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## THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# Education for Education's Sake

By STEVEN G. KELLMAN | SEPTEMBER 05, 2008 ✓ PREMIUM

That's what Stanley Fish wants, but is it possible?

To counter the old Platonic charge that poetry is mendacity, that conjuring worlds up out of words is lying, Sir Philip Sidney devised a clever strategy. The poet "nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth," contended Sidney, relieving literature of responsibility for veracity. At the beginning of his poem "Anecdote of the Jar," Wallace Stevens declares: "I placed a jar in Tennessee," but it would be ludicrous to demand eyewitness corroboration or photographic evidence. Stevens scholars do not waste their time excavating berms near Knoxville in search of shards of jars. While the poet appears to be making a statement, it is really a pseudostatement, subject to neither verification nor nullification. Although it liberated poetry, Sidney's gambit also trivialized it. If modern poetry, asserting its autonomy, says nothing, it says it to an evaporating pool of readers.

To counter widespread accusations that college instruction is mendacity, inaccuracy, indoctrination, or treason, Stanley Fish adopts a strategy similar to Sidney's. Declaring that "poetry is the liberal arts activity par excellence," he pushes back against pressures from trustees, legislators, corporations, students, parents, alumni, and other taxpayers who would deny the autonomy of higher education. Insisting that, like poetry, liberal-arts education "makes no claim to efficacy beyond the confines of its performance," Fish is in effect proclaiming that college teachers are pseudoprofessors; they profess nothing.

Fish sets out his philosophy of higher education in his new book, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford University Press). However, he anticipated both the style and substance of that book 36 years ago, with *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (University of California Press, 1972), which includes novel approaches to works by Francis Bacon, John Bunyan, George Herbert, John Milton, and others. In "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," an essay appended as a postscript, he offered a prescription for the study of any text. According to Fish, the proper task of criticism is to provide "an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time." The formula, which he emphasized through italics, was breathtaking in its conceptual elegance. It empowered readers to ignore centuries of disputation about intention, imitation, and effect. All one need — should — do is be attentive to the developing responses of the reader. Of course, who "the reader" is provoked robust discussion throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Fish himself attempted to clarify the question by developing the concept of "interpretive communities." But what his original

formulation did was provide an algorithm for generating any meaningful observation about a text. Defining what the task of literary studies was, it insulated the discipline from responsibility for what it was not.

Fish now offers a similarly severe definition of higher education. In *Save the World on Your Own Time*, whose very title rejects the soapbox and the pulpit as metaphors for the classroom, he exhorts liberal-arts professors: "Do your job, don't try to do someone else's job, and don't let anyone else do your job." That job is not, according to Fish, preaching, proselytizing, or electioneering. It is not inculcating ethical, social, or political virtues. What it is can be reduced to a binary formula repeated throughout the volume: "(1) introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry that had not previously been part of their experience; and (2) equip those same students with the analytical skills — of argument, statistical modeling, laboratory procedure — that will enable them to move confidently within those traditions and to engage in independent research after a course is over." All the rest is distortion, disruption, or at least distraction from what professors ought to do.

That is not to say that colleges should avoid any commerce with topics that are timely, controversial, and political. But Fish says that they should academicize them, by which he means something very like what Sidney meant when he said that poetry affirms nothing. To do their job, professors should be abstracting topics from their immediate networks of cause and consequence, neutralizing them as occasions for political action. University study of euthanasia, for example, means thorough scrutiny of the biology, history, anthropology, philosophy, theology, and legality of mercy killing; but understanding, not advocacy, must be the goal. Any campaign to support or oppose assisted suicide should be conducted on a professor's own time.

As he had when he reduced reader-response theory to a one-sentence algorithm, Fish casts his central tenet about the proper task of higher education into italics: "To academicize a topic is to detach it from the context of its real-world urgency, where there is a vote to be taken or an agenda to be embraced, and insert it into a context of academic urgency, where there is an account to be offered or an analysis to be performed." Fish does not deny the virtue of seeking social justice, world peace, environmental balance, or merely virtue, but he insists that, except as the object of study, those objectives have no legitimate place in a college classroom.

Like fin-de-siècle aesthetes who tried to liberate literature, painting, and music from any responsibility except to their own formal perfection, Fish celebrates the uselessness of the liberal arts. They are, he claims, "like poetry because they make no claim to benefits beyond the pleasure of engaging in them." However, to suggest, as Fish does, that college teaching, like music, should not be didactic is as perplexing as saying that music, like teaching, should not be musical. To do so, he must redefine teaching to exclude much of what has historically passed for pedagogy. And his strategy to immunize professors from the complaints of hostile outsiders ends up debilitating them. They should, he insists, embrace their uselessness.

The seductive beauty of Fish's formula is that it seems to dispose of many of the most vexing controversies in higher education. Although he concedes that a sizable majority of faculty members in the humanities and social sciences align with the left, ideological homogeneity is not a problem, as long as instructors are academicizing rather than politicizing. Ward Churchill, Lawrence H. Summers, Holocaust deniers, intelligent designers, Marxists, flat taxers, anti-Zionists — the question is not are they partisan, but rather do they, while teaching, analyze or proselytize? Disdaining the bromide that everything is political, Fish denounces English-composition courses that, using themes such as stem-cell research, capital punishment, and immigration, are instruments of indoctrination. He insists that it is possible — and desirable — to teach writing without content: "All composition courses should teach grammar and rhetoric and nothing else." (Fish himself confuses nominative and accusative cases when he writes about "the values favored by whomever is doing the indoctrinating.")

While maintaining that any topic is ripe for academicizing, inquiry rather than polemic, he also contends that topics that have receded historically lose their venom. He gives slavery as an example, but if an instructor at Ole Miss today asserted that Africans deserved shackles, those would surely be taken as fighting words, not scholarly hypothesis. Campaigning in the classroom for an electoral candidate would clearly abuse professorial privilege (and prove counterproductive among resentful students), but the boundary between politics (the deployment of power) and analysis is more porous than Fish admits. What is offered for study can be as loaded as how we study it. Replacing Edmund Spenser and Henry James with Gloria Anzaldúa and Amiri Baraka on an M.A. reading list is not a neutral academic procedure.

Why support universities? The study of philosophy, history, and musicology cannot be justified on economic grounds; Latin scholars do little to boost the nation's gross domestic product. And Fish himself admits that liberal arts for liberal arts' sake is a hard sell. He recounts how, as dean, he was pointedly not invited to lobby the legislature. Yet he dismisses as sentimentality claims that higher education helps build moral character. Nevertheless, though one can cite ethical monsters who are connoisseurs of Thucydides and Proust, training in the disinterested search for truth surely inclines us to respect both the truth and the search. Commitment to that kind of training is one small way to save the world, on anyone's time.

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Save the World on Your Own Time, by Stanley Fish (Oxford University Press, 2008)

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