Yet, with the critical cat now so far out of [the] bag that one can no longer ignore its existence, those who refuse the crime of theoretical ruthlessness can no longer hope to gain a good conscience. Neither, of course, can the terrorists—but then, they never laid claim to it in the first place.

—PAUL de MAN, "The Return to Philology"*

Within the problematic of general persuasion, difference is never theorized as a matter of irreducible dispersions or discontinuities; the "metaphors of life" Foucault alludes to are taken literally, and the category of the human (reader) quietly obscures the "murderous" difference of the other(s). So long as pluralist hegemony is assured, critics work confidently within the problematic of general persuasion and rarely address persuasion as such. Instead, various strategies are employed to recast the traditional opposition between rhetoric and logic, each yielding a more or less summary identification of merely rhetorical persuasiveness with mechanical niceties, formalities that can then be quickly dismissed. Some critics prefer to distinguish logic from rhetoric in explicitly moral terms, often proffered in a tone more generally associated with fear of the mob. In the liberal tradition, they regard rhetoric as a close cousin of

demagoguery; even its appearance is to be avoided. Argument is a matter of right reasoning, not flattery or cajoling; the persuasiveness of logic is wholly immanent, that is, not rhetorical. Other critics, moving in the opposite direction, ignore the putatively ethical question and underscore the mechanical or “technical” issue. Rhetoric is identified with poetry, and poetry is the object of criticism; criticism, therefore, must be radically opposed to poetry and poeticisms. Criticism and theory deal in propositions, not in rhetoric.¹ The traditional opposition is elevated to a scientific distinction grounded in the essential qualities of language. The problem of critical persuasiveness is entirely forgotten in this rush to science, which is precisely the end pluralism requires. Demurring that poetry is not “persuasive,” the critic is free to move on to the question of what poetry is. The nature of persuasion is not the object of literary criticism.

Since the early seventies, diversionary tactics like these have come under extraordinary pressure. For (both practical and theoretical) reasons we shall consider, pluralists cautiously began to broach the issues of persuasion and persuasiveness, though their interests were clothed in a vocabulary of understanding or belief that conceals the stubborn problems of how belief is constituted, understanding verified, or understanding distinguished from belief (from being persuaded to the truth of any given understanding). As their traditional postures become more and more untenable, reluctant critics are swept into the defensive polemics characteristic of pluralism’s contribution to contemporary critical debate. These efforts treat persuasion as a theme rather than venturing into a discussion of the logic of persuasion, as the latter would expose the structure of the pluralist problematic. But such work nevertheless reveals more than it conceals; the contradictions that now press upon the problematic of general persuasion demand some gesture toward resolution. The lapses and confusions that plague both the initial efforts to subdue those contradictions and later recuperative

¹This is not, of course, a new position. Cleanth Brooks proposes just such a distinction in “The Heresy of Paraphrase,” The Well Wrought Urn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947).
projects are symptomatic of the weaknesses in the problematic as a whole, and they enable us, as Macherey argues, "to read the ideological contradictions within the devices produced to conceal them, to reconstitute the contradictions from the system of their concealment." The pluralist polemic is an unwittingly revelatory "system of concealment."

E. D. Hirsch's *Aims of Interpretation* can serve to illustrate the pattern of the earliest stages of this (somewhat grudging) pluralist examination of persuasion. There are those who might refuse Hirsch the honorific "pluralist" on the grounds that he harbors a "monistic" commitment to authorial intention. This exclusion fails for several reasons that I will sketch here and argue over the course of my analysis. First, practically speaking, Hirsch's notion of "significance" allows for at least as large and diverse a plurality of interpretations as any pluralist conception would permit.

Meaning is the stable object of knowledge in interpretation, without which wider humanistic knowledge would be impossible. The chief interest of significance, on the other hand, is in the unstable realm of value. The significance of meaning in a particular context determines its value in that context. For significance names the relationships of textual meaning, and value is a relationship, not a substance. Value is value-for-people. Textual meaning has wide interest only when it has actual or potential value for a number of people. And this value changes. A poem may have a very different value for me at age twenty and age forty. It may possess different values for people in different cultural contexts. A poem has no absolute value. [H 146]

In terms of pluralism's own articulation of its ideal, Hirsch's theory encourages pluralistic multiplicity. This observation, combined with a close reading of a paradigmatic pluralist polemic such as Booth's "'Preserving the Exemplar,'" leads to the more pointed observation that pluralism—via the problematic

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of general persuasion—in fact works to impose a Hirschian notion of intention, expressed as respect for authors, on all participants in the pluralist “dialogue.” Hirsch’s (apparently monistic) position as an intentionalist does not conflict with his pluralist position; it is merely a particular species of pluralism. Its practical effects are pluralistic, and, as we shall see, the logic of Hirsch’s intentionalist account entails the pluralist view of persuasion. Ultimately, this reading of the Hirschian element in pluralist discourse leads to a critique of pluralism’s opposition between “monism” and “pluralism” in my discussion of Booth in Chapter 3. This opposition cannot be sustained; monisms are necessary to the theory and the practice of pluralism. In fact, as we shall see, pluralism, in Booth’s terms, is a monism. In my reading, the charge that Hirsch is a monist rather than a pluralist loses its coherence.

Hirsch’s work reveals the trajectory that carries an essentially theoretical text toward the problem of persuasion and, in the process, transforms it into a pluralist polemic. This transformation is dramatized in Booth’s work when he abandons his effort to distinguish pluralist theory from its practical values. The Aims of Interpretation contains ample evidence of the moral indignation characteristic of those who see persuasive rhetoric as a gaudy paint that renders even the most questionable postures tempting to some. But Hirsch is also committed to the scientistic model typical of those who dream of a pure language, a neutral instrument of communication, systematically cleansed of rhetorical excrescences, of seductive linguistic tricks meant to persuade the recalcitrant or the unwary. In the case of The Aims of Interpretation, both evasive strategies fail. Hirsch is left struggling to locate persuasion deep in the margins of his discourse. The silences and strains which hinder this effort mark the whole of The Aims of Interpretation. And the contradiction of the pluralist polemic so deforms Hirsch’s argument that persuasion paradoxically reappears at the very center.

Predictably, Hirsch defers the subject of persuasion until his “Afterword.” (Even here the pluralist reluctance to speak directly to the question lingers.) Then, he concedes only that “the
communal acceptance of hypotheses has much to do with persuasion, and persuasion in doubtful matters requires attention to rhetoric" (153). The vague, guarded word “much” never acquires more substance, and Hirsch has already assured his reader that “obviously, the consolidated knowledge within a discipline has nothing directly to do with rhetoric” (153). Persuasion thus occupies an embarrassingly compromised position; it bears the double burden of an unseemly intimacy with rhetoric—which must cut it off from knowledge—and of “much” of the responsibility for the “communal acceptance” of this same knowledge in its original (not yet consolidated) form as hypothesis.

Hirsch senses some problem here, but he attempts to solve it with a semantic distinction and, in the process, overlooks the real difficulty with his position. He argues that in a discipline, once a hypothesis has been communicated (persuasively, one must assume), it “must be used, tested, and expressed by others in a different form” (154, my emphases). This formal transformation yields “what is communicated (that is, propositions)” (154), which are distinct from the persuasive rhetoric that first brought the hypothesis to the community’s attention (and, apparently, inspired its subsequent use and testing). Hirsch concludes: “If this condition is not met, the hypothesis is not really subject to criticism at the level of the discipline and has nothing to do with knowledge” (154). Propositions alone can be said to have any relation whatsoever to knowledge, and a proposition is a hypothesis divested of its rhetoric, the how of its communication. This interlude has the tone of a final clarification, and Hirsch’s last, knowing remark confides that it is “easy” for a critic “to express with eloquent persuasiveness what is in fact nonsense” (154). The concept of eloquent persuasive nonsense remains murky and faintly redundant. In fairness, one must concede that this notion of persuasive nonsense is very widely accepted, and it is quite possible that Hirsch, were he to offer an example or an explanation of the term, would be scolded from some

4Cf. his discussion of synonymity, pp. 53–73.
quarters for belaboring the obvious. At any rate, he dismisses, with apparent relief, the issue of the relationship between persuasion and knowledge and closes his argument with a reprise of his central point, the distinction between value and knowledge, art and discipline (scientia).

It is perhaps extreme to suggest that these distinctions are so urgently pursued largely to obscure the problems surrounding the nature of persuasiveness. Hirsch seems not at all perturbed that eloquence can give nonsense the tone and character of “persuasiveness.” He rather leaves the impression that this is simply the state of our fallen nature. And he appears convinced that the step from hypothesis to proposition genuinely purges “what is communicated” of all rhetorical impurities and, thus, erases the ambiguities of persuasion’s role in the constitution of knowledges and the disciplines elaborated around them.

Under some circumstances, this kind of treatment of a concept like persuasion might go unremarked. The distrust of rhetoric and the fear of “bad” persuasion, of seductive reasoning, are pervasive cultural tropes; they appear in political and social as well as intellectual avatars, and their traditions are so well established that, generally, one may simply allude to them and trust any audience to fill in the lines of the argument. But Hirsch himself makes it quite impossible to allow these remarks to pass without comment. He avoids any theoretical analysis of the unresolved issues crowded around his treatment of persuasion. Nevertheless, he betrays his consciousness of its problematical importance by placing this flawed and untrustworthy concept of persuasion at the heart of his larger project, the defense of literary studies as a discipline. Defending the possibility of knowledge in literary criticism is one of the central aims of Hirsch’s enterprise. “One purpose of this book, then, is to give encouragement to those who are still willing to entertain the belief that knowledge is possible even in textual interpretation” (12). For him, the suggestion that reading may be “impossible” translates directly into a threat to the scientific or disciplinary status of criticism, and it generates his strongest condemnation: “Some of my colleagues are indignant at the present decadence in literary
scholarship, with its anti-rationalism, faddism, and extreme relativism. I share their feelings. Scholars are right to feel indignant toward those learned writers who deliberately exploit the institutions of scholarship—even down to its punctilious conventions like footnotes and quotations—to deny the whole point of the institutions of scholarship, to deny, that is, the possibility of knowledge (13). Hirsch’s effort to respond to this threat leads him willy nilly to the problem of persuasion.

Hirsch approaches the question by way of a discussion of “the sociology of knowledge.” He rejects Thomas Kuhn’s concept of the paradigm and replaces it with a strikingly similar notion. His own theory of “cognitive inquiry” is based on the “logical relationship between evidence, hypothesis, and probability,” but he claims that this relation is a “stable and permanent paradigm” (my emphasis) that “transcends” the ephemeral paradigms Kuhn defines (H 152). This transcendent paradigm is a kind of ultimate proposition; its logic is permanent, that is to say, not historically relative. Hirsch presents this argument without reference to rhetoric or persuasion, and it stands quite well, unsupported, for a moment. Then he adds:

Now this is a very abstract and simplified model for inquiry, but it is the kind of model that every serious inquirer assumes. Furthermore, it is an accurate model to the extent that it is widely assumed. For I have referred not only to the logical relationship between evidence, hypothesis, and probability, but also to a communal enterprise that exists only to the extent that this logical relationship remains the paradigm (or ideology!) for the members of a community of inquirers. . . . Thus in a special sense, there is a sociology of knowledge on which inquiry depends, on which all scientia depends. And to the extent that this sense of the communal enterprise collapses, so does the discipline itself collapse as a discipline. . . . The health of a discipline as a discipline is entirely dependent upon the devoted allegiance of its members to the logic of inquiry. [H 152, 154]

The tendency toward repetition here is characteristic of Hirsch’s treatment of the issue of communal allegiance. He insists that the centrality of community, indeed, of devoted allegiance, be
acknowledged. The transcendent, permanent paradigm of the logic of inquiry is an accurate model of disciplinary enterprise only “to the extent that it is widely assumed,” that is, “only to the extent that this logical relationship remains the paradigm (or ideology!) for the members of the community of inquirers.” It is thus a social fact in the most profound sense. And what is the unspoken role of persuasion in all this? Persuasion is nothing less than the originary moment in the process by which the potential (or hypothetical) community (an entity Hirsch does not discuss, as it falls outside the logic of the paradigm) comes to accept “the paradigm (or ideology!)” of a communal enterprise organized around the logic of inquiry: “Communal acceptance of hypotheses has much to do with persuasion.” Hirsch’s (dubious) distinction between a “proposition” and its rhetorical dress does not begin to address his real dilemma: the discipline of literary studies, as a discipline, and the knowledge that it produces depend upon persuasion.

The premium placed on avoiding the questions surrounding persuasiveness in general and persuasive nonsense in particular—no matter what the cost in coherence—becomes increasingly obvious. The very roots of Hirsch’s community lie in persuasion. Yet he summarily defines it as an erratic, unpredictable tool and declines to examine it further. He abandons the topic with the faintly mystical remark that “the writing of history is an art, or can be, but history is not an art; it is a discipline, which is to say scientia” (154).

Literary criticism, also a discipline, has for Hirsch a parallel relationship to art. Hirschian persuasion is a form of artfulness; it is added to something—“what is communicated”—which is located not in writing but elsewhere. The hybrid, as it is acted upon by a group of inquirers, generates devotion or allegiance, community, and then knowledge. But that elsewhere, the place

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5This distinction is untenable, and it represents as grave a threat for Hirsch’s position as his ultimate dependence on persuasion to found the critical community of inquirers. I pass by the opportunity to develop a critique of the opposition between “propositions” and the language in which they are “embodied” only in order to pursue the more crucial matter of persuasion.
Seductive Reasoning

of history and criticism which is not writing, is never named; and, curiously, it seems that art (persuasion) does the essential work, or at least, “much” of it. One wonders if that history which is not written with art (in art) can ever hope to be admitted to the discipline as knowledge. Without the persuasive artifice that wins communal acceptance for the logic of inquiry (or any other hypothesis), there can be no propositions.

Hirsch’s mishandling of the concept of persuasion is symptomatic. Having ignored the problem of persuasion through the entirety of his argument, he finally takes it up, then hastily discards it, after offering a contradictory definition concerned, above all, with forcing persuasion to the most remote margin of pluralist discourse. Why does pluralism shrink so from the problem of persuasion? What is masked by this sudden and awkward silence?

What is most puzzling in the closing passages of The Aims of Interpretation is not its silences, but rather Hirsch’s decision to place persuasion at such a crucial juncture in his argument. This is not the ideal strategy to defend his view of the logic of inquiry. And one can easily envision an “Afterword” that presents an essentially similar argument without pausing to muse about persuasive nonsense and the grave consequences of the failure of community. Why does Hirsch cloud the clarity of the logic of inquiry with a venture into the sociology of knowledge—a project he ultimately dismisses—and thus expose the weakest link in the pluralist argument?

The canniness and subtlety that marks the rest of Hirsch’s essay should warn us away from any illusion that his remarks

6For a rebuttal of Hirschian scientism as it touches on historiography, see Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of Nineteenth Century Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). On the question of history’s status as a science, White notes: “The physical sciences appear to progress by virtue of the agreements, reached from time to time among members of the established communities of scientists, regarding what will count as a scientific problem, the form that a scientific explanation must take, and the kinds of data that will be permitted to count as evidence in a properly scientific account of reality. Among historians no such agreement exists, or ever has existed” (12–13).
on persuasion are simply misbegotten. On the contrary, he is
denied the luxury of his own ideal argument; conditions within
the profession of literary studies compel attention to matters he
might prefer to pass over. The simple fact that *The Aims of Inter-
pretation* exists as a polemical address to the community is only
the first sign that the problematic of general persuasion and its
model of a homogeneous community of general readers labor
under growing inconsistencies.

Hirsch writes to forestall the dissolution of the community of
inquirers, which he defines as the source of any discipline’s
capacity to produce knowledge. He must address this problem
and, by extension, the problem of persuasion, because the com-
munity has already begun to divide. Hirsch’s explicit call for
allegiance to pluralism’s logic of inquiry tacitly acknowledges
that the “natural” homogeneity of the community can no longer
sustain its traditional practices and methods, its very logic, with­
out conscious and polemical efforts like his own; the community
must now be persuaded to remain (even perhaps to become) a
community.

In a sense, Hirsch’s text intervenes at precisely that originary
moment which his theory elides: the moment at which a poten­
tial (or hypothetical) community comes to accept “the paradigm
(or ideology!) of a truly communal enterprise organized around
the logic of inquiry.” A process of fragmentation, or differentia­
tion, has put the old consensus into question, and a new one
has yet to be achieved; and, of course, “communal acceptance of
hypotheses has much to do with persuasion.” There are many
ways to characterize this process of dissolution. One might be­
gin with the simplest demographic observations. The class,
race, gender, and ethnic homogeneity of the university in the
United States has been crumbling since at least 1945, and since
the civil rights and women’s movements of the sixties, this pro­
cess has been both theorized and translated into pedagogical
and disciplinary/scholarly practices. Yet although the very exis­
tence of his argument concedes this fragmentation of the critical
community, Hirsch does not and cannot explicitly acknowledge
this development. The logic of inquiry must be a “stable and
permanent paradigm." As a result, virtually nothing in his text contributes to a concrete image of the community he claims to represent. Hirsch discusses his community in strictly abstract terms, as an ethical subject operating a set of transcendent principles (the logic of inquiry) in the pursuit of knowledge (and self-reproduction). This enables him to displace his anxiety about the dissolution of the reading community away from "mainstream" scholars and onto a clique of "dogmatic relativists" (148), who can then be countered on more congenial theoretical ground, on ground at a safe distance from the problem of persuasion.

When explicit remarks about the character and makeup of the greater pluralist community or about its actual methods or what Stanley Fish will call its "interests and tacitly understood goals" (F 16) are unavoidable, Hirsch's argument shows the signs of enormous strain. At such moments, the pressure on his text is visible in startling passages that fail to conceal a rising panic. The logic of inquiry no longer seems wholly adequate to the task of unifying or constituting the community of inquirers.

Consider, for example, his observation that "the current instinct of students" suggests that they believe "more truth and value are found in underground studies than in those pursued within institutions" (H 136, my emphasis). This is an unexpectedly frank admission of the conflict and suspicion "within" the academy. Instinct is in apparent conflict with logic. This is not, however, cause for alarm: enterprising teachers have incorporated the underground into established courses. Hirsch's celebration of naive cooptation concludes: "Literary study is at present astonishingly heterogeneous. In some American universities little remains that the underground can call its own. I am not referring just to courses that stress or include pornography, but to the whole range of subject matters and their mixtures, historical-modal, generic-thematical, modal-generic, historic-thematical, covering, for instance, 'The Literature of Fantasy,' 'Women in Literature,' 'The Black Man in Literature,' 'Patristic Elements in Anglo-Saxon Literature'" (136). These curious comments appear in the course of the argument that "the idea of literature is
not an essentialistic idea, and no critical approach [i.e., the aesthetic] can, without distortion, make essentialistic claims upon literature" (135). Hirsch believes that the heterogeneity registered above demonstrates that "the aesthetic mode of perception can no longer be considered the governing mode, and the only vestige that remains of its former potency is the continued cheerful use of the word 'literature' in the titles of these courses" (136). Rejecting the previous overemphasis on the aesthetic, he insists that literary scholars have an ethical responsibility to teach "valuable books of many sorts in addition to valuable works of art" (143). Aesthetic criteria are to be suspended—or at least relaxed—in a curricular version of open admissions. But the old standards are not to be forgotten. As Hirsch observes, "the best that is thought and said is not always said well, even if it ought to be" (136).

In this context, the remarks quoted above might be interpreted merely as an unfortunate lapse into matters of personal taste, admittedly a politically insensitive lapse, but finally an irrelevant aside. At worst, they would suggest that Hirsch's allegedly historical view of the category of "Literature" is somewhat underdeveloped. But to dismiss these comments as marginal would be an error.

Underlying these brief remarks is the conviction that those "valuable books" which women ("Women in Literature") and blacks ("The Black Man in Literature") have recently forced into the canon—or at least, into the classroom—are aesthetically inferior to those chosen over the years by essentially white, male, and privileged scholars; despite "cheerful" incantations, literature from the underground is not valuable as art, in other words, it is not Literature. The brackets of fantasy and patristics serve not to camouflage the central issues but to highlight them; the effort to mask the troubling matters of sex and race is extraordinarily transparent. (I refrain from gratuitous speculation as to the groups or individuals Hirsch has in mind as the partisans of pornography; this reference remains extremely puzzling to me.) This "critique" of the aesthetic approach to literature merely reinforces the claim that the traditional canon was formed on
the grounds of strictly aesthetic judgment. This claim is precisely what is at issue.

Hirsch displaces the responsibility (or the blame) for these course changes away from teacher-scholars and onto students. This creates a gap between the alleged source of the changes—wary students who instictively believe truth and value are lodged in “underground” courses—and the actual sponsors of the courses—faculty members at established institutions. Hirsch bridges this gap with expediency. By representing scholar-critics solely as pragmatic teachers adjusting to the market, he reduces scholarly interest to the survival instinct. The initial displacement underpins Hirsch’s assumption that aesthetic value is no longer a central criterion for the selection of course materials (after all, students are interested in “relevant” texts, not poetic ones); with the second step, the complex and key role of the scholar is reduced to that of a commodity producer accommodating a new generation of consumers.

Hirsch is struggling to account for the fundamental shifts that are slowly taking place within literary studies as a discipline and to read them with as little emphasis on their discontinuity with the dominant pluralist paradigm as possible. Changes in the intellectual, social, political, and economic composition of the critical community have produced his persuasive efforts on behalf of the logic of inquiry. But only if specific references to this radically changed community of readers, and especially to their astonishing heterogeneity, can be avoided or discounted can it then be called upon to ratify the logic of inquiry with one disinterested (pluralist) voice. Hirsch must locate the source of innovations in the content of literary studies (and his focus on content is significant) outside the intellectual field of the academy: in political and social developments among students, above all, in an arena far removed from critical theory and theorists. This is the characteristic interpretative gesture I referred to in my discussion of pluralist commentators above, the tendency to consign power to a field that is wholly outside the discipline as such. Social power is acknowledged, but never as an imbalance or struggle internal to “science.” Naming “instinct” as the ulti-
mate source of the new course material enables Hirsch to ab­solve the teachers who are involved from any lapse in aesthetic judgment; we understand that although they teach these valu­able books, they do not consider them to be valuable as art. The new material is thus put in its place. This is Hirsch’s first reductive maneuver.

He then proceeds to supply a “new” definition of literature which is purely empirical, essentially cribbed from the reading lists his new colleagues are posting for their courses. This step allows him to take the new content of literary studies as a given (“the present realities,” [135]), rather than as a problem that has theoretical import. This gesture actually depends on another assumption: the notion that the essence of the “underground” is contained in the content of what can be studied there. Hirsch simply ignores the possibility that students seek “truth” and “value” outside their institutions because of the methods (critical and pedagogical) which prevail within them. He assumes that when we transplant “underground” material into established institutions we do not destroy or damage the very qualities that made it valuable in the first place. Conversely, and perhaps more significantly, he seems to assume that this migration does not fundamentally disrupt any of the conventional practices of literary criticism. He imagines that students and teachers form an essentially unified, pluralist community.

Hirsch simultaneously applauds the broadening of the curric­ulum and evaluates the new texts negatively as “works of value that have little aesthetic appeal” (136). The category of the aesthetic is not deconstructed but merely deferred, subordinated to other aims, certainly, but powerfully reasserted in the apparent­ly acquiescent observation that we must now teach “valuable books of many sorts” as well as great works of art. In a revealing phrase, Hirsch attributes the historical predominance of the New Criticism’s aesthetic-intrinsic approach to “the natural, centripetal impulse of the discipline” to “[define] itself over against other disciplines” (137, my emphasis), and he concedes that the result was “one-sided” (138). He can thus admit the need for a corrective expansion of the domain of literature and
conclude that “the process is entirely natural” (136, my emphasis). Both the theoretical prestige and formal status of the New Criticism and the purely aesthetic significance of the traditional canon are strengthened by this idealist critique, and Hirsch quickly moves to a series of analogies between contemporary critical issues and those faced by Matthew Arnold. The historical leap is justified by allusions to the “recurrent tensions of literary criticism” (139).7 Such a naturalizing account obscures the ideological and political significance of this apparently natural “process” and the deep rifts it has produced in the critical community. In this vision, not only is the reading community united, but it is essentially ahistorical, unchanged since Arnold’s day. In the most obvious sense, Hirsch’s is a typically bourgeois analysis, attempting to dissolve history into the natural play of timeless human tensions.

Paradoxically, Hirsch’s prescription for contemporary criticism takes as a major theme the critic’s role in history, her necessary tie to historical developments. He appears to address a fundamentally historical issue when he traces the “idea of literature” through its historical mutations. This line of analysis recalls the decidedly un-Hirschian work of such critics as Pierre Macherey and Raymond Williams. Hirsch’s rejection of aesthetic criticism’s claim to predominance on the grounds that it is intrinsic seems to align him even more closely with these marxist critics. Yet Hirsch’s ultimate aim is not to challenge the idea of literature but to defend both it and its Arnoldian mission “to civilize and humanize” (143).

The historicism of Hirsch’s account masks an essentialist project. His brief historical sketch of “how the grand, broad, and noble conception of literature as les bonnes lettres disappeared and was replaced by the narrower, more decadent conception of les belles lettres” (141) is a mythic evocation of the Golden Age of Literature. It is aimed against historical “relativism” and functions primarily to clear the ground for an Arnoldian assertion of

7Although one would not immediately think of Paul de Man and E. D. Hirsch as allies, de Man takes up a similar position in “The Resistance to Theory.” See Chap. 5 below.
the transcendent mean as an ahistorical paradigm: “The aims of
criticism change with history only because the deeper principle
of balance is absolute and therefore requires different applica­
tions at different times. This absolute principle of balance is the
antique norm of human fulfillment—the classical ideal of har­
mony under which all the conflicting appetences of life are nour­
ished, with none subjected to the tyrannical domination of an­
other” (139). This abstract image of a discourse composed of
conflicting appetences but freed from the domination of hier­
archy is the ideal expression of Hirsch’s empirical “opening” of
the category of Literature to include “just about anything in
print” (143). Hirsch’s vision of harmony represses the increas­
ingly bitter process by which the disciplinary boundaries estab­
ished and enforced by traditional literary studies are being dis­
rupted.

This exclusion lies at the heart of Hirsch’s text. He could not
simply ignore the problems of community and of persuasion;
the crisis of the logic of inquiry demands both a theoretical re­
sponse and a direct appeal to the general reader. But to make
that appeal successfully from within the problematic of general
persuasion, he must mask the true character of the division in
the critical community. Thus, Hirsch belittles and misrepresents
those who have criticized the aesthetic approach as an ideology,
noting that the New Criticism “had a purely intellectual success
greater than anything to be hoped for by those who attack it on
the grounds that it has grown boring and can no longer meet the
ideological and psychological requirements of the young” (128).
Again, the “young,” students, it seems, are the real source of
discontent. “Those” who speak for them apparently have no
other argument save the growing tedium (perhaps their own as
well). Of course, the very possibility of “purely intellectual suc­
cess,” great or small, is precisely what is at issue here, just as the
possibility of pure aesthetic value was above. But with the aes­
thetic held in reserve and neatly balanced by “valuable books”
(and courses like “Women in Literature”), Hirsch reduces the
hegemony of the aesthetic approach to a formal matter of schol­
arly excess and the “new definition” of literature to its simplest
symptom. The resulting account of the transformation of the object of literary study enables him to continue to regard the aesthetic approach primarily as "our most powerful programmatic idea" (127, my emphasis) and to imply that those teachers—always distinguished from theoretical "relativists"—who are responsible for expanding the domain of literature are more or less in agreement with him. Only his abstract and apolitical account of the critical community makes this collapse of contemporary critical issues and Arnold’s humanist project possible.

The ahistorical argument articulated in the invocations of the classical ideal and Arnoldian balance deflects the historical inquiry that rejects even the possibility of a purely aesthetic evaluation based on some invariant set of formal properties. This form of historical analysis is often a component of the work done by scholars writing and teaching at the margins of the canon. As Tony Bennett argues, this kind of inquiry seeks to identify "the historical formation of contemporary European belles lettres as a new and distinctive form of writing predicated on a new set of social, political and ideological relationships." Hirsch obliterates all traces of this threatening work. Scholars and teachers who introduce "works of value with little aesthetic appeal" into the curriculum are presented as Arnoldian humanists recreating the tradition of les bonnes lettres and reasserting the (ahistorical) golden mean. Critics currently pursuing Bennett’s questions—practically and theoretically—are ignored or represented as dogmatic relativists. From the Arnoldian vantage point he erects in place of their oppositional work, Hirsch can invoke the logic of inquiry.

Hirsch’s text evades the problem of critical method as it is articulated by changes in the curriculum. What is thus achieved is an evasion of theory at the site of its practice. This is paramount in a theoretical text like Hirsch’s where the effort is simultaneously to isolate and discredit an allegedly small group of irresponsible theorists and to shore up and discipline the general mass of scholar-teachers. The two groups must not appear to

8Bennett, Formalism and Marxism, p. 83.
overlap. Hirsch insulates his community of inquirers from the theoretical significance of its own pedagogy by misrepresenting the enormous critical pressure which is being placed upon the concept of Literature as a reversion to the "noble conception" of les bonnes lettres. He separates theory from content and divides contemporary theoretical issues from the (apparently) mundane practical changes that accompany them.

But the transformation in curricula has coincided with a general cognitive crisis that Hirsch prefers to represent only in terms of "decadent" French relativists and German hermeneuts. Growing numbers of scholars (and students) take a skeptical attitude toward Hirsch's pluralist logic of inquiry and show an unmistakable interest in continental criticisms of it. These scholars are suspicious of the process whereby "hypotheses" are transformed into "knowledge," and they have suggested, in a great variety of theoretical and practical ways, that this process may not be the simple or rational procedure Hirsch describes. They have begun, for example, to inquire into the possibility that the canonical texts identified thus far only as "valuable works of art" may also be "works of value" in a more social or ideological sense, that is, valuable in the service of particular ideological ends—ends not necessarily favorable to the whole of the expanded community of inquiry. The critique of the logic of inquiry is one aspect of a much broader social and political analysis.

Obviously, this analysis takes many different forms. The critical spectrum that spans the work of feminist critics and Derrida is a broad one. In fact, the heterogeneity of theoretical work adds another layer of complexity to the problems Hirsch faces as he seeks to resuscitate the logic of inquiry. But he obscures the possibility that these phenomena might be related. He argues for a continuity between Arnold's critical project and the teaching of "The Black Man in Literature," but not for a link between the latter and Foucault. Denying theory to those scholars who put it to practical use, he preserves an incongruously static image of a homogeneous critical community, an image that grounds his pluralist logic.
Yet even if Hirsch were not committed to the separation of theorists and practitioners (as well as theory and practice), he would find that serious difficulties attend any attempt to describe the various scholars engaged in critical analyses of the logic of inquiry. Raymond Williams has recently remarked that in literary studies in Great Britain, the current “crisis of the dominant paradigm and of its established professional standards and methods” has a “resonance well beyond the terms of a professional dispute. It is, in the fullest sense, one of the key areas in which a very general cultural crisis is being defined and fought out.”9 This assessment applies equally to the American context. The “opposition” that refuses the blandishments of the logic of inquiry is extremely diverse, even self-contradictory, comprising, as it does according to The Aims of Interpretation, everyone from Kuhn and Foucault to Derrida and (shadowy) marxists (H 147). We must add feminists and scholars of Afro-American literature to better understand pluralism’s anxiety; the list could be extended.

My own analysis of this heterogeneous “movement” is complicated by the fact that only some of the factions within it can be said to work outside what I will call the problematic of general persuasion, that is, to be genuinely anti-pluralist. Hirsch gives the largest part of his book over to refuting those theoreticians who are least threatening to pluralist discourse in the United States. He does not name names; as we shall see, this in itself is remarkably common among pluralists. But the “relativistic themes [of] contemporary hermeneutics” (H 13), transplanted from their original philosophical contexts and operating as handmaidens to neo-romantic, new critical analyses, that Hirsch concerns himself with do not seriously challenge the hegemony of pluralist discourse. In The Aims of Interpretation, those critical positions that threaten to name the problematic of general persuasion, those scholars who are examining the margins of the literary canon in order to put into question the political and

9Raymond Williams, “Marxism, Structuralism and Literary Analysis,” New Left Review 129 (September/October 1981), 54. Further references to this essay (RW) will be given in parentheses in the text.
ideological function of our "discipline," are only briefly represented, posed in cooperative, noncritical tableaux as the heralds of a return to les bonnes lettres.

Williams observes this tendency to confuse theories and theorists, and he contributes a typology of specific positions within the critical opposition. He focuses on marxism and structuralism, stressing that even within these discourses there are diverging tendencies, some wholly "compatible with the paradigm and thus with established professional arrangements" and others "not so assimilable and . . . indeed quite incongruent with the received definition" of literary studies (RW 54).

Williams's clarification is necessary because of the extremely ambiguous status of marxism and structuralism within the dominant paradigm. He writes: "Now, for various reasons, both Marxism and structuralism, in their different ways, have impinged directly on the paradigm and on its anomalies. Indeed the surprising thing is that in so many of their actual tendencies they have been accommodated, or have accommodated themselves, within that paradigm, where they can be seen as simply diverse approaches to the same object of knowledge. They can then be taken as the guests, however occasionally untidy or unruly, of a decent pluralism" (54). Hirsch's argument follows such an unusual trajectory and ends with such a surprisingly vulnerable account of persuasion in part because he does not recognize, as Williams does, the astonishing degree to which dogmatic relativists and oppositional critics will cooperate with pluralist discourse. In his desire to establish a pure standard, he sees all deviation, however minor, from the logic of inquiry, as an irretrievable fall from rationality. He is left demanding communal allegiance to ratify his "transcendent" logical paradigm and threatening an intellectual apocalypse if the community of inquirers resists.

"Decent pluralism" assumes a more compromised and less puritanical practice than that of the logic of inquiry, and it generates more oblique strategies. The decent pluralist realizes how much room there is to bargain, and he seizes the opportunity presented by the willingness of certain critical discourses to ac-
commodate themselves to pluralism. A paradigm is not truly in crisis until it has lost its intellectual authority, its discursive confidence, and the administrative power to impose its analysis. (Williams remarks that the crisis in literary studies is in an early stage; in the Cambridge tenure battle which was the immediate occasion for his essay the dominant paradigm prevailed, and Colin MacCabe lost his position.) But as administrative power seeps away, the discourse is diluted and even revised; as it attempts to accommodate its critics and opponents, incorporating the “underground,” it increasingly runs the risk of exposing its contradictions. We see this process in microcosm in Hirsch’s text: the difficulty he evidences in handling the concept of the community at close range; his empiricist program to open the category of literature; his ultimate recourse to an impotent intellectual ultimatum: either respect the logic of inquiry or the discipline as discipline will cease to exist. These stumbles in an otherwise deft and complex analysis suggest both the difficulties engendered when persuasion is treated largely by evasion and the principal issues in the current struggle. But to establish fully the pluralist stake in this critical crisis, we must turn to one of Williams’s decent pluralists and to a text less centered on hermeneutic issues, more extensively struggling with the concepts of community and persuasion, which constitute the problematic of general persuasion. When the logic of general persuasion collapses, what strategies does decent pluralism adopt to pacify unruly guests? How does it seek to control or contain those discourses it finds most difficult to accommodate?

In Wayne Booth’s work, decent pluralism comes into plain view, asserting its anxiety and its minimum requirements in an open polemic. Booth specifies the pluralist polemic as a response to an intruder who disrupts the ethical balance of general persuasion. As we develop an analysis of this decent pluralism, we can simultaneously uncover the contradiction of the pluralist polemic and begin to construct an image of the anti-pluralist, the unwelcome guest in the decent paradigm of literary studies.