“Fish Tales” and the Politics of Anti-Professionalism

JOHN TRIMBUR

In “Fish Tales: A Conversation with ‘The Contemporary Sophist,’” Stanley Fish offers, among other things, an eloquent analysis of liberalism and the modern liberal state. As Marxist-Leninists say, and as Bush’s mobilization of federal troops to Los Angeles in May 1992 indicates, the power of the modern state consists, in the final analysis, of “armed bodies of men.” But the authority of the state—its discursive ability to author itself and secure widespread consent—is more complexly mediated, and Fish’s analysis of liberalism presents one set of reasons why this is so. According to Fish, the “unhappy insight” liberalism brings to the modern world is that “conflict”—and here Fish refers to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theological and real (and quite bloody) battles—“cannot be avoided.” The point of liberalism, therefore, is not “so much to avoid . . . but to control” these conflicts, to design a state apparatus that ostensibly treats contending parties, interests, and points of view equally so that they may coexist within a regime of civil peace.

As Fish makes clear, the actual liberal state is not, and has never been, the neutral arbiter it claims to be. But this fact should not distract us from what I take to be the central point in Fish’s analysis: that popular allegiance to the modern state does not result from the account liberalism has classically offered. It does not result from the rational self-interest of individuals who decide to affiliate rather than continue in the anarchic conditions (what Hobbes calls the “inconvenience”) of the state of nature; nor does it result from universalist principles of natural right. Instead, it grows out of a particular historical conjuncture marked by weariness with the sectarian and political passions of the day and, significantly, the inability of Englishmen to agree on fundamental principles of belief. The ostensible and self-proclaimed rationality of the modern state emerges from its apparent reasonableness, as a way to deal with forces such as “conviction, belief, passion,” which, as Fish notes, have fallen into a “zone of suspicion.” It is not so much that an Age of Reason, as we encounter it in its traditional versions, has triumphed over feudalism and medieval superstition as that the threat of its opposite, figured as an uncontrolled fanaticism, has proved to be more than the social order can bear.

There is a telling point here in Fish’s portrayal of liberalism as a “brief against belief and conviction”: liberalism does not in the first instance deny or suppress what we have come to call “difference” in the name of a general
rationality, a transcendental subject, or some other universalized category of understanding, as we might be led to believe by both liberalism’s account of itself and current postmodern critiques of liberal ideology. Rather, the structure of feeling that underwrites liberalism is born precisely from a fateful representation of difference as invariably disruptive and always potentially violent, and a desperate effort that follows to design a social machinery capable of keeping social and cultural differences in check and balance.

I mention these points in part because I admire the lucidity of Fish’s analysis of liberalism but also because the main outlines of state formation that Fish sketches can be applied, by way of analogy, to the formation of professions and the constitution of professional expertise as we know it. As I will suggest in a moment, the profession of literary studies emerges not only from a codified body of knowledge and a set of institutionalized practices but also from a very real moment of cultural anxiety about the unregulated circulation and consumption of written texts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Stanley Fish, as most readers of JAC will be aware, has written a number of essays on professionalism that delineate its habits and discontents. One of Fish’s prime concerns has been with what he calls “anti-professional” currents of thought running from both the right and the left. In essays such as “Profession Despise Thyself: Fear and Loathing in Literary Studies” and “Anti-Professionalism,” Fish has countered charges from the right that literary studies has fallen into hopeless careerism and the relentless production of specialized scholarship, thereby abandoning the abiding truths that make literary studies a vocation or calling, free from the market and special interests, capable of articulating general propositions about the human condition. At the same time, according to Fish, anti-professionalism from the left amounts to charges that literary studies, again because of its careerism and specialized scholarship, is no more than an avoidance of real world issues and political struggles. As Fish has it, the right thinks the “world is too much with us” while the left thinks “we are not sufficiently of the world” (Doing 213).

In both cases, according to Fish, left and right wing anti-professionals alike have gone transhistorical by locating literature in a realm separate from the beliefs, practices, and professional routines by which literature is constituted in the first place. Anti-professionalism, in other words, has transplanted literature into an ahistorical world, where, once we cast off the roles and jargons imposed on us by professional and institutional contexts, we will be able to see the true meaning of literary works—not as more grist for the academic mill but as either repositories of timeless value, as the right holds, or revolutionary defamiliarizations of common sense, as the left might say. The upshot for Fish is that neither of these positions can be considered coherent; each appeals to standpoints above or outside the ongoing conver-
sational practices by which literature and literary works—whether periods, genres, authors, canons, or critical methods—become objects of inquiry. Anti-professionalism, as Fish says, is “indefensible because it imagines a form of life—free, independent, acontextual—that cannot be lived” (Doing 246).

Fish has become well known for this strong version of professionalism, for mounting a case on behalf of professionalism that does not argue so much for the benefits or desirability of professionalism (as people in rhetoric and composition often do) but for its inevitability, as an unavoidable set of conventionalized assumptions, institutions, and understandings without which literary studies would be quite impossible. I find it hard to disagree with Fish’s point, despite (or maybe because of) the fact that he makes it so provocatively by casting himself into the apparently scandalous position of holding that the study of literature is “merely another profession” among many, that operates according to the same processes of initiation, credentialing, assigning credit, and evaluating performances that govern, say, engineering or dentistry. Fish’s case for professionalism seems to me a bracing and useful corrective to the self-images currently available within literary studies, whether the traditional image of the custodian of culture or the insurgent image of the cultural critic. Casting himself so unapologetically as a “mere” professional, going about the only business a professional can go about—reading and writing, publishing articles, joining professional associations, going to meetings, taking part in the conversation (and the gossip) of the day—Fish makes the very helpful point that “anti-professionalism is basically an up-to-date, twentieth-century form of the traditional hostility to rhetoric” (Doing 219). Fish helps us see that institutionalized practices and professional vocabularies are not “iron cages” that channel a genuine love of literature into the distorting grooves of expertise but are themselves enabling fictions, a local rhetoric made up to get some work done.

Still, one does not have to fall into what Fish calls anti-professionalism to want to make the point that the profession of literary studies is inflected decisively not only by its conventionalized practices and procedures but also by its relation to the public. As I mentioned earlier and as I believe the formation of literary studies reveals, the profession emerges historically from and continues to carry the traces of a particular set of cultural anxieties about literacy. Burton Bledstein, one of the leading historians of the “culture of professionalism” in the United States, suggests that the increased availability of printed matter in the late nineteenth century (a “riot of words”) was experienced by the mid-Victorian middle classes as an anarchic and unregulated condition (65-79). According to Bledstein, the unprecedented dissemination of the written word isolated individual readers in their own private worlds, apart from such social settings as the audience at the theater, the music hall, the symphony. This isolation not only created a new realm of human experience, it also served to induce “confusion and frustration that
gave way to self doubt and mistrust" (78). Such atomized and unregulated acts of reading produced, in effect, cultural anxieties in mid-Victorian America about "who would distinguish the true words from the false ones" (78), and these anxieties were resolved, at least symbolically, by such measures as the tighter postal obscenity law of 1973, the publication of self-help guides such as Noah Porter's *Books and Reading: Or, What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?* (1870), and Charles Eliot's fifty-volume plan of self-education, *The Harvard Classics*. Moreover, with the emergence of professional librarians, spokespersons, educators, and English departments, the "citizen," Bledstein suggests, "became a client whose obligation was to trust the professional" (78-79).

There is, of course, as Fish notes (*Doing* 216), an anti-professional edge to Bledstein's account of the cultural authorization of expertise. Nonetheless, to see the formation of professionalized literary studies as part of a larger interaction of the professions with public pressures and popular anxieties does not, it seems to me, necessitate a break with Fish's strong version of professionalism but instead may supplement it in an important respect. That is, literary studies is not and never has been the self-enclosed body of experts talking to each other endlessly in an arcane and publicly incomprehensible language, as some anti-professionals put it, but has always been subject to and in part the product of popular influence and opinion. Fish makes just this point in the *JAC* interview when he says that "the questions raised by feminism, because they were questions raised not in the academy but in the larger world and then made their way into the academy, have energized more thought and social action than any other 'ism' in the past twenty or thirty years."

Taken at any particular moment, especially to unreconstructed anti-professionals, such popular pressures from below—and one might list here not only feminism but the force of African-American, gay and lesbian, and Third World movements and the current widespread interest in popular culture—might appear from the right to be "merely" ephemeral intrusions into timeless work, or from the left to be liberatory forces coopted by their academic mediations into "mere" business-as-usual, professional behavior and the production of careers. Both views, however, miss the telling point: that the boundaries of the profession are permeable and subject to consequential redefinition and change from internal and external pressures.

On the other hand, and now I want to return to Fish's analysis of the modern liberal state, it is precisely the permeability of these boundaries that can, and certainly has, induced a great deal of anxiety recently about the "conviction, passion, belief" that appear to have suddenly invaded the academy, threatening and, in some instances, actually precipitating civil wars within English departments. You name it, poststructuralism, deconstruction, feminism, the new historicism, minority and postcolonial discourse, rhetoric and composition, postmodernism, and cultural studies have each and all
served to disrupt the normal functions and self-images of English departments. In this light, Gerald Graff's injunction to "teach the conflicts" looms as the essentially liberal gesture, formulated in the name of an even-handed reasonableness capable not so much of avoiding conflict as of controlling it—giving it a shape—in pedagogical form.

Fish is right when he says that the issue has to do with the forms professionalism might assume. As may be evident, I do not find it helpful to argue against professionalism in the name of a pure politics or cultural critique. I don't think one can simply dismantle the boundaries between the popular and the academic—to go directly to the people (to turn "clients" back into "citizens") or to get to literature or writing or mass entertainment as it "really" takes place. Nor does it seem altogether satisfactory to argue, as Graff does, that we can just "teach the conflicts," as if from a position above the fray. What seems most interesting and yet somewhat underpredicated in Fish's analysis of professionalism and liberalism is the ongoing interplay of the academic and the popular, the high and the low, the expert and the public.

It is an (un)civil war, what Gramsci referred to as a "war of positions," that marks contemporary American culture. In the midst of these cultural battles—and I'm thinking of the Mapplethorpe controversy and the NEA, the fight about Carol Iannone at NEH, Camille Paglia and the anti-feminist backlash, the emerging debate about funding PBS, the controversies over the canon and multicultural education, Dan Quayle's bashing of Murphy Brown and the politicization of popular culture, and the whole "political correctness" phenomenon—the problem, as I see it, is not a matter of learning how better to explain to the public what professionals in literature or rhetoric and composition actually do and what they believe, as Teachers for a Democratic Culture has suggested. The issue to be faced is not just one of public relations, of how to publicize and advertise professional work. Given the permeability of the boundaries between our profession and public politics, the issue I want to address is how can we, without either abandoning or defending professional expertise, rearticulate it in order to redirect current popular anxieties, beliefs, and passions toward the goals of a democratic culture. At a time in our collective history when the media and opinion-makers have identified the university "elite" as scapegoats, I think it is crucial not to concede the opposed term of "populism" to Dinesh D'Souza, Lynne Cheney, and the Wall Street Journal (hardly grassroots spokespersons, after all). But as Fish might say, there's no reason to think that professional expertise can or cannot intervene effectively in the culture wars—and no necessary consequence to any particular analysis or theory professionals offer that would entitle them to speak for or to the public. It all depends on what you want and how persuasive you are. It's a matter of rhetoric.

Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Worcester, Massachusetts
Don’t Know Much about Automobiles: 
Fish’s Anti-Theory Theory

FREDRIC G. GALE

Familiar to many of us is Stanley Fish’s long-running interest in dispelling the myth of theory and his oft-repeated contention that there would be no consequences even if there were such a thing as theory. In the JAC interview, he comments, “I don’t have any principles.” Then he adds, “A lot of people assume that this is what action in the world should be: you strive from some mode of action that, if viewed from the outside over a period of time, would be seen as consistent in philosophical terms. Again, I don’t see that.” Here Fish is distinguishing principles (which he doesn’t have) from beliefs (which he has plenty of). Beliefs are understood to mean something very like the Wittgensteinian “form of life,” where what one does and what one assumes reality to be are unified. Instead of principles, Fish relies on his “sense of what is wrong.” This “sense” supplants a more constraining reliance on theory.

Theory, although it fails to describe reality, nevertheless provisionally accounts for certain events and gives human beings a scheme for dealing with them. Even though theories are constituted in language and are, therefore, contingent rather than necessary, without theories we humans would waste a lot of time guessing how other people, animals, and things are going to behave in a lot of different circumstances.

Let’s see how that works. Suppose, for example, that a theory-less Fish is driving along a remote, tree-lined North Carolina road in, let’s say, a Jaguar, a British automobile more kindly regarded for its classic beauty than for its mechanical reliability. Driving along, Fish is admiring nature and listening attentively to a baseball game on the radio. Suddenly, the Jaguar’s engine stops, and Fish allows the car to drift to a stop by the side of the road.

Now let’s imagine what Fish would do. He has no theory about internal combustion engines, so it is pointless for him to look under the car’s hood. Perhaps he gets out and kicks the tires one by one because he’s seen people do that in automobile showrooms and he assumes that one can determine