

STANLEY E. FISH'S SPEECH ACTS

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Contemporary post-structuralist hermeneutics lay more emphasis than ever before on the interpretive activity of the reader. Its most radical representatives question the basic critical assumption of traditional hermeneutics: that an objective textual meaning can be described—an assumption which lay at the basis of structuralist and New Critical theories. The polemic work of Stanley E. Fish has been a decisive influence in producing this shift of emphasis in American academic criticism, at the cost of frequent misrepresentations of the nature and aims of literary hermeneutics. It is my aim in this paper to examine Fish's theory of interpretation and show that it rests on inadequate conceptions of the key issues of interpretive theory: meaning, intention, interpretation. If we describe more carefully the nature of linguistic and literary convention, we shall find that «conventional» hermeneutics and structuralism are not to be done away with so easily as the pervasive use of the term «poststructuralist» would make us think.

In his essay «Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics»¹, Stanley Fish leaves his dismantling of New Criticism unfinished. He writes about «the affective fallacy fallacy», but not about «the intentional fallacy fallacy». In one sense, he pushes anti-intentionalism to the limit, to the point that the author all but disappears in his theory as a producer of meaning. Or rather, he is equated with the reader, Jane P. Tompkins sums up Fish's contribution to reader-response criticism thus:

instead of being seen as instrumental to the understanding of the text, the reader's activity is declared to be *identical with* the text and therefore becomes itself the source of all literary value. If literature *is* what happens when we read, its value depends on the value of the reading process. (*Reader-Response Criticism* xvi)

But an individual act of reading cannot turn a good work (a work which is generally agreed to be good) into a bad one (one which is generally agreed to be bad), unless it be for the reader himself. I would use the plural: the value of literature depends on the value of the

¹ Stanley E. Fish, «Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics», *New Literary History* 2.1 (1970): 123-162. Rpt. in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980) 70-100.

reading *processes*. In one sense, value is a subjective matter of appreciation; in another sense, it is a matter of social privilege being given to certain works. The two senses are not unrelated, but they do not coincide. I would also like to point out another necessary distinction: there must be some point where the individual element in interpretation goes beyond what is socially pre-determined. In Fish's theory they are one and the same thing².

Fish denies that the formal features of the text have any kind of objectivity. He sees them as the product of the reader's activity:

the formal units are always a function of the interpretative model one brings to bear; they are not «in» the text, and I would make the same argument for intentions. That is, intention is no more embodied «in» the text than are formal units; rather an intention, like a formal unit, is made when perceptual or interpretive closure is hazarded³.

He holds that to describe the reader's experience «is to describe his realization (in two senses) of an author's intention»⁴. Here authorial intention seems to be at once all-pervasive (because it is linked to the identification of formal units) and non-existent (because in fact it is a construction of the reader). But the reader does not experience the text as a simple realization of what he takes to be the author's intention. The reader does not attribute everything to the author, even if the author is his creation: he always reserves a place for himself. And that is a necessary consequence of the structure of linguistic understanding⁵.

According to Fish, what a sentence means is what it does. An unsettling sentence by Milton «means» the unsettling effect it causes, and «ordinary language» «means» the illusory givability of meaning it strives to convey⁶. But of course this is using the concepts of meaning and doing in a cavalier fashion. It would be more helpful to see the difference in the similarity as well as the similarity in the difference⁷. A sentence can mean something in a more or less abstracted

² Cf. Robert Scholes, «Who Cares About the Text?» *Novel* 17.2 (1984): 175.

³ Stanley E. Fish, «Interpreting the *Variorum*» (*Critical Inquiry* 2 [1976]: 465-485; rpt. in Tompkins 164-184) 166.

⁴ «Interpreting the *Variorum*» 174. Cf. also «Working in the Chain Gang: Interpretation in the Law and in Literary Criticism», *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1982): 211.

⁵ Let us suppose that you do not agree with me on this point. This would be a practical example of what I mean. You cannot possibly believe that it was my intention to cause that disagreement (you know I want you to think I am right!); your rejection of my account is a space which you have reserved for yourself, because it was not a part of what you take to be my intentions. Different people have different beliefs, and the knowledge of this fact is an active element in linguistic understanding.

⁶ The conclusion, as Edward Regis has pointed out, is that all «ordinary language» sentences «mean» the same illusory givability—a «paltry truism» indeed («Literature by the Reader: The 'Affective' Theory of Stanley Fish, *College English* 38 [1976]: 267, 270).

⁷ Fish sees that difference to a certain extent, e.g.: «the information an utterance gives, its message, is a constituent of, but certainly not to be identified with, its meaning» («Literature in the Reader» 77-78). This allows him to make an excellent criticism of I. A. Richards's theory in *Principles of Literary Criticism* («Literature in the Reader» 90 ff.). But there are many intermediate levels in an utterance between its information and what Fish calls its meaning, and elsewhere he keeps playing down even that basic distinction.

way, or in a very concrete way. But surely it can do something only when it is used as a concrete specimen in actual discourse. «You are a lazy oaf and a man of delay» has a clear meaning, to wit, that the potential masculine hearer-role is predicated to be a lazy oaf and a man of delay. But in *this* particular context (an academic paper) it does not do anything, except serve as an example⁸. Now if it were uttered in different concrete circumstances as «real» language⁹, it could do very different things; it could humiliate the hearer, it could be taken as a joke, it could puzzle the hearer because of its irrelevance. These effects cannot spring from the semantics of the sentence alone, because different effects cannot have the same cause. The difference derives from the practical situation in which the sentence is uttered and the social link between the speaker and the hearer. This link may be confirmed or modified by the sentence; in both cases something is done which has a practical effect, that is, an act of social intercourse takes place. All those effects Fish would no doubt take as the meaning of the sentence in each context, but then he would have suppressed the element common to them all, the abstract semantic meaning which can only be reached through a metalinguistic maneuver and whose interplay with the concrete facts of the situation would bring about the results. Let us watch the disappearance of this semantic meaning: «A sentence is never apprehended independently of the context in which it is perceived, and therefore we never know a sentence except in the stabilized form a context has already conferred» («Normal Circumstances» 637). This statement may sound like science, but actually it is science-fiction. A sentence is always apprehended in two different «contexts»: one is Fish's, the other is *the language system*, at different levels of abstraction: phonemic, lexicological, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic—where the in-built «degree-zero» context of the utterance is set against the actual context in which it occurs. All these levels are necessary steps in the description of meaning which Fish ignores.

We may follow Austin and Searle¹⁰, and call «what the sentence means» its (locutionary) meaning (a semantic level of description), and «what the sentence

⁸ That is, it only does something insofar as it is understood to be metalanguage. Metalanguage, by the way, is one more in the list of issues blurred by Fish. «A sentence is never not in a context» («Normal Circumstances, Literal Language, Direct Speech Acts, the Ordinary, the Everyday, the Obvious, What Goes Without Saying, and Other Special Cases», *Critical Inquiry* 4.4 [1978]: 637). This sounds fine, but in fact metalanguage happens to be a way of having sentences without any context, the trick is to declare that the context does not count as one. We may also call what we obtain in this way the prototypical or degree-zero context; the essential thing to keep in mind is that it is not just *any* context. The issue of metalanguage also drives a wedge into Fish's identification of style and meaning (see Regis 269). In my «lazy oaf» example the fact that I repeat the sentence as an explication of its meaning is a clarification...of the fact that *because of the metalinguistic status of this sentence in my text* there wasn't any need to explain its locutionary meaning in the first place: it is self-evident to speakers of English.

⁹ Metalanguage is, of course, real language. My point is that in order to work, metalanguage deliberately ignores this fact. This is a perfect scandal: may it afford endless subject matter for Derridean essays. But it can also be seen as a perfectly routine semiotic maneuver which allows language to function.

¹⁰ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1962; 2nd. ed., 1980); John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969).

does» its illocutionary force (a pragmatic level). Sentences can have an illocutionary force only because they have a locutionary meaning. Sentences mean so that they can do; they do by means of meaning. However, this first kind of «doing», illocutionary force, is still a systematic, conventional action. Illocutionary meaning is yet another tool used by the speaker to try to produce a *perlocutionary effect* on the hearer. Of course, he may fail, because the perlocutionary effect is no longer tied to the identification of intentions: it only requires a successful aiming at the mark.

It is clear that Fish is interested in these effects and in describing the way one can aim at the mark beyond what linguistics takes to be the upper level. This is a fruitful and fascinating task, which has benefited from many of Fish's insights. But it is confused by his describing the whole process of communication as one of aiming at the mark. He reduces speech activity to perlocutionary intention and effect¹¹. Fish recognizes the inherent intentionality of language¹², but he does not follow up on the implications of his own theories.

The focus of critical attention in Fish's theory is the response of the reader, and not the contents of the text; for this brand of reader-response theory, «meaning is no longer a property of the text but a product of the reader's activity» (Tompkins xvii). Does this mean that there is no relationship between the properties of the text and the reader's activity? Fish would say that the formal properties are such only through the reader's activity. However, if the reader is a reader and not merely a thinker, this activity is something related to a text, an object he perceives and which affects his mental processes; the reader must make something of the text. And Fish's theory can give no account of the extent of the reader's indebtedness to the text. His conflating of locutionary meaning, illocutionary force, and perlocutionary effect confuses the issue. Now, if we hold that meaning is not in the utterance, but in the reader's activity, we may be holding a variety of different things.

- That none of the three levels of meaning is in the utterance. The reader is a responsible, grown-up person who doesn't need the fetters of the text. Surprisingly enough, this is what Fish claims in most of his moods. He denies any interaction between the reader's assumptions and the text, because the text is the product of the assumptions the reader brings to bear on it. Which leaves unexplained why we bother to read different texts¹³.

- That only the locutionary meaning is coded in the utterance. This is at odds with speech act theory, which postulates that there is no neutral utterance: all of them have an illocutionary force. Fish does not favour this middle position, either: «No sentence is ever apprehended independently of some or other illocutionary force» («Normal Circumstances» 637).

¹¹ Scholes makes a similar point (179). H. P. Grice («Meaning», *Philosophical Review* [July 1957] 377-388) holds a somewhat similar theory of meaning, which is refuted by Searle (*Speech Acts* 42 f.). Of course, Grice's theory is less evidently absurd—Fish is closer to Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty than to any other semantician.

¹² E.g. in «Working on the Chain Gang» 213.

¹³ Cf. Suresh Raval. *Metacriticism* (Athens [GA]: U of Georgia P. 1981) 130.

- That the perlocutionary effect is not coded in the utterance. Here Fish's theory becomes trivial. Only the most optimistic and reviled rhetoricians have assumed that the addressee is a pipe whose stops they can handle at will. Paradoxically, Fish himself presupposes such a control sometimes, if only as a heuristic construct of the reader's.

Fish realizes the paradox his claim leads to: «if intention, form, and the shape of the reader's experience are simply different ways of referring to (different perspectives on) the same interpretive act, what is that act an interpretation *of*? I cannot answer that question, but neither, I would claim, can anyone else» («Literature in the Reader» 177). But I think that if we keep in mind some relevant distinctions the question is an easy one to answer; it is not a problem for theories other than American poststructuralism.

Intention is a central concept in speech act theory, but not a pervasive one. It may be argued to be a very weak intention. You do not have to buy what the speaker says in order to understand him. You only need to identify his intention to make you identify the illocutionary act he is intending you to identify¹⁴. But Fish's account of how formal features come into being is a bit different.

what utterers do is give hearers and readers the opportunity to make meanings (and texts) by inviting them to put into execution a set of strategies. It is presumed that the invitation will be recognized, and that presumption rests on a projection on the part of a speaker or author of the moves *he* would make if confronted by the sounds or marks he is uttering or setting down. («Interpreting the *Variorum*» 183).

In this account, there is no difference between the moves which require an identification of the author's intention and those which do not, because identification is not a concept Fish uses, except as a synonym of interpretation. Up to the illocutionary level, a significant act of intention is at play *in the language system* (I am not referring to strictly ideological intentions), and it must be identified. You are reading something which I intend (in the locutionary level) to be a text about Stanley E. Fish, and not about the secret life of plants. If you take it to be about the secret life of plants and fail to identify those semantic properties which make it a text about Stanley E. Fish, you are not an informed reader—not even an informed speaker of English. On the macro-illocutionary level¹⁵: this counts as an academic paper. Very trivial, really. But lots of social conventions are at play in distinctions like that, and most often they are not merely assumed to exist by the reader in a creative way: they are identified as intended (or unintentional) meaning: they are interpreted with reference to the kind of social activity the speaker is undertaking.

¹⁴ And you know that happens when there is no longer any conflict between the illocutionary act you identify and the speech situation where it occurs, which includes the assumed relationship between speaker and hearer.

¹⁵ I borrow this term from Wendell Harris, *Interpretive Acts* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 47. See, however, the qualifications below.

Now, once you know what my paper is about, you may like it or you may not¹⁶. That is a part of your response which does not need to postulate my perlocutionary intentions in order to take place¹⁷. Perlocutionary effects ought to remain the property of the reader in some degree; it is Fish's merit to show that in fact there is not such a simple response, but it is a mistake to posit a perfect coincidence between perlocutionary effects and the perlocutionary intention assumed by the receiver. Anyone who believes in the existence of bad verse accepts this kind of hair-splitting.

We may conclude that the objectivity of the text is not «an illusion» («Literature in the Reader» 82) but a convention, and that the meaning of a text cannot be described simply as the product of the reader's activity. It is not naive to speak of «the meaning of the text» as something which is understood by the reader. There is a lot of meaning in texts, thanks to the existence of interpretive conventions. As Regis points out, Fish is blinded by the apparent inertness of the physical text, and makes too much of it: «the fact that the words lie there quite independent of human action *after they are put there by human action* does not necessitate the conclusion that their meaning has been specified apart from human activities» (Regis 278). And who put the meaning there? The author. Not Fish's mental author, but the real¹⁸ one. And the reader. Of course a reader can put into a text whatever he wants: allegorical readings of texts not written as allegories are only an extreme instance¹⁹. Language can mean in spite of the author, although it would be more precise to say «in spite of the author's consciousness and intention». But the author is not the ghostlike being that haunts many of Fish's essays.

Fish's statements on intention are not organically related to his theory of meaning. In «Literature the Reader», he assumes that the identification of intention is not required by his method of analysis; only in those cases where it is explicitly stated and thus becomes an experience for the reader²⁰. But, as speech act theory demonstrates (and Fish seems to accept in later papers), all discourse involves the use of significant and unstated intentions. In «Interpreting the *Variorum*». Fish follows a different strategy: he postulates intentions everywhere, only they are the result of the reader's assumption that all his reactions are intended by the author, not the historical authorial intentions as they may be identified by means of scholarship²¹. That is, he conflates E. D. Hirsch's «meaning» and «signifi-

¹⁶ Cf. Scholes (173), or the general argument of E. D. Hirsch's *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: U of Chicago P. 1976), which can be read as an attack on Fish's theory of interpretation. Michael Fischer argues that Fish shares with other poststructuralists this misconception of interpretation. They ignore the fact that the conventional interpretive categories not only organize the world: they describe it too (*Does Deconstruction Make Any Difference?* [Bloomington: Indiana UP. 1985] 50 f.).

¹⁷ I mean that perlocutionary acts do not have felicity conditions which must be fulfilled in order for them to take place. Linguistically speaking, they simply take place.

¹⁸ See note 51 below.

¹⁹ Here E. D. Hirsch's conceptual distinction between «meaning» and «significance» is useful, although Hirsch is too optimistic about the possibility of general agreement in the description of meaning.

²⁰ Fish, «Literature in the Reader» 89.

²¹ Fish, «Interpreting the *Variorum*» 174-175.

cance»; meaning and this peculiar version of authorial intention «are the same thing»²². Fish is right in the sense that the authorial intention as such is a noumenon. My point, as I have said, is that the reader is not alone with what he takes to be the authorial intention. A large part of this is implicit in the ordinary workings of language, and much of the rest is a function of the general interpretive strategies of his age and situation: his interpretation can always be held to be accountable to those of other readers²³.

It is easy to show that Fish is not consistent with his theory in his own critical practice²⁴. Let me point out some examples. In *Surprised by Sin*²⁵ we find Milton making his reader revive the drama of the Fall in his reactions to the rhetoric and situations of *Paradise Lost*. For instance, the reader who reads a suggestion of moral error into the verb «wander» when it is used in a pre-lapsarian context has «wander'd» himself; he has not stuck to the Christian teaching which forbids such assumptions when thinking of Adam and Eve before the Fall: the reader is trying to justify in some obscure way his own fallen nature. The inadequacy of his reading forces him into recognizing the only possible source of the moral error he has detected: himself. Now, who is this reader? Is it Fish himself, reading the text in one among many possible ways, that is, constructing «his» version of Milton's intention, and cheerfully acknowledging its relativity? Not in the least. Not the 1970ish Fish in any case: the reader's adventures in the poem are presented in *Surprised by Sin* as a pattern used by the *actual* Milton in a deliberate way, expecting that the readers would notice it²⁶. With the support of abundant textual material from the 17th century, Fish reconstructs what is «undoubtedly» the authentic authorial intention²⁷. He reconstructs; for instance, the only correct way in which the words of God at the beginning of Book III should be read, «notwithstanding anything else we may read into them» (*Surprised by Sin* 65). Fish reads the text; critics such as Empson or Waldock²⁸, who find Milton's God self-righteous and unjust, read *into* the text.

This is not a criticism of Fish's readings in *Surprised by Sin*. Indeed, I think they are far more satisfactory than his later theoretical pronouncements, even if the deliberateness of the work is overemphasized at times. Much could be argued in favour of Fish's conception of the workings of *Paradise Lost*, and Fish is more

²² Stanley Fish, «With the Compliments of the Author: Reflections on Austin and Derrida», *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (1982): 693. Cf. also Fish's «Change», *South Atlantic Quarterly* 86.4 (1987): 423.

²³ In a later essay, Fish watches this principle at work in ordinary language («How to Do Things With Austin and Searle: Speech Act Theory and Literary Criticism», *MLN* 91 [1976] 986) but surprisingly enough he does not realize the extent of its bearings on his own theory.

²⁴ Cf. Rader, «Fact, Theory and Literary Explanation» (204); «Explaining Our Literary Understanding» (908).

²⁵ Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's, 1967).

²⁶ Fish, *Surprised by Sin* 15, 130.

²⁷ Fish, *Surprised by Sin* 258.

²⁸ William Empson, *Milton's God* (Norfolk, 1961); A. J. A. Waldock, *Paradise Lost and Its Critics* (Cambridge, 1947).

than equal to the task. My point is that this kind of reading is at odds with Fish's theories on the text and on authorial intention. And there *is* a way in which *Surprised by Sin* is curiously myopic in its critical assumptions. Fish equates what he considers to be Milton's intention with the *proper* way of reading the text. He does not seem to realize that Waldock or Empson are rejecting not only Milton's «deficient technique» (Fish triumphantly shows that the technique is not deficient at all) but also his deficient ideology. Now, Fish's reading keeps both the baby and the bathwater, because its ultimate justification is the reader's belief in the literal truth of Milton's world-view²⁹. Unless you are a seventeenth-century Puritan, you cannot read Milton properly. This is obvious in a trivial sense: the more a reader shares the ideology of a work, the greater his chances are of enjoying it. But Fish does not stop there, and goes on to imply that all readers who do not share the ideology of the author are incompetent readers. The reader is sinning all the time, miming Adam and Eve, and the greatness of the work lies in that he is made to acknowledge this and correct his evil ways. But what if the reader does not believe in God or in free will, what if he does not accept Milton's logic of damnation or the Christian doublethink on predestination and foreknowledge? The only answer we get from *Surprised by Sin* is: he is a bad reader (in both senses), he is of Satan's party.

There is...only one true interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, and it is the reward of those readers who have entered into the spirit of Milton's 'good temptation' and so 'become wiser by experience'. Others 'sport in the shade' with half-truths and self-serving equivocations and end by accusing God or by writing volumes to expose the illogic of His ways. (*Surprised by Sin* 272).

This seems to be advocating the reduction of criticism to hermeneutics, to the interpretation of the author's meaning; discussions of present-day significance are presented as pernicious deviations, misreadings. Fish believes that he has provided a defense of *Paradise Lost* because he has presented it from Milton's point of view. But even if we allow the latter claim³⁰, the task of the critic hardly stops there... unless he fully shares Milton's assumptions. Not many people do nowadays, and presumably most of us will join Empson and Waldock in hell. In his later works, Stanley Fish has progressed from this moderately obtuse position towards «a radically simplistic and theoretically impoverished concept of criticism» springing from «an unexamined and confused concept of interpretation» (Raval 134).

Anyway, I have wander'd from my true calling, which is to show that the snare I have been laying does not work, either, and Stanley Fish will swim clean out of it with no effort at all. It does not matter if his theories contradict his critical practice. In a recent essay he argues that theory is useless³¹ even for the practical

²⁹ Ponder carefully on the reasoning in pages 38, 86, 225, 228, 331 of *Surprised by Sin*.

³⁰ See Robert Crosman, «Some Doubts about 'The Reader of *Paradise Lost*'», *College English* 37 (1975): 372-382, Regis 276-277.

³¹ Except insofar as it is a mere practice like any other, etc. Fish denies the difference between praxis and theoretical praxis, or theory-making. This is only one more in the list of Fish's claims that

critic who develops a theory of his own: «lors de sa performance en tant que words-worthien ou miltoniste, il posera des questions et il donnera des réponses qui appartiennent à cette tradition-là de la pensée et sa position théorique sera littéralement à côté»³². Many data could be found in support of this theory; they teem in Fish's own work. But a theory is not a mere construct to accommodate a random set of data. It must be comprehensive, that is, it must explain all the phenomena it covers. Fish ignores that with most serious theoreticians, theory is a way to come to grips with texts in a new and fruitful way. Obviously, Fish is in a difficult position when he considers the relationships between theory and practice, since his own theory is absurd and unworkable. The only way out is to declare that anyway *la Théorie est sans conséquences*. It is an attempt to generalise his previous accurate diagnosis of his own theory, but it will not do. Not just because it identifies what (supposedly) *is*, the divorce between theory and practice, with what *should* be. It will not do because the implicit analogy is faulty: most theoreticians are trying to solve real (if sometimes microscopic) problems, while Fish's efforts are directed to pseudo-problems. Fish's theory is known for announcing fantastic perspectival upheavals which result in nothing: texts do not exist, because readers make them in the act of reading, because they have interpretive strategies, which derive from interpretive communities... which presumably agree to write texts. This is showing the text off the scene only to let it in again through the back door, a mere trick of prestidigitation without any theoretical or practical implications³³.

It is Fish's mind-blowing discovery that «categories like 'the natural' and 'the everyday' are not essential but conventional» («Normal Circumstances» 626). But that is what he says. What he means is that they are «conventional» in exactly the same sense. I will focus on one of his examples, speech act theory, to try and pin down the moment where Fish commits his fallacy. Because there is a specifically Fishean fallacy, repeated over and over in different contexts. In two words, it is the refusal to acknowledge that all rules were created conventional, but some were created more conventional than others. This refusal is related to a more general fallacy, described by Scholes: Fish refuses «to see any difference between the primary system in which a text is encoded and the secondary system that can be brought to bear only by an interpreter who comprehends the primary system» (Scholes 178). Another version of Fish's claim is that there is no difference between brute facts and institutional facts: all facts are institutional³⁴. A toothache counts

his works should be read as fiction (see f. i. Stanley Fish, «Interpreting 'Interpreting the Variorum'». *Critical Inquiry* 3.1 [1976]: 196). I think that eventually they will, but it is his fault that people keep trying to examine them as theoretical statements; he should not send his contributions to *Critical Inquiry* in the first place.

³² Stanley Fish, «La théorie est sans conséquences», *Critique* 41 (1985): 453. Trans. of «Pragmatics and Literary Theory 1: Consequences», *Critical Inquiry* 11.3 (1985): 432-458.

³³ This is the conclusion reached by Charles Eric Reeves, «Literary Conventions and the Noumenal Text: Stanley Fish's Egalitarian Poetics»; *Neophilologus* 70.3 (1986): 336, and by Fish himself in *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge [MA]: Harvard UP, 1980) 370.

³⁴ Fish, «How to Do Things with Austin and Searle» 1019.

as a toothache in the very same sense as a law counts as a law. The World is the only institution Fish recognizes. He is blind to the rest, which makes him unable to explain change or conflict. An illusory «equality» of all interpretations is all that he is able to offer³⁵. This is the result of his inadequate theory of meaning.

Fish claims that there are no literal meanings, or that all meanings are equally literal. I will show how this assumption «works» using one of Fish's examples in «Normal Circumstances». I could use the PRIVATE MEMBERS ONLY example, but I will choose something more austere, *Samson Agonistes*. If a typological critic, the argument runs, chooses to see that *Samson Agonistes* is, read in a literal way, the story of Christ, there will be no way of showing that he is wrong, because he will be right. The very absence of reference to Christ could be said to be a requirement for that reading, an evidence of «Milton's intention to respect typological decorum» and of the ignorance of the characters as to their own significance, which is required by the assumptions of typology³⁶. So, Fish concludes, if we read this poem as referring to Samson rather than to Christ, it is because we have already chosen to do so in the first place, and not because of any constraints the «literal meaning» of the poem places on us.

This is not the case. The absence of literal reference to Christ can at most be said to be no definite proof that the poem does not refer to Christ; in no case is it a positive proof that it does refer in any way to Christ, let alone literally³⁷. And Fish overlooks the fact that if the poem is said to refer to Christ it can only be by virtue of its referring to Samson, who is a Christ figure. In Aquinas' words (I expect he is less suspect than Fish as a theorist of typological interpretation) the allegorical reading which refers Old Testament figures to New Testament ones must derive from the literal reading:

Et ideo cum in omnibus scientiis voces significant, hoc habet proprium ista scientia, quod ipsae res significatae per voces, etiam significant aliquid. Illa ergo prima significatio, qua voces significant res, pertinet ad primum sensum, qui est sensus historicus vel litteralis. Illa vero significatio qua res significatae per voces, iterum res alias significant, dicitur sensu spiritualis, qui super litteralem fundatur et eum supponit³⁸.

Or, allegory and linguistics are not the same level of interpretation, except in Fish's works³⁹. Fish is apparently dreaming of a typological interpreter who, perfectly acquainted with English and with writing, looks at the printed word «Samson» and reads the sound ['Kraist]. But such people are hard to come by. Fish will

³⁵ «Interpreting 'Interpreting the Variorum'» 196. Cf. Reeves 339; J. Timothy Bagwell, «Who's Afraid of Stanley Fish?» *Poetics Today* 4.1 (1983): 128-29; Scholes 171, 174; Ellen Rooney, «'Not to Worry': The Anxiety of Pluralism and the Therapeutic Criticism of Stanley Fish», *Dalhousie Review* 64.2 (1984): 325.

³⁶ Fish, «Normal Circumstances» 628.

³⁷ That is, if we have agreed to stick to logic in the first place. Fish always leaves a door open behind him, and no doubt he would use even the trump card of the Mad or Illogical Interpreter.

³⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.i.10.

³⁹ Cf. Scholes 176.

not help us in the least if we want to account for different readings of the same words, whether they be ironic, metaphorical or allegorical; his theory is genuinely uncooperative and unilluminating.

Anyway, Fish could relinquish some of the claims implicit in his example and still hold the following:

There always is a literal meaning because in any situation there is always a meaning that seems obvious in the sense that it is there independently of anything we might do. *But that means that we have already done it*, and in another situation, when we have already done something else, there will be another obvious, that is, literal, meaning. («Normal Circumstances» 631)

In sum, Fish does not see that we use locutionary meaning as an instrument in the determination of illocutionary force or perlocutionary effect. He wants to have them at once. «A sentence that seems to need no interpretation is already the product of one»—Fish said that⁴⁰. «A sentence that seems to need an interpretation needs and interpretation». I said that. Fish does not follow the logic of his argument; he does not go on to say that sentences which seem to need an interpretation will finally be the product of *two* interpretations, the built-in one and the needful one. Instead, he conflates the two, and in doing so he does not deconstruct the arguments of linguistics: he blurs them. Fish lumps any kind of semiotic rule into his bag of «interpretive strategies», and plays havoc with the complex workings of the various systems these rules constitute⁴¹.

Perhaps it is not obvious how the notion of illocutionary force is relevant to such questions as metaphor or irony. But literature is just another use of speech, and it can profit from a speech act approach. «Just another use» does not mean that it is to be interpreted according to the rules of «ordinary language», whatever that is. It means that, just like any other area of speech activity, literature has its own conventions which are in force whenever a reader decides to *read something as literature*⁴² or a writer decides to write literature. An equivalent of these second-degree rules may be found in the difference between irony and a lie. Lying is a perlocutionary activity; it cannot be described in illocutionary terms. That is, the intention the speaker has of performing the act in question (lying) need not be identified in order for the speech act to be successful. Irony, on the other hand, must be identified as such in order to succeed as a speech act. It is a speech act which we might describe as illocutionary-like, as a result of a complex macro-

⁴⁰ «Normal Circumstances» 637; cf. «Working on the Chain Gang» 212.

⁴¹ Cf. Joh-K. Adams, *Pragmatics and Fiction* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1985) 53 f.

⁴² Sometimes Fish has accepted as much (cf. «How Ordinary is Ordinary Language?» *Language, Logic and Genre*, ed. Wallace Martin [Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1974]). Fish claims here that any piece of writing may be read as literature. This would be quite acceptable if it did not afford him to neglect the other side of the question, which works have been *written* as literature, and which works are *in fact* read as literature.

illocution⁴³. Other theorists have developed along these lines pragmatic theories of literature which avoid the pitfalls pointed out by Fish⁴⁴.

There are some significant confusions in Fish's account of speech act theories. Fish rejects Searle's version of speech act analysis because he thinks it seeks to bring back the constative utterance which had been rejected by Austin⁴⁵. This is not true: Searle distinguishes carefully an affirmative proposition, which is emitted in what Austin would call a locutionary act (and hence can be isolated only in a metalinguistic way) and an assertion, which takes place at the illocutionary level: "A proposition is to be sharply distinguished from an assertion or statement of it (...). [A]n assertion is a (very special kind of) commitment to the truth of a proposition» (*Speech Acts* 29). In both Austin and Searle, the notion of constative utterance is given up, and instead the «neutral» utterance is seen as a mere *analytical phase* in the production of meaning⁴⁶. Austin's theory is not naively ignorant of the different steps in the production of meaning, although Fish's siding with him would make us think so. And if Austin dislodges constative utterances, he maintains the notion of the explicit performative which is the very model for a direct speech act (e.g. Austin 32, 83 ss).

Of course, an explicit performative, or any direct speech act, is not identified automatically as one because of its form; the context must be the appropriate one⁴⁷. But the conclusion does *not* follow that a direct speech act is a not direct speech act *once it has been identified as one*. Fish seems to think that the «direct» in «direct speech acts» is a device to rule out the contextual negotiation of meaning. For instance, in his account of Searle's theory, he claims that Searle believes that «in the performance of direct speech acts speaker and hearer do *not* rely on their mutually shared background information because what is actually said is available directly». This is a misinterpretation of Searle's notion of the direct speech act. Searle's definition does include contextual requirements: «for any possible speech act there is a possible linguistic element the meaning of which (*given the context of the utterance*) is sufficient to determine that its literal utterance is a

⁴³ This reservation is due to a shortcoming of the classical accounts of speech acts, Austin's and Searle's. Both assume a sentence-grammar as the starting point of their discussion, and the theory suffers from this. Austin and Searle can account for abstract, genetic or primitive speech acts such as promises, orders, etc. which take place in a linguistic limbo of one-sentence texts. An extension of the speech act theory towards the realms of text and discourse is possible, but not in a simple way. Discourse acts presuppose a first layer of primitive speech acts: narrative fictions is a kind of reporting, irony is a kind of affirming. The neatness of Searle's condition analysis disappears in the second level of analysis, which is bound to more specific contexts and conventions, such as the literary communicative situation.

⁴⁴ E.g. Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977); Teun A. Van Dijk, «La pragmática de la comunicación literaria», *Pragmática de la comunicación literaria*, ed. José Antonio Mayoral (Madrid: Arco/Libros, 1987); Jon-K. Adams, *Pragmatics and Fiction*.

⁴⁵ Fish, «Normal Circumstances» 639.

⁴⁶ This phase is the *locutionary act* in Austin (*How to Do Things with Words* 94 ff.) and the *propositional act* in Searle (*Speech Acts* 24). Searle's account is somewhat different from Austin's, but that need not bother us here.

⁴⁷ Cf. Fish, «With the Compliments of the Author» 720.

performance of precisely that speech act» (*Speech Acts* 20-21; emphasis mine). A literal utterance is assumed to be understood with reference to the most usual context in which it would occur, what I have called the degree-zero context. Here Fish would fall back on his anti-conceptualism and reject here the notion of literal language, but we have already tested the strength of his foundations. Actually, there is no need to go back on this subject. Searle «himself described the fallacy Fish is committing here before Fish wrote a single line on the subject»⁴⁸.

The core of the argument against the notion of direct speech acts is that normal circumstances are also the result of a convention which declares them to be normal, that is (a fishy syllogism), that there are no normal circumstances⁴⁹. It would be an error to think that Fish's theory holds even in the limited sense he claims for it. It is generally agreed that noumena are not a legitimate object of study, that we live in a phenomenal world, but Fish is still waging a war against noumenalism. In fact, his phenomenology is modelled after Berkeley's, and not after Kant's or after Husserl's. It is insufficient in several of its steps: precisely those which lie at the basis of what Fish thinks are his originality and combativeness. The philosophical sandy base of Fish's theory is the belief that the phenomenological reduction is a problem which has implications for literary theory. He substitutes the concept of belief for Husserl's intentionality⁵⁰, and he ignores Husserl's dismissal of the noumenal world as a pseudo-problem. Everything relevant is left by Husserl on this side of the phenomenological reduction, including the real world⁵¹. Phenomenological analysis (or criticism, or any kind of analysis) is not relieved of its responsibilities because of that reduction. What it is relieved of is of the need to consider that question at all: *epokhé* is Husserl's last world on the noumenal. But Fish keeps trying to prove that the basic assumptions of the «foundationalist» theories involve a jump into the noumenal world. They do not: instead, they are concerned with the relevant conventions which are at play in the phenomenal world, those which are neglected by Fish in his enthusiastic denunciations. Indeed, his whole critical enterprise is a self-consuming artifact, and it can be taken to culminate in the following phrase: «One wonders what implications [my theory] has for the practice of literary criticism. The answer is, none whatsoever» (Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 370). Now, this is not a clever conclusion which demonstrates the vanity of the critical enterprise at large. It is the foreseeable result of Fish's dealing with irrelevant or mistaken premisses in the first instance. Terry Eagleton observes that many post-structuralists pick on a straw target: the naive positivist attitude, which is no longer at work any-

⁴⁸ See chapter 6 of *Speech Acts*, «Three fallacies of contemporary philosophy».

⁴⁹ See the same syllogism at work in ruling out the distinction between literature and nonliterature in Fish's «Facts and Fictions: A Reply to Ralph Rader», *Critical Inquiry* 1.4 (1975): 891.

⁵⁰ See Bagwell's «Who's Afraid of Stanley Fish?»

⁵¹ Which is not the noumenal world. Fish does not seem to draw a difference between these concepts (e.g. «Change» 425-426).

where save in their own writings⁵². Fish's indiscriminate notion of interpretation has the consequence of obscuring the real issues of interpretation, and of the fact that there are relevant critical disagreements⁵³. His one-sidedness may allow us to see how our interpretive assumptions make circumstances, but it masks the not unrelated and more interesting problem of how circumstances make our interpretive assumptions.

Fish's epistemology is therefore an essentialism masquerading as an anti-essentialism. He grudgingly accepts the evidence that shared assumptions do provide knowledge and solve problems: «One can always have recourse to a vocabulary at a higher level of generality (a higher level of shared assumptions) than the level at which there is a dispute. But...[it] will have no epistemological priority over the accounts it transcends»⁵⁴. That is, he fails to realize the logical consequence of this situation: that what is «essential» or «epistemologically prior» is inessential since it cannot be brought to bear on actual circumstance, whereas the «inessential» translatability of semiotic codes becomes essential for practical activity. Normal circumstances are for Fish «statistically, not inherently, normal» («Normal Circumstances» 643). He is right, of course: any evening the sun may rise, and Fish will gape at it just like any «foundationalist» critic. Following his bent, he equates «not essential» with «non-existent», «dismissable». This merely statistical difference may be irrelevant for someone as thirsty of essentialism as Fish, but it is not without consequences in the structuring of communication. It directs the difference between what is presupposed and what has to be made explicit, or the difference between direct and indirect speech acts. That is, the difference between what is normal and what is not is not inherent in the nature of things, but it does not follow from there that it is not inherent in the nature of language. What is irrelevant in linguistics or literary theory is bringing substantialism into the discussion.

There are historical analogues for Fish's maneuvering, and not all are counted among the Greek sophists. Fish himself describes one such instance of irrelevant substantialism. Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* can be read as a «speech act play» because we can see in it the dramatization of the main principle of the speech act theory, that «at least in terms of legal and moral obligation, reality is a matter of public specification» (Fish, «How to Do Things» 987). But the proud hero of the play seeks «a world where essences are immediately recognized and do not require for their validation the mediation of public procedures» («How to Do Things» 998). Stanley E. «Coriolanus» Fish sets himself apart from the community because of his essentialist vocation. He seeks a deeper level of language beyond the conditions of its public specification. «What Coriolanus does opens the way for anyone who feels constrained by the loads of a society to declare a society of his own, to nominate his own conventions, to stipulate his own obligations» («How

⁵² Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P. 1983; pbk. 1987) 140 f.

⁵³ Cf. Rooney 326.

⁵⁴ Fish, «With the Compliments of the Author» 717.

To Do Things» 998). Fish's «egalitarian poetics» and «admirable intellectual tolerance»⁵⁵ rest on radical skepticism and on solipsism, not on a workable theory of society⁵⁶. Fish's «controlled subjectivity» («Literature in the Reader» 87) is not a satisfactory substitute for «objectivity», because it does not reach the level of intersubjectivity. It does not account for the existence of communication between different «interpretive communities».

It is not surprising that the analysis of the potentialities of speech act theory in literary studies in «How to Do Things with Austin and Searle» is ultimately faulty and misleading. Not that it is entirely without merit. Fish criticises some defects in the vague applications of speech act theory to literature developed by Ohmann and Iser⁵⁷, above all their misinterpretation of the notion of felicitous utterance. But of course he does so on the basis of his own conception of meaning, which is untenable. And some of the assumptions he challenges in these theorists are not as faulty as Fish believes. Take, for instance, his objections to Ohmann's speech act analysis of narrative. According to Fish, «Ohmann invents 'the general speech act of telling a story'» («How To Do» 1008). But it is not an invention. Ohmann's account (in «Speech, Action and Style») is faulty, but telling a story *is* a speech act; it is not something you do with your feet. Fish wants to prove that it is not an illocutionary act in the sense described by Austin or Searle. Granted; both linguists are concerned only with what we might call the «primitive» illocutionary acts, those that can be conceived of at sentence level. Telling a story involves a whole text or discourse process. Moreover, it can be described as a (discourse-level) speech act without implying that it is an illocutionary-like act at discourse level. In the simplest, most unproblematic sense, a story can be identified at the macro-locutionary level; it is a series of meanings which need not involve the illocutionary intentions of speaker and hearer to be identified as such⁵⁸.

Fish also criticises the use of speech act theory to tell fiction from nonfiction and literature from nonliterature. He does so once more by virtue of denying the «ontological priority» of «normal circumstances» and «ordinary language». I leave to my implied reader the analysis of just why these reasonings are vitiated, as an exercise in ingenuity.

There are many other weak points in Fish's theories. I will mention some in passing, although each would require a detailed analysis. His conception of the

⁵⁵ Reeves, with a touch of irony: Ralph Rader («Explaining Our Literary Understanding: A Response to Jay Schleusener and Stanley Fish, *Critical Inquiry* 1.4 [1975]: 908), with a touch of ferocity.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ralph Rader, «Fact, Theory and Literary Explanation», *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1974): 272; Fischer 47: raval 131 ff.

⁵⁷ Richard Ohmann, «Literature as Act», *Approaches to Poetics: Selected Papers from the English Institute* (New York: Columbia UP, 1973) 81-107; «Literature, Speech, and the Space Between», *New Literary History* 4.1 (1972): 47-73; «Speech, Action and Style», *Literary Style*, ed. Seymour Chatman (London: Oxford UP, 1971); Wolfgang Iser, «The Reality of Fiction», *New Literary History* 7.1 (1975) 7-38.

⁵⁸ We may note in passing that in this analysis Fish is using some categories («locutionary act» or «meaning») which are at odds with his theory as stated in «Literature in the Reader» or «Normal Circumstances». But we have already seen that Fish does not bother about such trivia.

temporal sequence of a text is insufficient; its equation of all «experienced meanings» does not account for the construction of a structure in the reader's mind using only the relevant meanings; it can't explain the difference between first reading and rereading, or between «the work as experienced» and «the work as remembered»⁵⁹. His use of «slow reading» and of multiple conflicting alternatives in the reader's mind is at best debatable⁶⁰. It will not do as a rationale of both reading and criticism. Except, of course, in a theory like Fish's, which conflates reading and criticism, assuming no difference between the «interpretive strategies» of either⁶¹. His notion of «interpretive community» is useless because it is tautological. It is not useful for the understanding of how changes in interpretation take place (indeed it seems to rule them out) and it gives a wrong, monolithic image of the actual workings of interpretation⁶². Also, ruling out the theoretical validity of the concepts of «literature» and «evaluation» is a shortcoming of his theory, not an advantage as Fish seems to think⁶³. Anyway, Fish is not able to explain the simplest phenomena of literary understanding. Therefore, his claims to provoking a revolution in literary evaluation cannot be taken seriously: they are vitiated in their very assumptions.

This «theory» of interpretation is not post-structuralist in other sense than the purely chronological one. Its assumptions are naively prestructuralist; at times they are pre-Aristotelian. They are always counter-intuitive (a quality which is *not always* a virtue). Fish's theory does not explain the phenomena that traditional hermeneutics, structuralism, Marxism, and other theories explain; the would-be paradoxes it hurls against these «foundationalist» theories are the result of a misunderstanding about which are the relevant issues in critical activity.

It is difficult to write on such a decentered subject as Stanley Fish. He is constantly reworking his theories, abandoning earlier positions, either putting forward uncompromisingly radical views or returning to more conventional assumptions⁶⁴. He is a moving target, but I think that an equation can be found to describe his

⁵⁹ I borrow these terms from Jeremy Hawthorn, *Unlocking the Text Fundamental Issues in Literary Theory* (London: Arnold, 1986): 62.

⁶⁰ Cf. Douglas Bush, «Professor Fish and the Milton *Variorum*», *Critical Inquiry* 3.1 (1976): 182; Regis 266, Rader, «Explaining» 909.

⁶¹ Cf. Steven Mailloux, «Stanley Fish's 'Interpreting the *Variorum*': Advance or Retreat?» *Critical Inquiry* 3.1 (1976): 184; Adams 57.

⁶² Cf. Mailloux 187; Scholes 171-174. Later on in «Change», Fish provides a theory of change which goes back on many of his previous assumptions about interpretive communities; in fact (although Fish does not say so) it does away with this concept as it was defined in his previous essays. However, his new conception is still fantastically idealistic, curiously reminiscent of Plato's anamnesis, and does not relate changes in consciousness to actual social or institutional circumstances.

⁶³ Fish, «Facts and Fictions» 891; cf. Rader, «Fact» 269.

⁶⁴ E.g., in «Working on the Chain Gang» (203) he seems to have come back to the commonsensical notion that interpretation involves an interaction between the reader and the text. But it is an illusion. His hazy notion of «interpretation» is still the same («Working» 211). I think that Fish would no longer hold (in 1990) some of the extreme views I criticise, but he has not abandoned subjectivism to the extent implied by Gary Saul Morson («Literary Theory, Psychoanalysis, and the Creative Process», *Poetics Today* 3.2 [1982]: 158 f.), who would rank Fish alongside Mukarovsky—a structuralist!

trajectory. Fish is the paradigmatic representative of what Wendell Harris (163) has called «all-or-nothingism», and the logic of his ways may be instructive for the purposes of a discipline, semiotics, which is essentially probabilistic (or better «fallibilistic», in C. S. Peirce's terms). At times it seems that Fish realizes that as a theorist of interpretation he deals in phony wares. But he insists in foregrounding them, apparently for the sake of producing critical noise. «It is the nature of sophistry to lull the reasoning process; logic is a safeguard against a rhetorical effect only after the effect has been noted»⁶⁵. This effect may procure an audience [or all-or-nothingist] theories in the picturesque panorama of American post-structuralism, but it will not secure them a significant place in the history of criticism as it will be told in the next century.

On second thoughts, I find that I have ridden Fish too hard. After all, having an audience, being «interesting», is the only thing he has consistently lain a claim to⁶⁶.



⁶⁵ *Surprised by Sin* 6. Did you note it just now?

⁶⁶ See «Interpreting 'Interpreting the *Variorum*'» 195. This alleged limitation of the theory's claim is of course not true, since Fish has not uttered his speech acts in the right context.