

# ACTS OF LITERATURE

## Luiz Fernando Ferreira Sá and Miriam Mansur interview Stanley Fish<sup>1</sup>

Stanley Fish is a public intellectual, legal scholar, and literary theorist, known most widely for his scholarship of 17th century English poet John Milton. He has taught English at the University of California at Berkeley and Johns Hopkins University, and both English and Law at Duke University. He was Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Since June of 2005, Fish has held the Davidson-Kahn Distinguished University Professorship of Humanities and Law at Florida International University. A prolific writer, some of Fish's most important works include: *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, (1967), *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980), *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and it's a Good Thing, Too* (1994), *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (1999), *The Trouble with Principle* (1999), and *How Milton Works* (2001). Fish spoke over the phone with Miriam Mansur and Luiz Fernando Ferreira Sá on July 3, 2009, from upstate New York, where he lives for about half the year. Below are some excerpts from that conversation.

**ALETRIA:** ALETRIA, the periodical of Literary Studies of the Graduate Program in Letters of UFMG devotes this issue to contributions that offer a critical or theoretical revision of literatures in English. In what way would you address such broad topics in the area of literatures in English?

**Fish:** Of course canonical texts are always being reintroduced and regrafted in ways that are not predictable. And it is also the case that in the age of the Internet, for example, canonical texts will not be delivered whole or entire, but will show up in fragments, at various posts on the Internet. So that it seems to me that there is now a traveling library, a moving library, which we call the Internet, which is a new possible location for the survival and transmission of canonical literary texts. Of course, every new development in theory or every new development in a kind of focused interest that we find in the humanities leads to re-readings of canonical texts, so that we customarily go back to canonical texts and discover in them some of the concerns that are now highlighted in our contemporary life, including technological concerns.

**ALETRIA:** You seem to advocate for the end of theory and a return to literary criticism. In your opinion, what do we do with literature?

**Fish:** There are several questions there. First, I don't advocate for the end of theory, I advocate for the end of the claims that are sometimes made for theory. The age of theory, which, let's say, in the United States and France started sometime in the

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60's was very exhilarating and exciting. It broke through frozen and congealed ways of interpreting and opened up new possibilities of thinking about literary texts, and in fact about thinking of everything in the world as a literary text. This is very exciting. It gave both, students and professors, something new to do. But at a certain moment, I can't exactly pinpoint it, the interest in theory took a political turn. By that I mean that it became an article of faith, on the part of some, that the new ways of thinking about language and literature could be translated almost immediately into a program for political action, usually a program that situated itself on the left and involved the subversion of entrenched political and sociological structures. This I think was a big mistake. It is not the case in my view that any form of theory has a political component or has obvious and inevitable political implications. Once the turn to theory became the turn to theory as the turn to politics in theory, too much was demanded of theory. Many people in this country and elsewhere believed that from literary theory could be derived a new form of life that would in the end bring about a new and better and more democratic society. This was a hope or a burden that literary theory could not bear. So, I am just calling, and have been for a long time, for an end to what I think could be an outlandish claim made for theory. Theory is a form of stringent philosophical thinking about topics like language, literature, canon, structure, tradition, history etc. As such, it is a certain kind of activity that merits its own canon, and its own roster of rewards and accomplishments. One does not need to attach to theory a hope that it cannot bear. I have no problem whatsoever with people continuing to do theory, so long as they don't look to theory for salvation.

**ALETRIA:** You have been clear about your views on Higher Education, and you have written a book that delves beyond classroom controversies into more familiar territory for many academics: how to run a university, the life of a dean, the teaching of writing, the best way to attract funds and gain visibility. According to you, should Higher Education be democratic at all?

**Fish:** I think that this is a very intriguing question. It is obvious, at least in the United States and many western countries, that institutions of Higher Education are located in a democracy. Does that mean, however, that what goes on within a university should be democratic in the sense that all voices should have an equal weight and have an equal opportunity to be heard? I think the answer to that question is no. The business of institutions of Higher Education is not democracy, rather, it is the transmission and growth and discovery of knowledge. In the course of transmitting or growing or discovering new knowledge, democratic principles may sometimes be useful, but they may sometimes be beside the point. So that I think a confusion or conflation of democracy in the institutions of Higher Education is inadvisable. It leads to demands and also leads to the politicization of Higher Education. If you believe the business of Higher Education is democracy it is a very easy step then to conclude that institutions of Higher Education should themselves be engaged in the reforming of democracy, or the spread of democracy,

or the purification of democracy. Whereas in fact I think institutions of Higher Education should be engaged in the business of educating and that is it.

**ALETRIA:** In 1967 the world of Milton studies was divided into two armed camps: one proclaiming (in the tradition of Blake and Shelley) that Milton was of the devil's party with or without knowing it, the other proclaiming (in the tradition of Addison and C. S. Lewis) that the poet's sympathies were obviously with God and the angels loyal to him. In *Surprised by Sin* you are said to reconcile the two camps by subsuming their claims in a single overarching thesis: *Paradise Lost* is a poem about how its readers came to be the way they are – that is, fallen – and the poem's lesson is proven on a reader's impulse every time he or she finds a devilish action attractive or a godly action dismaying. Do you think *Surprised by Sin* serves as a kind of synthesis to the opposing views? What issues raised in *Surprised by Sin* continue to set the agenda and drive the debate?

**Fish:** I think that was what I was doing in *Surprised by Sin*. Although my view of the book's accomplishments emerged later than its publication, necessarily when I was writing the book all I was trying to do was figure out what was going on in *Paradise Lost*. Now, any critic who takes upon himself or herself that task enters a conversation that has been going on for a very long time. As you indicated, it has been going on since at least the time of Addison, at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In Milton studies that conversation always had a single shape, it was a conversation between those who believed that the poem preached a form of obedience to God, and therefore that either Christ or Adam in paradise were the heroes, or it was a poem which preached rebellion and the necessity of challenging tyrannical authority, which meant of course that Satan was the hero of *Paradise Lost*. This opposition continued to motivate and to shape the criticism of *Paradise Lost* up until the time I wrote *Surprised by Sin*. And what I did in that book was imagine the poem as a strategy designed by Milton to bring his readers to a certain state of awareness, and in order to do that, he decided, I thought, to make the poem a series of tests and educational experiences for the reader. Once you begin to think about it in that way, the attractiveness of the satanic character, the attractiveness that almost everyone has acknowledged, the attractiveness of the satanic character became something that could be explained without concluding that Satan was the hero of the poem. You could say, as I did say, that Satan must be attractive in order for the poem's lessons to be strongly experienced by the reader. The reader has to realize that his attraction to Satan is one legacy of the original sin he or she shares with all other fallen people. Now, once that argument was put in place, it became generalizable, by that I mean that people began to talk about the structure of the readers' experience in ways that had been frowned upon before, at least in Anglo-American literary criticism. So, I think that it could be said that *Surprised by Sin* inaugurated, that is, began, a new set of inquiries in Milton studies, which continue to this day. I just completed a paper or I am revising a paper on recent work on *Paradise Lost*, and recent work on *Paradise Lost* is still arguing or rearguing that same opposition, often in response to *Surprised by*

*Sin*. So even though it was published more than 40 years ago, I am pleased to be able to say that *Surprised by Sin* still has a central place in the critical debate surrounding *Paradise Lost*.

**ALETRIA:** In *How Milton Works* you explore the radical effect of Milton's theological convictions on his poetry and prose. For Milton, the value of a poem or of any other production derives from the inner worth of its author and not from any external measure of excellence or heroism. Milton's aesthetic, you teach us, is an "aesthetic of testimony": every action, whether verbal or physical, is, or should be, the action of holding fast to a single saving commitment against the allure of plot, narrative, representation, signs, drama – anything that might be construed as an illegitimate complement to divine truth. Much of the energy of Milton's writing, according to you, comes from the effort to maintain his faith against these temptations, temptations that in any other aesthetic would be seen as the very essence of poetic value. Would you say that the testimonial aesthetics of Milton's verse is what makes him difficult and disquieting to (un)academic audiences?

**Fish:** Yes, it seems to me that Milton as a writer, and as a religious thinker, is always, one might say, obsessed with the dangers of what would be called, in the Christian and in other traditions, idolatry. Idolatry is the sin of worshipping part of the Creator's Creation in place of the worship of the Creator. What Milton wants to do is teach us that courage, heroism, beauty, sympathy, generosity, and other values are only truly values when they are connected to, in recognition of, and allegiance to, the one true God, so that a so-called beautiful piece of verse, which was dedicated to a bad moral proposition, would, in Milton's view, not really be beautiful because beauty can only be a feature of a performance, if that performance is connected to the worship of, and recognition of, and allegiance to, God. In the same way, Milton would deny that a man or a woman of bad moral character could produce excellent or compelling or worthy poetry. Only a good man can do good things would be his reply. And in fact, that is what he says in a very famous sentence in his prose work the *Apology*, when he says that you can only write something praiseworthy or that rightly praises something worthy, if you yourself have something worthy of praise in your heart. This is a radical aesthetic, as your question indicated, because it denies the freestanding virtues, that for example make possible liberal thought, and by liberal thought I mean post-enlightenment thought, in which deity or Godhead is removed from view, and liberated man in fact is on his own devising a system of law and virtue. Milton would say that that project is misguided and impossible, and that is the lesson that many common readers find very uncomfortable.

**ALETRIA:** In *The Trouble with Principle* you argue that there is no realm of higher order impartiality—no neutral or fair territory on which to stake a claim—and that those who invoke one are always making a rhetorical and political gesture. In the course of making this argument, you take up questions about academic freedom

and hate speech, affirmative action and multiculturalism, the boundaries between church and state, and much more. You show how our notions of intellectual and religious liberty are artifacts of the very partisan politics they supposedly transcend. Is that also the case of Milton's "Paradise Within?" In other words, to what extent is Milton's "Paradise Within" a rhetorical and political gesture?

**Fish:** It certainly is a rhetorical and political gesture, that is, when Milton urges the "Paradise Within" and therefore true values, external circumstances, and felicities, he speaks from a position of radical protestant theology. And I believe, from a position that is called antinomianism, that is, the radical internalization of value and the location of virtue and meaning in an interior setting of the heart or soul. That is certainly in the history both of philosophy and of Christianity a partisan view, so that the idea of a "Paradise Within" in relation to which outward actions are sanctified as opposed to the idea that outward actions can lead to sanctification, which might, let's say, be part of or for a Catholic tradition. These are very partisan notions. Now, of course, Milton, like anyone else, who was strongly committed to his or her convictions believes and must believe that those convictions are universal, in the sense that all persons should share them. And it is also his belief that would be the belief of anyone who was strongly convinced of his truth. It is Milton's belief that it is blindness and error that prevent others from seeing the truth, which are for him so clear and obvious, and therefore, again returning to the question of strategy, he devises his strategy, in *Paradise Lost* and in other works, of bringing people, insofar as it is possible, to see what he sees as so clear and obvious.

**ALETRIA:** In *Is There a Text in this Class?* you begin by examining the relation between a reader and a text, arguing against the belief that the text alone is the basic, knowable, neutral, and unchanging component of literary experience. To claim that each reader essentially participates in the making of a poem or novel is not, you show, an invitation to unchecked subjectivity and to the endless proliferation of competing interpretations. For each reader approaches a literary work not as an isolated individual, but as part of a community of readers. "Indeed," you write, "it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or reader, that produce meanings." If the author has been dead ever since Roland Barthes declared his/her demise, it now seems that the reader and the text are in a terminal state. All right! Let them all die (out) so that meaning may be produced. But to what extent are the interpretive communities another order of impartiality and hence, another rhetorical and political gesture?

**Fish:** My idea of interpretive communities was originally introduced, as your question indicates, in order to reconcile the two competing ideas of subjectivity and objectivity in the area of criticism: is it the text a capable objective and object that contains meanings or is it the reader who produces or makes meaning? The interpretive community notion gave the following answer to that question by pointing out that the question itself assumed the independence of some one

another of text and reader, but when texts and readers come into view, emerge within interpretive conditions that no one chooses but are necessarily pressuring, then the easy opposition between text and reader is replaced and you have a new object of study, and that object of study is the interpretive community. Those sets of assumptions, clear oppositions, hierarchies, canonical formation, etc, into which a reader steps and also all those teachings of the interpretive community furnish the function of the reader so that the text that appears to him or her, and the he or she who is doing the speaking are themselves functions of the interpretive communities. Now, what has changed in my view of the interpretive community is the relationship of the notion of interpretive community to a question of correct and incorrect interpretation. At the time when I developed the idea, I suggested more than once, that what is or is not a good or correct or a legitimate interpretation, was something determined or decided in a way by the interpretive community. That is, I made the interpretive community not only into a descriptive or sociological notion, but into a normative notion. Subsequently, I've decided or seen that that was a mistake, that the interpretive community idea is a valuable, and, I think, powerful, way of describing the context in which interpretations emerge, become established, perhaps accepted and then later challenged. That is, the interpretive community notion is able to explain how that happens, but it does not, that is, the interpretive community notion does not, answer the question: yes, but which of these readings, which emerged from the history of the interpretive community, correct? And so, in my later thinking about the interpretive community I divorced its descriptive or sociological force from its normative force, in fact decided that it had no normative force. Another way to say this is that there is in fact a correct reading of a text; it is the reading or meaning that the author intended. What the interpretive community notion, or the interpretive community idea allows you to do is to map this history of the efforts of interpreters to determine what an author meant. Nevertheless, what an author meant remains as the more or less fixed object of everyone's attention.

**ALETRIA:** In *Professional Correctness*, you raise a provocative challenge to those who try to turn literary studies into an instrument of political change, arguing that when literary critics try to influence society at large by addressing social and political issues, they cease to be literary critics at all. You seem to have offered a kind of reality test to those critics who read Edward Said, in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, to the letter. When does a literary critic become an intellectual (in Said's terms, for instance)? And furthermore: Do intellectuals ever function as literary critics or professors?

**Fish:** Certainly, public intellectuals at the time of Said have functioned as literary critical professionals, and as you know, Said himself produced wonderful readings of Johnson, Swift, Joseph Conrad, and other canonical authors. Said also, quite late in his life, I mean I don't think he was, I think he was only in his late thirties or early forties, when he rethought himself as a Palestinian and began to become actively involved in the PLO –The Palestinian Liberation Organization. At that

point he became another kind of figure, or rather, we might say, he became too a critic: on the one hand, he could still indeed produce wonderful readings of literary texts in the context of the traditional mode of literary criticism, and on the other hand, he became a figure on the world stage, appearing on television, taking positions, writing political tracts. Now, let's take what is arguably his most celebrated work: *Orientalism*. *Orientalism* is a study of the way in which the East, as most of us think about it, has been in a fact fabricated or made by the West. And this kind of work and thinking has been continued to be the example by Gayatri Spivak, a study of the ways in which the so-called Other is given shape by those who have the political or social power to do so. That is an intellectual thesis; it does not necessarily call for a set of actions in the political world. Another way of approaching this question is to think of the work of Michel Foucault. When Foucault describes how modern penology works, or when Foucault describes how mental institutions in the modern world are set up and how insanity is a product of certain forms of categorization, is he issuing a call for reform? Is he offering his descriptions as a preliminary to a political program? I think that what Foucault could do in his best and most interesting work, the answer to that question is no, he is just, not just, he is powerfully describing something that is happening in the intellectual/social political world, he is not offering himself as an agent of political change. It is when intellectuals, literary critics, or historians or intellectual historians, it is when they decide that the descriptive and analytical work they do has important political implications that they cross a line – which I don't think should be crossed, at least while you are operating as a professor in the university. I am not saying of course that professors in the university shouldn't be active and actively political citizens. I am just saying that they should be active and actively political citizens on their own time, after class. And that is important if literary criticism or literary studies are to survive as a distinctive thing. It is important to separate their arena of action from the arena of action that we think of as political. If literary studies is just a branch of political action, then it loses its distinctiveness and there becomes no reason for being interested in literary studies as something that has a value in itself.

**ALETRIA:** In a 2001 interview with Jeffrey Williams you said that New Criticism provided us with a vocabulary, with its notions of tension and paradox and verbal artifacts, and that what surprised you was the survival, through all of the changes in literary criticism and in literary theory, of some commitment to close reading. Isn't close reading, far from being a lost art, a powerful pedagogical tool, especially in the ways it is performed by some deconstructionists?

**Fish:** It can be, but I think there are some deconstructionists, certainly Derrida would be a wonderful example, who are marvelous close readers, and of course Paul De Man would be another. However, it seems to me that in many departments of literature, at least, in this country, close reading of the time that the New Critics practiced is no longer taught. In fact, it can now be taught in ways that seem absolutely amazing to current day students. What has happened, and again I

return to the scene that I sounded in my response to several of your questions: what's happened is that as the ambitions of the literary critics have expanded to include the ambition to alter the world, the focus on language, linguistic facts, traditional literary forms, the ability to identify them, and to speak about the ways in which they are moderated and modulated by various authors, all of this has taken, in a sense, a backseat to the possible political implications of literary and other texts. So, I guess what I am saying is that as long as literary studies harbors what I think is the thorough and impossible ambition of being truly political in an efficacious sense, there will always be a temptation to diminish or to devalue or ignore what used to be called literariness, and it's only if you have a focus on the literary, if you have a form of activity which is appropriate to literary criticism and is recognized by everyone as such, so as long as you have that, that you have a discipline that is distinctive and it can be said to again have a value of itself.

**ALETRIA:** Back to Milton, you have stated in an interview given to Gary A. Olson, titled "Fish Tales: A Conversation with 'The Contemporary Sophist'" that you thought Milton was an antinomian Christian and that Milton was a strong antinomian, by which you meant he refused to flinch in the face of the extraordinary existential anxiety produced by antinomianism. You concluded your thought on Milton saying that much of your thinking about many things stems from your study of Milton. To what extent would Milton's extraordinary existential anxiety produced by antinomianism, perhaps even a kind of sophistry, be related to Derrida's philosophical project?

**Fish:** I am not sure, actually, when he asked that question. Of course, Derrida had more than one philosophical project, but if you think of the early Derrida, in works like *Grammatology* and other works, his project is, I think, recognizably theological; that is, if I can return for a moment to the idea of idolatry. Remember that idolatry, the sin of idolatry, is the sin of substituting for the transcendent God some portion of His creation and worshipping it. In Derrida's works, what happened over and over again, at least in his early works, is that he exposed the appeal of some supposedly substance theory and enduring empathy as delusive. He is always talking about the way in which intelligibility is made possible by something that its machinery cannot contain, which he sometimes calls the trace, and sometimes gives it other names. It seems to me that this way of thinking is very much akin, this kind of theological thinking that you find in Milton, pretty much guided by Augustine, in which the things of this world are only in a fact shadows or gestures toward a reality which they express, but cannot contain. That I do think that there is some kind of relationship, perhaps not a homology, between the derridean project and the miltonian project, at least as I described it.

**ALETRIA:** You have already stated that liberalism distresses you and that you are a localist, which means that you don't have an intellectual agenda in any strong sense, or, to put it in deliberately provocative terms, you don't have any principles. Are you still a localist? How far from relativism is your stated localism?



**Fish:** I don't think relativism is a possible way of thinking for any human being because it involves the regarding of your own convictions as just the convictions of someone, and not as the convictions that are true, and I don't believe that any of us can do that. Because relativism is a position in philosophy, but one that no human being has ever been able to live out, that is, relativism, as a philosophy, developed the notion of values that have, in a sense, a homegrown location. That is, you can look at the various values in the world, value-systems in different parts of the world, and know that they are compelling to those who live in those portions of the world, but are not compelling to those who live in other portions of the world. You can therefore conclude, if you allow this relativistic conclusion, that value is relative to local or national or ethnical or religious contexts. But, as I said a moment ago, even those philosophers who may develop, like you do, a value, do not themselves live it out in their lives, because those philosophers will make as much use of words like correct and true, right and wrong, legitimate and illegitimate, as any one of us. So, I have never thought of myself as a relativist or one who puts forward relativism, but otherwise I think that all of us labor within partial contexts; we are all partial, situated beings. But the labors we perform are all in the direction of discovering universal truths. It is just that there is no methodology or algorithm which is available that would allow us to judge finally between the competing notions of truth that emerge in the world. That doesn't mean that there is no truth; it merely means that those of us who are trying to apprehend the truth all operate under the same limiting conditions, under the same liabilities. Once again, this winds its way around to a theological notion very much like the notion of original sin. We all see through a glass darkly, but what we are trying to see, and perhaps at some moments do see, is a single truth, to which are limited conceptions that have only a limited access.

**ALETRIA:** Keeping your localist perspective in mind, one last question: How can one study Milton in Brazil while the First World makes wars?

**Fish:** In order for me to answer that question, I would have to know more than I do know about the structure of Higher Education, or education in general in Brazil, and unfortunately I have never myself been to Brazil. So, I don't know, let me give a slightly indirect answer to your question. I can imagine cultures, that is, societies, I can imagine societies in which the study of literature as I advocated, as an aesthetic performance which has its own history of rules, would seem to be impossible because the political urgencies that inform the society were so pressing that the value of academic study of literary works would seem extremely small. It seems to me that the kind of attitude toward literary studies and toward academic studies that I advocate, for example, in the world in your own time, on your own time, that stands, is perhaps only possible in a society which is relatively stable politically and economically, and perhaps in societies which are not stable politically or economically, the kind of, let me give a term that critics use, the kind of ivory tower, educational practices that I advocate might seem irresponsible. Again, I

don't know, unfortunately, I am admitting to my ignorance about the situation today in Brazil, but of course, the fact of your calling me up to ask me these questions indicates that there are people in Brazil who do in fact have the kind of interest in these matters that I have been advocating and representing for a long time.

