

Reprint and Response

Introduction

by
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A RECENT ISSUE OF *PMLA* (January 1992) focused its articles on “Theory of Literary History.” It is a measure of the impact that Stanley Fish has had on the disciplines most interested in the Modern Language Association that one of the articles takes as its point of definition “the prevailing wind in literary studies” which its author, James L. Battersby, suggests is “relativism, in one or another, usually extreme, form.” The work of Stanley Fish becomes for Battersby the most appropriate site for the discussion of modern literary history and relativism. Battersby argues for a rejection of Fish’s position and presents his case for “translatibility, interpretation, arbitration, and objective knowledge in a world without a foundation” (52). The fact that, perhaps with the exception of “objective knowledge,” all Battersby’s terms are likely to be the objectives of theorists on all sides of contemporary discussions suggests how important Fish is to the central questions facing contemporary discussions of theory in literary studies.

Since *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (1967), a study of how readers’ responses are integral to the rhetorical strategies of *Paradise Lost*, Fish has explored the implications of recent epistemological discoveries to determine what can and cannot be said about the meanings of texts and who can and cannot engage in such discussions authoritatively. Fish has pursued these questions in a series of books and articles to conclusions that range from the identification of “interpretive communities” as the boundaries within which any text means something to his more general critique of scholars in law and literary study who make claims for their practice based upon theories of truth or justice. He has challenged postmodernist

critics on their treatment of theory as beyond the reach of their skepticism. In *Is There A Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980) and *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (1989) Fish pulls together the perspectives and critiques that, while not comprising a system of approaching texts in itself, represent a major body of work requiring commentators such as Battersby to take into account in any description of contemporary criticism.

In “Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do,” the essay printed below, Fish carries forward his concern for epistemological integrity to challenge the claims for authority he sees being made by work done under the rubric of “interdisciplinarity.” His argument challenges the facility with which so many literary critics have moved from theories that question the traditional practices of the discipline of literary study to pronouncements about texts that derive their authority from the hybrid perspectives of interdisciplinarity. Fish’s discussion contributes much to the understanding of what has to be in place for literary critics to conduct the examination of what constitutes their own discipline and suggests the questions that must be addressed before critics can proceed to studies located in an interdisciplinary arena. In an era when disciplines such as English and History are both looking to other disciplines as models for enhancing their projects and looking within to re-establish their own coherence and authority, Fish’s challenge is an important one. His body of work offers a clear and complex context within which his treatment of interdisciplinarity is productive. Scholars committed to interdisciplinarity need to take Fish’s challenge seriously and look for an improved practice in their own work through responding to Fish.