LYCIDAS: A MORE OR LESS PLATONIC DIALOGUE ON STANLEY FISH’S “HOW TO RECOGNIZE A POEM WHEN YOU SEE ONE”

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The setting for the dialogue is a rolling lawn on the campus of a small liberal-arts college in Arcádia, a prosperous, peaceful (and, alas, fictional) small town in upstate Rio de Janeiro. Lycidas, a young professor of English-language literature, recently read Stanley Fish’s article, published in Brazil in the first issue of paLavra. So enthusiastic was he that he talked his colleague Melibœus, a notoriously skeptical middle-aged professor of Brazilian literature, into reading it too.

LYC. Well, then, Melibœus? What did you think of the article?

MEL. I must say I enjoyed it a lot. These Americans have a wonderful sense of humor. To pull off a practical joke like that in the classroom, and then publish an account of it! Really, the dumbing down of college students is unbelievable.

LYC. (slightly put off) But —

MEL. And I love the poker-faced way he goes on piling conclusion on conclusion, as if he really meant it. Like Swift’s “Modest Proposal.” Beautifully done.

LYC. But of course he means it.

MEL. (his turn to be surprised) What do you mean?

LYC. (flustered) Now, you can’t be seriously suggesting you think the whole thing is a practical joke.

MEL. (genuinely taken back) Lycidas, surely you’re not saying that —

LYC. Yes, he is serious about it.

(An awkward pause. The two men eye each other in mutual disbelief.)

MEL. You mean… what he says about poetry —?

LYC. Yeah, and I think he’s into something. And so do lots of people. You know, Melibœus, this guy has a following!

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1 Originally published in Portuguese in paLavra, No. 3, 1995, a publication of the Department of Letters of PUC-Rio (Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro). Translated and considerably revised by the author. I would like to thank Prof. Maria Paula Frota, who read several versions of this paper, for her many critical observations and suggestions.

2 Fish 1993.
MEL. Yes, and so does the Reverend Moon. Lycidas, though we don’t often agree on many things, I’ve always thought of you as basically… uh… you know…

LYC. (somewhat annoyed) Well, I honestly can’t understand how anyone can fail to be convinced by Fish’s argument.

MEL. Try me.

LYC. Now, this article literally changed my entire way of looking at literature. Stop smirking, Mel! Look, I used to think that what makes a poem a poem is the fact that it contains certain intrinsic formal characteristics, such as meter, rhymes, imagery, and so forth. But Fish made me see it’s not so. Actually, a text is no more than the reading of it you construct for yourself in your mind; there is no text-in-itself, with characteristics that are objectively contained in it, that make it poetic or anything else. You just call a poem a poem because you look at it with “poetry-seeing eyes” (Fish 1980: 326), that’s all. A list of names, whatever, can be a poem; all it takes is that some interpretive community should decide that it is a poem.

MEL. Well, for some reason Fish’s argument doesn’t quite overwhelm me. All it proves, it seems to me, is that the power of a professor over his students can work wonders. Or maybe that suggestion is a tremendous force.

LYC. Really? Well, here’s an example for you. You know, of course, William Carlos Williams’s little poem “This is just to say” — a poem that has none of the traits traditionally assigned to poems: meter, rhyme, alliteration, imagery; it’s just a text that in other circumstances might very well be read as a note left by someone on a kitchen table. Well, how do you explain the fact that this text is considered a poem, unless it’s because people look at it in a special way?

MEL. Well, I don’t think it’s particularly hard to explain that, but let me take one thing at a time. The first problem with Fish’s thesis is that he says poems are poems solely because they are read with the intention of reading poetry into them. He doesn’t take into account the intention to write poetry.

LYC. But he says that both writer and reader are immersed in the same culture, so that both look at the text informed by the same cultural assumptions. So it doesn’t really make any difference whether he considers the writer’s side or not.

MEL. But it does make a difference! Just as the reader comes to the text armed with a number of attitudes that make up an intention to find poetry in that text, poets also have an intention to write poetry when they sit down to write a poem — that is, they resort to a number of textual strategies that are not the same ones they use when they want to write something that is not poetry. You might say that they write with “poetry-writing hands.” In other words, it is simply not true that it is only the reader’s attitude that makes the poem;

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3 The example is taken from Arrojo 1986.
the text quite often has a number of traits that make it a poem, traits that were consciously placed in the text by the writer, who actually intended to write a poem.

LYC. But this is precisely Fish’s point: a text doesn’t have to have any intrinsically poetic characteristic to be read as a poem. For instance, he observes that in every text there are all kinds of repetitions of consonants and vowels and rhythmic patterns and stuff. You’ll find such things in any text if only you look for them hard enough.

MEL. True. But before we go any further I want to establish one thing: it is not an a priori truth that when a poet sits down to write a poem he uses precisely the same textual devices used by a novelist when he sits down to write a novel, or by an advertising man when he writes an ad. So it’s perfectly possible that the distribution of distinguishing traits is different for any given type of text. I would even as bold as to venture that if you counted the number of sequences of words amounting to ten syllables in The Lusiads and in the Rio de Janeiro City phone book you’d probably agree with me that there may be some intrinsic differences between a Renaissance epic and a telephone directory.

LYC. Very funny. But Williams’s poem —

MEL. I’ll get around to Williams’s poem in a minute. I just want to establish some basic facts beforehand. You do agree with me that it is not an a priori fact that when a poet sits down to write a poem he never resorts to any specific strategy that is characteristic of his particular art? Would you say that it is sheer coincidence that practically all of Emily Dickinson’s mature verse is written in ballad meter, for instance?

LYC. Of course not.

MEL. Whew! So you do admit that it is possible for a poet to rely on some sort of formal device when she writes a poem?

LYC. That’s obvious, Mel.

MEL. Is it really? It certainly doesn’t seem obvious to you. You speak of Williams’s poem as if it were a paradigmatic case and not an extreme example.

LYC. Look, if you hold that there are intrinsic poetic characteristics in poems, just how do you account for Williams’s poem — and a whole lot of other poems too? Because in twentieth-century poetry Williams’s poem is not all that deviant.

MEL. Right you are. We have to account for Williams’s poem also, together with a lot of poems by Manuel Bandeira, Oswald de Andrade and many more. But I don’t think we should lose sight of the fact that there is a huge corpus of poetry, which includes Camões, Emily Dickinson and many others, and which makes up the core of Western poetry, that defines the paradigm of the concept. My position is this: we can only say that Williams’s “This is just to say” and Oswald de Andrade’s so-called joke poems are poems because we have previously formed a concept of poetry based on intrinsic, defining characteristics of poetic texts, and this is what makes them poems to begin with.
LYC. But if you agree with me that Williams’s poem has none of these “defining characteristics,” how can you —

MEL. Let me explain. Let’s begin with a hypothetical example. Say that an eminent member of the U.S. academic world who agrees with Professor Fish’s position — call him Professor Bird — decides to prove that the concept “man” is not based on any intrinsic characteristics of the objects it refers to. In other words, that a man is a man just because we see him with “man-seeing eyes.” Somebody disagrees with Professor Bird and argues that it is possible to define a man: say, a being with two arms and two legs. But Professor Bird promptly produces a one-legged man and a one-armed man, and crushes his opponent’s argument. But, says his opponent, a man has intelligence. Professor Bird immediately presents to us a pinhead with an I.Q. of 15. But man is born of woman, says the opponent; and naturally Professor Bird comes up with a test-tube baby. In desperation, the opponent says: a man has a given genome, or set of chromosomes, whatever they’re called, a given biological blueprint. But Professor Bird, triumphant, pulls an ace from his sleeve: Well, he says, there’s an Amazonian people who believes the jacaranda tree is human, that it has an immortal soul just like a man. Now, if there is at least one interpretive community that “reads” the jacaranda as a man, then this proves that there can be no objective definition for man. There is no way to define the concept “man” intensionally (if you allow me a bit of semantic jargon) but only extensionally: you can’t define “man,” only point to the objects that are labeled “man” in a given culture. So we conclude that all you can say about the concept “man” is that it refers to anything that is seen with “man-seeing eyes.”

LYC. Exactly.

MEL. So you accept Professor Bird’s concept of “man”? Do you really believe that’s the way it works? I mean, that the only way of defining the class of men is to say, tautologically, that it is the set of things that are called men?

LYC. Yeah, why not?

MEL. Because there’s a better explanation. The problem is, we’re dealing with an excessively rigid notion of “class.” Professor Bird and Professor Fish seem to believe there are only two logical possibilities: (1) There is a perfectly well-defined class (of poems, of men) such that one can always say, on the basis of certain defining characteristics, whether or not a given object belongs to it. (2) There are no classes that can be defined intensionally; nothing has any intrinsic characteristics; there are only particular ways of seeing or reading, imposed by interpretive communities. If alternative (1) is not true — if there is no perfectly well-defined class of poems or men — then we are stuck with (2) and interpretive communities and the whole kit and caboodle of Fishism. Reminds you of what Dostoevsky once wrote — if there is no God, everything is permissible. There’s no third alternative.⁴

⁴ At the time I wrote the original Portuguese version of this paper I had not yet read Nussbaum 1994, where Dostoevsky’s dictum is also mentioned. Her paper argues for a position similar to the one I defend here, with an intellectual rigor and a degree of erudition that are quite beyond my scope.
LYC. Well, do you see any?

MEL. I certainly do. The third alternative is a solution that is much less counterintuitive and that accounts for a fact that Fish’s theory cannot hope to explain. It is based on a far more elastic notion of “class.” There is such a thing as a concept of man, and there is a class of beings that can be ascribed to this class in an entirely unproblematic way — beings that are two-armed, two-legged, intelligent, and so on, that fit the definition of man pretty well. Then there are other beings that resemble this hard core of the class of men, though the identification is not perfect: that is, beings with some of the defining characteristics but not all. These range widely all the way from beings that deviate only slightly from the definition (one-armed men) through beings that are farther from the defining core (say, a basket case with very low intelligence) to those that have a relatively precarious standing in the category (the hypothetical case of the jacaranda tree, whose single claim to humanity is its supposed possession of an immortal soul, according to one Amazonian tribe). So you see the existence of a tribe — an interpretive community — that believes that trees are human is no proof that there can be no such thing as a set of defining characteristics of the concept “man.” In just the same way, the fact that there is a poem by William Carlos Williams — or a whole lot of poems by modernist poets, for that matter — in which most of the defining characteristics of the concept “poem” are absent does not necessarily imply that there can be no such thing as a set of defining traits for the concept “poem.”

What makes a poem a poem? As in any class, here we have a set of defining characteristics — an admittedly open and indefinite set — on the basis of which a number of objects have varying degrees of belongingness to the class, each of them being more or less clearly related to one another. Some objects — say, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” — are closer to the hard core of the class, meaning that they possess a large number of the defining traits of the concept “poem”: lineation, a fixed form, the use of conventional imagery, meter, rhyme, alliteration, and so forth. Other objects — for instance, “Song of Myself” — have a looser relation to the hard-core members of the class, particularly at the historical moment of their appearance: Whitman’s rhythm deviates from standard meter forms, there are no rhymes, the imagery is less conventional, though other elements are present: lineation, alliteration and a sort of elevated diction, to name only three. But the moment that Whitman is admitted into the canon of Western literature, new defining traits — precisely those that are characteristic of Whitman’s style — join the original core, so that a larger number of texts are now felt to be members of the class of poems. Of course, there remain a number of texts that have relatively few defining traits of even this new, enlarged version of the concept “poem” — and so we arrive at Williams’s little poem at last. Its claims to poetic status are based on only a few characteristics of a modern lyrical poem: brevity, lineation, unadornedness, whatever. In this way, it seems, we can have our cake and eat it too: we can still talk about internal characteristics of texts that makes them poems and we can include Williams and Oswald de Andrade too. Not only that, but we can explain a fact that Fish can’t account for.

5 What follows is, of course, closely based on Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblance” (see Wittgenstein 1975). But in strictly Wittgensteinian terms there would be no hard-core, perfectly defined members of any given class, no “intrinsic characteristics”.

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LYC. What fact?

MEL. The fact that, in the context of English-language culture, it is unnecessary to prove to anyone that “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” is a poem, whereas in many situations — and that includes classroom situations, as you know quite well — we have to engage in strenuous argument in order to convince people that a given text is a poem — say, Williams’s “This is just to say.” Shakespeare’s sonnet, whether it is scribbled on the door of a subway train or written on a blackboard or printed on a piece of paper found in the garbage, is recognized by any literate member of English-language culture as a poem, whereas the list of names discussed by Fish was read as a poem only because Fish, from his position of power as a teacher, told his class it was a poem. Well, Fish’s explanation simply can’t account for this fact.

LYC. But you keep assuming that a text has objective characteristics that are actually in it. This is just what Fish shows isn’t so. In actual fact, things have no immanent characteristics; it is our socialization that teaches us to read these characteristics into them. How can you say that something is objectively contained in a text? For instance, in order to understand that “The Raven” is about the death of a beautiful woman, you have to read it just the way an interpretive community reads it. There is nothing “objectively” inscribed in the poem.

MEL. Well, that depends on how you define “objectively.” Fish is right when he says you have to know the rules of a culture in order to be able to tell a poem from a shopping list. You have to belong to a given culture to know that “Lenore” is a woman’s name, that a sonnet is a sonnet, that you raise your hand in a classroom when you want to speak, and all that. In a cultural context, this is precisely what it means to know something “objectively.” An objective property of a cultural object is just that: a property that can easily be recognized in it by anyone who masters that culture’s code. In that sense, we may say that the sonnet form of “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” is an objective property of this particular text. The problem is that Fish starts out from this obvious fact — that a poem’s poeticalness or poeticity (horrid words!) is not a property of the molecular structure of the ink it’s written in or the paper it’s written on, that no property is naturally inscribed in anything, that all these things make sense only in the cultural context of a system that has to be learned — to arrive at the bombastic conclusion that the only thing that makes a poem a poem is the fact that you look at it with “poetry-seeing eyes.” Nothing justifies this quantum jump. If an interpretive community decides that a text is a poem, it is precisely because the community finds in this text a number of characteristics or properties or traits that make it possible to identify it as a poem — with variable degrees of certainty, from cases where there is no possible doubt, such as “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?,” to borderline cases like “This is just to say.” And yes, these are properties that are objectively in the poems, in the only sense that the word “objectively” can have in a cultural context.

LYC. Well, you talk as if you had access to the poem itself, but in fact we have access only to a reading of the poem. The poem is constructed in your mind.

MEL. True enough. But true only in a sense that makes it a practically irrelevant truth.
LYC. What do you mean?

MEL. Let me give an example first. You know, of course, the old philosophical problem of “other minds”: my own consciousness is the only consciousness the existence of which I can be really sure; it is quite possible that every other person in the world is an automaton that only seems to be human.

LYC. Right.

MEL. But it so happens that for all practical purposes everyone acts as if they were human beings, with conscious minds just like me, and I have to interact with them as if they were indeed as human as myself. So it turns out that the other-minds problem is really a nonproblem, in the sense that it affects nothing, that it has no practical consequences whatsoever. Here’s another example, closer to home: it may be that words have one meaning for me and a different meaning for everyone else. Maybe every time I say “It’s raining” everyone takes me to have said “There is only one God”; and when they answer “And Elvis is his prophet” I think they’re saying “Take your umbrella”; and so on, always, so that I can never find out whether or not we speak the same language. Since it all works out nicely in the end, it doesn’t make any difference.

LYC. I don’t see where you’re getting at.

MEL. Well, let’s say that Fish is right, that the text really is constructed in the mind of each reader. Now, there’s no way I can get inside anyone else’s mind. If I can’t even be sure whether we are indeed speaking the same language — nay, if I can’t even be sure we are all human beings — of course I can’t tell whether we all construct exactly the same text, or a text that’s only more or less the same, or totally different texts. So if I am to translate “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” into Portuguese, I have to act as if my reading of the sonnet were the sonnet, and as if my translation were faithful to the original, just as I have to assume that my readers will really read what I write and not construct a totally different meaning in their minds.

LYC. But this isn’t a problem to Fish at all! As he explains, the subject-object dichotomy is really a false one, because both the subject and the object are constructed by the same culture and therefore they are constituted in the same way. Since a culture fills all the consciousnesses of its members in exactly the same way, “the very notion of an unconstrained self, of a consciousness wholly and dangerously free, becomes incomprehensible” (p. 335). So you don’t really need to get into someone’s mind; all the minds have been shaped by the same culture.

MEL. On the very same page Fish says that the way someone sees something “would never be individual or idiosyncratic, since its source would always be the institutional structure of which the ‘see-er’ was an extending agency.” So are we supposed to conclude that Kant’s mind was really determined by the institutional structure of the University of Königsberg? Or that Galileo’s mind was determined by the institutional structure of seventeenth-century
Italy, including the Aristotelian physics and the Ptolemaic astronomy he was brought up on? Come on, give me a break.

\textit{LYC.} That’s not what Fish says. He says that a \textit{totally} free consciousness is incomprehensible.

\textit{MEL.} Yes, but back on page 333 he does quote an author who says that culture fills brains in \textit{exactly} the same way, doesn’t he? You’ve just mentioned that passage yourself. So that not even the slightest degree of freedom is possible. According to Fish, since Fish’s mind was filled by a culture that believes texts have intrinsic properties, Fish could never arrive at the idea that texts have no intrinsic properties! If we are to do away with the subject-object dichotomy altogether, as Fish wants to do, we must do away with the possibility that a subject can actualize a possibility that is not previously given by the subject’s culture. So there can’t be guys like Fish who challenge the paradigms of the culture they belong to. No, Lycidas, somehow I just can’t take seriously a theory that denies the possibility that it can be formulated itself, the way Grouch Marx refused to join a club that would accept him as a member. And, in any case, Fish’s view runs into another serious problem.

\textit{LYC.} What is it?

\textit{MEL.} A moment ago I said that even if we can’t get into someone else’s mind we have to act as if other people’s readings of the texts they read or hear are more or less like ours. If we fail to make this assumption, we run into an insoluble problem — an infinite regression.

\textit{LYC.} What do you mean?

\textit{MEL.} You say that in actual fact we never have access to the text itself, but only to a reading of it, right?

\textit{LYC.} That’s right. As Fish says on page 326, “Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them.” When I read “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” what I’m reading is only a text I’m constructing, under the impact of the readings permitted by my interpretive community.

\textit{MEL.} O.K., but how do you have access to these readings?

\textit{LYC.} By reading and listening to what my contemporaries write and say about Shakespeare, obviously!

\textit{MEL.} But how do your contemporaries write and speak? In \textit{texts}, just like Shakespeare’s sonnet, right? How do you have access to \textit{those} texts?

\textit{LYC.} Well, uh… Actually, I only have access to readings of those readings…

\textit{MEL.} Which, in turn, are also texts themselves, and so on and on. If you don’t have access to a meaning that is objectively contained in Shakespeare’s text, then you don’t have access to the meanings of any of the texts that supposedly express this social consensus on the
meaning of “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” These other texts don’t have stable and definite meanings any more than Shakespeare’s text does. If the principle of indetermination of meaning applies to the text $S$, then it must necessarily apply as well to the whole series $s_1, s_2, \ldots, s_n$ of readings of $S$. We fall right into a pit of infinite regression. How do we get out of it?

LYC. Can we? And why should we?

MEL. Well, if we can’t get out of it, then how come we communicate with one another? How come we’re talking right now about a text we’ve both read? At some point in the series we have to act as if we did have direct access to the meaning of a text — say, at $s_o$. But then why not at $S$? Why not do it from the start? If we indeed need to make believe that we can have access to the objective meaning of the reading of an interpretive community, why not make believe that we can have access to the objective meaning of the original text? And this is just what I’m getting at: in actual practice, we all do that.

LYC. I believe Fish would reply that this infinite regression you speak of is precisely what happens in reading, which is why every reading is a construction that is not based on any actual properties that exist in the text. And that’s why you can never say a translation is exact, and why I can never be sure that your reading of a text is exactly like mine.

MEL. Yes, I agree: we can never be completely sure about any of that, just as we can’t be completely sure that other people are really human and not Blade Runner-type androids. My point is that, at least in the vast majority of cases, we have to act as if we were indeed sure. When I read or translate a text, for instance, I have to act — provisionally, anyway — as if I had full access to the text’s objective meaning; otherwise infinite regression would stop me cold. Just as I have to act as if I were sure that everyone else is human. And that when I say “It’s raining” people indeed reply “Take your umbrella.”

LYC. Yeah, but in actual fact — I mean, the real situation is not quite that.

MEL. Well, what do you know! So you do believe in a reality-in-itself, an essential reality, after all! So now it’s my turn now to say: no, Virginia, there is no Santa Claus, and no reality-in-itself, as distinguished from the reality we construct for our own purposes. Isn’t that precisely what Fish believes? (In fact, I do believe there is a real world “out there,” but since we have no direct access to it, for the purposes of this discussion we may as well assume it doesn’t exist.) In the world we live in, a world where essential realities are out of the question, we can’t simply plunge into the abyss of infinite regression. In the world we live in, Professor Fish writes his articles pretending that we — his readers — will capture precisely the meaning he has in mind, and we read him pretending that the meaning we construct in our minds is... but wait a minute, we have to indulge in make-believe in even more ways than that: after all, we didn’t read what Fish actually wrote, but only a translation of his article published in paLavra magazine. We also have to pretend that the translator did a reasonably good job, so that we understand exactly what Professor Fish meant to say. That being the case, it seems more sensible — in most cases, at any rate — to assume the working hypothesis that the text does contain a stable, definite meaning, which
may be identified with what the author meant to say and can be captured in a translation, and that the different readings of a text are functions of the individual differences between readers, who are not mere cake molds that culture fills with exactly the same cake mix — even though I know it’s impossible to prove that this is really the case, even though I know this is just a useful fiction. Because Fish’s fiction — and theories about the world are all fictions, aren’t they? — doesn’t seem that useful once you realize what its implications are.

LYC. So it’s back to square one? Back to the good old commonsense view of reality? Are we supposed to reaffirm the integrity of the rationalist subject, the stability of textual meanings and all the other dogmas that have been questioned by artists and philosophers in the past century? Are we going to pretend we’re living in the age of Enlightenment? I suppose you’re aware, Melibœus, that if you reject the sort of stand taken by Fish you are assuming the existence of some stable point in the universe that ensures the stability of the subject, of language, of meaning. To espouse this sort of view after Nietzsche, after the failure of all the grands récits of modern reason, is, you know, pretty naïve.

MEL. Well, not necessarily, my dear Fyodor Mikhaylovich. Of course we can’t ignore all these things. It would be back to square one only if I were stating that texts really have a single, stable meaning. But all I’m saying is that, in most circumstances, we have to act as if they did. The critique of the notion that texts have intrinsic and stable meanings is necessary; the point is whether Fish’s alternative is acceptable. It’s quite obvious that the rationalist notion of subject must be questioned and critiqued, and the same goes for the idea that a text has a single, stable meaning: of course it would be naïve to say that a text really has just one fixed meaning for ever and ever. But it’s one thing to say that a concept must be questioned and quite another to say that we must rush to affirm dogmatically the exact opposite of the concept in question: if there is no subject, then everything is permissible.

LYC. But what do you believe in? Either the subject is a stable point or it isn’t. Texts either have or don’t have a single stable meaning. Either we act as if we still assumed essential, absolute categories or we act as if these things were no longer possible. There’s no middle way.

MEL. Well, I can simply choose the fiction that suits my purposes in a given set of circumstances. It’s one thing to assume an absolute conception of the subject or of meaning as was done in the nineteenth century, and something else again to hold that such notions cannot be taken to be absolutes, but that for certain practical purposes they remain useful fictions.

Here an example may clarify my point. Three systems of the universe have been successively adopted in the West: the Ptolemaic, the Copernican and the Einsteinian. The three are mutually incompatible, and yet we use all three, depending on the circumstances. If you’re lost in the woods and you’re trying to find your way back to the camp by walking toward the sunset, you’re assuming a Ptolemaic view of the universe, according to which the Sun goes around the Earth, rises in the east and sets in the west — that’s the useful fiction for you there and then. Now, if you’re a scientist calculating the orbit of a rocket that’s supposed to reach the Moon, you’ll be working basically within a Copernican framework, according to which the Moon goes around the Earth and the Earth-Moon
system goes around the Sun. But if you’re a scientist working on a space probe that’s supposed to get to the Andromeda Galaxy a few million years from now, you’ll have to work with an Einsteinian model of the universe. The three views of the universe are all fictions; none of them can be held up as an absolute description of the essence of the universe. You use one or the other, depending on your needs at each particular moment.

Now, if every view of reality is no more than a construct, then the proof of the pudding is in the usefulness of the construct. My view is a construct just as much as the one you defend, and, as I hope to have demonstrated, far more useful. What’s wrong with using the fiction of the stability of meaning, as long as it isn’t reified in any naïve way? Of course I know perfectly well that “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” has been read very differently at different times — two hundred years ago, fifty years ago, twenty years ago. So if I have to write a critical study of the sonnet I’ll have to take this fact into account; I can’t pretend that my reading excludes all others, that it and it alone captures precisely Shakespeare’s conscious or unconscious intention, or that it will remain valid one hundred years from now. This is one circumstance in which the fiction of the instability of meanings is useful.

But I can’t adopt this view all of the time, not even most of the time. When I’m reading an essay — say, Fish’s article — I have to assume that the meaning of the text is a stable, well-defined object, one that can be summed up in a certain number of propositions. If I couldn’t say that the author defends this and that theoretical position, if I had to assume all the time that I have no access to Fish’s ideas, that the meanings of his words are totally unstable, and so on — well, how could we possibly have the kind of conversation we’re having right now?

When I’m reading a poem, however, I have to assume from the outset that the meaning of the text in question is less stable and definite, since this relative instability and this relative indefiniteness are two characteristics that distinguish a poetical text from a critical text in our culture. This, however, is quite different from saying that a text is poetical or critical just because a given interpretive community looks at it with poetry-seeing or essay-seeing eyes. Poetical texts and critical texts belong to two different families; they are written on the basis of different textual strategies, and they have different characteristics — yes, intrinsic characteristics, in the precise sense that a text may be said to have intrinsic characteristics, according to this particular useful fiction.

But even when you’re dealing with a poem there are circumstances when you have to — so to speak — bracket off the semantic instability of the text. For instance, when you’re translating. Any attempt to translate a poem on the basis of the notion that it allows an infinite number of possible readings would be doomed from the outset. It would be like trying to paint someone’s portrait based on the notion that a person’s face is constantly changing, undergoing the effects of aging, and so on. If I am to translate a poem, the poem must sit still, at least for a while. That is, even if only provisionally, I have to assume that a limited range of possible readings — the ones I recognize at that particular moment — is what makes up that poem: this is the fiction that must be adopted by a translator of poetry. This is how every translator necessarily works, even those who publicly profess theories like Professor Fish’s; of this I’m quite sure. Just as I’m sure, my dear Lycidas, that you will never include the Rio de Janeiro phone book in the bibliography of your Brazilian poetry courses.
LYC. Well, I don’t see why not. You say that lineation, rhythm, rhyme and alliteration are objective characteristics of poetic texts in the Western tradition, don’t you?

MEL. Yes, in the sense I have given to the phrase “objective characteristic.”

LYC. O.K., here’s a passage from the Rio phone book: “Silva, Olavo — 2234-5454. Silva, Olivio — 2257-2130.” Well, what’s to stop me from treating this as poetry? According to the view you defend, this text has a lot of the defining characteristics of poetry, doesn’t it? It’s all there — lineation, alliteration, repetition, you name it!

MEL. You’re quite right, Lycidas. According to my own definition of poetry, the phone book has a perfect right to be read as poetry. And, you know, compared to some of the recent Brazilian poetry I’ve read, this poem of yours ain’t so bad!

References


