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Something Fishy is Going On: The Misapplication of Interpretive Communities in Literary Theory

Erie Martha Roberts

When the New Critical theoretical paradigm began to dissolve in the 1980s, the theories that challenged it were, in many ways, completely antithetical to the New Critic paradigm. These new theories legitimized that which the New Critic rejected as invalid. Marxists inserted ideology into theory; Feminists added women. Some of the more acute challenges came from reader-response critics, who supplanted the text for the reader. It is the reader, they argue, who holds interpretive power, not the text. However, reader-response critics have always been susceptible to the charge of relativism. How can one avoid complete subjectivity? How can one stabilize the text, while still making room for the reader? These are just a few of the many questions reader-response critics must answer. Within reader-response theory, scholars have many different ways of dealing with this problem. One influential solution is Stanley Fish's concept of the interpretive community. It serves a vital purpose, but this purpose is very different from the one Fish gives it. This theory has been challenged and dismissed by most of Fish's critics for many just reasons. However, his critics are wrong to completely eliminate the interpretive community. The real problem with the concept is that Fish dangerously misapplies his theory, thereby embedding it in a power structure that creates a discussion about power and ideology and not truth.

Interpretive communities are a concept created by Fish; as a result, he is one of the few critics to discuss them in depth. His book of essays, *Is There A Text in This Class*, contains most of Fish's work on interpretive communities. The first part of the book consists of previously published essays, including Fish's earliest work on interpretive communities, "Interpreting the *Variorum*." Fish argues that it is "the structure of the reader's experience" that gives meaning to a text (*Variorum* 981). However, this position begs several questions. Specifically, one wonders, "why should two or more readers ever agree? ... What is the explanation on the one hand of the stability of interpretation (at least among certain groups at certain times) and on the other of the orderly variety of interpretation if it is not the stability and

variety of texts?" (*Variorum* 989) In response to these queries, Fish creates the interpretive community, a notion he claims "has been implicit in [his] argument" (*Variorum* 989). Fish defines the interpretive community as being "made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (*Variorum* 989). His definition is in general vague and imprecise, because he neglects to answer important questions, such as how these communities come about, how (or if) they change and develop, and who belongs to them.

Perhaps recognizing the inadequacies of his earlier definition, Fish further defines his interpretive community in the second section of his book. When trying to describe how different people would come together to form such a community, Fish argues that "if the understanding of the people in question are informed by the same notions of what counts as a fact, of what is central, peripheral, and worthy of being noticed—in short, by the same interpretive principles—the agreement between them will be assured, and its source will not be a text that enforces its own perception but a way of perceiving that results on the emergence to those who share it" (*Text* 337). But this definition still leaves unanswered questions.

It is not until several years later, in his book *Doing What Comes Naturally*, that Fish can produce a less ambiguous, although still far from perfect, definition. There, Fish defines interpretive communities as being "no more than sets of intuitional practices" which are "continually being transformed by the very work that they do" (153). These practices, however, only exist in relation to "general purposes and goals that ... form the basis of a continuity" within the community (153). It is on this "vague, inconsistently applied, and unworkable" (Scholes 171) group of intellectuals that Fish places the responsibility "both for the shape of a reader's activities and for the text those activities produce" (*Text* 322). While Fish sets out to defend and empower the reader, he instead puts the power to create meaning into the hands of the interpretive community.

Having finally created a somewhat acceptable definition of the interpretive community, Fish must also show how it is used. Fish's main piece of evidence is a real-life example in which

students in a sixteenth-century religious poetry class successfully interpreted this list of authors as if it were a religious poem:

Jacobs-Rosenbaum
Levin
Thorne
Hays
Ohman (?) (*Text* 323)

Fish manipulated the situation, drawing a box around the list, writing on top of it "p. 43," and telling the class "that what they saw on the blackboard was a religious poem of the kind they had been studying" (*Text* 323). The class was then asked to interpret it, and they performed this role perfectly. The students found meaning in most every part of the "poem," from claiming that Jacobs was "a reference to Jacob's ladder" to postulating that the final line of the "poem" should be read as "Oh Man, since it is man's story as it intersects with the divine plan that is the poem's subject" (*Text* 324). What Fish has done is show how, though the influence and suggestion of those in control, an interpretive community can mold anything into something worthy of study. But all of this is done within the confines of the community, in this instance a class, which is governed by an all-powerful teacher and by her ideology and beliefs.

Interpretive communities, thus, are designed to bind texts and readers. In Fish's view, the benefit of employing such a theory is that "solipsism and relativism are removed as fears because they are not possible modes of being" (*Text*, 321). However, this idea creates a power structure that allows for manipulation by those at the top. In fact, the power structure Fish creates encourages such manipulation, because that is what helps bring stability of meaning (discussed below). Fish has saved himself from critical anarchy, taken inherent meaning away from the text, and given all interpretive power and control to the interpretive community in one fell swoop.

In general, critics have been less impressed by Fish's theory than Fish has himself. They reject outright the idea of the interpretive community by calling into question its existence, its necessity, or its implications. One reason for this is Fish's difficulty in defining it. Fish and his critics find themselves at an impasse: while they share a vocabulary, they do not share an understanding of the vocabulary. If Fish cannot define what an

interpretive community is, how can there be a genuine discussion about its use or misuse, or about its construction or membership? Even R. B. Gill, a proponent of interpretive communities, recognizes that Fish's definitions leave much to the imagination, admitting that "membership in interpretive communities cannot be exactly described" (54). Fish is simply playing a tricky rhetorical game, where he "uses the term in a variety of ways without ever defining it precisely" (Davis, "Fisher" 682). The result is a community that is constantly in flux, and "the size and shape of the 'community' change to suit Fish's needs" (Scholes 173). For Fish's critics, his inability or unwillingness to define interpretive communities makes it very difficult to engage in any form of debate; one cannot intellectually object to something, or simply enter into a rational debate, when it is never defined.

This situation has many repercussions for Fish's critics. Because the interpretive community is vaguely defined, they must rely on their own interpretation of Fish's work, specifically the interpretive community. At the same time, however, they are forced to rely on Fish's use of the interpretive community. None of his critics define interpretive communities for themselves. Rather, they merely manipulate Fish's definitions to fit their needs. It is not surprising, therefore, that Fish's critics can only see the implications of Fish's theory and, as a result, immediately reject it. It is all or nothing because they accept too much of Fish's theory to consider any other alternative. The result is a critical tradition that can do nothing other than invalidate Fish's theory all together.

The problem with the viewpoints of these critics is that, paradoxically, they accept too much and too little of Fish's theory. They are correct in pointing out the many inconsistencies and problematic implications with Fish's theory. Robert Scholes, Samuel Weber, Catherine Gallagher, and Walter Davis are all sensitive to these aspects of the interpretive community. Disturbed by either methodological problems or ideological implications, such as the protection of the status quo, each scholar entirely rejects the interpretive community.[1] However, by rejecting the entire concept because of these implications, they clearly accept the power structure in which Fish embeds the interpretive community. A study of their objections shows that these critics implicitly accept Fish's argument that interpretive

communities can, in fact, hold interpretive power and control truth. Their adherence to Fish's system of power and truth blinds them to any other use of the interpretive community. The interpretive community can, and should, play an important role in our understanding of interpretation, pluralism, and truth. It simply should play a role different from the one Fish assigned.

To begin with, despite Fish's vague and underwhelming definition, interpretive communities do exist, and they exist in a variety of different forms. One form is the self-selecting interpretive community: the theorists who choose to belong to a specific ideological group. Marxists, feminists, and new historicists are just a few of many familiar self-selecting communities. A shared set of certain interpretive principles binds these interpretive communities together and informs their judgment of works. This is not to say that there is not disagreement or debate within the community. Because self-selecting interpretive communities made up of individuals, they are cannot be completely uniform in their thought or philosophy.[2] But it is the overreaching themes, ideology, or practical skills that bind these communities together and are what is important when defining them. This is why American feminist, British feminist, and French feminist critics can, despite major differences, all label themselves as "feminist."

The other type of interpretive community is the situational interpretive community. This community is made up of individuals who, for one reason or another, are a part of a specific situation that will influence how they think. A classroom, for instance, would be an example of a situational interpretive community. Take, for instance, any upper-level English class at Illinois Wesleyan. All members of the class are bound by common experiences, not only academic (such as having to take Practical Criticism or the Gateway course) but also nonacademic (having to live for several years within the "IWU Bubble"). This situation inherently creates a group of people who have similar experiences and who are, therefore, going to interpret the text in similar, although not identical, ways. Furthermore, the professor governs this class. Any conscientious student knows what a specific professor says is acceptable style or interpretation and what is not. Thus, the professor's particular views produces norms that stabilize the interpretations produced. Fish himself discusses

such a community in his "poem" example, discussed above. Were it not for the fact that the list of names was presented in a religious poetry class, and the class told it was a religious poem by the teacher, they probably would not have interpreted it as they did. The stability and meaning given to the "poem" is a direct result of the specific situation, including, but not limited to, the fact that they were all English majors at Johns Hopkins University and taught by Stanley Fish.

Thus, interpretive communities do, in fact, exist. But they do not exist in the way that Fish or his critics assume they must. Rather, the interpretive community is a way to explain pluralism in literary theory; it holds a purely sociological function. It is when Fish and others misapply the idea and give it all interpretive power that problems arise. Giving interpretive communities this power creates a top-down power structure where there is little room for innovation or dissent. Fish and his critics accepted this implication of ideology and power inherent in Fish's work, which in turn influences how they responded to the idea as a whole. Thus, Scholes, Weber, Gallagher, and Davis can only see the implications of Fish's theory in their work: that the interpretative community protects the status quo and the dominant ideology. This is because they do not question Fish's definition of the interpretive community, which gives all interpretive power to the community. Fish himself says that the norms for determining truth are "not embedded in the language ... but in an institutional structure within which one hears utterances as already organized with reference to certain assumed purposes and goals" (*Text* 306). Fish, Scholes, Weber, Gallagher and Davis all implicitly accept this idea, which creates the all-or-nothing situation in which most Fish critics find themselves.

Thus, Fish's misapplication of the interpretive community creates a situation where the interpretive community that is the largest or the loudest must necessarily controls the discourse and truth. The interpretive community at the top will inevitably be the community with the most compelling ideology, the most influence over those in power, or, most dangerously, the prettiest rhetoric. Those who shout the loudest and whose words are the prettiest will gain more members. And when interpretive power is given to such a group, the more members who advocate a specific position,

the more likely it will be that that position is accepted as fact by a majority of the people.

Just one (of many) example of this can easily be seen in R.B. Gill's defense of interpretive communities. In his article "The Moral Implications of Interpretive Communities," Gill obviously believes that Fish's theory is a windfall for those who see Christian morality in all (or most) works of literature. Arguing that reader-response and speech-act theories in general offer "some of the most promising support of moral criticism" (52), Gill sees the interpretive community as the best way for the moral critic to ground his ideology in more accepted theory. Interpretive communities give "a *feeling* objectivity to our values" (56, emphasis added) and "certainly has potential for being profitably *used* by the religious circle" (60, emphasis added). Gill does not adhere to Fish's theory because it is methodologically sound or generally persuasive. Rather, he adheres and advocates it because he can use its power to advance his ideology and create his own regime of truth. Gill's move is theoretically sound; it uses the principles set forth by Fish to reach a conclusion supported by the argument. But the fact that he can make such a move is dangerous. Thus, we have a situation where R.B. Gill can honestly and justifiably manipulate the interpretive community to suit his own needs and purposes. And when these implications are realized and utilized by interpretive communities that hold more sway within the broader academic community, it won't be long until the interpretive community with the most power controls what truths pass from teacher to student. It has become a question of rhetoric and control, and not of a quest for Truth.

The search for Truth should be the ultimate goal of any intellectual inquiry. But that search is obstructed by Fish's version of the interpretive community. Although the interpretive community is a sociological reality, Fish errs when he gives all interpretive power to the amorphous, vague community. As a result, he takes interpretive power away from the two places where it legitimately rests: with the reader and the text. And his critics err when they accept this as an inherent part of the interpretive community. Interpretive communities need not be the monolithic, controlling entities Fish makes them out to be. They have a distinct and important sociological purpose. Without the idea of interpretive communities, it would be very difficult to explain

pluralism. But by ignoring any other possible definition or use of the interpretive community—by simply accepting Fish's theory as he envisions it—his critics are left with no choice but to reject it. And the resulting debate is nothing more than a repetitive discussion about power, the status quo, and ideology. The search for Truth is no longer the focus, which is the most disturbing result of all.

Notes

[1] In his review of Fish's book, "Who Cares About the Text?," Robert Scholes grants Fish several premises. "In particular, he is right to question the status of texts," he writes, "[i]nterpretation *does* enter the reading process at a very real point and interpretation is never totally free but always limited by such prior acquisitions as language, generic nouns, social patterns, and beliefs" (172). But despite what he grants Fish, or perhaps because of it, Scholes argues that Fish's theory is "dangerous because it's partially accurate and wrong because it is mistaken about where we are constrained and where we are free" (175). The thrust of Scholes's argument is that language already exists to bind the text. "A text is bound to its language," he argues, "it exists as a text only in and through its language. It is not so bound to any interpretive community" (173). And it is not only the text, in Scholes's view, that is bound by language, but also the reader: "The reader's choices in 'making' meaning are in fact severely limited by the writer's previous choices of what marks to put on the page" (176). Thus, Scholes successfully manages to accept many of Fish's general premises, but does so in a way so as to reject the problematic concept of interpretive communities.

Samuel Weber focuses more on the relationship between the interpreter and interpretation. In his book *Intuition and Interpretation*, he argues that Fish's interpretive community creates a situation wherein author and critic alike are "situated within a tradition of interpretation, and this predetermines any moves they may make, whether affirmative or innovative" (34). The result, as Weber views is, is that "there *can* only be one interpretation *at a time*" within any interpretive community (37). Clearly disagreeing with this implication, Weber dismisses the idea of the interpretive community.

Building upon same philosophical principles and critical observations as Weber, Catherine Gallagher argues that Fish's theories simply defend and uphold the status quo in her article "Re-Covering the Social in Recent Literary Theory." Although Fish himself claims that his theories "have no practical implications at all, except for the very general ... implication that we should all relax" (42), Gallagher claims that "Fish's theorizing does have a function: its unannounced purpose, like that of much pragmatist theory, is the legitimation of the *status quo*" (43). In fact, Gallagher goes so far as to argue that Fish's methodological problems and philosophic inconsistencies arise "from his need to validate the *status quo* by proving that changes, although inevitable, are never progressive" (44). The result is a conservative, static theory that, if not useless, is then dangerous and should be completely rejected.

Finally, Walter A. Davis, Fish's most vocal critic, openly attacks Fish and rejects his theories in his essays "The Fisher King: *Wille zur Macht* in Baltimore" and "Offending the Profession (After Peter Handke)." In "Profession," Davis argues that Fish's arguments are "all a matter of rhetoric" (706), but little substance. He gives a more detailed critique in "The Fisher King." He expands upon his rhetoric argument, saying that, "For at its skill, [Fish's argument] is a rhetoric that runs no risks" (711). Fish's arguments are all style and no substance, and Davis rejects this seemingly empty theory.

[2] This idea, of course, relies on the concept of free will. Individuals do have free will and although their environment might shape them, they do have the ability to choose for themselves. This includes the ability to pick and choose among various aspects of differing theories in order to create one that best fits their personal viewpoints.

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