

STANLEY FISH "WHAT MAKES AN INTERPRETATION ACCEPTABLE?" (1980)

By addressing the conditions by which all truth-claims are articulated, few have responded better than Fish to the absolutism, the quest for fixed interpretations, which has dominated literary criticism. He attempts to demolish the possibility of all absolute truth-claims by proposing that for those who believe "in determinate meaning" (338), therefore "disagreement can only be a theological error" (338). Fish points out that for those who believe in absolute determinacy, the 'truth' is empirically ascertainable, lying "plainly in view, available to any who has the eyes to see" (338). In this scheme of things, those who do not agree with this putatively self-evident 'truth' are thought to "perversely substitute their own meanings for the meanings that texts obviously bear" (338). Arguing, by contrast, that it is what he calls 'interpretive communities' which "constitute the objects upon which its members . . . can then agree" (338), Fish contends that it is an illusion to believe that "facts exist in their own evident shape and that disagreements are to be resolved by referring the respective parties to the facts as they really are" (338). Disagreements cannot be resolved by reference to the 'facts' "because the facts emerge only in the context of some point of view" (338). As a result, disagreements as to the 'truth' "must occur between those who hold (or are held by) different points of view" (338). Consequently, what is at stake in a disagreement is the "right to specify what the facts can hereafter be said to be" (338).

Fish argues that what goes on in the field of literary criticism is a variation upon this scenario. It is here that

everyone's claim is that his interpretation more perfectly accords with the facts, but where everyone's purpose is to persuade the rest of us to the version of the facts he espouses by persuading us to the interpretive principles in the light of which those facts will seem indisputable. (339)

The text is a "consequence of the interpretation for which it is supposedly evidence" (340) as a result of which a word "will be seen to *obviously* have one meaning or another" (340) only "in the *light* of an already assumed interpretation" (my emphasis; 340). Whenever a critic makes adamant assertions of the sort 'without a doubt . . . ' or 'there can be no disputing the fact that . . . ,' "you can be sure that you are within hailing distance of the interpretive principles which produce the facts that he presents as obvious" (341). Consequently, it follows that "when one interpretation wins out over another, it is not because the first has been shown to be in accordance with the fact but because it from the perspective of its assumptions that the facts are now being specified" (340).

Fish goes so far as to argue, in opposition to the pluralists, that there is nothing in the text itself which rules out some readings and allows others. Given that the text "is always a function of interpretation, then the text cannot be the location of the core of agreement by means of which we reject interpretations" (342). This rejection is, rather, "determined by the literary institution which at any one time will authorise only a finite number of interpretive strategies" (342), that is, by a "core of agreement" or "canons of acceptability" (348) concerning the "ways of *producing* the text" (342). This does not mean that these rules are "monolithic or stable" (343). Rather, the "boundaries of the acceptable are continually being redrawn" (343). An easily dismissed reading does not mean that the text excludes it but that there is as yet no elaborated interpretive procedure for producing that text" (345), "no way of 'looking' or reading (and remember, all acts of looking or reading are ways) that would result in the emergence" (346) of meanings of the sort that has been easily dismissed.

Fish proceeds to argue persuasively that what is transformed when emergent canons of acceptability permit a new way of looking at the same text is not the text per se. The object of transformation is, rather, the text(s) produced by the prior interpretive strategies which the new strategies will in turn dislodge. To put this another way, 'getting back to the

text itself' is a gesture frequently lauded but it is "not a move one can perform because the text one gets back to will be the text demanded by some other interpretation" (354). Indeed, Fish contends that the best way to conceptualise the relationship between dominant and emergent strategies is in terms of displacement: a

new interpretive strategy always makes its way in some relationship of opposition to the old, which has often marked out a negative space (of things that aren't done) from which it can emerge into respectability. . . . Rhetorically the new position announces itself as a break from the old, but in fact it is radically dependent on the old, because it is only in the context of some differential relationship that it can be perceived as new or, for that matter, perceived at all. (349)

In other words, the "discovery of the 'real point' is always what is claimed whenever a new interpretation is advanced, but the claim makes sense only in relation to a point (or points) that had previously been considered the real one" (350). The reason for this that the "space in which a critic works has been marked out for him by his predecessors, even though he is obliged by the conventions of the institution to dislodge them" (350). That is, "it is because something has already been said" (350) that the critic "can now say something different" (350) which is reflected in what Fish describes as the "unwritten requirement that an interpretation present itself as remedying a deficiency in the interpretations that have come before it" (350).

In short, Fish contends, the basic gesture involved in all criticism is to disavow interpretation in favour of simply presenting the text; but it is actually a gesture in which one set of interpretive principles is replaced by another that happens to claim for itself the virtue of not being an interpretation at all. The claim, however, is an impossible one since in order 'simply to present' the text, one must at the very least describe it . . . and description can occur only within a stipulative understanding of what there is to be described, an understanding that will produce the object of its attention. (353)

The announcement that one is 'returning to the text' or to the 'facts themselves' will be a powerful rhetorical ploy as long as it is predicated on the assumption that criticism is secondary to the text in the same way that interpretation is secondary to the facts themselves. As Fish puts it, "there are no moves that are not moves in the game, and this includes even the move by which one claims" (355) not to be part of the game.

For all these reasons, a truly radical interpretation (of the 'world' or of literary 'texts') is an impossibility because "in order to be wholesale, it would have to be made in terms wholly outside" (354-355) the dominant conventions in place and by which it could not therefore be recognised as such.