



*Robert Scholes on the "Look Far," Summer, 1981  
Photo by Loree Rackstraw*

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT SCHOLES

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*J. Timothy Bagwell*

BAGWELL: At the lecture you gave (“Is There a Fish in This Text?”),<sup>1</sup> I asked you about Stanley Fish because I and other people had assumed you would talk about Fish.

SCHOLES: I was hoping you would . . .

BAGWELL: To “draw us in” I believe you said.

SCHOLES: Into my net, yes.

BAGWELL: You said at the time that you were very sympathetic to Fish and that you didn’t see yourself as being that far away from him.

SCHOLES: The Fish of the last few essays in *Is There a Text in This Class?*—which is not so far away from the Fish of the Preface—is the one that I’m most in sympathy with. I do believe in communities of interpreters. I do believe that interpretation is not a unique and individual process, but a learned behavior that is done within a community, a class, a trained body who will reach certain kinds of agreement about interpretation because they’ve been schooled in similar ways and share similar assumptions about it. There is a certain unique dimension to each interpretation, but that’s precisely what we lose when several interpreters’ work is combined. The eccentric things are the ones that fall out and the concentric ones—the ones that all the interpreters of the school agree on—are the ones that remain part of the interpretive tradition.

BAGWELL: In Chapter Two of your book, “Toward a Semiotics of Literature,” you say that we sense literariness in an utterance when any one of Jakobson’s six features of communication becomes multiple or duplicitous. Perhaps Fish would deny that anything in literature can be multiple or duplicitous, because nothing is simple in the first place.

SCHOLES: I find it difficult to take that seriously. I know that Fish has mounted a strong attack on the whole notion of ordinary language versus literary language—it goes back to his essay “How Ordinary is Ordinary Language?”

I still find the distinction useful, even though one can't make an absolute categorical distinction between the two. I find all efforts to damn literary approaches that involve generic or categorical criticisms misguided because they insist that the categories be logically watertight and of course they can then show that they are not. The fact is that the serious genre critics have always known that they were dealing with what Wittgenstein called "family resemblances" rather than logically exclusive categories. Now if Fish wants to say that there is no difference between an ironic statement and a straightforward statement, then I think he'd be in difficulty. I think the whole history of the study of language and rhetoric has too much of a stake in a difference of that kind to just throw it out the window. I think our ordinary acts of interpretation have too much of a stake in that difference. We need to know when someone is talking to us whether they're joking or not, or we feel that we need to know.

BAGWELL: Fish would say that there is no explicit meaning: the explicit one is the one you are taking as irony. But we do that all the time. We juggle two things: we understand how something might have been meant, and then we see how it really seems to have been meant.

SCHOLES: That's the way I think it works, and a lot of the evidence for that would lie in the fact that irony is frequently misinterpreted—that people do interpret straightforwardly and sometimes with serious consequences. There's a brilliant essay by Barbara Johnson in her new book *The Critical Difference*, an essay on *Billy Budd*, in which she suggests that the whole structure of *Billy Budd* is based on Budd and Claggart having two different interpretive methods—that Billy Budd essentially reads everything straight, thinks that the signifier and the signified are always motivated, always tightly tied together—and that Claggart interprets everything ironically. So that Budd reads Claggart as meaning what he says, as intelligible, and Claggart reads Budd as the total opposite of what he is supposed to be: because Budd looks beautiful, Claggart reads him as villainous and the opposition between them is not simply between good and evil, but, you might say, the opposition between motivated language and arbitrary language, between two theories of interpretation.

BAGWELL: Or between two "codes"?

SCHOLES: Sure. Johnson's view is that Melville is quite aware of these things and is therefore including a kind of deconstruction process in *Billy Budd*, that Melville is quite deliberately frustrating simple interpretations of his own text, which is one way of accounting for the differences interpreters have had in resolving the meaning of *Billy Budd*.

BAGWELL: The reason I asked if you would accept the word "code" is because I want to ask you about semiotics, which you describe as the study of the

codes that enable meaning. You're the director of the program in Semiotic Studies at Brown University. Why a program in that?

SCHOLES: It didn't arise in a programmatic way. It wasn't the case that, aha, here's semiotics: how can we publicize it, how can we dramatize it, how can we spread the gospel of semiotics. It really came about in another way, trying to devise a program that answered certain student needs and student desires for particular kinds of study. We then tried to find a name for the program that answered those needs. The needs are present in lots of places. Our way of responding to them is relatively unusual, perhaps even unique. The needs are needs for serious ways to come to terms with contemporary media, with film, with video, with various mass and pop forms of discourse. There's a need to understand how one is situated among all these things. There is a need to penetrate through the messages that come from all sides—from the media, from politicians, from institutions of all kinds. There's a need for a way to understand what's happening to us in these institutions. Semiotics is a reasonably appropriate term for taking an interest in all of these things.

Every institution has attached to it—either explicitly or implicitly—a code of behavior which manifests itself in the utterances that it emits or that the people in it emit. One can study institutional behavior through texts as well as through observing individual human behavior. What we do in the semiotics program is to look at texts and try to generate a theory of how these texts communicate and also how the people who utter texts, emit texts, have themselves been shaped by the institutions which enable them to utter those texts. The English language is one large-scale institution, but with all sorts of small-scale institutions—communities of interpreters, all kinds of social groups. There's a medical community which has its own kinds of texts, there's a literary-critical community, there's a baseball community, and so on. To be a baseball fan is to be constituted in a particular way by a particular culture, and in some sense to desire to reduce the whole thing to numbers if possible. The statistical dimension of baseball fandom is one of the remarkable features of its code. I think to a greater degree that in any other sport that I know, baseball fans like numbers. One might ask why that is, what it does to baseball fans, and what it does to people who grow up thinking that you can reduce ultimately the value of an individual to a set of numbers—provided you have enough numbers.

I think what we try to do is take people who are fans, say movie fans—almost every student who comes to college is a movie fan—and I use that word “fan” very advisedly. It comes from fanatic, it implies an unthinking behavior, behavior which is very much a coded behavior with very little room for freedom, critical thought of any kind. We try to take people who have gotten so used to getting their pleasure from films and other image texts—a narrated pleasure—take those people and in some way destroy that

pleasure for them or make them suspicious of that pleasure, make them critical of the pleasure, make them ask: “What am I paying for this pleasure? What am I paying in an abandonment of possibilities of critical thought for submitting to these narrative texts which are produced by Hollywood and other places in order to extract money from me in return for my pleasure? What am I paying in addition to the money in terms of a loss of political freedom or other kinds of freedom?”

BAGWELL: Do we want to defend ourselves against literary classics in the same way?

SCHOLES: My theory is that we don't do things like look at Shakespeare's ideological commitments enough; we don't even read some of the plays in which they're most obvious. We don't, for instance, read the Henry VI plays to see what he does to Joan of Arc. *Henry VI* is as blatant a piece of religious/political manipulation as you could hope to see. We never look at Shakespeare that way. I'm not saying that's the only way we have to look at him, but as long as we're caught up in the masterpiece syndrome, as long as Shakespeare is our major example in the masterpiece syndrome, I would say that he, more than anyone else, ought to get a more critical scrutiny from us.

BAGWELL: But you wouldn't exclude the possibility of snaring someone in a literary/artistic/aesthetic net for some noble purpose.

SCHOLES: All rhetoric and propaganda can serve a cause we approve of or a cause we disapprove of. The same with literature. I don't think there's any difference. The thing about literature is that the degree of pleasure that it provides is greater—that makes literature more dangerous than rhetoric. Whenever someone gives you pleasure, watch out. I still inhabit a couple of literature departments myself. I think that literature can be a discipline. I think sometimes we lose sight of that. I believe enough in the liberal arts to think that any genuine intellectual discipline is useful, but my feeling is that for literature studies to be a discipline, the literary texts have to be supported by either history or theory. One has to teach either literary history along with social and political history and make it a discipline by reaching out to culture and beyond the pleasure of texts or to interpretive theory, which then bears on other kinds of texts as well as literary texts. Semiotics is simply the move to theory from a literature department. I can see an equally valid move toward culture and history. What I can't see is a literature department which is simply belletristic. In fact there is one other move, which is the functional move toward instruction in writing and expression, but I think that that move has to be supplemented by either theory or history too.

BAGWELL: How would a program in semiotics differ from a program in Comparative Literature?

SCHOLES: The Semiotics Department at Brown is the place where film is studied at Brown, for instance. The Comparative Literature Department at Brown is not ready to admit that film is literature or that that distinction isn't a significant one. The Comp. Lit. departments in many schools are not ready to abandon a sort of high belletristic position. Comparative Literature—emphasis on literature—means high art; and popular forms, so called “lower” forms, and media such as film which do not stress the letter in literature are excluded. If a Comp. Lit. department were to embrace film and various forms of popular culture, and to take them seriously, I think it would be very close to being a semiotics program.

BAGWELL: Does this mean that professional opportunities other than teaching are available to your students?

SCHOLES: A fair number of our students end up working in some aspect of media and practical communications: they work for radio stations, television stations, magazines, and the like. We don't train people in that way. We are really, I hope, in certain ways almost as useless as philosophy departments. We are really trying to train people in ways of thinking and in the use of media, the limitations of media, the critiques of media—and I include the written word as a medium among media there. The major at Brown requires out of ten courses that there be four in theory and at least two in production, which can be speech, writing, and filmmaking and several other things, and the remaining courses in interpretations of texts in various media. We are looking to produce a graduate who is effective in communications, but who also knows the theory.

BAGWELL: Are you afraid of creating semiotic monsters who will take their knowledge of the way codes manipulate people and go off and change the advertising industry such that the rest of us, who don't have that insight, become helpless?

SCHOLES: Sure. Any kind of knowledge, if it's genuine knowledge, can be used for good or bad ends, depending on how you define “end.” I think that conscience is not something that you teach, because that amounts to brainwashing. You hope that it develops and you try to set a reasonable example in terms of your own thought. You try not to be cynical and manipulative in the way that you teach. But yes, I think if we really are teaching people effectively to understand the processes of communication, that can be misused. But I think that any study can be misused.

I have mixed feelings about usefulness. I think that in certain ways we are “unfitting” people to make a commitment to an advertising agency. And I have mixed feelings about that. It's a good thing in certain ways, but I hate to think of leaving people totally unfit to live in this culture. What we want is to make them just dissatisfied enough to want to change society for the better and not so dissatisfied that they opt out completely.

BAGWELL: According to a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “the moldy fig academics are lining up against the hermeneutical mafia in literature departments across the country.” Geoffrey Hartman is quoted as saying: “There’s a fear that Deconstruction will empty literature of meaning.” And Gerald Graff says, “Literary intellectuals have collaborated in assuring literature’s ineffectuality.” Do you think there’s a kind of battle shaping up, or has it already taken place?

SCHOLES: If there is, it’s in a teapot. I don’t think there’s a consequential battle of any kind going on. I do think there’s a lot of reaching for notoriety in that kind of position on both sides. I don’t think that literature’s effectiveness is something that college teachers are responsible for. They are responsible for helping people to read and interpret critically. I think the deconstructive people are trying to do that, I think Gerald Graff is trying to do that, and I think it’s probably a good thing that different people do it in different ways. I think as an interpreter of texts, Hartman has a hell of a lot more to contribute than Graff. That’s a personal judgment of the interpretive work that I’ve seen by the two writers. I haven’t seen the total output of either one of them. I think that deconstructive procedures as a kind of mass movement will result in an awful lot of similar, predictable interpretations, which makes the interpretations less interesting.

BAGWELL: In the next to the last chapter of your book, you contrast semiotics with theories of meaning: hermeneutics, New Criticism, and reader response theory. In general, you say that semiotics is not an interpretation of meaning; it is the exposure of codes, it is an exposure of what enables meaning. Doesn’t that make your enterprise and that of the deconstructionists similar in some ways?

SCHOLES: Yes and no. Deconstruction is really the New Criticism in fancy dress. That’s the main thing one needs to notice about them. Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man have fashioned a philosophy which enables the New Critical enterprise to be resumed in a more refined way. Since the New Critics taught us all a lot, the deconstructionists can go on teaching us a lot. But despite the more strenuous philosophy of the deconstructionists, it is essentially the same thing that is being taught there—how to read for indeterminacy of meaning. The New Critics were looking for paradox and ambiguity—the text that could not be paraphrased. The deconstructionists are doing the same thing.

BAGWELL: In the last chapter of your book—“Uncoding Mama: The Female Body as Text”—you seem to be engaged in a kind of Deconstruction of the literary texts you refer to, all of which eliminate the clitoris from female sexuality by writing it out of existence. Does this imply that you are more of an activist than perhaps you are willing to admit?

SCHOLES: I’ve been accused of being a closet moralist. I suppose to some

extent I have to plead guilty to that. My approach to literary texts is anchored in a pedagogy. I'm a teacher first and a critic or interpreter or semiotician or whatever second. And pedagogy is rooted in a certain amount of faith in the political process as it has been developed in this country: far from perfect, mind you, and based on assumptions about the ability of people to learn enough to make their own decisions, which are very idealistic assumptions. I'm still trying to help realize that enterprise by teaching reading and writing on a large scale at the highest possible level. My interpretive methods are based on their teachability more than anything else.

BAGWELL: The notion that one has to defend oneself against texts, that one must step back and reflect on what's going on is emphasized by Marxist aestheticians. How would you contrast your enterprise with theirs?

SCHOLES: I have learned from the Marxists. You can learn from anybody who is on the outside. It's the Marxist criticism of bourgeois society that one learns from, not the Marxist defense of Soviet society, which is simply rhetoric and propaganda on behalf of a not very effective social state. So that I think you learn from all of those who are on the outside, who are critics with no prior commitment to the thing they are criticizing, in fact, who have the reverse desire to expose it. That's what criticism is all about.

BAGWELL: Would you want to say something about how this interview as it appears in print will be an interpretation of Robert Scholes?

SCHOLES: Sure. Semiotically speaking, one of the things that will be missing will be all the intonations in the words that I say, the pauses, the gestures, our situation vis à vis one another. There's going to be a lot lost in that translation and it is definitely a translation. That you elect to eliminate certain replies of mine and certain questions of yours or questions of mine or replies of yours is another kind of constraint, but it's also a formal constraint—you have size requirements, relevance requirements, interest requirements which may make a written version more interesting than the oral version, but something has to be done to compensate for the interest that we may have generated by sitting here and being with one another while we talk. The history of written narrative forms consists partially of attempts to compensate for what is lost by not being in an oral situation in which you get immediate audience feedback.

BAGWELL: How do you think a history professor might teach a little differently after attending your seminar in recent narrative theory?

SCHOLES: Well, narrative theory calls into question the possibility of ever telling the whole truth about anything. This has implications for law as well as history: we need to operate law courts with the myth that one can tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Semiotics would argue that those propositions are impossible.

NOTES

1 Scholes's title alludes to Stanley Fish's recent book, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).