Stanley Fish's Tightrope Act

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Contents

Works Cited 12

Save the World on Your Own Time. **Stanley Fish. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. 189 pp.**

Whatever our opinion may be about our long-time academic star Stanley Fish— Milton revisionist, anti-foundational theorist, and administrative entrepreneur—we can't help being dazzled anew by his *chutzpah* as, from semi-retirement in Florida, he has morphed into a public intellectual for all seasons in a *New York Times* weekly blog and other journalistic venues. Holding forth on everything from religion in politics to a reevaluation of Kim Novak as a sex symbol, he delights in breaking every rule he sets forth in *Save the World on Your Own Time* against scholars mouthing off about subjects outside their academic specialization. To be sure, he feels he can speak about Novak and other worldly matters as long as he's not within his classroom, scholarly realm, or administrative role. Though published by Oxford, like several of his scholarly tomes, this book is mostly a collection of previously published journalistic pieces addressed to general rather than scholarly readers—a point that presents some serious equivocations, as we will see. He has also aged into something of a curmudgeon, though his temperament is more that of a bemused Socratic gadfly. His thinking, as always, can be astringently provocative, his style witty and finely honed—despite occasional tics like his excessive use here and elsewhere of *perspicuous* and *perspicuity.*

Fish's aim here is to present the most systematic version to date of his distinctive take on the perennial issue of political, moral, and other advocacy by college *teachers, as well as administrators and whole universities. His position is equally, adamantly critical of the political left and right. It is based on the principle of "academicizing" political or moral issues:* "To academicize a topic is to detach it from the context of its real world urgency, where there is a vote to be taken or an agenda to be embraced, and insert it into a context of academic urgency, where there is an account to be offered or an analysis to be peiformed *(27). He explains:*

> This is not to say that academic work touches on none of the issues central to politics, ethics, civics, and economics; it is just that when those issues arise in an academic context, they should be discussed in academic terms; that is, they should be the objects of analysis, comparison, historical placement, etc.; the arguments put forward in relation to them should be dissected and assessed *as* arguments and not as preliminaries to action on the part of those doing the assessing. The action one takes (or should take) at the conclusion of an academic discussion is the action of rendering an *academic* verdict as in "That argument makes sense," "there's a hole in the reasoning here," "die audtor does (or does not) realize her intention," "in this debate, X has the better of Y," "the case still is not proven." (25-26)

He cites several mission statements by prestigious universities to point out what he finds to be confusions in these matters, like Yale's dedication to developing students' "moral, civic, and creative capacities to the fullest" (11). He responds tartly:

> I'm all for moral, civic, and creative capacities, but I am not sure that there is much I or anyone else could do as a teacher to develop them. Moral capacities (or their absence) have no relationship whatsoever to the reading of novels, or the running of statistical programs, or the execution of laboratory procedures, all of which can produce certain skills, but not moral states. Civic capacities—which mean, I suppose, the capacities that go along with responsible citizenship—won't be acquired simply because you have learned about the basic structures of American government or read the Federalist papers (both good things to do). You could ace all your political science and public policy courses and still drop out and go live in the woods or become the Unabomber. (11)

Well, as with stories of Nazis who read Goethe and listened to Mozart while stoking the gas chambers, one could argue that although not everyone derives the intended value from study of the humanities, enough students might to justify the stated goals. Still, Fish has a point about the inflated claims in such mission statements. And he uses his principle to make some trenchant judgments, like one against Harvard President Larry Summers's ill-fated pronouncements on differing cognitive capacities between women and men in science. While most of the controversy around this episode was based on the dubious credibility of the studies Summers cited, Fish argues that this was beside the point, which is that Summers should have spoken just as an administrator—not as a scientist, which is even outside his field of academic expertise, economics. At times, however, Fish pushes his principle beyond what many of us would consider tolerable limits, as when he takes a "strictly business" view of universities' fiscal policies, opposing responsible investment of endowments or living-wage movements for non-academic employees: "The goal should be to employ the best workers at the lowest possible wages. The goal should not be to redress economic disparities by unilaterally paying more than the market demands" (31).

Fish can sound like a right-winger at such times, but at others he staunchly denounces the likes of David Horowitz, William J. Bennett, and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni for being the mirror image of academic leftists wanting to politicize universities toward partisan ends, and for mimicking "vulgar-postmodernism" to push for affirmative action hiring of Republican faculty in the name of "intellectual diversity" and what Horowitz coyly terms "'the unsettled character of all human knowledge'" (121). (Thus have the chickens of deconstruction once again come home to roost.) His chapter "Higher Education Under Attack" should be required reading for every administrator in the humanities, for the ammunition it provides in exposing the hypocrisy of conservative legislators and cultural warriors blaming rising tuition costs on wasteful spending by universities throughout decades of Reaganomic cuts in government funding for education while the society-wide cost of living has spiked. In this case, Fish justifies administrators and faculties taking sides on a political issue because it is one that directly impinges on universities' academic functions.

One position calculated to raise the hackles of Fish's progressive colleagues is his opposition to any notion of universities as democratically administered institutions or of classrooms as sites for the practice of democracy. He cites another mission statement claiming that college should "help young people to learn to speak in their own voices and to respect the voices of others," as well as to develop "a capacity for insight and concern for others." Fish comments, "Respecting the voices of others is not even a good idea. You shouldn't respect the voices of others simply because they *are* others (that's the mistake of doctrinaire multiculturalism); you should respect the voices of those others whose arguments and recommendations you find coherent and persuasive" (54).

Well. It hurts to admit it, but I am increasingly inclined to agree with him here the older I get, though for somewhat different reasons, as my Freirean convictions have fallen victim to the law of unintended consequences. As it happens, I have never had the opportunity to teach in the kind of urban, working-class, multicultural setting lauded by progressive champions of a polyphony of diverse voices, but have had to cope with homogeneous student bodies, overwhelmingly white, middle-class, rural or small-town, and Republican. In their single-minded pursuit of job-oriented education, their resentment of any general-education requirements, and their hope for easy A's through rote learning, they direct their "resistance and transgression" not toward the dominant society, but toward us hapless critical pedagogues trying to prompt them to question it. My encouragement of open classroom discussions has often led to the most belligerent, ill-informed students, usually conservative, drowning out everyone else's voices, or to meandering bull-sessions among students largely ignorant about the topics under discussion ("I feel that Saddam Hussein was behind 9/11"). My insistence that students be able to provide sources, evidence, and cogent reasoning for the views they express in discussion or papers just leads to semester-end evaluations complaining, "He doesn't respect students' opinions." At this point, I can out-curmudgeon Fish in the conviction that course evaluations, initiated like many other reforms of the sixties as means of empowering disenfranchised students, have degenerated into consumer-satisfaction surveys—further enfranchising those most enfranchised—and should be abolished.

Fish's general project throughout this book of distinguishing between analysis and advocacy, academic and political or moral judgments, is a tricky tightrope act. Although he goes to admirable length defending it against some disagreements, it is obviously subject to critiques from several directions. Some of these, he has shown sympathy for in the past, but here he tends to dismiss them with straw-man oversimplifications rather than serious considering their most refined formulations. One is Marxist ideological critique and its variations by the Frankfurt School, Althusserians, Foucauldians, Freireans, feminists, post-colonialists, and educational theorists like James Berlin, Ira Shor, Henry Giroux—and (sorry, Stanley) Fish's wife, Jane Tompkins, author of the celebrated "Pedagogy of the Distressed" in this journal. I might be

inclined to pursue these directions myself, but I assume they are already familiar to most readers of *College English.* Instead, I will provisionally concede partial agreement with Fish while pursuing some possible shortcomings in his case on its own terms.

He says, "College and university teachers can (legitimately) do two things: (1) introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry that had not previously been part of their experience; and (2) equip those same students with the analytical skills—of argument, statistical modeling, laboratory procedure—that will enable them to move confidently within those traditions and to engage in independent research after a course is over" (12-13). Putting aside for a moment the vagueness about how these goals might fit into the specific context of English studies, let's take Fish at his word here. Regarding #1, the kind of students prevalent in the colleges where I have taught for over three decades are quite unlikely to have previously experienced leftist bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry (Marxism and other varieties of socialism, feminism, and multiculturalism). Nor can these bodies of knowledge, with large traditions of intellectual and literary champions, be dismissed as beyond the fringe of legitimate scholarly study, as Fish rightly dismisses creationism and Holocaust denial. Concerning #2, consider his statements about teaching analytic and argumentative skills quoted above, as well as these: "In a classroom, the gathering of evidence on the way to reaching a conclusion is the prime academic activity" (70); "The goal is to establish, by argument and evidence, the superiority of one analysis or description or prescription over its (intellectual) rivals" (173).

Suppose that instead of advocating or attempting to indoctrinate students into left political views, a teacher says, as I habitually do, "This leftist source makes this argument, supporting it with this reasoning and evidence," and that the teacher goes on to compare and contrast this argument fair-mindedly with conservative counterparts, then "establish [es] by argument and evidence, the superiority of one analysis or description or prescription [the leftist one] over its (intellectual) rivals." To borrow a page from Fish's well-known defense of anti-foundationalism, this simple rhetorical move would seem to re-admit to legitimate academic discourse, at a stroke, the whole body of political content and advocacy (of superior prescriptions) that Fish has banished. The same move can be used to resurrect every other educational goal Fish kills off: the case for the moral value of education in general and of literature in particular, instruction to "respect the voice of others," multiculturalism, etc. Simply academicize the arguments for and against each of these goals, in the manner of Gerald Graff's "teaching the conflicts." (Here and elsewhere, Fish dismisses Graff with a few asides—rather ungraciously, especially considering that as dean at the University of Illinois-Chicago, he hired Graff and presumably encouraged his curricular and pedagogical innovations.) Fish does not recognize his inconsistency between the above passage on page 173 and one two pages later, trashing Mark Bracher's "Teaching for Social Justice: Re-Educating the Emotions Through Literary Study" in *JAC.* Fish rejects out of hand Bracher's claim: "What right do we have to impose our view [. . .]—'our liberal' or 'progressive' ideology—on our students? We have the right [. . Jbecause the

evidence supportsf. . Jour ideology" (Bracher, qtd. in Fish 17 5). If Bracher or any other teacher can "perspicuously" establish that the evidence supports left ideology (against conservatives' best shots in rebuttal), then shouldn't he or she be squarely in Fish's academic ballpark?

Fish likewise dismisses another of Bracher's claims, that "if literary study could systematically help students overcome their indifference to the suffering that surrounds them, and experience compassion for the sufferers, it would make a significant contribution to social justice" (Bracher, qtd. in Fish 171). Fish rebuts:

> But literary study could have this effect only if it were no longer literary study, that is, if the study of stylistic effects, genres, meters, verse forms, novels, romance, epic, the contest of interpretations [. . .] were made instrumental to an end not contemplated by those who either produce the literature or consume it. To be sure, some poets or novelists write with the purpose of expanding the sympathies of their readers, but what of those who do not? (171)

But, damn it, what of all those who *do*? How are we to evaluate *their* quality? Or are they to be banned from English studies? Fish was a Yale grad student in the days of Cleanth Brooks & Company, and I've always thought his multiple theoretical phases were basically variations on the New Criticism, with all its blind spots—for example, toward literary realism, romantic-transcendentalist poetic theory ("Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world"), and existentialist *littérature engagée.* Why not just teach "the contest of interpretations" between formalist and political or moral approaches without pre-judgment, *a la* Graff?

In another formulation, Fish says, "The only advocacy that goes on in the classroom is the advocacy of what J ames Murphy has identified as the intellectual virtues, 'thoroughness, perseverance, intellectual honesty,' components of the cardinal academic virtue of being 'conscientious in the pursuit of truth.' [...] If you're not in the pursuit-of-truth business, you should not be in the university" (20). Leaving aside Fish's voluminous writings on the problematic nature of truth and its pursuit, let's again pursue the consequences of his arguments here. Suppose we take as a subject of academic study the obstacles posed to the pursuit of truth in a society in which public opinion is manipulated by political and corporate forces spending billions of dollars annually to produce propaganda, deception, outright lies, and other more-or-less toxic forms of "spin." (When Fish and other theoretical deep thinkers like Barbara Herrnstein Smith address the subject of truth, it is almost invariably on an abstract epistemological level, avoiding the epistemology of deliberate lying or propaganda.) Shouldn't those of us in the pursuit-of-truth business devote a major part of our teaching and scholarship to dissecting and assessing all these sources of fallacious argument, *as a purely academic enterprise*? Shouldn't we also perhaps take an advocacy position—opposing the systematic stupefaction of the entire American polity and culture, with the same fervor

Fish recommends for opposing cuts in spending for liberal education? In other words, might not the advocacy of "intellectual honesty" take on the force of the kind of moral imperative that Fish claims to eschew, in the manner of Emerson's exhortation to the American Scholar: "See it to be a lie, and you have already dealt it its mortal blow" (75), or Chomsky's "Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of government, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions" (1)?

Also suppose, just hypothetically, that "the superiority of one analysis or description or prescription over its (intellectual) rivals"—say, the intellectual superiority of one political party or ideology in America over others—can be established by "argument and evidence"? Suppose further that one party not only constantly flaunts its anti-intellectualism but is expressly committed to the following view, attributed by journalist Ron Suskind to an "unnamed [Bush] administration official" (generally presumed to be Karl Rove):

> The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality — judiciously, as you will — we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors [. . .] and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." (Qtd. in Danner)

What would Fish say about whether we should be advocates for the party of "the reality-based community" against the party that would replace it with their own fatal fantasies?

I really have no idea how Fish might respond to my questions, and I would be open to being persuaded by his response. But his failure to consider such questions at any length is surely "a hole in his reasoning here." An even more gaping hole is left by his failure to say anything about how the very kind of academic deliberation on political and moral issues that he prescribes and practices here, or the kind of questions that I raise in response, could be centrally incorporated into the liberal arts curriculum, individual courses, and pedagogical practice—particularly in English. All his support of studying analytic skills, "coherent and persuasive" argument, and "the canons of argument and evidence" leaves us rhetoric scholars nodding, yes, yes, of course. And yet, the sum of Fish's attention to the teaching of rhetoric, and particularly argumentative writing, as the academic discipline in which his prescription for academicizing political argument might best be embodied, or to the long history of the academic study of political rhetoric and possible ways of returning it to a central place in the humanities as one means of reversing the universally-lamented decline of political literacy in

America, amounts to —zero. I find this failure to champion a revival of the critical study of political rhetoric especially disappointing for someone with Fish's influence as a theorist, administrator, and public intellectual.

Worse yet, Fish's only direct discussion of writing instruction comes in a disastrous ten-page sub-chapter titled "A Radical Proposition: Teaching Writing in Writing Courses," which his editor should have deep-sixed. It is based on a course Fish taught at UIC, which he introduced by telling students, '"We don't do content in this class. By that I mean we are not interested in ideas—yours, mine, or anyone else's. We don't have an anthology of readings. We don't discuss current events. We don't exchange views on hot-button issues. We don't tell each other what we think about anything—except about how prepositions or participles or relative pronouns function'" (40.) Yes, Fish's course was entirely about grammar, with a dash of usage "howlers" like the confusion between "disinterested" and "uninterested." He insists, "All composition courses should teach grammar and rhetoric, and nothing else. [.. .]Ideas should be introduced not for their own sake, but for the sake of the syntactical and rhetorical points they help illustrate" (44-45). But he doesn't even explain what he includes and excludes under the rubric of "rhetorical points"—a large escape clause. What did students write in this class? Apparently just exercises in grammatical sentences, not even papers.

Now, I happen to agree that all students should be required to study grammar, even Standard English grammar—preferably back in "grammar school" and high school, maybe college Basic Writing, and that grammar, style, and usage should be corollary components in every writing and literature course. But why call a grammar class a writing class? For someone who insists that professors be authorities in their own academic discipline, Fish shows no glimmer of familiarity with a half-century of research on the relation between the teaching of grammar and of writing, or on the relation between form and content in writing. (E.D. Hirsch, who wrote a blurb for Fish's dust jacket, must have swallowed a strong suspension of disbelief to get through this chapter.) The chapter sent me back to Fish's 1992 interview with Gary Olson in *JAC* (reprinted in Fish *There's No)* to see what he said about research in composition pedagogy, which turns out to be precious little; however, his general view of politics and English studies there, including critical pedagogy and critique of political rhetoric, was far less constricted than it is here. Surely Fish, in writing for a non-academic audience here, must have known he was throwing red meat to all those who upon meeting an English professor burst out with mock chagrin, "Oh, oh, I'd better watch my grammar," as well as to right-wing culture warriors who constantly admonish us to teach grammar instead of—whatever else it is that we do.

Moreover, Fish falls into the pernicious practice common to a wide diversity of scholars in rhetcomp of reducing the whole field to The Course Formerly Known as Freshman English—aka First-Year Writing. What about more advanced levels of writing courses as an introduction to academic discourse and incorporation of information assigned for writing in other courses, in the mode of Writing across the Curriculum? What about argumentative writing courses, which I would put at the center of the

humanistic curriculum? Fish only says snidely, "Students who take so-called courses in writing where such topics [hot-button issues] are the staples of discussion may believe, as their instructors surely do, that they are learning how to marshal arguments in ways that will improve their compositional skills. In fact they will be learning nothing they couldn't have learned better by sitting around in a dorm room or a coffee shop" (41). Does Fish therefore believe that advanced courses centrally devoted to argumentative writing cannot improve either students' argumentative or writing skills? None of his crankish pronouncements in this chapter, of course, are supported by a shred of the kind of empirical verification that he insists is central to responsible scholarship.

As one possible alternative to Fish's cramped view of rhetcomp studies, my own approach to these issues that I have developed over the years since "Teaching the Political Conflicts: A Rhetorical Schema" postulates that the "subject" of courses in composition and rhetoric, *beyond First-Year Writing,* should be application to reading and writing instruction of scholarship in critical thinking, cognitive and moral development, sociolinguistics, and principles of argumentative rhetoric. This subject matter should be developed centrally throughout the undergraduate and graduate curriculum, including literary studies.

At one point, Fish advocates teaching "critical analysis," but then adds parenthetically, "sometimes called 'critical thinking,' a phrase without content" (54). This glib dismissal of critical thinking reveals another gap in his scholarship, concerning the history and multifaceted content of critical thinking as an academic discipline. In 1980, Chancellor Glen Dumke mandated "critical" thinking instruction throughout the California State University System. Dumke's executive order was followed by a decade of successful national and international efforts by scholars in Philosophy, English, Speech, Psychology, and Education to delineate criteria of critical thinking and implement them in course content, not only in college but at all levels down to elementary school (see Ennis; Hatcher and Spencer; Lazere, "Critical.") Some of us in English were active players in developing critical thinking courses, but the movement never got a foothold in English studies nationally, and even in California such courses withered away as Philosophy and Speech won the turf wars. Almost all current members of the Association for Informal Logic and Critical Thinking are in Philosophy (more in Canada than in the U.S.) or Educational Psychology.

My own synthesis of scholarship in critical thinking, psychology of cognitive and moral development, and sociolinguistics includes the following modes of intellectual development and reasoning abilities, with obvious applications to reading and writing instruction as well as to forming political and moral judgments:

> Development from authoritarian and absolutist thinking to intellectual autonomy, nuanced thinking, and committed relativism (in William Perry's term).
>
> The ability to retain and apply material previously studied and to sustain an extended line of reasoning in reading, writing, and speaking.

> The ability to reason back and forth between (and to connect) the concrete and the abstract; between the personal and the impersonal; between the literal and the figurative, the explicit and the implicit; between the actual and the hypothetical or between what presently exists and conceivable alternatives; between the past, present, and future; and between causes and effects.
>
> The ability to understand (within personal, historical, and political contexts) complex ideas, multiple levels of meaning or points of view, and to recognize irony, paradox, and ambiguity in disparities between what is said and meant, between appearance and reality, and between intentions and results.

Fish would undoubtedly quarrel with particulars here. But I hope that he and others in our profession will agree that such a general framework provides a far richer conception of rhetcomp studies than his, *entirely within his parameters of academic inquiry*; that it provides the basis for a whole curriculum-full of legitimate applications to politics, public rhetoric, and *especially* literature; and that it presents yet another moral imperative: to defend the development of these abilities against their destruction by the stupefying sound-bite discourse of contemporary politics and mass media.

For one example, take Fish's opposition to teaching students "to respect the voice of others," an opposition I have said that I share in regard to this goal's more naive formulations. However, schemas devised by cognitive and developmental psychologists include a progression from egocentric, ethnocentric, or sociocentric psychology to what Piaget termed "reciprocal" thinking, which enables us to see things from others' viewpoints when we can in fact learn something useful by doing so. Rhetcomp pedagogy applies this progression in approaches like Rogerian argument and Peter Elbow's "believers and doubters," in which students are obliged to identify with their opponents' viewpoint in spoken or written arguments, prior to critiquing it. And the same principle permeates modernist literature, epitomized by Proust in the coda of *The Past Recaptured*:

> Only by art can we get outside ourselves, know what another sees of his universe, which is not the same as ours and the different views of which would otherwise have remained as unknown to us as those there may be on the moon. (1013)

Here art for art's sake is not the formalist aesthetic endorsed by Fish and the New Critics, but, again, a moral imperative to expand our mental horizons beyond what Walter Pater, one of Proust's mentors, termed "that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us" (221). So would Fish perhaps acknowledge that evolving from a self-centered viewpoint to one *capable* of empathizing with that of others whose views may be "coherent and persuasive" is a moral and

aesthetic virtue—as is the resulting capacity to transcend racial, gender, class, party, or nationalistic prejudices, and to "experience compassion for the sufferers"? Would he further acknowledge that pedagogy in rhetcomp and literature might conceivably provide effective means for expanding these capacities?

My aim here has not been to play "gotcha!" with Fish, but to urge him to write another entire book to fill the significant holes in his reasoning in this one—an invitation that I sincerely hope he will accept.

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