

Desquamation and Other Fish Diseases

By Mark Herring

There's No Such Thing as Free Speech... And It's a Good Thing Too, by Stanley Fish (Oxford University Press, 1994) 330 pages, index.

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In every work regard the writer's End
Since none can compass more than they intend.

—Alexander Pope

Little did Pope know when he coined those elegantly reasonable lines that he would be scuttling an entire critical theory in the latter half of the Twentieth Century. Stanley Fish, Political Correctness High Priest at Duke University, weighs in with a new tome of essays that, as we shall see, weigh more than the thought behind them, and disavow Pope's lines as so much nonsense from Bubo. In this age of Deconstruction, Political Correctness and Multiculturalism, the charge of being lightweight is, admittedly, saying very little. But if ever there was an incredible lightness of being, we have it in Professor Fish in spade-shaped balloons.

For readers who may be scratching their heads, this is the *same* Stanley Fish who wrote the eminently readable and timelessly helpful *Surprised by Sin* nearly thirty years ago. While Fish managed to seine the depths of Milton, he did so without falling too far into that channel known as the affective fallacy. *Surprised by Sin* not only helped Milton scholars, but it also aided thousands of readers who might have otherwise neglected the magnificent poem. Fish wrote with panache and control, leading readers into the profound meaning of Milton without losing them in the babblative patina of scholarly nonsense so common in academics. While *Surprised by Sin* did not come close to C.S. Lewis's magisterial Preface to *Paradise Lost*, it came as close as any since, and continues rightly to rank in a place along side those must read books about great poets.

That is why coming to Stanley Fish today is so profoundly disconcerting. To read *Surprised by Sin* as I did twenty years ago, and then to read this collection of essays today, is rather like discovering that Bill Clinton had formerly worked for the College Republicans. It's a thought that does not compute very well in the present mix of things.

Though the seeds of Professor Fish's discontent had been sown in the earlier Milton work, they were sown with hardly the fanfare and the self-conscious effort at wit present in this book. With essay titles like, "The Empire Strikes Back", and "Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do", you know you're in for it; you also know that what you're likely *not* to get is fun. Throughout the essays, Professor Fish tries to navigate the Charybdis of conservative myopia while clearing port on the Scylla of liberal insincerity. Lamentably, all he succeeds in doing is treating the reader to the flotsam and jetsam of both, but especially the jetsam that is modern liberalism.

The first thing to bugle the reader that all is amiss is the confounded bad writing. After explaining why the great books and the political correctness approach to learning are both wrong, Fish weighs in with this inscrutability:

Each for different reasons (finally not all that different) rejects the narrowness of "merely" disciplinary work and tries to move away from it, either by simply (ha!) rising above it or by endlessly complicating it. [Political correctness] sacrifice[s] the real advantages of local intelligibility to the empty dream of non-exclusionary ways of knowing.

Or,

... New Historicist assumptions permit interpreters to get away with doing almost no work at all of the kind that would result in persuasive arguments as opposed to discrete, ad hoc speculations.

Further,

[T]here is no end to the process of drawing out process.

Lastly,

Perhaps this is the result we want, but somehow I doubt it and therefore I tend to think that the law's creative rhetoricity will survive every effort to deconstruct it.

To all of which one might be led to reply, as does Kramer on the television show, *Seinfeld*, "giddy-up!" The law may survive "rhetoricity" but it is unlikely that the English language will survive Professor Fish's mangling of it. What puzzles the reader about these examples (other than making sense of them) is why Professor Fish has chosen to write in this manner. Some parts of the volume are eminently readable, and although there are not any memorable, quotable passages, most are not uniformly as dense as these examples show. Yet these examples multiply throughout, leaving the reader in wonderment at the nonsense.

The matter of style, however, may only be a matter of taste, and therefore not altogether substantive. My own Edwardian nimiety may be such that I have simply hit upon something that one in a hundred readers would notice. The real problem with the book is, of course, the philosophy it espouses.

Professor Fish repeatedly informs readers that he does not know why *he* has become a liberal darling, a jousting partner for Dinesh D'Souza, and a voodoo doll for conservatives. He points to his arguments against the academy, against political correctness and in favor of Milton, all as clear evidence that he cannot be pigeon-holed as a fire-breathing liberal. But these essays reveal Professor Fish as wanting to have it both ways. Essentially he opines, in effect, "I'm not really saying that anything goes; I merely indicating that there are no holds barred."

For example, Professor Fish wishes to argue against words like 'reason' and 'merit' or 'level playing field' and 'tolerance'. He will not come right out and say that these things do not exist or that they cannot be found. Rather he argues that there are no reasonable grounds for believing in them. When the dust settles from these essays, what Professor Fish does not believe in are absolutes; consequently, *everything* is up for grabs.

This can hardly be thought of as a conservative or traditional position, or even a neutral one. If it is anything at all other than so much claptrap, it is clearly a left of center viewpoint. The history of liberalism and, in fact, of the academy, has been to call into question every held belief, every sacred thought, every received absolute. Moreover, it has been the history of liberalism to impugn them for no other reason than to be deriding them and anyone who cherishes them. For Professor Fish to decry those who would pin him with the liberal label when all he is doing is merely being "academic" or "inquisitive" is disingenuous in the extreme.

The same is true for his legerdemain on the subject of political correctness. Professor Fish would wish us to believe that he is not in favor of the movement. But after reading his words, we find the tweeded Fish as saying, "six of one, half a dozen of the other". In the end, he merely triumphs the cause. Here is his own verbal sleight of hand on the subject:

There is no really correct correctness, at least not any we can validate by standards that are themselves not political. "Political correctness" is simply a pejorative term for the condition of operating on the basis of a partial vision, and since that is the condition of all of us, we are all politically correct.... I ... propose an emendation, the substitution for "politically correct" of the more accurate phrase "faithfully correct", correct from the vantage point of the different faiths we involuntarily inhabit.

Oh, I get it. It's not political correctness, it's faithfully correct, and it just so happens that only the left have figured this out rightly. Thanks for clearing that up for us, Professor. So, you see Gilligan, you have your absolutes, and I have mine. It doesn't matter if we're at loggerheads on this, contradictory of each other. The Professor says so long as we are

faithfully correct to them, we'll be fine. The whole sorry mess brings to mind one of those poignant remarks of Chesterton. He wrote that for a man to say he served his own God his own way was like a man who claimed he had his own private sun and moon.

In the last essay of the book, Fish reprints an interview Gary A. Olson did with the famous author. The interview is instructive for Fish reveals himself in many ways, first by arguing that the feminist approach is wrong but productive, and that while conservatives have acted like thugs, and liberals silly and foolish, the Professor would chose silly and foolish any day.

What is most revealing in this interview, however, is the story the Professor tells about his six-year old daughter Susan. He tried to get her to quit playing with their dachshunds at the dinner table. Susan stopped playing with the dogs by showing her hands and saying she was not longer *playing* with them. To which Professor Fish replied,

“Stop *kicking* the dachshunds!” So I said, forgetting every lesson I had ever learned as a so-called philosopher of language, “Susan don't do *anything* with the dachshunds!” She replied, “You mean I don't have to feed them anymore?” At that moment I knew several things. First, I knew I was in a drama called “the philosopher and the dupe” and that she was the philosopher and I was the dupe. I also knew that this was a game she could play indefinitely because she could always recontextualize what she understood to be the context of my question in such a way as to destabilize the literalness on which I had been depending....

Only an American academic would see an epiphany in this ordinary event. Of course the Professor might well be right about the dupe part. At any rate, this story reveals the zenith to which the intellect soars in these essays. Professor Fish has more to offer than this as was once evidenced by *Surprised By Sin*. It could well be that the Professor had only one book in him. But a mind that flashed with such brilliance should, if only like a stopped clock, be right more than once. In the course of these essays, Professor Fish remarks about how he was once called the “contemporary sophist” by a reviewer who meant it pejoratively. Professor Fish was so taken by it, that he often uses the epithet to refer to himself. These essays provide ample evidence that this particular shoe fits. But Professor Fish would do well to reread Aristophanes's *The Clouds* before he advertises this untoward characterization too widely, especially before the parents of his students.