ous professional development. For the two-year college department chair or writing program administrator looking for a point of reference for themselves or their colleagues regarding the daily work of teaching, conceptualizing, and building a writing program in the ever-changing waters of the two-year college, perhaps for faculty development, or just for reassurances that the choices they make are solid and sure, there is likely to be no stronger collection or book available.

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Winning Arguments: What Works and Doesn’t Work in Politics, the Bedroom, the Courtroom, and the Classroom

Stanley Fish has written a follow-up to his 2011 How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One (reviewed by me in TETYC 41.2). Although Fish mentions in passing Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein’s They Say / I Say and Andrea A. Lunsford et al’s Everything’s an Argument, the new book—Winning Arguments: What Works and Doesn’t Work in Politics, the Bedroom, the Courtroom, and the Classroom—isn’t a textbook. And though Fish references J. L. Austin, Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, and Jürgen Habermas, Winning Arguments isn’t academic either. It’s for the public, finding a much larger audience than anything published in CCC ever will, which is why Winning Arguments has great importance for teachers of writing. Winning Arguments presents a portrait of argument—its aims, its practitioners, its methods—as it is practiced currently in various venues. This is argument as our students see it carried out, argument that seems effective, argument that one might think burgeoning rhetors ought to imitate. I can imagine a reading of Winning Arguments that sees its pedagogical value as offering readers a taxonomy, a heuristic for invention even, and the book is quite useful for its articulation of how language shapes the world, but I see its value elsewhere. Winning Arguments outlines the very sort of public discourse—a discourse built upon bulldozer arguments that strive to win at all costs—that is so problematic and that writing courses can and should upend in this, our present moment.

And what is that present moment? I picked up my copy of Winning Arguments here in Seattle the day it hit the shelves, July 5, 2016. Alton Sterling was shot that morning in Baton Rouge; the next day, July 6, Philando Castile was shot in St. Paul; the day after that, July 7, Lorne Ahrens, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, Brent Thompson, and Patrick Zamarripa were shot in Dallas. I began reading Fish’s book in the midst of this, and as I read it, I couldn’t help but question the worth of argument, of rhetoric, of the teaching of writing. Why bother teaching organization, thesis statements, the semicolon, when people are dying in the streets? I tried to console myself with the party line—that education fights ignorance and intolerance, works against violence, restores communities—but in the face of overwhelming despair in and for the world, these answers don’t seem to cut it. I don’t think I am alone, as a writing teacher, in questioning what we do when we teach summary, synthesis, business writing, argument papers, literary and rhetori-
cal analysis, and the like, what purpose these papers have for communities in and beyond the academy, how such assignments might be formative for our students as they prepare to, and already, engage the public.

Fish is useful for helping teachers of writing theorize, reflect on, and question the assumed value of argument, something so often taken for granted. Fish begins with an epigraph from Richard Rorty: “There is no such thing as non-discursive access to truth.” That sentence encompasses Fish’s book. “We live in a world,” Fish says, “where God and Truth have receded, at least as active, perspicuous presences, and the form they take at any moment will be the result of a proposition successfully argued, of an argument: believe me, this is what God is like and what he wants, or, believe me, this is the truth of the matter” (13, emphasis in original). Because we are fallen (Fish’s biblically loaded term), argument is how we access truth, work through difference, make sense of the world.

Because both God and Truth are inaccessible, Fish claims “argument is everywhere, argument is unavoidable, argument is interminable, argument is all we have” (3). This claim begets another: attempts to escape argument are misguided. Fish catalogs various efforts to get around argument, looking to George Orwell, Jonathan Swift, and Aristotle (among others). They each seek language free from spin, bias, motive, manipulation, or interpretation. They “yearn for the unvarnished truth” (197). But this is a fool’s errand, Fish says, an “impossible dream” (20). We cannot escape argument—in either its purest or most corrupt forms—because of our inability to access unmediated, unadulterated Truth. Fish writes, “For all intents and purposes, and as far as we know or can know, we live in a world of argument. Indeed, arguments about the world come first, the world comes second” (13). (If this sounds familiar, it is because it echoes Fish in How to Write a Sentence [7]). For the teacher of writing, this claim is significant, because it endows language with an immense amount of power. Rather than writing merely reflecting the world—a view I’d suggest many students hold, a view implicit when students write “about” a topic, such a phrasing suggesting the topic is solid and steady and that words are to accurately represent that topic—Fish claims the opposite, that “words make the world” (Winning 5, see also 97). The implication is that words matter, that arguments matter, that language has the potential energy to change how we exist, interact, and live together; for the classroom, the implication is that writing becomes urgent. Students are no longer just writing about the refugee crisis, for instance; their words shape how others understand that crisis; their words, Fish would argue, frame the crisis in such a way that the words create the crisis—or some version of it—for readers, for the writer too, and for our communities at large. This is, by far, the most useful contribution of Winning Arguments to the classroom.

From the premise that words make the world, Fish offers a taxonomy of argument. The title of the book gives away its chapters, their divisions based on what Fish calls bound-space argument, the idea that in certain venues only certain arguments are effective or even able to be heard. Fish addresses
political (chapter 2: “The All-Spin Zone”), domestic (chapter 3: “He Says, She Says: The First Domestic Quarrel”), legal (chapter 4: “What You Can and Cannot Say in Court”), and academic arguments (chapter 5: “I Said That First: Being Original”). Chapter 6, “Why We Can’t All Get Along: Everything Is an Argument,” reiterates Fish’s claims (made in the opening chapter) about the unavoidable necessity of argument. The book is a five-paragraph essay packed full with examples of argument in action, with Fish drawing from (among others) the Fall of Man, 12 Angry Men, Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, the shooting in Charleston and its effect on the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina State House, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf, the debate over the name of the Redskins football team, Married with Children, Holocaust denial, the authorship of Shakespeare’s works, the Marlboro Man, and marriage manuals giving advice on arguing with your spouse. These case studies give Fish a stage to do what he does best: showcase his ability to read a text and explicate how it does what it does. He uses speech-act theory to explain how the Declaration of Independence works; he demonstrates how the First Amendment is a fiction; he shows (to readers’ surprise and unease) how the argument in favor of gay marriage is the same argument Stephen Douglas made against Abraham Lincoln in favor of slavery: both hinge upon an “argument for freedom of choice” (80).

But Winning Arguments, useful as its take on the relationship between language and the world is, and appealing as its simple, clean, accessible presentation of argument is, has (at least) two problems. First, despite Fish’s masterful performance as a reader, his representation of rhetorical practice strikes me as quite limited. To his credit, he writes, “Argument is protean—ever changing, variable, mutable, kaleidoscopic, voracious—and almost anything can be its vehicle, swinging a big stick, putting on a badge, intoning a holy phrase, making the sign of the cross, wearing a uniform, speaking in a stentorian tone” (8). I am pleased that this list addresses gesture as a rhetorical act instead of focusing solely on the verbal as most of the book does (aside from a few remarks on visual rhetorics [191–96]), but look again at that list. A diplomat speaks softly and carries the big stick, law enforcement puts on the badge, a priest intones a holy phrase and makes the sign of the cross, nurses and firefighters and soldiers wear uniforms, people on stages speak in stentorian tones. Fish’s shape-shifting notion of argument is still relatively classical: people in authority do rhetoric. And who is in authority? Most often, white, middle- to upper-class, able-bodied, straight men. I think, too, of Fish’s examples of argument. While he does look to a variety of texts in a variety of media and genres, the majority are quite classical in how they carry out rhetoric: an authority proclaiming to a relatively passive audience. The classical is not inherently bad, but it is too narrow a conception of rhetorical practice, even for a primer written for the public. Though Fish isn’t known as a champion of critical race or feminist rhetorics, more discussion of nontraditional rhetorics—digital, embodied, multimodal, feminist, queer, nonverbal, disability, and others—would have helped Winning Arguments better account for
the wide range of rhetorics practiced today. (This is the critique Paul Butler makes of the public intellectual unaware of, or ignoring, recent scholarship and advancements in composition and rhetorical theory; see also Zwagerman; Moe, “Review of Between.”)

And the second issue with Winning Arguments is in Fish’s response to what he acknowledges is problematic in how argument is practiced today, much of it in stalemate. He writes, “The calcification of political debate into arrayed phalanxes of talking points is not an aberration in political argument, it is political argument, at least at the present moment, and as a result political arguments go nowhere except in circles, and are rarely, if ever, won outright” (62, emphasis in original; see also 55 and 203 for argument that goes nowhere). His response is to find a way to work within the broken system nonetheless, to attend to the bound spaces that govern rhetorical practice, to do what works in various situations so that the rhetor might avoid stagnated arguments by instead using the right argument for the given situation. Fish might help us avoid the stalemate, yes, but the purpose of argument as he lays it out remains the same—to win—and that’s the problem. Argument needs to be about something other than beating your opponent, and as teachers of writing, as rhetoricians, rather than continuing to teach and write and work within the same old tired models of argument, we would do well to imagine other possibilities for rhetorical practice—to make arguments with the goal of finding truth, with the best interests in mind for all parties, arguments where the parties involved actually listen to each other and from that listening respond in productive, thoughtful ways.

And so, I distrust argument as Fish presents it for how easily and how often it reduces to diametrically opposed sides, as if there are only two positions on any important issue. I distrust argument when Fish parrots those two sides (as he does throughout Winning Arguments) such that they and the argument they represent become caricatures of themselves. I distrust argument for the five-paragraph form (like that governing Winning Arguments) that foists a false sense of mastery upon a subject while simultaneously shutting down further inquiry (Moe, “Of Chiasms”). I distrust argument for our reliance on war metaphors to describe how it operates (Winning 23; see also Lakoff and Johnson 4). I distrust argument for how it’s employed in the public sphere, so often bombastic, a concern for the greater good trumped by beating your opponent into submission. I distrust argument when our public discourse is such that a presidential candidate debates on national television the size of his penis rather than addressing the problems facing our country. It seems to me that long-form, substantive argument is dead in the public sphere, replaced by sound bites and bumper-sticker rhetoric. (And yes, I am aware of the irony that I am making an argument against argument.)

Yet, somehow, persuasion still occurs. I think of my own story, voting in my first election for Bush, fully believing “That government is best which governs least” and inching toward Thoreau’s rewrite of that belief: “That government is best which governs not at all” (227). Eight years later, I voted for
Obama, discarding small government altogether and moving decisively to the left. My persuasion was not the result of a single speech given by the lone orator on the stage; it was a confluence of factors, much too complicated to be put into a taxonomy and included in a tidy chapter in Fish’s book. But it seems to me that’s how persuasion happens on the big issues, the issues students love to write about and the issues people love to argue about: abortion, same-sex marriage, the death penalty, immigration reform, climate change. Multiple factors act upon the individual, and because of that, Fish’s take on argument seems too simple. No one changes their mind because of a single speech; rhetoric isn’t that easy.

So again, I come back to the questions opening this piece: Why teach writing, rhetoric, or argument, and how does Fish’s book help to answer these questions? As Fish says, argument is unavoidable and inescapable, and argument is a means of accessing knowledge, Truth, even God. But there is another value to argument, one that is not readily visible when argument is a shouting match of talking points bereft of any true dialogue. Argument—for it to be worthwhile, for it to be redemptive, for it to work toward reconciliation—needs to be grounded in inquiry, reaching toward others rather than planting our feet, fists up and ready. This is what’s absent in Fish’s book. There is no mention of the role of careful, nuanced, critical inquiry, and how such inquiry begets argument. There is no mention of setting ideas in relation to others, of navigating the disparities between those ideas, of synthesizing them into something new. There is no mention of the crucial “Yes, but . . .” or “No, but . . .” move careful rhetors make, not merely opposing others but instead building upon what they say, perhaps with a “Yes, and . . .”

Now, I’m not trying to escape argument as are those Fish lampoons throughout Winning Arguments for their naïveté, and I don’t intend for Fish to be a scapegoat for all that is wrong with rhetorical practice. He serves to highlight a problem much bigger than his book alone. Or, as Fish says himself, “‘Stanley Fish’ is a placeholder for ideas you don’t want to be associated with” (qtd. in Zwagerman 459). I may be asking too much of Winning Arguments in wanting a more nuanced discussion of argument and its relationship to inquiry, especially given its audience of the general public not versed in the finer points of, and current scholarship in, rhetorical theory and practice. But, given that this is Fish’s audience, perhaps it is all the more pressing to present a richer conception of rhetoric, since argument as it is practiced in the public sphere is broken. When I set the book alongside the front page of the New York Times, I can’t help but wonder what the place of argument is in our nation, in our public discourse, in our communities, in our classrooms, in our pedagogies. And I can’t help but wonder, too, if we need to rethink argument when argument—as Fish understands it and presents it, and as many of our students perceive it—is only about winning.

Works Cited

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