The Reader-Response Theory of Stanley Fish

He drew a circle that shut me out--

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout:

But Love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle that took him in!

Edwin Markham

At this point I would like to take a closer look at Stanley Fish's reader-response theory. It is my intent first to examine Fish's literary theory before criticizing it and then tie it in more broadly with the privatization of meaning and other phenomena occurring in philosophy and society which I will argue are historically conditioned. In other words, Fish's thesis is influenced by existential notions of truth and the rise of modernism/post-modernism.

There are really two kinds of reader-response criticism: one is a phenomenological approach to reading which characterizes much of Fish's earlier work, and the other is an epistemological theory characteristic of Fish's later work. The phenomenological method has much to commend itself to us as it focuses on what happens in the reader's mind as he or she reads. Fish applies this method in his early work "Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost." His thesis in this work is that Milton used a number of literary techniques intentionally to lead the reader into a false sense of security whereupon he would effect a turn from the reader's expectations in order to surprise the reader with his own prideful self-sufficiency. The supposed intent of Milton was to force the reader to see his own sinfulness in a new light and be forced back to God's grace. Fish's thesis is a rather ingenious approach to Paradise Lost and to Milton's (mis)leading of the reader.

Fish's concern at this point in his career is with what "is really happening in the act of reading," and this is reflected in his compilations of essays entitled Is There a Text in This Class? especially the first half. Fish defines his own phenomenological approach as "an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time. His concern is with what the text does as opposed to what it means. As J. F. Worthen suggests, much of his work can be seen as a reaction against the formalism that characterized the age of New Critical theory which held that meaning was embedded in the textual artifact or, as Wimsatt and Beardsley referred to it, "the object". He suggests that, "The context for the discussion is the question of whether formal features exist prior to and independently of interpretive strategies. As one might imagine Fish eventually offers a negative response to this question. He posits that rather than having a text that contains formal features identifiable in all times and places that it is the
reader that projects these features onto the text, thereby also answering "No" to the question, "Is there a text in this class?"

From this point in Fish's career his theories evolve into a form of criticism that rejects the author's intentionally and places meaning solely within the arena of those receiving the text. Thus his theory is sometimes called "reception aesthetics" or "affective stylistics." Fish claims that it is the interpretive community that creates its own reality. It is the community that invests a text, or for that matter life itself, with meaning. Those who claim that meaning is to be found in some eternal superstructure or substructure of reality he labels "foundationalists." Naturally, because foundationalists comprise their own interpretive communities and interpret through such a grid, they will be opposed to theories such as his own. His theory is epistemological in that it deals not so much with literary criticism (although the implications for such are tremendous) as with how one comes to know. In the following analysis of Fish's theory I will focus primarily on his later reader-response theory.

Meaning in the Reader

This aspect of Fish's theory is one of the most radical and controversial. He posits that meaning inheres not in the text but in the reader, or rather the reading community. "In the procedures I would urge," he writes, "the reader's activities are at the center of attention, where they are regarded not as leading to meaning but as having meaning. He can hold this because he believes that there is no stable basis for meaning. There is no correct interpretation that will always hold true. Meaning does not exist "out there" somewhere. It exists, rather, within the reader.

In his earlier work he made a claim, not wholly disavowed in his later material, that what a text means is the experience that it produces in the reader. To define meaning he says, "It is an experience; it occurs; it does something; it makes us do something. Indeed, I would go so far as to say, in direct contradiction of Wimsatt and Beardsley, that what it does is what it means. Here Fish stakes out the territory of his critical enterprise which is to set himself against the formalist principles of the past with its supposed scientific agenda. This project he admits took some time from which to effect a complete liberation. But this is the principle that will eventually lead his theory from (what his critics would call) an "objective" to a fully blown "subjective" interpretive theory. Indeed, his early theory appears to be completely vulnerable to the criticism of subjectivity as he posits an experiential dimension to meaning which inheres in "the active and activating consciousness of the reader," a charge he will later attempt to counter.

Fish's next move in his anti-formalist agenda is to deny the text as object, which was so important to Wimsatt and Beardsley and the New Critics. "The objectivity of the text is an illusion and, moreover, a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically convincing. What exactly Fish means by this statement is somewhat unclear. He does not, as it may appear, deny the ontological reality or the existence of the palpable object, although one
could argue that that is exactly what this sentence by itself means because he apparently pairs the word "objective" with "physical. It is the context that illuminates what he is driving at. But he does deny the text's independence as a repository of meaning. The text does not contain meaning: despite being written upon, it is a tabula rasa, a blank slate onto which the reader, in reading, actually writes the text.

Fish takes the idea of the hermeneutical circle seriously. The reader is always reading her preunderstanding back into the text with no possibility of achieving an "objective" or author-centered interpretation. Fish claims that an interpretive theory is itself circular, that the interpreter will always find what he is looking for in the text, that formal patterns "are themselves constituted by an interpretive act. He claims at one point 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.

Because the assumptions one begins with will determine the outcome of the study, for Fish, "success is inevitable. The methods with which one approaches the text have already determined the outcome, one's presuppositions actuate the product.

For Fish a text is only a Rorschach blot onto which the reader projects her self-understanding or, as we shall see, her culturally determined assumptions. The text contains nothing in itself, rather the content is supplied by the reader. It is the reader that determines the shape of text, its form, and its content. This is how Fish can claim that reader's write texts. Worthen's comment is apt. He says, "as far as Fish is concerned, reading can only repeat reality, in that it necessarily consists of nothing but replications of independently existing collective interpretive strategies. This is exactly what reading does and this is one of the difficulties of his theory. It fails to account for the text being able to expand the readers' understanding or Weltanshung by introducing her to a different way of perceiving. For Fish the text can only function as a mirror that provides a reflection of its reader.

Authorial Intent

It is in this same manner that Fish dismisses the idea of authorial intent as the guiding principle in interpretation. In analyzing one of his previous critical works he declares,

I did what critics always do: I "saw" what my interpretive principles permitted or directed me to see, and then I turned around and attributed what I had 'seen' to a text and an intention. . . . What I am suggesting is that formal units are always a function of the interpretive model one brings to bear; they are not "in" the text, and I would make the same argument for intentions.
To claim that the author intended to say or do such and such is really a declaration regarding the interpreter, in Fish's theory. Thus different interpreters will see different intentions because they are a creation of the reader and not the author. As with New Critical theory, the author fails to live past the creation of the text, indeed, for Fish the author as well is a creation of the reader.

Fish can make this move because of his epistemic beliefs that nothing we see, perceive, or think is uninterpreted. He considers the attempt to access the author's intention as naive; for how would one ever access an intention as it does not exist in any objective or uninterpreted realm that can be mediated to our consciousness without itself being interpreted? We could have access to documents regarding the author's true intention, "but the documents . . . that would give us that intention are no more available to a literal reading (are no more uninterpreted) than the literal reading it would yield." Thus when John writes, "These things have been written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God; and that believing you may have eternal life in his name," we are no closer to his intentions than were he to have said and written nothing.

Fish is following after the New Critical school, which as we have seen, disregarded authorial intent as well as historical interpretation. For Fish it is not important to access the original context in order to access meaning. He says, "to consult dictionaries, grammars, and histories is to assume that meanings can be specified independently of the activity of reading. But as we have seen it is the activity of reading which takes center stage in the making of meaning. Fish posits this because he believes that we as interpreters are cut off from past worlds or cultures. In other words, he believes that we are without commonality with past cultures and that, therefore, a complete disjuncture exists. The interpreter belongs to a different world from the author.

Interpretive Communities

What lies behind Fish's thinking at this point is a strong view of the social construction of reality. Fish firmly believes that knowledge is not objective but always socially conditioned. All that one thinks and "knows" is an interpretation that is only made possible by the social context in which one lives. For Fish the very thoughts one thinks are made possible by presuppositions of the community in which one lives and furthermore the socially conditioned individual, which all individuals are, cannot think beyond the limits made possible by the culture. This culture is referred to by Fish as an "interpretive community" and the strategies of an interpreter are community property, and insofar as they at once enable and limit the operations of his consciousness, he is too [community property]. . . Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties.

Fish believes that interpretive communities, like languages, are purely conventional, that is, arbitrarily agreed upon constructions. The way a community lives is in no way a
reflection of some higher reality, it is rather a construction, or edifice that has been erected by consensus. This holds true for the interpretive strategies a culture or an institution employs as well as their notions of right and wrong. A culture's morality is no more founded in any external reality than its language. Nor is it possible to specify how language correlates with the external world. Language and its usage are arbitrary decisions made by convention as is the fact that we call north "North" instead of something else.

In response to a criticism launched by M. H. Abrams, Fish explains some of his understanding of the conventional nature of language.

If what follows is communication or understanding, it will not be because he and I share a language, in the sense of knowing the meanings of individual words and the rules for combining them, but because a way of thinking, a form of life, shares us, and implicates us in a world of already-in-place objects, purposes, goals, procedures, values, and so on; and it is to the features of that world that any words we utter will be heard as necessarily referring [italics mine].

Similarly, what we call literature is not such because of some abiding principle of truth or art that exists in an atemporal state, but it is such because the culture values it for interests of its own, that is because it reflects the culture's values and beliefs in some way.

Thus the act of recognizing literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it.

In this view literature is simply the expression of an ideology. Because of his views on literature, literature tends to lose its "special status" as literature and becomes simply a reflection of communal values which is as subject to change as are cultures. That is not to say that the individual or culture consciously chooses its values, which would imply some form of objectivity or the ability to stand apart from one's values. To Fish it is not possible to abstract one's self from one's values. Fish is simply a product of his environment without the ability to choose his beliefs and values. They are instead informed or determined by the culture which is historically conditioned and no more able to choose objectively than the individual.

Using Fish as an example of post-structuralist critical theory, I will in the remaining chapters analyze his thought as it relates to post-modernism. What follows is an examination of post-modernism from the perspective of the discipline of philosophy, or an history of ideas approach. It is not intended to be a comprehensive history of Western philosophy but a brief examination of some of the salient features which I believe have contributed to the rise of what is now being called post-modernism. I will end the chapter with an emphasis on the "linguistic turn", as Rorty has called it, in philosophy of the twentieth century by examining some of the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein as his
thinking bears some similarities to that of Stanley Fish and lays some of the groundwork for the current state of things. Wittgenstein is important as his thinking is often characterized as thoroughly conventionalist and misappropriated as such.

In the following chapters I would also like to take a critical look at some of Fish's theory and examine some of the consequences of his thinking. Fish claims that because his thinking is theoretical it is without consequences (he consistently tells his critics "not to worry"). He is at least disingenuous if not patently dishonest in this assertion as his theories have grave consequence especially for those who would appeal to some transcendent standard.

In taking a critical stance toward Fish's literary theory I am well aware of Fish's response to those who disagree with his theories or, as he puts it, "feel threatened" by his ideas. Those who hold to the idea of essences, or to the reality and accessibility of transcendent truths, he labels as foundationalists, members of the "intellectual right."<sup>Footnote54</sup> And he further accuses them of holding to a naive epistemology which views the mind as merely reflecting the world as it really is (an sich).<sup>Footnote55</sup> Moreover they are characterized as without understanding how fundamental language is to one's world view and the cultural assumptions that go with it. I must plead guilty to being a foundationalist with objections to Fish's theory. Fish claims that his theory, however, is internally coherent, while I will argue just the opposite, that his theory does not cohere based on his own assumptions. Fish's response to these criticisms would be to deny me as his critic access to his theory in the first place because I do not share his assumptions and, to him, only those who are within a community can understand its thought. That claim is, however, as we shall see, one of the bases of my criticism. Let us turn briefly to the history of philosophy.