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Critical Response

II

Stanley Fish's "Interpreting the Variorum": Advance or Retreat?

Steven Mailloux

Readers who have followed Stanley Fish's past campaigns must find his "Interpreting the Variorum" a rather curious performance.¹ The first two sections contain another striking example of Fish's ability to resolve critical disagreements by using his reader-oriented analysis. However, in Section III of the article, Fish seems to have made a strategic retreat: he no longer claims priority for his Literature-in-the-Reader Approach. He now appears satisfied with being one among equals; reader-response, psychoanalytic, even formalist criticisms are now seen as equally valid approaches to literature. This is a far cry from Fish's earlier claims: "I am calling not for the end of stylistics but for a new stylistics, what I have termed elsewhere an 'affective' stylistics, in which the focus of attention is shifted from the spatial context of a page and its observable regularities to the temporal context of a mind and its experiences."² Fish's retreat from this position follows a rather direct course in "Interpreting the Variorum": from the claim that people read this way, using this interpretive strategy; to the qualification, all people interpret but interpretive strategies differ; to the conclusion that no critical interpretive strategy has priority over any other. This radical change in Fish's stance results from a rigorous reexamination of his critical position and his honest attempt to clarify his procedures for himself and his critics. Nevertheless, we might justifiably ask if these most recent developments result in an advance, a retreat, or even a surrender in Fish's rethinking of his reader-response methodology.

1. Stanley E. Fish, "Interpreting the Variorum," Critical Inquiry 2 (Spring 1976): 465–85; all page references made in the text refer to this article.
The crux of Fish's argument in "Interpreting the Variorum" is that people read in different ways (they write different texts) because they belong to different interpretive communities. True enough. However, in the course of his argument Fish seems to collapse the distinction between the interpretive act of reading and the interpretive act of criticism. Fish uses the term interpretive strategies to refer to both the interpretive strategies performed by readers and to his critical strategy which describes those acts. However, critical models are not isomorphic with reading strategies; that is, critical interpretations like Fish's are descriptions of perceptual strategies (in reading) and not the strategies themselves. Fish's implicit dismissal of the reading process/reading description distinction for his own approach leads him to dismiss the distinction for other approaches. And since he has already acknowledged that people read in different ways, he concludes that different critical models are equally valid. Therefore, according to Fish, critics disagree because they read differently. But, as I will show, critical interpretations differ, not because critics belong to different interpretive communities of readers, but because they belong to different interpretive communities of critics.

In previous articles when Fish discussed interpretation, he kept the interpretive act of reading and the interpretive act of criticism conceptually separate. In "What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?" he explains the all-important difference between his reader-response criticism and the work of stylisticians: "I have repeatedly objected to the absence in the work of the stylisticians of any connection between their descriptive and interpretive acts. In the kind of stylistics I propose, interpretive acts are what is being described." Fish's affective stylistics describes the interpretive acts involved in reading, and thus its description is also interpretation. At this point the description/interpretation is still separate from "what is being described"

3. Of course, the definition of reading becomes crucial here. I am using the term to refer to the temporal interaction of the reader with the text, the moment-by-moment psycholinguistic process that occurs from the instant I open a book and perceive the title or first line, "In my younger and more vulnerable years . . ." to the moment I comprehend the final sentence, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

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—the interpretive acts of reading. Fish's final statement in this discussion is perhaps ambiguous:

The stylisticians proceed as if there were observable facts that could first be described and then interpreted. What I am suggesting is that an interpreting entity, endowed with purposes and concerns, is, by virtue of its very operation, determining what counts as the facts to be observed; and, moreover, that since this determining is not a neutral marking out of a valueless area, but the extension of an already existing field of interests, it is an interpretation.  

Who is the “interpreting entity” referred to in this last sentence: the reader, the critic, or both? Since interpretation is the giving of significance to “facts” or (in Fish's terms) “the extension of an already existing field of interests,” Fish's final statement could be referring to critics and readers, both of whom perform interpretive acts. However, since he is contrasting some activity to what the stylisticians do, he seems to be referring to his critical interpretive act. Fish comes close to collapsing the interpretive act of reading with the interpretive act of criticism in this last sentence (or is it only the article’s reader who does this?), but he doesn’t unambiguously do it. Not so in his later article, “Interpreting the Variorum.”

The argument in Section III of “Interpreting the Variorum” moves from a consideration of problems within Fish's model to a transcendence (or expansion) of the model to include a recognition of all critical strategies. The discussion begins with a clear statement of Fish's approach, which restates past formulations preserving the reading process/reading description distinction: “In the procedures I would urge, the reader's activities are at the center of attention. . . . these activities are interpretive—rather than being preliminary to questions of value they are at every moment settling and resettling questions of value—and because they are interpretive, a description of them will also be, and without any additional step, an interpretation, not after the fact, but of the fact (of experiencing)” (p. 474). As Fish begins considering the objections to such descriptive procedures, he introduces the notion of “interpretive strategies” (p. 476), which he uses to refer to activities of readers. In describing the reading experience of a line from Lycidas, Fish writes that “the reader is always making sense. . . . the reader will have hazarded an interpretation, or performed an act of perceptual closure,

5. Fish quotes Hubert Dreyfus, What Computers Can't Do (New York, 1972), p. 136: “There must be some way of avoiding the self-contradictory regress of contexts, or the incomprehensible notion of recognizing an ultimate context, as the only way of giving significance to independent, neutral facts. The only way out seems to be to deny the separation of fact and situation . . . to give up the independence of the facts and understand them as a product of the situation” (“What is Stylistics,” p. 148, n. 37, italics added).
I do not mean that he has done four things, but that he has done one thing, the description of which might take any one of four forms—making sense, interpreting, performing perceptual closure, deciding about what is intended” (p. 477, italics added). Here, reading and description of reading are distinct; however, the distinction starts to blur when Fish begins describing his description.

In his metacritical discussion, reading strategies and critical strategies become synonymous; Fish collapses the distinction between interpretive acts in reading and those in criticism. Fish writes,

rather than intention and its formal realization producing interpretation (the “normal” picture), interpretation creates intention and its formal realization by creating the conditions in which it becomes possible to pick them out. In other words, in the analysis of these lines from Lycidas 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. [Pp. 477-78]

“Interpretive principles” guide his criticism which is based on an “interpretive model”: “formal units are always a function of the interpretive model one brings to bear” (p. 478). From “interpretive principles” to “interpretive model” to “interpretive strategies.” These interpretive strategies in criticism become indistinguishable from the interpretive (perceptual) strategies of reading. In other words, Fish's discussion makes interpretive strategies refer to what originally were two different levels of interpretation: reading and its description. This ambiguity makes the collapsing of the distinction imperceptible: the act of reading and the critical act become one and the same. Therefore, when Fish shows that different interpretive strategies of reading (different perceptual habits) exist (p. 479), it is an easy step to assert that different equally valid interpretive strategies of criticism exist:

The moral is clear: the choice is never between objectivity and interpretation but between an interpretation that is unacknowledged as such and an interpretation that is at least aware of itself. It is this awareness that I am claiming for myself, although in doing so I must give up the claims implicitly made in the first part of this paper. There I argue that a bad (because spatial) model had suppressed what was really happening, but by my own declared principles the notion “really happening” is just one more interpretation. [P. 480]

However, this conclusion is the result of an unacknowledged metacritical step: the collapsing of a distinction between the reading process and its description in criticism.
With this crucial step made, Fish goes on in Section IV to discuss why interpretations differ. Explicitly, he discusses interpretive strategies of reading; implicitly, he refers also to critical strategies. His insights into the nature of "interpretive communities" are extremely convincing. Still, they do not fully explain disagreements in critical interpretations. This is because there is a difference between interpretive communities of reading and interpretive communities of criticism. A formalist may read a text the same way as Fish; he may use the same perceptual strategies in his temporal reading process and thus belong to the same interpretive community of readers. However, the formalist's critical model causes him to devalue his reading experience, to ignore his reading strategies. This is, in fact, what Fish has earlier asserted in the less ecumenical part of his article: "My quarrel with this procedure (and with the assumptions that generate it) is that in the course of following it through the reader's activities are at once ignored and devalued. They are ignored because the text is taken to be self-sufficient—everything is in it—and they are devalued because when they are thought of at all, they are thought of as the disposable machinery of extraction" (pp. 473–74). The critical conclusions of Fish and the formalist differ not because they belong to different interpretive communities of readers but because they belong to different interpretive communities of critics. Of course, Fish can't make this distinction because he has collapsed the two levels of interpretation—reading and criticism—into one.

With formalist interpretive strategies, the descriptive act (designation of grammatical units, patterns of imagery, etc.) is followed by an interpretive act (assignment of independent meaning to formal units or giving significance to the connotative flow). In reader-oriented criticism like affective stylistics, the description is of interpretive acts; so the descriptive and interpretive acts of criticism are one (though the reading process and its description remain separate). With formalist interpretive strategies, a spatial model of reading is assumed: the reader is always "stepping back from the text, and then putting together or otherwise calculating the discrete units of significance it contains" (p. 473). The actual temporal reading experience goes unrecognized; the moment-

6. Psychoanalytic criticism (like Norman Holland's) presents a distinctly different case. It resembles the reader-oriented criticism of Fish in that both value the reader's experience and set out to describe it. The distinction, of course, is in the level of response described: conscious vs. unconscious. (See Victor Erlich, "Reading Conscious and Unconscious," College English 56 (March 1975): 766–75.) Therefore, Fish is right when he implies that there is no theoretical justification for claiming his method's priority over psychoanalytic criticism. (See "Interpreting the Variorum," pp. 481–82.)

by-moment interaction of reader with text is ignored. In reader-
response criticism a temporal model reflects the reading process. That is,
the claim of affective stylistics is that its description/interpretation
reflects or dramatizes the way most readers actually read. This is an
empirical claim that can be tested against intuitive, psycholinguistic, and
critical evidence.8

Of course, the use of all this evidence is itself an interpretation (a
metacritical one). But what is most important here is recognizing the
reason for using these types of evidence: all have a phenomenological
basis in perception. Reader-response criticism is indeed a fiction,9 but it
is a fiction securely based on a perceptual foundation: the act of reading
literature. It may or may not be an accurate description of that act, but at
least it attempts to describe a temporal reading experience, a model
differing radically from the spatial models of formalist criticism. And as
long as reader-response critics use other fictions—intuitive, psycholin-
guistic, and critical—to support their analyses, they can claim a priority
for their approach.

This priority is what Fish now seems to deny in Section III of “Inter-
preting the Variorum.” However, his denial is a paradoxical one. As
Fish himself has shown, formalist critical strategies are based on a model
of reading that devalues the temporal reading experience. Therefore,
Fish can accept formalist models as valid only if he denies the very basis
of his positing interpretive strategies in the first place: readers interpret
as they read. Indeed, what Fish now appears to have given us is a self-
consuming criticism.

Fish begins with an evaluative assumption at the very basis of his
theory: “attention to the reader is a critical necessity.”10 This leads him to
a description of the temporal reading process. And since the reading
process involves interpretive strategies, his description is at the same
time an interpretation. At this point in his critical formulation, Fish
could move quite logically from description/interpretation to evaluation:
true to the original assumption of his approach, he could begin evaluat-

8. Fish’s concluding statement in “Interpreting the Variorum” is paradigmatic of his
use of intuitive evidence: “you will agree with me (that is, understand) only if you already
agree with me” (p. 485). Regarding psycholinguistic evidence: Fish has noted the work of
for a model of perceptual habits in reading can be found in works such as The Literature of
Research in Reading with Emphasis on Models, ed. Frederick B. Davis (New Brunswick, N.J.,
1971); Psycholinguistics and Reading, ed. Frank Smith (New York, 1973); and J. A. Fodor et
al., The Psychology of Language (New York, 1974). For Fish’s use of critical evidence, see the
citation of other critics’ reading responses in his Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost
(London and New York, 1967), and the first two sections of “Interpreting the Variorum.”
9. See Fish, “Facts and Fictions: A Reply to Ralph Rader,” Critical Inquiry 1 (June
ing literary works in terms of the interpretive strategies actualized during the reading process. What kind of reading experience does the text provide? Does that reading experience encourage the reader to become a better performer of interpretive strategies? As Fish has recognized, he is attracted to works that disorient the reader—"perhaps literature is what disturbs our sense of self-sufficiency, personal and linguistic."¹¹ This disorientation makes the reader more self-conscious of his reading process and thus makes him a better reader (and perhaps even a better person).¹² The value of literary disorientation is implicit in Fish's approach. And since affective stylistics provides the best methodology for discovering such disorientation, it holds priority over other methods that are less effective.

The point here is that an approach founded on an assumption of the reader's priority cannot in the end deny that value. When Fish accepts formalist criticism to be as valid as his own approach, he does exactly that. He is able to do this and still seem consistent, because, instead of moving from description/interpretation to evaluation, he moves from description/interpretation to metacriticism. The process is simple: interpretive strategies (as a metacritical category) become more valued than readers (as a critical emphasis). What was initially a constitutive means becomes a theoretical end. The decisive step (as I have shown) was to collapse the reader's act and the critical act.

Instead of recognizing the evaluative logic of his model, Fish rejects the priority of his specific procedures and announces an ecumenical policy toward all critical approaches. Why? The answer may be that Fish is more interested in preserving the descriptive focus of his approach than in recognizing the evaluative bias of his assumptions. As he has continually stated: "My method . . . is oriented away from evaluation and toward description," and "I regard evaluation not as a theoretical issue but as a subject in the history of taste."¹³

Certainly, the descriptive power of Fish's procedures is impressive. Fish himself has often helped to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of his approach. He has shown that the method begins with an epistemological view of reading and adopts a procedure that will bring the reader's interpretive strategies to critical light.¹⁴ There arises a dual

¹². Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature (Berkeley, 1972), esp. p. 371: "In all of these works, an uncomfortable and unsettling experience is offered as the way to self-knowledge, in the hope that self-knowledge will be preliminary to the emergence of a better self, with a better (or at least more self-aware) mind." See also my article, "Evaluation and Reader Response Criticism: Values Implicit in Affective Stylistics," Style 10 (Summer 1976): 329-43.
¹⁴. Fish has said, "I in print have critiqued Searle because he along with Austin thinks man is a legal animal. The correct critique of me would be to say that for me man is an
pressure within his critical formulation: on the one hand, Fish is drawn to applying his model not only to reading (from which it initially arose) but to criticism itself. This results in the metacritical tolerance of “Interpreting the Variorum” and the denial of his original model’s priority. On the other hand, there is a tendency within the original model, implicit in the basic value placed on reading, to move from description/interpretation to evaluation. Fish chooses to embrace the descriptive power of his method at the expense of the evaluative force of his assumptions. Fish is able to accept the validity of all interpretive strategies in criticism only by denying the assumption upon which his own critical strategy is based: the priority (in the critical act) of describing the experience of the reader in his interaction with the text. What is exemplified so forcefully in Sections I and II of “Interpreting the Variorum”—the priority of reader-response criticism—is denied in Section III. As we can now see, Fish’s surrender is only a misguided retreat disguised as an advance. Hopefully, another campaign will be waged to make up the lost ground.

epistemological animal, because my reader as I talk about him is always attempting to place himself, asking himself questions about what he knows and where he stands, and in the context of those questions in fact placing himself in various positions in which he rests, from which he is dislodged, from which he moves voluntarily and involuntarily” (from MLA Annual Convention, Seminar 284 on The Reader in Fiction: The “Narratee” and the “Implied Reader” Approached through Semiotics, Hermeneutics, and Phenomenology, San Francisco, December 28, 1975).