan: So, perhaps to summarize your position, one might say that for you, epistemology must take a secondary role to the actual needs of the classroom.

Bleich: No, it would be wrong to say that. These two items need to be considered as equal influences on the development of new forms and new ideas, and one must not grow accustomed to thinking of epistemology and theory as the source of anything, any more than we grow accustomed to thinking that the classroom is the source of anything that people think and people do. We need to develop a means of acknowledging the interaction of epistemological, social and pedagogical needs – there must be a balance of emphasis. There cannot be any exclusive emphasis on one thing. One of the characteristics of the hegemony of men is the belief that there must be some sort of emphasis or underlying situation, there must be some sort of answer or unifying principle that someone can *find.* That attitude has got to change,

especially as inevitably, as generations go on, the classroom and the academy will be better balanced. I'm sure that life would be different in South Africa if the classroom reflected the society accurately.

Ryan: Would you like to comment on the German reception theorists, Jauss and Iser, and perhaps some of the others that have made an impact on literary studies?

Bleich: Jauss is different from Iser. Jauss, I belive, is a speculative scholar. I won't comment too much on him. He speculates about things, he just stipulates the idea about horizons of expectations of an audience in a particular time but, as a real idea, that is very much of a problem for me. How you can tell what the horizon of expectations will be of people a thousand years ago? I don't think you can even stipulate it for people a hundred years ago. But just to think that way may make some sense, because it shows that it makes it necessary to study the politics and the sociology of any particular civilization. The implication is that it is absolutely necessary when studying a literary text to study other disciplines, which means that you're really studying that society from several standpoints. That would be the importance of Jauss's proposal – he shows why it's necessary for us to study other things as well as the texts in question. Reception theory automatically shows that literary study is an interdisciplinary subject. And in Iser's case – Iser's case is a problem because to my judgement, the theory itself is completely unusable. He stipulates that a text has gaps or blanks, and later texts have more blanks, and as time goes on, up till the present, the reader has to do more and more. Leon Edel, in *The Modern Psychological Novel,* detailed how the stream-of-consciousness novel began. He traces the characters of Dostovesky, Richardson, Proust in what he calls the subjective novel (that's where the 'subjective' came from in my own work – Edel was my teacher in graduate school and my use of the term "subjective" came from his phrase, the 'subjective novel'). He does not make the claim that there are more or less gaps, he just says this is a qualitatively different style of writing, and maybe the reader works differently in reading that kind of literature than reading Fielding or Defoe. To say that history is somehow moving towards a more active reader is really quite strange to me. How are you ever going to show it with a particular novel? You could show that there are more readers, and the reader is more and more capable of doing different kinds of things with reading, but to imagine that you have to go back to Genesis, or into the Odyssey to show that the first texts were gapless, which you can see is quite absurd. If you accept the concept of gaps, then every text must have gaps. And then you say that reading is the process of filling the gaps. Suppose you forget about the progressive theory that he proposes, then you're left with this active process of filling things in (and this comes partially from Ingarden). This describes the action of reading – filling in missing things. What does that imply? Well (I think Iser would deny this) but that implies somehow that a *full reading* is possible. Suppose each reader throws out something different? I think Iser would say that that is what you would expect because there is an underlying structure in the text, and readings are different. He would probably say that he does not require a comple-

table text, only a provisional completion or some sort of completion. However, then you are left with the problem that the New Critics had, i.e. Wellek and Warren (who also read Ingarden). You are left with a structure of norms that underlies a text. Iser's structure of norms would be different, which is the structure that is filled in. Of course, Wellek and Warren do not say anything about filling anything in – the structure is the essence. The problem is the same with Iser as with Wellek and Warren: who decides what the underlying structure is? If it is an objective structure, then everyone should see the same one. But that is not true either; everyone does not see the same structure, and there can be no fixed ways of deciding what the structure of a novel is, because all there is is the text, there is nothing but the text, and anything you say about the text is either so obvious it need not be said, or it's interesting, but not necessarily the truth. So there is no way to decide what an underlying structure is, and therefore the whole concept of gaps is a problem. Because if you think there are gaps, then you make the acid test, and we can do this with Holland and Fish as well. What happens when you go into the classroom and you want to teach a novel? Do you say to the class 'what is the structure and what are the gaps?' You do that, and what's going to happen? Each person will say something different. Then there can be no gaps and no structure. In Holland's case, you go in and say – 'what is this reader's identiy theme?' – all the readers are going to say – 'we all agree – that's his identity theme, the love of money' – everyone's going to go out thinking permanently that John Jones's identity theme is love of money and that's it, and everything he reads is going to be according to his identity theme. It's and artificial construction. So you cannot get the identity theme, and you cannot get the gaps in the classroom. And the interpretive community (I don't know if that is Fish's underlying thought) *can* be done in the classroom of course. Fish thought of that idea at least at the same time as I did but maybe afterwards. The test of a theory of reading is what happens when we begin to introduce that theory among real communities. It does not have to be a classroom – it can be a literary group, among people reading in their spare time, or in any reading situation. That's the test. So in Iser's case I do not think you get any results, and the test in fact shows that there's a big problem with that particular theory. The interesting thing about both Iser and Holland is the accent on masculine hegemony, namely that it depends on *Iser* to tell what the gaps are; it depends on *Holland* to tell what the identity theme is. It's not something that everyone can find, and if everyone did it, it would be like a religious service. In psychoanalysis, there is nothing of the sort. The change in psychoanalysis has been from the doctor/patient relationship to group therapy. Group therapy has changed psychoanalysis, so there you can see this is a viable theory because it is susceptible to change – his theory is not supple and fertile enough. Fish does not yet have a theory. When he does have a theory, maybe he will make some contribution, but right now he has a series of critiques, which does not amount to a theory.

Ryan: Talking about theories, what do you think of the recent move, centred on the journal *Poetics,* to establish what is called an 'empirical science of

literature' which, in effect, is not dissimilar from some of your own ideas. Perhaps the term 'science' is a misnomer. What they seem to be trying to study is reading communities as epistemologies that produce various readings. In other words, one should cease studying texts and study instead the readings of texts, which are themselves texts worthy of study.

Bleich: Well, that's what I have been doing. I do not know what their approach has been. I guess Schmidt is now the editor of *Poetics,* and the truth is I've asked Schmidt several times to send me an actual study of readers, since 1981 in fact. I have not seen an actual study of readers from Schmidt. Have you?

Ryan: I agree that for at least five or six years now, the journal has included some tentative and highly theoretical remarks. The theory itself seems to have value.

Bleich: Schmidt's theory is of some interest, but look at what kind of a theory it is. It is a theory, without the investigation having first been made. For such an elaborate theory, one cannot help wondering how you can propose a theory of that complexity based on theoretical sources without first looking at the phenomenon. The rational process of thought is not to think up the theory first and then find out the data. I'm waiting to see what Schmidt's data is. I have some inkling the data is done by questionnaires, to ask readers their opinions about this or that book. Well, there is some interest for the sociology of reading in that, but given the theory that Schmidt has, it may be very elementary and unimportant material. I'm sceptical about finding things out through questionnaires. Besides, I've been doing this for twenty years: writing articles about the different readings of texts. The theory that I propose emerges from these inquiries, these investigations. I did not bother calling them empirical or scientific or anything like that. Some people need those words – somehow they have to identify themselves with positivistic science which is to me a terrible mistake. The attempt to call a study empirical and scientific is an implicit admission that the study of literature as it is, in the humanistic idiom, is secondary. And the attempt really may be to masculinize the study, by identifying it with science: 'We're going to do this in a no-nonsense way, we're going to take data, we're going to do experiments, etc'. I am a little suspicious of that, but let us see what the results are.

Ryan: You mention this polarity of theory and data, or investigation and model building. Do you think it is possible (and I have the deconstructive invasion of America in mind here – particularly the second generation deconstructors, beyond Miller, Bloom and de Man) that in fact a theory can generate a new concept of data?

Bleich: What do you have in mind?

Ryan: I mean that the whole deconstructive notion of literary meaning (or its absence) might in fact generate new kinds of readings.

Bleich: I cannot predict that. It sounds a little utopian to me. We will see what

readings we get, and we will work with them when we get them. Certainly, deconstruction is a different style of reading, but the question is whether to proceed with it and how, than whether it is gong to generate new readings. If you read a lot of deconstructionist readings of literature, they all look as if the purpose of the literary work is to show the truth of deconstructionist thinking. That is not their purpose; they can be made to have that purpose, and the readings are interesting, but if they all show that the language turns back on itself, the point is made. We can assume that because language turns back on itself, language does not require every book to be read in a deconstructionst way. We know we can read any book any way we wish. The point about language is made (by the deconstructionists) but what are we going to do with this idea (that language undermines its own meaning)?

Ryan: It seems that deconstruction has caught on to such an extent in the American academy that it is displacing Marxism from its traditional role as the official opposition.

Bleich: The American academy never had any official opposition. I have not seen any opposition to anything in the American academy. It is too conservative. There are a few Marxists – there is a Marxist group that reads at the MLA, and it is part of the establishment. The whole academy is apolitical. It plays no political role. It has no lobby in Washington. Other organizations have an office in Washington, and apply pressure for legislation that serves a particular community. Marxism is like another game in the American Academy. Marxism is a social theory, but it has been academicized. I do not think deconstruction can replace anything. It is practised by graduate students. Deconstruction is good for post-adolescent graduate students. Deconstruction is not going to disappear either. It is not junk, but it is not the answer. Those who really accomplish something in deconstruction are still worth reading. The same is probably true for reader response theory. The test of the theory is not how much you can read it, but what it's going to do. Reader response theory, as far as I am concerned, has just begun to try to do something. I think it is wrong to say there has been a new interest in theory over the past fifteen years.

Ryan: I'd like to discuss your ideas a litte more. You mentioned that you have become, on the one hand, a lot more interested in the interpersonal, rather than the individual subjective act of reading and, on the other hand, you have placed much more emphasis on gender and reading recently.

Bleich: First of all, I have always been interested in gender as a topic even before it became politically common. Gender has always been a theme and topic of my work. I've been reading feminist epistemology and a particularly good essay by Naomi Scheman about psychology of objects. She makes the point that masculine epistemology insists on the isolation of particular objects. I'll go on in a minute about that but you can see the connection between feminist epistemology and subjective thinking. If you arrive at a position where you believe that the objectification of things is not necessary, but a matter of choice, and then you read from a feminist viewpoint, then you see

that there is a common interest between subjective thinking and feminist theory. There is a common political interest – namely, to change the social structure of society, but more modestly, to change the classroom and pedagogical institutions, and not only to develop new styles of thought, but to have these thoughts act as part of the political need for change. For example, in the classroom, not to have the idea of an authority figure, to reduce the action of grading, to encourage interaction in class and in a group. The feminists have shown that in any classroom confronted by an authority figure the women do not speak – they have not been trained to speak. So, the socialization of the classroom is part of the feminist political program and it is part of my political program also. It is in everyone's interest to function more on an interactive level, and to consciously pursue interactive forms. That is part of the phenomenological experience that leads to theory. The theory is a very important one because it serves to focus a lot of these social impulses that people have. The theory is that the psychology of individual development cannot be thought of at all as the foundation of psychology. Freud for the most part did think that way but there are elements (in his work) that do not suggest this. One has to think of relational psychology. People who have advocated the object-relations school have taken a step in that direction. Vygotsky claims that language or thought is internalized social speech. Individual language is inherently dislectic or dialogic (as Bakhtin also said). Even in an individual essay, one can discern, that there is a lot of back and forth. It may not always be that way. Nevertheless, there are prompts to show that it is dialogic in a sense. It means that the whole status of individual psychology has to be reunderstood. The Freudian pattern is a step in that direction, and Nancy Chodorow has tried to follow it part of the way. I have done it too – I arrived at it after her book but I had not read her book, two years ago. She comes up with a feminist description of child development that depends a lot on interaction. There are many women doing work on infant language acquisition. One who started out early was Margaret Donaldson, but there are others now: Maureen Shields in England, for example. They are discovering interactive situations that are not describable by the masculine models of Piaget and Chomsky. This is a different way of thinking, one which is more sympathetic to my way. Trevarthen and Huebly introduced this idea of innate intersubjectivity, primary subjectivity and secondary subjectivity. And they say that intersubjectivity is innate, which is an interesting variation. Chomsky says that language is innate. Is intersubjectivity innate? Well, what can that mean? Is it programmed into the genes? No, they are not looking for that. They are looking for fixed patterns of crosscultural behaviour that show that a child automatically responds to certain faces, automatically responds when a stimulus comes from another person, and the role of the human being in an infant's life is always the most important possible role. And it would not matter if the human being was a man or a woman. It eventually gathers importance in feminist thinking that the mother-exclusive situation is shown to be, while important, not necessary: that the child could be a perfectly healthy fine child if nurtured in the early years by a man. So it is this kind of work that comes under the influence of the feminist movement, and feminist epistemology

which actually comes up with new pieces of knowledge because of the political motivation and desire to change things. So you can see again what my sympathy and interest is in feminism. It's simultaneously a theoretical and a political movement – that is what is very attractive about it. I can see how an academic project ought to proceed with that simultaneous demand – theoretical advances and practical changes. My earlier books were not cognizant of this although I move in that direction in *Subjective Criticism* and *Readings and Feelings*. In my seminars I have discovered that there are gender differences in response to fiction, but there is no gender difference in response to poetry. I do not think it matters what gender the actual author of the work of literature is. The author's gender has no bearing on the way people read it. People who read a work easily accept the work and do not realy care about gender except in a secondary way. Men generally care more about the author, are more concerned about the gender of the author. But we'll see if that's true. That's the work on gender: it is part of my larger interest in intersubjectivity.

Ryan: Can you tell me how you would like to envisage the future of the academy?

Bleich: It's not for me to say what the whole academy should do. I am obviously unhappy with a million different things about the academy, but I cannot really tell the academy how it should develop. I can only advocate certain things within my sphere of functioning. I advocate the abandonment of grading in the teaching of language and literature. I advocate the regular and systematic use of groupwork in all classes that teach language and literature. I advocate collaboration among students, which is possible when you drop grades. Therefore I advocate the elimination of competition, which does not mean the elimination of argument and dispute, but the elimination of social competition. I advocate the abandonment of research as the primary criterion for tenure, and I am looking into teaching achievements. You can see the two things go together: if the academy emphasized groupwork, which is much more time-consuming and if teachers really did groupwork the way it's supposed to be, the teaching iself...

Ryan: Could be the research itself?

Bleich: Well, it *could* be their research. It could lead to research. You would not have to justify your existence in the academy by printing up what happens in the class. You could just conduct your class. Now, if the teacher only teaches, it is not so much work. So, what they actually do is write articles; that saving of time makes it possible for people to write, and get tenure, as it is said. But suppose we did not need to write to get tenure. Writing is important – it shall be done, but it is just as possible to have an important influence in your community by taking the initiative of teaching, and so on. Also, I advocate the mixing of courses. I'm involved in something here called the integrated distribution requirement cluster. I advocate the mixing of courses from various different fields. We spoke earlier that one of the implications of Jauss's work is the use of several disciplines in the study of language and

literature. In order to take that seriously, people in literature departments should take the initiative and combine with other departments. It is done in part, in the American Studies and Victorian Studies and African Studies programs. But the courses are separate. There is no dynamic link between these courses. There is no material linking of subject matter. It is assumed that somehow the students will be able to put it together, but the faculty does not know how to put it together. So the interdisciplinary theme needs to be stressed in the academy. I advocate that in all public meetings in the academy, only one third of the time should be spent giving oral papers, and two thirds of the time spent in discussion, based on papers that have been written and previously distributed, so that the plan of a conference would be to get together to discuss new work, and not just to hear a paper. So, I advocate a change in the character of professional meetings. I advocate balancing of gender and race in the staff of the universities, so that the university resembles the structure of society. A lot of the white ethnic groups are already well represented. What else do I advocate? I advocate the abandonment of all prizes, the abolition of the Nobel Prize because it's a competition and not a suitable achievement to strive for. But there are a dozen different prizes – best teacher, bets student, best paper. The money should all be shunted into scholarships and fellowships for students. The concept of the 'best essay' is a disgusting principle, and it infiltrates the whole academy. There should be no best essay. I advocate the banning of canned food. I advocate the elimination of all polyester socks.