

Stanley Fish: *The Critic as Sophist*

R. V. Young

"HEARKEN AND HEAR THEN," says Thrasymachus. "I affirm that the just is nothing else than the advantage of the stronger" (*Republic* 338C). Thus Plato, the founder of the Academy, dramatizes the political outlook of a sophist of the fourth century B.C., a view that today would be the equivalent of "anti-foundationalism" or of "social constructivism." The rest of the first book of the *Republic* consists of Socrates unfolding the myriad contradictions in this viewpoint through a series of ironically pointed questions. After Thrasymachus is effectively dismissed, the remaining nine books proceed through a complex discussion of the nature of the Just and its place both in the individual soul and in the community. One of the founding works not only of Western philosophy but indeed of the humanist tradition is careful, then, to acknowledge the influence of sophistry in the intellectual life of Athens; but it devotes a relatively brief space to its refutation. The sophists, however, would now seem to be enjoying their revenge. What is today called the "academy" is largely dominated by sophistry, and a prominent academic spokesman, Stanley Fish, is pleased to

flaunt the designation, "The Contemporary Sophist."¹

Fish may well be the most famous professor of English in contemporary America; that is, unlike most of us, his name will occasionally crop up in *Time* or *Newsweek* or even in the *New York Times*. He first gained notoriety as a defender of political correctness and radical academic programs as Chairman of the English Department at Duke, which he helped to transform into a citadel of postmodernism. When the Department imploded in the mid-nineties, he was briefly Director of Duke University Press and then went on to his current position as Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois, Chicago. (It is a curious feature of university administration that reducing an academic department to a state of confused bickering is often a means of becoming a dean on another campus.)

Unlike most left-wing academics—that is, most academics—who sound ridiculous when they attempt to defend postmodernism and political correctness in a public forum, Fish is a nimble debater and a persuasive rhetorician. He presents himself not as a radical, but rather as a moderate of conservative inclinations, and he depicts the postmodern, politically correct professors who currently dominate most departments in virtually

R. V. YOUNG is Professor of English at North Carolina State University and author of *At War With the Word and Doctrine* and *Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (2000).

all the universities and the vast majority of colleges throughout the United States as an embattled group of ivory-tower innocents threatened by a conspiracy of savage conservative ideologues, armed with enormous sums from right-wing foundations, who have seized control of the levers of government and trumped up the entire issue of political correctness for their own sinister political purposes. Oliver Stone may even now be considering a film version (Tom Hanks as Stanley Fish?), but the scenario may be too far-fetched even for him. Finally, and most significantly, Fish maintains that his sophisticated denial of all essences, principles, or moral and intellectual foundations does not amount to relativism and has, indeed, no practical consequences at all. The collected works of Stanley Fish could very aptly be entitled—with a back-handed tribute to Richard Weaver—*Ideas Have No Consequences*.

I shall devote very little effort to a refutation of Fish's self-portrait, less still to correcting his image of the pitiful denizens of English departments unfairly maligned for a nonexistent political correctness and shivering in terror at the depredations of marauding right-wing fanatics. I am rather inclined to admire the sheer brazenness of it, much as one is filled with wonder by Falstaff's account of being "eight times thrust through the doublet, four through the hose" by an indeterminate number of "rogues in buckram," as he was "at half-sword with a dozen of them two hours together" (*I Henry IV* II.iv). Everyone likes a good story. I shall be at some pains, however, to show that the ideas espoused by Stanley Fish—his anti-theory theories of literature and discourse—have malign consequences, not only for the faculty and students of colleges and universities but also for the morale and tone of public culture outside the academy. Because his general understanding of human nature and of the human condition is false, Fish fails in the

specific task of a university scholar, which requires that learning be placed in the service of truth. And this, finally, is the critical issue in the contemporary university of which Stanley Fish is a typical representative: sophistry renders truth itself equivocal and deprives scholarly learning of its reason for being. Fish's gift for sophisticated equivocation is neatly exemplified in his disarming claim to be some kind of "conservative" in his 1991-92 debates with Dinesh D'Souza:

I appear before you today by virtue of a mistake made by central casting that has tapped me for the role of ardent academic leftist, proponent of multiculturalism, and standard-bearer of the politically correct. Unfortunately, my qualifications for this assignment are so slight as to be non-existent. First of all I am, as you can see, a 53-year-old white male. More important, I have for the past thirty years taught only traditional texts written by canonical male authors of the ultracanonial English Renaissance—John Milton, John Donne, Edmund Spenser, George Herbert, Francis Bacon, Ben Jonson, Andrew Marvell. When not writing on these classical authors, I have in recent years addressed a number of issues in literary and legal theory, and I think it fair to say that I have come out on the "right" end of the spectrum every time, arguing against the liberationist claims often associated with deconstruction and some versions of feminism, against the political pretensions of the New Historicism, against the utopian vision of interdisciplinarity, against the revisionary program of the Critical Legal studies movement, the left wing of the legal academy.²

We may begin by observing that the coy admission that he is "a 53-year-old white male" rests on the multiculturalist assumption that an individual's moral and political views are determined by his race and age. Second, Fish implies that because he teaches traditional, male authors of the "ultracanonial" English Renaissance, he is also teaching them in a fashion that enhances their "canonical"

status. Finally, there is the sophist's master stroke: by treating the claims of the leftward lunatic fringe of academe as if they were sufficiently plausible even to merit rational debate and establishing his own position to the "right" of these, Fish effectively moves the "center" further and further to the "left." He also neglects to point out that his disagreements with the left are largely a matter of means and semantics rather than ends; that is, he has no objection to dismantling, say, English departments, but he would maintain that what thus emerges is not an interdisciplinary practice but merely a new discipline.

If one can only smile at Fish's pretense to be the new Russell Kirk, it is difficult to control outright laughter when he raises the specter of a heavily funded neo-conservative assault on the innocent, mild-mannered academicians of the contemporary university. Neo-conservative organizations, he alleges, "are enabled" in their sinister undertakings "by massive infusions of outside funding from a familiar list of far-right foundations, think tanks, and individuals. In the past two years the National Association of Scholars (a successor to the infamous Accuracy in Academia) has received \$425,000 from two of these foundations alone; and the *Dartmouth Review*—the flagship of yellow journalism, academic style—has received \$300,000 from the Olin Foundation in the past decade."³ This is shocking. A student newspaper, which has to compete with the "official" student paper that receives college funding, and an organization of academics (who, in my experience, are mostly old-fashioned liberals who mostly vote Democratic), with about one-sixth the members of the Modern Language Association, have received between them over the past ten years about three-fourths the amount of one "Genius Grant" from the MacArthur Foundation. The MacArthur Foundation is not noted for supporting conservatives, and

this is true also of the Ford and the Rockefeller Foundations, either of which doles out more money to left-wing causes in a single year than the "familiar list of far-right foundations, think tanks, and individuals" can muster among them. The occasional Republican NEH Director has, likewise, about as much influence on the overwhelmingly leftward bias of the federal education bureaucracy as a rain shower has on the saltiness of the sea. The commitment of university faculties and administrations and the deployment of university resources to the agenda of multiculturalism and left-wing political correctness is so nearly total, that any proclamation of a threat from the right can only be regarded as an occasion for farce rather than serious discussion.

Stanley Fish is, then, both a typical and an influential representative of the humanities faculty of the contemporary American university. In the light of these qualities, his status as a leftist is not worth arguing about, but the nature of his influence over students, other professors, and the culture as a whole, as well as the manner in which he wields it, is of great moment. The "conservative" stance Fish assumes on some current academic issues and his occasionally conservative rhetoric are belied by his fundamentally sophistical view of the human situation in reality.

In one of the definitive works of conservatism in the twentieth century, Richard Weaver designates the rise of nominalism as a critical turn in the emergence of the intellectual and cultural disintegration associated with liberalism, which it is the business of a reviving conservatism to contest: "The defeat of logical realism in the great medieval debate was the crucial event in the history of Western culture; from this flowed those acts which issue now in modern decadence." It is nominalism that provides the intellectual foundation—if a paradox may be hazarded—for the attack by Fish and numerous others

(their name is Legion) on the very idea of intellectual foundations:

It was William of Occam who propounded the fateful doctrine of nominalism, which denies that universals have real existence. His triumph tended to leave universal terms mere names serving our convenience. The issue ultimately involved is whether there is a source of truth higher than, and independent of, man; and the answer to the question is decisive for one's view of the nature and destiny of humankind. The practical result of nominalist philosophy is to banish the reality which is perceived by the intellect and to posit as reality that which is perceived by the senses.⁴

Weaver articulates here not a specific conservative view or policy regarding a particular issue but a basic premise on which conservative thought necessarily rests. If there is no objective order of truth, goodness, and beauty to which mankind is bound by virtue of the permanent reality of human nature and the human condition, then there is nothing for the conservative to conserve.

Now the unifying thread that runs throughout the entire fabric of Stanley Fish's works is the steadfast denial of the principles of practical reason; that is, he rejects the notion that there are permanent, self-evident premises upon which human beings ought to base their judgments about morality and other important matters of worth—especially, the meaning and value of works of literature. Fish maintains that all of our knowledge and all our beliefs are produced by our interaction with the social circumstances or situation of which we are a part, and which also produces us as participants in an endless game of rhetorical one-upmanship. Fish's argument, which has changed only in details since the publication of *Is There a Text in This Class?* in 1980, has a *prima facie* plausibility. What is more, he trims it out with an apparent modesty, which suggests a conservative reining in of the more outlandish claims

of postmodern academics:

I want to say that "really" is always used in just such a specialized sense, that is, in a sense that acquires its intelligibility in relation to some elaborate enterprise or discipline; and, moreover, that this isn't the dreaded Relativism or some other supposedly post-structuralist horror, because in a world where the ultimate grounds of reality are not available to us even as we live them out—in our world as opposed to the world as seen by God—the facts and values and opportunities for action delivered to us by various discursive formations are not second-hand, are not illusions, are not hegemonic impositions, but are, first of all, the best we have, and second, more often than not adequate to the job.⁵

Many conservatives are likely to be further heartened by a parenthetical observation a few sentences further on in the same essay: "in our culture science is usually thought to have the job of describing reality as it really is; but its possession of that franchise, which it wrested away from religion, is a historical achievement not a natural right."⁶

These remarks seem not merely sensible, but even pious. Certainly it is true that the human capacity for understanding reality is severely limited, and there is a kind of satanic pride in presuming to a knowledge of "the world as seen by God." Stanley Fish the Miltonist seems to have heeded the advice of the archangel Raphael in *Paradise Lost*: "Heav'n is for thee too high / To know what passes there; be lowlie wise" (VIII. 172-73). But even the most complaisant conservative ought to become uneasy with the implications of Fish's attack upon that most radical of leftist academic trends, cultural studies: "One could always argue, and argue persuasively, that for a particular purpose at a particular time the partiality of the cultural text will be more helpful than the partiality called literary criticism or philosophy or art history. To say that the cultural text is partial is not

to criticize it or to deny its usefulness in certain circumstances; it is merely to deny its claim to be representationally superior to other partial texts that are doing other jobs.”⁷ What Fish does not tell us here is why we should prefer one “job” to another “in certain circumstances,” or even why some “jobs” should be done in any circumstances whatsoever.

He can give us no instruction on this point because there is no external basis on which a particular discipline may be judged as to its appropriateness either “for a particular purpose at a particular time” or for its general validity. There is no privileged language or rational method that is not part of some discipline or discourse or community of interpretation, and hence there is no means of adjudicating intellectual disputes except through rhetorical persuasion or compulsion:

The vocabularies of disciplines are not external to their objects, but constitutive of them. Discard them in favour of the another discipline, and you will lose the object that only they call into being. If a literary critic were to internalize the goals and assumptions of historians in the course of explicating a poem, the result would be an explication that bore none of the marks of literary criticism and a piece of language that would no longer be recognizable as a poem because the vocabulary of description would contain no resources for bringing to light (a phrase weaker than the actual effect) poetic features.⁸

Note that Fish is not merely maintaining that academic disciplines are socially constructed, a proposition that will hardly draw much disagreement, but that the disciplines construct the objects of their inquiry. In other words, without literary critics there is no literature; and when an historian reads *Othello* for details about, say, marriages in the Jacobean period or about the contemporaneous Englishman’s view of Venice, the Bard’s work ceases to be a play and becomes instead documentation. This view

seems analogous to the belief that if an office clerk borrows a cavalry officer’s saber to open a letter then the saber is no longer a weapon. In any case, the assertion is patently wrong with respect to literature. Homer was able to recognize a “trustworthy singer” and “delightful song” long before there was an institution of literary criticism.⁹

Fish’s arguments depend upon the equivocal use of key terms and the erection of false dichotomies, devices that often reinforce each other. While it is true that “disciplinary boundaries...remain in place” when, say, a literary scholar cites historians of religion to explicate Donne,¹⁰ it does not follow that the various academic disciplines are hermetically sealed off from one another. If the literary scholar makes an error of historical fact or doctrinal interpretation, then his literary criticism as such is subject to correction by the historian or by any scholar using the knowledge and methods of history. For example, a Calvinist reading of Donne’s Holy Sonnets that adduces his use of the term “prevenient grace” as evidence may be put in question by showing that “prevenient grace” is not an exclusively Calvinist phrase or concept but in fact derives from medieval scholasticism.¹¹ Although the historian and the literary scholar have different purposes for the evidence, it is the same evidence. In parallel fashion a literary critic may correct, say, a political philosopher who interprets St. Thomas More’s *Utopia* as if it were a tract setting forth a political blueprint rather than a pervasively ironic work of literature deploying fictional dramatic speakers. The nature of *Utopia* is not altered by the “project” of the reader; indeed, an essential element in a mature critical reading of any work is precisely to determine its genre—the *kind* of work it is.

For a number of years, Stanley Fish held a joint appointment as a professor both of Law and English at Duke University. In a number of essays in books such

as *Doing What Comes Naturally*,¹² *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech*, and, most recently, *The Trouble with Principle*,¹³ he discusses either law or literature or in some instances both together. In all of these essays the reader encounters the same style, the same arguments, and—of greatest significance—the same point of view. Fish the literary critic and Fish the legal scholar are both Fish the sophist. Nevertheless, the persistent, indeed relentless, attention of this most remorseless of readers does not grind down the variety of texts that he takes in hand into an indistinguishable lump. Notwithstanding the contrary assertions of Fish himself along with the exponents of cultural studies, rational persons of modest education can still easily distinguish between essentially diverse kinds of discourse without recourse to the protocols of academic disciplines. Let English departments and law schools shut down their operations tomorrow: *Lycidas* remains a different category of writing from *Roe versus Wade*.

Fish's argument relies upon an equivocation—upon treating a metaphor as a literal statement: "A text that was adequate to every detail as seen from every possible angle would be unsituated; it would not proceed from a perspective—a 'here not there'—but from everywhere and therefore from nowhere." He then proceeds to treat the figure of intellectual "vision" or "viewpoint" as if it were subject to exactly the same limitations as physical line of sight or visibility:

For human beings the formula "as far as I can see" is more than a ritual acknowledgement of fallibility; it is an accurate statement of our horizon-bound condition; of the fact that at any one moment, the scope of our understanding and, within that understanding, the range of actions we might think to take, are finite and cannot be expanded by an act of will. We do not wake up in the morning and announce as our programme for the day "I will now see beyond my horizons."¹⁴

But of course we do. One way of framing the traditional goal of a liberal education is to say that it "expands our horizons." Although our capacities are "finite" (there are few who would dispute this proposition), it is precisely the possession of understanding and memory that distinguishes us from the beasts that perish and enables us in some measure to transcend our local and temporal situation "in a particular place." Even our physical sight can be enhanced by various devices such as spectacles, telescopes, microscopes, x-rays, and the like; the liberal arts are the tools that enhance our intellectual vision, to "see" further and occupy different places and engage in different points of view at the same time. Fish's reduction of human reason not only flies in the face of common sense and experience; it depends upon treating an analogical relation as if it were univocal, as his own movement among disciplines without losing his distinctive point of view demonstrates.

"Knowledge, in proportion as it tends more and more to the particular," writes Cardinal Newman, "ceases to be Knowledge."¹⁵ Newman is directly concerned with the utilitarian view, already powerful in his day, that would reduce education to banausic training. Fish's approach to education, however, makes "knowing more and more about less and less" not a particular hazard of specialization, but a necessary condition of human knowledge. Intellectual provincialism thus becomes not a defect to be remedied by education but rather its inevitable result. Anti-foundationalism is thus neither liberal nor liberating; it is Newman's vision of education that provides genuine intellectual liberation:

Possessed of this real illumination, the mind never views any part of the extended subject-matter of Knowledge without recollecting that it is but a part, or without associations which spring from this recollection. It makes every thing in some sort lead to

everything else; it would communicate the image of the whole to every separate portion, till that whole becomes in imagination like a spirit, every where pervading and penetrating its component parts, and giving them one definite meaning. Just as our bodily organs, when mentioned, recall their function in the body, as the word "creation" suggests the Creator, and "subjects" a sovereign, so, in the mind of the Philosopher, as we are abstractly conceiving of him, the elements of the physical and moral world, sciences, arts, pursuits, ranks, offices, events, opinions, individualities, are all viewed as one, with correlative functions, and as gradually by successive combinations converging, one and all, to the true centre.¹⁶

Newman knows that he is "abstractly" describing an ideal, but the pursuit of this ideal is crucial if we are in any measure to aspire to the paradoxical status of *free creatures*: "To have even a portion of this illuminative reason and true philosophy is the highest state to which nature can aspire, in the way of intellect; it puts the mind above the influences of chance and necessity, above anxiety, suspense, unsettlement, and superstition, which is the lot of the many."¹⁷

To reflect but for a moment on the sources of anxiety and superstition pervasive in our post-industrial world, to contemplate myriads of young (and old) men and women worshipping before the altar of the television and consulting the oracle of the internet, ought to be sufficient admonition that now is no time to drain the liberality from liberal education and condemn these persons to the intellectual servitude enforced by specialized "disciplines" or to the moral and rational corruption fomented by politically correct academic ideology.

In a debate with Richard John Neuhaus in the pages of *First Things* over the place of religion in public life, Stanley Fish reveals something far more significant than his opinions about Christianity, namely, his indifference, nay obliviousness, to

the *content* of education. In "Why We Can't All Just Get Along," Fish argues that the call by a number of recent commentators—he mentions Michael McConnell, Stephen Carter, and George Marsden—for increased tolerance of Christian perspectives in debate on public issues is fundamentally mistaken *from a Christian perspective*. Religion and secular liberalism begin from totally incompatible premises, Fish says. Religion assumes that it is already in possession of truth, truth that is as urgent as it is incontrovertible. Liberalism demands "open-mindedness"; it tolerates every imaginable viewpoint except the one that claims to be true. Thus to put the truth perpetually on hold, he insists, is altogether subversive of religion:

To put the matter baldly, a person of religious conviction should not want to enter the marketplace of ideas but to shut it down, at least insofar as it presumes to determine matters that he believes have been determined by God and faith. The religious person should not seek an accommodation with liberalism; he should seek to rout it from the field.¹⁸

Fish's reductionist account of generic "religion"—he does not, let it be noted, deal with the complex historical realities of Israel, Islam, and the Church—is handled very deftly by Father Neuhaus in his rejoinder, "Why We Can Get Along." I do not wish to recapitulate the entire debate, but a particular argument offered by Fish in his final rebuttal seems to lay bare the very heart of our current academic malaise. Father Neuhaus points out a contradiction running through Fish's assertion that persons of differing persuasion about religion inhabit mutually incomprehensible mental realms:

There are numerous problems with the idea that opposing first premises necessarily results in incommensurable discourses that make it impossible for people to understand one another. Were that the case, a

non-Christian could not understand the poetry of the very Christian John Milton, but in fact non-Christians such as Stanley Fish are recognized authorities on Milton. Were that the case, the Christian Milton could not depict the reasonings of both Satan and Adam in a way that enables the reader to see both positions.... Finally, the person who wants to make the point that nobody can stand outside his belief system and compare it to another belief system has to stand outside belief systems and compare them to one another. In other words, he has to do what he says cannot be done.¹⁹

This answer implies a stage beyond a technical argument about the logic of argument and takes into account St. Paul's injunction, "with fear and trembling work out your salvation" (Philippians 2:12). Faith is not a set of blinders forcing the believer to look only in one direction, Fish's imprisoning "perspective"; faith is the gift of grace that strengthens the believer to adhere firmly to the hard truth that he is tempted to abandon: "I do believe, Lord. Help my unbelief" (Mark 9:23). The Christian, truly, should be most tolerant of what seems error because of his awareness of his own fallibility as a sinner.

The reply that Fish offers furnishes a breathtaking glimpse into the abyss of contemporary academic scholarship. He describes how his labors as a Miltonist involved "poring over Milton's prose works, reading Augustine, Tertullian, and other church fathers known to have influenced him, reading contemporary sermons and theological tracts." All of this diligence, however, has nothing to do with the man, Stanley Fish:

I was not doing this work in order to decide what I myself believed about the Trinity or the resurrection of the soul [*sic*] or free will but in order to decide what I believed about what Milton believed about the Trinity or the resurrection of the soul [*sic*] or free will. And when I did decide about what Milton believed, the decision led me not to live my life differently than I had before but to

interpret Milton differently than I had before.²⁰

Fish concludes by observing that "an intimate (personal) knowledge of Milton's beliefs is not only not required [of a Milton scholar], it is beside the point."²¹ An academic authority on Milton is not even allowed to ask whether the poet's beliefs are true, because the sophistic, anti-foundationalist view that "truth" can only be the particular perspective that each individual happens to hold now forecloses the question of truth before it can be asked.

There is, once again, a problem here with consistency: if we are all prisoners of our initial epistemological assumptions, as Fish insists repeatedly, how then can anyone achieve such detachment, nay, aloof indifference to a subject so provocative as John Milton's theology? But "how" is finally less interesting than the "why"? What could possibly move a man to devote such intense study to the works of a writer who is obsessively preoccupied with questions to which the answers are of no interest? It is not necessary for a scholar to be resolutely confessional: the truth is so precious that it must not be preempted by personal inclination or driven off by over-zealous haste. Likewise, it is not necessary to agree with Milton. It is necessary, however, to take his ideas seriously in order for the magnificent poetry to count for much. Fish bills himself as a teacher of "canonical" works, but the only possible claim a book can have to be great, to be a part of the "canon," is that it raises in compelling fashion issues that every human being is bound to confront. The work of a liberal arts curriculum is to provide students with the intellectual skills of imaginative critical inquiry and with access to the most vigorous and profound accounts of the human condition produced in our cultural tradition; that is, with books that in some measure lead them *to live their*

lives differently than they had before.

Ironically, for all his insistence that every human being is rooted in a specific situation and confined to a particular point of view, Fish treats both social institutions and works of literature as bloodless, deracinated abstractions. Socially and educationally the result is demoralization. The great questions of human existence are universal and perennial, but, like the books that embody them, they do not dwell in an abstract realm of Platonic forms. We encounter them in concrete versions in actual historical circumstances. To recognize that these are *our* questions, that *we* must come to grips with them, is a large part of what it means to be an educated man or woman. In our world these questions have been shaped by a Christian vision of the human condition.

To erect a dichotomy between Christianity and liberal polity and to exclude specifically Christian formulations from academic discourse is an effort to obliterate the particular historical reality of American culture as a part of the larger development of Western civilization. The result is the sterile professionalism exemplified by Stanley Fish: to be a “*professional authority*” on Milton “requires me not to share Milton’s beliefs but to be able to describe them.” This is fair enough, but in context it is also disingenuous. On Fish’s own showing, among professional authorities a certain “kind of question is not even to be asked. ‘Was Milton really inspired by God?’ is such a question; it is not debatable within the conventions of Milton criticism....”²²

The defect of such conventions is not that they prevent a scholar from sharing Milton’s beliefs; the problem is that he is impeded from taking Milton’s beliefs seriously. Such “professional conventions” are, in effect, a misapplication of the protocols of the physical sciences. A zoologist may study iguanas as a species; he would not study “Chester,” the pet iguana once possessed by one of my sons, for his

unique and lovable qualities. In fact, Chester would be of interest as a laboratory specimen only insofar as he was typical, indeed virtually interchangeable with other iguanas. He would be a mere object of study. Milton is not a *typical* poet, and there is no purpose in studying him as such, as if the truth of his ideas were no more significant than the truth of Chester’s ideas. Poets as a “species” are a rather banal lot and not really worth studying. They are only of interest for their uniqueness—the very feature that makes them inaccessible to the methods of the physical sciences and to the kind of brisk professionalism that Fish extols.

We need to recall that the opposite of a “professional” is an “amateur,” and an “amateur” is literally a “lover.” Although professional standards and scholarly objectivity are absolutely necessary to any academic discipline, the very nature of the humanities requires the scholar retain an element of “amateurism.” He must “love” the subject. In part this means that authors and works of literature must engage the scholar’s deepest interest and concern, and that the questions they raise must be important to him. Beyond this engagement, however, the scholar must in some sense converse with the authors whom he reads with his colleagues and students. The voices of great writers continue to resonate long after they have passed from this world: they interrogate us more acutely than we interpret them, and their judgments matter more than the opinions of most of our contemporaries. I may often “disagree” with Milton, but his view of matters is more important than mine—or Stanley Fish’s. And what decent person would not prefer the good opinion of Jane Austen to that of Maureen Dowd? Literary amateurism has been adroitly sketched by Gary Saul Morson:

Love: you have to love the material. If you are just going through the motions, if you don’t care, why should the students? You know the old saw from Soviet days: they pretend

to pay us, and we pretend to work. I sometimes imagine students thinking: they pretend to teach and we pretend to learn.

Here's a yardstick: if after you have given a lecture on literature, you can still stand up without effort, you haven't done your job.²³

Where there is no truth—or where “truth” is merely how I feel today or whatever currently serves my interests—there is, however, no real possibility of love. The result is a relentless, vehement, ruthless apathy, and this oxymoron is perhaps all that can explain one of the most curious features of the postmodern university: the intense bitterness and viciousness of its disputes over curriculum, hiring, and other matters of academic policy. *Odium theologicum* is mild compared to *odium academicum*. At first, one might assume that where the disputants have no confidence in their ability to discover absolute truth, and hence no really settled convictions, their quarrels would be less harsh, but in fact the opposite is the case. If, like Thrasymachus or Stanley Fish, a man does not believe in principle, if he thinks that principles are at best mere illusions and, more commonly, hypocritical pretexts for self-interest, then the only real basis for disagreement or dissension is personal.

Where issues and ideas do not matter only egos are left. The practical effects of this perspective can be very curious indeed. Consider Fish's “Preface” to the essays constituting his part of a series of debates with Dinesh D'Souza over political correctness and affirmative action in the academy: “*The last piece, ‘Speaking in Code’, was written in the knowledge that it would indeed be the last... and I let out all the stops and allowed myself a harsher tone than I would have otherwise employed.*” In fact, the full title of the “last piece” is “Speaking in Code, or How to Turn Bigotry and Ignorance into Moral Principles,” and it argues that opponents of affirmative action, presumably including D'Souza,

are in fact hypocritical racists. But observe what follows immediately in the “Preface”: “*However harsh the accents either of us fell into on stage, our personal interactions were unfailingly cordial. We dined together, traveled together, and played tennis whenever we could.*”²⁴ Fish goes on to describe himself dancing at D'Souza's wedding shortly thereafter.

How “cordial” should a man be with someone he regards as a racist? Or does a man invite to his wedding someone who has suggested before a large university audience and in print that the bridegroom is a racist or, at best, a dupe of racists? Are we to infer that neither Fish nor D'Souza takes the accusation seriously? Or despite the “harshness” of Fish's rhetoric, is it actually the case that secretly neither man regards racism as a serious accusation? Throughout the contemporary academy one witnesses the display of a great deal of vitriolic language and furious opprobrium that seem all out of proportion to the putative causes and occasions. It is difficult to recall a society even remotely close to the United States in size and complexity where racial and sexual discrimination and class oppression are so minimal. It would appear that the true hypocrisy and bad faith, at least in universities, are attributes of the regnant left wing ideologues who mobilize the rhetoric of victimization in the interests of their own professional self-aggrandizement. As Fish says about his series of debates with Dinesh D'Souza, “*It was short-lived, but it was a great show.*”²⁵ And herein lies the significance of Stanley Fish for the assessment of contemporary literary theory: his brash disdain of principle and his embrace of sophistry reveal the hollowness hidden at the heart of the current academic enterprise. The solemn agitation and furiously sanctimonious denunciations of relatively minor, when not nonexistent, injustices in American society are finally mere political posturing—just part of the “show.” When truth has

been abandoned and principle scorned, there is little else for *soi-disant* educators

and scholars to do besides putting on a show.

1. Gary Olson, "Fish Tales: A Conversation with 'The Contemporary Sophist,'" in Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and It's a Good Thing, Too* (New York and Oxford, 1994), 281-307. 2. "The Empire Strikes Back," *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech*, 53. 3. *Ibid.*, 55. 4. *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago and London, 1948), 3. 5. "Looking Elsewhere: Cultural Studies and Interdisciplinarity," in *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Oxford, 1995), 72. 6. *Ibid.* 7. *Ibid.*, 81. 8. *Ibid.*, 85. 9. *Odyssey* VIII, 62, 64. For a further discussion of how Fish overlooks the fact that great works of the literary tradition constitute discourse communities rather than being constituted by the latter, see R.V. Young, *At War With the Word: Literary Theory and Liberal Education* (Wilmington, Del., 1999), 131. 10. "Looking Elsewhere," 84. Fish is quoting Robert Hodge and borrowing his example. 11. See R.V. Young, *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan* (Cambridge, 2000), 5-8. 12. *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, N.C., and London, 1989). 13. *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1999). 14. "Looking Elsewhere," 81. 15. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. Martin J. Svaiglic (Notre Dame, 1982), 85. 16. *Ibid.*, 103-04.

17. *Ibid.*, 104. 18. *The Trouble With Principle*, 250. This essay first appeared in a slightly different version in *First Things*, 60 (February 1996), 18-26; followed by Father Neuhaus's rejoinder, and a final reply by Fish, which is also reprinted in *The Trouble With Principle*. See below nn. 19, 20. It may be worth observing that the later version of the passage cited in this note is softened by the omission of the final phrase "to extirpate it, root and branch" from the original version. 19. *First Things*, 60 (February 1996), 29. 20. "Faith Before Reason," in *The Trouble With Principle*, 273. This essay first appeared as "Stanley Fish Replies to Richard John Neuhaus," *First Things*, 60 (February 1996), 35-40. The quaint error "resurrection of the soul" is no mere inadvertence, since it appears in the original version of the essay (39) as well as in the version quoted here. An error of this order by so eminent a scholar is a small but telling warning of the perils of writing about a complex topic in which one has no personal stake. A man seriously engaged in such issues as the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body would instinctively recoil from the phrase used by Fish. 21. *The Trouble With Principle*, 274. 22. *Ibid.* 23. "Teaching as Impersonation," *Literary Imagination*, 4 (2002), 151. 24. *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech*, 51-52. 25. *Ibid.*, 52.

An Alternative Conservative

Jeremy Beer

The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry, edited and introduced by Norman Wirzba, *Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint*, 2002. 352 pp.

THE PUBLICATION OF *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Berry's *Unsettling of America*, a cultural defense of small-scale farming that is justly regarded as an agrarian and conservationist classic. Since 1977, Berry has been a prolific novelist, poet, and essayist—as well as a full-time farmer—and he has won a surprisingly broad following.

The extent of Berry's mainstream acceptance can be ascribed to his willingness to criticize big business, environmental depredation, and (especially earlier in his career) organized religion. But in fact, Berry's is a voice profoundly at variance with prevailing prejudices. If he is a critic of globalization and an economy dominated by multinational corporations, he is also a withering critic of big government and distant bureaucracy. If he is an environmentalist, he is also a humanist—one who argues eloquently against artificial contraception. If he is a

critic of institutional Christianity, it is precisely because the Christianity he has most intimately known is heretical in its stark separation of body and soul. In short, Berry is much more subversive, and much more conservative, than some of his public seems to realize.

The foundation of Berry's critique is his unyieldingly anti-individualist and anti-liberationist conception of freedom. He mocks the therapeutic view that each of us is called to reach his "full potential as an individual." His social and political philosophy rests on an explicit rejection of the modern idea—and ideal—that freedom consists in maximum personal liberation from external constraints, including the constraints of community, tradition, and nature. That "one has the right to be freed from any objectionable condition by any means" is to Berry a dangerous doctrine. Individual autonomy, the goal to which it points, is impossible: "there is only a distinction between responsible and irresponsible dependence." Far from being autonomous, the self is a social creation. "[W]e are *not* the authors of ourselves.... Each of us has had many authors, and each of us is engaged, for better or worse, in that same authorship."

But as Berry realizes, the doctrine of the autonomous self is in the ascendant, and not only among "certain liberationist intellectuals" and other elites. Americans

JEREMY BEER is Editor in Chief of ISI Books. He holds a doctorate in psychology from the University of Texas, Austin.