

Interpretation on Tlön: A Response to Stanley Fish

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IN *Is There a Text in This Class?* Stanley Fish's central theoretical claim was that there is no such entity as a text prior to interpretation, since what that text is seen to be or to mean is itself a product of interpretation. This meant that it is deceptive to think, as we normally do, that interpretations can be supported or refuted by appealing to independent textual evidence, for according to Fish what looks to us like "independent evidence" will already have been tautologically predetermined by our interpretive assumptions. As Fish put it, "The question of what is in the text cannot be settled by appealing to the evidence since the evidence will have become available only because some determination of what is in the text has already been made."¹ It followed, then, that "all objects are made and not found, and . . . they are made by the interpretive strategies we set in motion" (p. 331). Whereas "skilled reading is usually thought to be a matter of discerning what is there," Fish argued that it is really "a matter of knowing how to *produce* what can thereafter be said to be there" (p. 327).

This "conventionalist" view of human understanding, as Fish calls it in his essay in the present volume, has had a distinguished history going back to Hobbes and the ancient Pyrrhonists. But what precisely follows from conventionalism has never been completely clear—a symptom of which is the eruption of disputes over relativism whenever a conventionalist argument is put forth, notwithstanding the best efforts of conventionalists like Fish to conjure these disputes away. The consequence of conventionalism remained unclear in Fish, though he reassured readers that *nothing* followed from his position, that alarmed scholars were, in his oft-repeated phrase, "not to worry" because his argument left interpretive authority more firmly intact than it was under the old objectivist dispensation.

The ambiguities were further deepened in Fish's case by his tendency to vacillate between strong and weak versions of his key concept of "interpretive communities." At times Fish wrote as if an interpretive community were a monolithic state, defined by some single "interpretive strategy" which bound all its members and predestined

them to impute the same meanings (for example, Christian allegory, Freudian symbolism) to every text they encountered. As Fish put it, "Members of the same community will necessarily agree because they will see (and by seeing, make) everything in relation to that community's assumed purposes and goals."² At other times, Fish seemingly weakened this determinism, speaking as if the members of interpretive communities chose democratically among a number of potential interpretive strategies (though it was unclear what the basis of that choice could be) and engaged in intracommunity disagreements.

In a general way Fish's concept of interpretive communities was enormously suggestive, pointing up as it did the dimension of group solidarity that can be observed in the practice of interpretation, particularly in an age of competitive academic interpretive schools, each of which does indeed tend predictably to attribute the same kinds of meanings to texts. It is hard to explain the notorious disparities which have historically marked schools of interpretation without tracing some of them at least to biases which have nothing to do with the texts being interpreted. What is more, the attention paid by Fish and other reader-oriented critics to "strategies" readers possess before they start reading produced more interesting practical results than much of the conventional criticism which ignored "the reader's share." Once the institutional constraints on interpretation are recognized, it becomes possible to have a history and a sociology of reading—as distinct from the history and sociology of literature—and the processes of canon formation and tradition making then become open to historical investigation and critique in a new and valuable way.

But Fish's way of putting the argument that readers "produce" meaning assumed that once we acknowledge the institutionally conditioned nature of reading, we have to discard the very concept of a text existing *prior* to our interpretations of it. This reasoning forced Fish to the very strange conclusion that no text can *invite* its readers to interpret it in some ways rather than others. To say that there is no object of interpretation prior to its construction by an interpretive community is tantamount to saying that no text can ever *resist* a determined reader. It amounts to a proclamation of interpretive infallibility.

Fish went so far as to state that "theories always work, and they will always produce exactly the results they predict, results that will be immediately compelling to those for whom the theory's assumptions and enabling principles are self-evident. Indeed, the trick would be to find a theory that didn't work" (p. 68). For example, "If your definition of poetry tells you that the language of poetry is complex,

you will scrutinize the language of something identified as a poem in such a way as to bring out the complexity you know to be 'there.' . . . you will attend to the presence of alliterative and consonantal patterns (there will always be some), and you will try to make something of them (you will always succeed) . . ." (p. 327). Here was the essence of the "strong" version of the concept of interpretive communities: the "community" is defined by a single strategy—the language of poetry viewed as complex—which necessarily reproduces itself in every act of interpretation.

My claim is that if you imagine a world in which the practice of interpretation worked the way Fish's above statements describe, it would be a bizarre world indeed, one whose premises would be incoherent within the language spoken by you and me and Fish. It would be a world, for example, in which no reader could ever approach a text with a theory in mind only to discover that the theory does not fit that particular text; in which no one who initially expected a poem to be complex could discover that such complexity is lacking; in which no one who initially expected a text (or other object) to be a poem could decide that it is some other kind of text (or object). Fish in effect posited an interpretive world in which no reader could ever explicitly experience *surprise*. This was an odd turn of events if you knew the earlier, so-called affective stylistics phase of Fish's critical career, during which it seemed as if, for Fish, readers of literature never experienced *anything but surprise*. Whereas the ideal readers posited by affective stylistics were almost moronically susceptible to having their expectations altered at every line-by-line point of the reading process, the reader of *Is There a Text in This Class?* was logically immune to surprise.

Fish was obviously thinking of a real interpretive community, that of the New Critics, when he stated that readers equipped with a theory of poetic complexity will "always succeed" in attributing complexity to poems. But is it true that the New Critics *always* found the poetic complexities which they looked for? Almost always perhaps, suspiciously often, in my view, but not always. Brooks and Warren, for example, in *Understanding Poetry*,³ disparaged Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life" for its lack of complexity, just as they and other New Critics disparaged poems by various Romantics and Victorians for the same deficiency. If Fish were right, why didn't Brooks and Warren simply *ascribe* complexity to Longfellow as well as to Donne and Yeats?

We can easily imagine a revisionist New Critical interpretation which rehabilitates "A Psalm of Life" by "showing" how complex its metaphors *really* are, just as we can imagine a newer kind of reading

that "proves" the poem is really about the way its figurality subverts the determinate moral message ("Life is real! Life is earnest!") which generations of readers have naively attributed to it. Fish excels at such imagined rewritings, but the question is whether such exercises can be performed because interpretive strategies create texts, or merely because given enough ingenuity we can always impose a strategy on a text which is not one that it invites?

If we adopt the former position, Fish's position, we then have no way of accounting for the *specificity* or *selectivity* of interpretation, the fact that readers activate only some of many potential strategies in their inventory, applying some strategies to some objects and not to others. As Robert Scholes observes, in one of the shrewdest of many critiques which Fish's work has attracted, "It is like saying that bluejays and robins can never be seen by the same person because any person will be either in the bluejay community or the robin community and therefore will see only one or the other."⁴

The only way to avoid this absurdity is to accept the proposition which Fish denies, that some strategies will suit a text better than others, that a text will support some readings and resist some. The New Critics could then have had a defensible reason for not attributing their preferred kind of complexity to "A Psalm of Life"—namely, that it just isn't there. Admittedly, that would not be much of a "reason" or an "explanation," for to say that we interpret a text the way we do because the text has directed us to do so is tautological. The question then arises, what kind of "explanation" of interpretive choices are we looking for or do we expect to find?

To adopt a Kantian form of speaking, we might say that the assumption that interpretations may be predetermined by what they purport to be interpretations of is a precondition of thinking coherently about interpretation. In Wittgensteinian terms, this assumption is built into our language game—I would add, into all the language games we know to have been actually practiced. In either vocabulary, the notion of a text prior to interpretation is something we *presuppose* rather than something we could ever *prove*, for any attempt to prove it would already have to presuppose it before it could start. Fish concedes as much in his present essay when he speaks of the "absoluteness" of certain beliefs and assumptions (p. 107). But he does not retract his earlier view (as we will see, his "anti-professional" argument restates it), and he does not see that his present position would leave him without a vantage point for coherently stating that view; for from what possible standpoint could Fish profess to *know* that "all objects are made and not found"?

Fish actually contradicted that thesis in the unguarded moments

of *Is There a Text in This Class?* Thus having said that “theories . . . always produce exactly the results they predict” and that “the trick would be to find a theory that *didn't* work,” Fish went on to adduce at least one striking example of a theory that didn't work. Taking up the case of what happened to Chomsky's theory of syntax when faced with results it couldn't explain, Fish observed that though the orthodox Chomskians managed to ignore the problem for awhile, “eventually *the weight of the unassimilable data proved too much for the model* and it more or less collapsed” (pp. 362–63). The emphasis is mine, in order to underscore how fully a sentence like this one demolishes Fish's logical edifice. Once again, if Fish thought that we inevitably “transform” the facts according to our interpretive model, why did he suppose the Chomskians had to abandon their model, instead of just transforming the data to suit it? To say that “the weight of unassimilable data proved too much for the model” is surely to presuppose that the data existed prior to the model and exerted independent force on it.

One begins to see how stubbornly language resists the formulation of Fish's message, betraying him into unwitting acknowledgments of the priority of texts which he wishes to deny. The persistent anomalousness in Fish's attempt to state his case comes through in various ways: in his talk of how interpreters “transform” data when there is supposedly no prior stuff to transform; in his use of pronouns which by his lights refer to nothing: for example, “the shape” of a group of his students' interpretations “was constrained not by the names [on the classroom blackboard] but by the interpretive assumptions that gave them [*sic*] a significance before they [*sic*] were seen” (p. 328); in his claim that certain facts are paradigm specific when if they really were his own reference to them would make no sense: for example, Pat Kelly, a visionary baseball player, “simply did not recognize the facts to which the sports writers' questions routinely refer” (p. 270); how, then, did Kelly correct the writers about those facts, as Fish says he did? And how did Fish know what Kelly was talking about?

We need go no further than the incident which inspired the title of *Is There a Text in This Class?* for a case in which Fish assumes that a text can predetermine how it is interpreted. You recall that in Fish's anecdote a professor is asked, and initially misconstrues, the question, “Is there a text in this class?” and is finally led to the appropriate context by the student's further explanation, “No, no, I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?” (p. 305). In telling the story, Fish clearly assumes that the “text” here, the student's questions, controls its interpreter, specifying its relevant and nonrelevant contexts.⁵

Scholes puts his finger on the key problem when he says that Fish's conception of an interpretive community fails to admit "any difference between the primary system in which a text is encoded and secondary systems that can be brought to bear only by an interpreter [and an author or speaker] who comprehends the primary system."⁶ Applying Scholes's terms to the "Is there a text in this class?" incident, we could call the "primary system" here the natural language of English (whose terms are infinitely translatable into other natural languages), while the "secondary systems" would be (1) the "system" of academic literary theory, containing theories which say that interpretation is "just us," and (2) the "system" of classroom protocol requiring the purchasing of textbooks. Because Fish's student and her professor shared both the primary and secondary systems, the one was able to manipulate her "text" to move the other from the wrong secondary system to one called for by the text.⁷

Scholes's remarks suggest that, despite its grain of truth, the proposition that "interpretive strategies 'produce' (or 'create') texts" is too grossly formulated to be more helpful than misleading in the philosophy of interpretation. As Scholes puts it, "The notion of a single interpretive community presiding over every act of interpretation is mistaken and misleading. . . . Most acts that justify the term 'interpretation' at all involve the use of several codes, and most interpretive disputes can be usefully seen as disputes over the proper hierarchy of codes" (p. 178).

A corollary here would be that while any "secondary system" must be a product of *some* "institution," such systems need not be institutionally *specific*. That is, the same secondary systems are shared across different institutions—a fact which explains how readers of different critical schools have a basis from which to disagree about particular texts. Recognizing the areas of *overlap* across different institutions would check the tendency encouraged by Fish to talk as if interpretive communities were disjunctive and incommensurable⁸—as they would be if interpretive strategies were institutionally specific. Scholes's more differentiated vocabulary obviously does not solve all the problems of interpretive theory, much less offer a magic resolution of interpretive disputes, but it points the way toward a less misleading model for reconciling what readers bring to texts with what they discover in them.

For the fact is that Fish would really need a new language in order to describe his model coherently, a language in which pronouns like "them" and "they" and verbs like "transform" were not forever intruding, with their awkward implication of entities prior to interpretation and objects which are trans-institutional rather than institu-

tionally specific. Fish's argument would have better luck in the language game played on Jorge Luis Borges' fictional planet of Tlön, where religion, letters, and metaphysics, Borges tells us, "all presuppose idealism," and thus where our everyday notions of identity, causality, and continuity are regarded as the perverse aberrations of heresiarchs.⁹ In Tlön, for example, the verbs "find" and "lose" are "neologisms not authorized by usage and alien to all rigorous thought," since these words presuppose the identity, independent of mind and language, of what is said to be found and lost (p. 11). That is the kind of language Fish needs.

All this, however, may seem quite beside the point of Fish's present essay, "Anti-Professionalism," where he seems to have left behind the problems in philosophy of interpretation which were so central to *Is There a Text in This Class?* for the quite different concerns of the sociology of professionalism. But Fish's present attack on "anti-professionalism" has merely transposed his earlier arguments into a sociological idiom. The villain of Fish's melodrama, now called by the name "anti-professional," is Fish's earlier pet target, namely, anybody who feels threatened by the reduction of interpretive authority to the question of which groups possess the power to force their standards on others. Just as the target of *Is There a Text in This Class?* was the person who could not give up the myth of something "outside" interpretation which motivates and licenses reading, the target of Fish's present essay is the person who clings to the security blanket of some value or end "outside" professionalism which legitimates criticism and teaching. Earlier Fish called these opponents philosophically naive; now he also calls them anti-professional.

It is not surprising that Fish should so easily make the transition from the philosophy to the sociology of interpretation, since the argument of *Is There a Text in This Class?* already conflated the two. In transferring sole and exclusive authority to interpretive communities, Fish's message was, in effect, "Whatever is institutionalized is right," and that continues to be his message here.

One might be tempted to reply to Fish that it need not be either anti-professional or philosophically naive to criticize the *existing* forms of professionalism against some competing idea of what professionalism should be. But such an argument can have no meaning in Fish's universe, since it assumes that it makes some normative difference what the particular *content* of professionalism is at a particular moment. For Fish, whatever professionalism happens to be at any moment is necessarily what it "should" be; being professional for Fish is accepting as correct whatever goes on in a profession. To criticize

any profession is automatically to appeal to a nonexistent extra-institutional standard.

But is it necessarily? In making this jump, Fish once again betrays his overly monolithic notion of institutions and fails once more to distinguish between critical standards which are "institutional," as all standards are by definition, and critical standards which are institutionally *specific*, as all are not. Take Fish's remarks on Richard Ohmann, who questioned "the presence of a Renaissance specialist in a small college in Joplin, Missouri" as an instance of parochial professional interests having been placed above larger community interests. Fish charges that Ohmann has sought to invoke "a noninstitutional standard" (p. 101), something "outside" institutions in general. But has he? So far as I can see, what Ohmann has invoked is not a *noninstitutional* standard but the standard of "the needs of Joplin," which, whatever we take those needs to be, are as "institutional" as any other standard one could name.

In fact in this case, the Joplin standard is not even external to the professional standard, insofar as professional literary study claims to hold itself accountable to the larger values of the nonprofessional community. Ohmann has not attacked literary studies from outside the profession, much less from outside all institutions, but has held it responsible to its own declared values. Once again, we need a more differentiated model of intra-institutional and cross-institutional conflict than Fish provides.

If we read through to the end of his essay, we find Fish finally conceding that it is *not* after all necessarily anti-professional to criticize the reigning forms of professionalism. We even find him concluding that "anti-professionalism is professionalism itself in its purest form" (p. 106). One may think Fish is merely indulging his gift for perverse paradox here, but one should recognize that this conclusion is actually required by the contradictions of Fish's position. For if the practices accepted within a professional institution are always right, what happens when attacks on the professional institution have become accepted within the institution? They must be right, too—though presumably they did not *become* right until they became institutionally respectable. Once the "community" has become fragmented and pluralized, Fish can only vindicate all its different factions and pluralities, thus evading the hard question of what is to be done when models of professionalism conflict.

All Fish can do is conclude that anti-professionalism is the ultimate form of professionalism. This is a conclusion so singularly question-begging that I suspect even the philosophers of Tlön might lose patience with it.

NOTES

- 1 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), p. 274; hereafter cited in text.
- 2 Fish, p. 15. Conversely, Fish wrote, "members of different communities will disagree because from each of their respective positions the other 'simply' cannot see what is obviously and inescapably there" (p. 15). I have heard Fish deny that his concept of interpretive communities was or is "monolithic" (in an essay entitled "Change," delivered at Georgetown University, June 1984), but that it often will be obvious from the quotations presented here.
- 3 Cleanth Brooks and Austin Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1960), pp. 9–12.
- 4 Robert Scholes, "Who Cares About the Text?" *Novel*, 17, No. 2 (Winter 1984), 176.
- 5 This contradiction was pointed out to me by my student at Northwestern University, Kirstin Peterson. In *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, 1982), Jonathan Culler acutely points out "the reemergence of the text's control" in Fish's work (p. 72).
- 6 Scholes, "Who Cares About the Text?" p. 178. On the "monolithic" nature of Fish's conception of community, see n. 2 above. Stephen Toulmin objects extensively to the practice of regarding "paradigms, or constellations of absolute presuppositions, as unitary and indivisible" (*Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts* [Princeton, 1972], p. 123), a point not taken up by Fish in his remarks on Toulmin in the present essay.
- 7 When someone says something like this, Fish tends to object that one can easily imagine a situation in which another quite different context would be the "right" one, yielding quite a different meaning—i.e., "contexts" are unstable. Following Derrida vs. Searle, deconstructionists have made heavy—and I think fallacious—use of this "structural openness of context" (in Jonathan Culler's phrase, *On Deconstruction*, pp. 123 ff.), as if it were an argument for something "problematic" about interpretation.
- 8 See above, n. 7.
- 9 Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," tr. James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York, 1964), p. 8.