Seductive Reasoning

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Published by Cornell University Press


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"NOT TO WORRY": THE THERAPEUTIC RHETORIC OF STANLEY FISH

Everyone is obliged to practice the art of persuasion. This includes me, and persuasion is the art that I have been trying to practice here.

—STANLEY FISH, Is There A Text In This Class?

Stanley Fish’s *Is There a Text in This Class?* takes as its subject the anxiety and resistance characteristic of Anglo-American pluralism as it confronts an intruder variously named deconstruction, relativism, and post-structuralism. This anxiety is quintessentially expressed by the problem of the text; the pluralist’s tenacious pursuit of a determinate text that “always remains the same from one moment to the next” (F vii) is its most prominent symptom. By tracing the practical and theoretical process whereby he “stopped worrying and learned to love interpretation,” Fish hopes to calm the “fears” that he believes provoke Abrams and Booth into periodic assaults on the “new readings” of post-structuralism.

In the process, *Is There a Text* explicitly addresses the problem of persuasion with the aim of reconciling pluralist and (allegedly anti-pluralist) post-structuralist positions. But in the pluralist context as I have thus far defined it, Fish’s treatment of persuasion is atypical. The particular silences that generally characterize pluralist polemics, which strain Hirsch’s commentary and shade Booth’s analysis into circumlocutions, are completely abandoned in this therapeutic reading. Fish attacks the “demon-
“Seductive Reasoning” model of criticism, with its free-standing objects and its neutral perceptions, to argue that all of critical activity is “a matter (endlessly negotiated) of persuasion” (F 17).

Yet though his treatment of persuasion departs from the work of such pluralists as Hirsch and Booth, it is not possible to locate Fish in a simple opposition to pluralism, or beyond it. *Is There a Text* is also a response to Booth’s offer to reconstruct a critical commonwealth embracing post-structuralists and cognitivists, mysreaders and intentionalists. Booth’s price of admission is a monistic pluralist practice: post-structuralists must render their practice(s) compatible with the problematic of general persuasion, offering up a *lisible* post-structuralism and censoring the anti-pluralist elements inhering in the theory of differance.

I

Fish defines his project as a persuasive assault on a series of “anticipated objections,” by which he means anticipated pluralist objections. He observes:

in general, people resist what you have to say when it seems to them to have undesirable or even disastrous consequences. With respect to what I have been saying, those consequences include the absence of any standards by which one could determine error, the impossibility of preferring one interpretation to another, an inability to explain the mechanisms by which interpretations are accepted and rejected, or the source of the feeling we all have of progressing, and so on. It has been my strategy to speak to these fears, one by one, and to remove them by showing that dire consequences do not follow from the position I espouse and that in fact it is only within that position that one can account for the phenomena my opponents wish to preserve. . . . I have been trying to persuade you to believe what I believe because it is in your own best interests as you understand them. [F 369]

In this passage, Fish appears—despite the reservations some traditional pluralists may voice—to be working within the problematic of general persuasion. Yet there is a difficulty here; it lies
in Fish’s account of pluralism’s best interests as pluralists understand them.

To begin, Fish seems unaware of the radical violence that this appealing passage does to the very notions of scholarship and knowledge to which his audience clings most tenaciously. It is precisely the desire to achieve disinterested judgment, to pursue truth or the facts even into disasters, if that is where they lead, that determines the pluralist resistance to post-structuralist claims. (Hence the extreme privilege a critic can claim, within the pluralist problematic, for a study that begins with one set of assumptions and ends with contrary conclusions.) To offer, as the quintessential value of one’s analysis, the advantage of furthering the best interests of a pluralist audience is less than tempting; to pluralists, this is a form of intellectual bribe. In the pluralist problematic, when one’s interests are involved, the only honorable alternative is to disqualify oneself. Judgment is only clouded by interests and can never be furthered or enabled by them. Fish’s account of the actual operation of interpretation seems to me to be correct in many respects; the point here is that he has chosen a rather peculiar—and not at all promising—way of attempting to persuade his pluralist readers. And this in a passage that represents an unqualified attempt to address pluralists persuasively.

Fish wishes to deliver over to pluralism a post-structuralism that is pluralist in character. *Is There a Text* is a strategy, seeking not simply to describe or explain but to contain the significance of post-structuralist theory within a reading that bears as its most telling ideological mark the fact that it is “consoling” (321). Toward this end, Fish radically revises Booth’s pluralist understanding of post-structuralism. He refuses the figure of misunderstanding, identifying it as a “caricature” of the post-structuralist position (268). Consequently, Fish’s rereading produces a post-structuralism that is fundamentally different from Booth’s. This is our first clue to a doubleness in Fish’s argument that will eventually reverberate through all its levels. He rejects the standard pluralist line on post-structuralism because *Is There a Text* addresses two audiences. The first is obviously composed
of anxious pluralists. But the second is composed of the post-structuralists whose work is the source of that anxiety. Fish sets himself the impossible task of satisfying both audiences. In other words, he refuses to acknowledge the exclusions that constitute audiences. As a "representative" of one form of post-structuralism, he seems to offer an uncompromising account of his theory. Nevertheless, he himself argues that it falls within the boundaries of pluralist discourse as critics such as Booth and Hirsch have established them, indeed, that "it is only within [his] position that one can account for the phenomena [his] opponents wish to preserve."

Fish's Anglo-American pluralist audience is disturbed by the impact his theoretical position (identified, by them and by him, with post-structuralism) might have on their practice as literary critics. His response is soothing: "One wonders what implications [this argument] has for the practice of literary criticism. The answer is, none whatsoever" (370). Consolation consists of severing the tie that binds the theoretical content of post-structuralism to any challenge it might present to the practice of Anglo-American pluralism. Fish offers pluralism a post-structuralist theory that paradoxically claims as its practice a continuation of Anglo-American literary criticism as it has developed over the last forty-odd years.

The divorce between theoretical speculation and practical consequences recalls Hirsch's tactics (as well as Booth's), but Fish is explicit where Hirsch is circumspect. Fish anticipates the common-sense objection that an argument with no consequences can make no claim to our attention: "Why should I be interested in it? What does it matter?" (370), and he counters it on two levels. He suggests that an argument may be interesting without "directly affect[ing] our everyday experience of poetry" and then adds that to think otherwise—to demand some transformation in the work of practical criticism as an index of the "interest" of his argument—is to participate in a "certain anti-theoretical bias built into the ideology of New Criticism" (371). What is startling is the ease with which Fish adapts the New Criticism's stance to his own purposes. To speak very generally, the New
Critics viewed the aesthetic (Literature) as a privileged realm and the poem as an autonomous verbal structure to be contemplated and understood in itself; the autonomy of the artifact, the lack of instrumentality that kept it aloof from social or political concerns, was essential to its function as a locus of value. The paradox of elevating to a privileged status a discourse defined by its irrelevance to social and political life was hardly an insurmountable problem; Literature—like Fish's theory—was interesting without directly affecting everyday experience.

Fish proceeds to point out that his argument goes to the heart of institutional concerns: "the status of the text, the source of interpretive authority, the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, the limits of interpretation" are "basic topics, and anyone who is able to advance the discussion of them will automatically be accorded a hearing and be a candidate for the profession's highest rewards" (371). The question immediately arises: Is the theoretical discourse of our discipline obsessed with topics that are essentially or inherently irrelevant for the practice of interpretative criticism? Or is it rather Fish's particular solution to these basic problems that has no practical consequence? In either case, one is forced to concede that such speculations are well rewarded in the current climate, and Fish ends his own investigation precisely by thanking his audience for rewarding him with their attention. He repays them in turn by reassuring them that nothing in their classrooms or their essays need change as a response to his theorizing.

This embrace of a paradoxically central irrelevance appears at the very close of Is There a Text, and it recalls Hirsch's sudden turn toward persuasion and the problem of the community in the "Afterword" of The Aims of Interpretation. In a curious sense, Fish's strategy seems to reverse Hirsch's. The latter moves from a rigorously theoretical argument into a pluralist polemic, but he concludes with an invocation of the "logic of inquiry" in an effort to bind his community together; the "logic of inquiry" functions as a kind of theoretical trump card, fixing the methodological horizon for all inquiry within any discipline whatsoever. Fish pursues an equally theoretical argument in the
body of his essay, but he concludes with an almost bizarrely modest or unassuming claim: his discourse will leave no mark; it seeks only to "interest" us. The community will remain intact because theory has no connection to practice. In the place of Hirsch's ultimatums and threats, we find the assurance that nothing will change—nothing essential can change.

Fish achieves his peculiar reconciliation of post-structuralism and pluralism through a systematic interrogation and debunking of pluralist anxieties. He argues that many of those attributes of pluralist discourse that pluralists themselves imagine to be essential to it are in fact contingent or misinterpreted; simultaneously, he claims that post-structuralism does not harbor the demons that pluralists so often spy lurking in its theoretical pronouncements. Ultimately, Fish's critique contends that pluralism's fears about post-structuralism, fears of relativism and solipsism, indeterminacy and the loss of authority, are incoherent, inexplicably misconceived.

Fish's analysis comes very close to the claim that the pluralist polemic is a contradiction embodying the ideological crisis of pluralist discourse. But his own view of this "contradiction" is radically different from my own. To posit a general reader embodying universal human qualities (which leave him vulnerable to persuasion from any direction) and then to undertake a polemical catechism of pluralist values in order to cleanse discourse (and the reader) of solipsism and relativism is manifestly incoherent. I take this incoherence as a symptom of the mounting pressure on the pluralist paradigm, a symptom that offers an entryway into pluralist discourse, an opportunity to reveal the functions and the limits of the problematic of general persuasion and to trace the outlines of the anti-pluralist challenges multiplying at its margins. Fish concentrates his analysis neither on the contradiction as such, nor on the problem of its production, but on one element of it: pluralism's curiously misplaced fear of the outsider, the critic as renegade. He observes, parenthetically, "There is something of the police state in Abrams's vision, complete with posted rules and boundaries, watchdogs to enforce them, procedures for identifying their violators as
criminals" (337). For Fish, this state is also symptomatic. But it is not a symptom to be exploited, that is, read. Rather, Fish attempts to "cure" pluralism, dissolving its symptoms in a concept of interpretation that covers the field and cannot be dislodged. His analysis works to make the outsider disappear; there is no renegade critic stalking the interpretive community.

In "Demonstration" versus "Persuasion," Fish describes a model of critical activity generally preferred by pluralists. In this "demonstration" model, "evidence available apart from any particular belief is brought in to judge between competing beliefs," and "interpretations are either confirmed or disconfirmed by facts that are independently specified" (F 365). He identifies this demonstration model as "the more familiar model of critical activity (codified in the dogma and practices of New Criticism)" (365), and he contrasts it with his own persuasion model, as elaborated and put into play in Is There a Text. But Fish does not propose to replace the traditional practices derived from the familiar model with innovative practices derived from the persuasion model he constructs. Instead, he suggests that the "practices" that are "codified" in the New Criticism are essentially formulaic justifications for the interpretative act, comprising a rhetoric of "getting-back-to-the-text." In this instance, the phrase "mere rhetoric" is actually more accurate. Is There a Text devastatingly reveals that no such demonstration practice is or ever was possible. The demonstration model is an ideological mystification of a persuasive practice. Fish advocates only that we abandon the fiction of the demonstration model that so many have come to accept as fact and acknowledge, theoretically, that our practices actually conform to the persuasion model. And this gesture, of course, is no threat to pluralism.

Obviously, Fish's account of persuasion as it operates in pluralist practice does not simply conform to the model I have elaborated thus far of the problematic of general persuasion. The weakest aspect of his reading is its refusal to consider fully the possibility that the pervasive adoption of the inadequate demonstration model was determined by pressing and specific historical and ideological considerations, considerations that
persist. Instead, Fish leaves us to assume that an apparently whimsical or perverse or possibly accidental historical process was responsible for pluralism’s choice of a (distorted) analogy to scientific inquiry as the justification for its practice.

As Fish recalls the work that finally led him to abandon the demonstration model, he observes that his opponents often charged him with not simply reading, but rather with attempting to persuade his audience to a new way of reading. His critical paradigm shifts dramatically once this objection is “no longer heard as an accusation.” He recognizes that “what I was trying to persuade them from was not a fundamental or natural way [of reading] but a way no less conventional than mine and one to which they had similarly been persuaded, if not by open polemics then by the pervasiveness of the assumptions within which they had learned how to read in the first place” (16). This is a demystifying gesture: the seemingly “fundamental” or “natural” ways of reading are, in truth, “conventional,” “learned,” produced by persuasion, “if not by open polemic.” But in a disturbing parallel to Fish’s account of the demonstration model, this passage leaves the relationships between persuasion and the “pervasiveness” of (pluralist) assumptions about the “natural” way to read unspecified. If the pervasiveness is neither due to some overwhelmingly persuasive correspondence to natural facts nor achieved by “open polemic,” is it achieved by covert polemic? Or, perhaps, by administrative procedures that necessarily violate the principles in whose service they are carried out? Or by some other means? Perhaps pervasiveness is never the product of polemic as such, but specific to the oxymoronic operation of covert polemic.

What is elided when this distinction is not addressed is the difference between a discourse that is consciously persuasive, elaborating its conventions without recourse to naturalizing gestures (without the alibi of the demonstration model) and a discourse that, although it is equally unnatural, is nevertheless unconscious of its conventional and limited scope and pervasively elaborates its interpretations not by open polemic, but by another process which lends to its arguments the force and ap-
pearance of nature. The difference is what Barthes identifies
with the term "myth." Covert polemics must invoke the cate-
gories of nature and objectivity. In Fish's analysis, the history of
the pervasiveness of certain assumptions about reading—fore-
most among them the presumption of a natural reading—is lost.

Fish records the refusal of open polemic—the attacks made on
his efforts to persuade readers—but he does not specify its func-
tion or "origin." Rather, he construes the replacement of a dem-
onstration model by a persuasion model (covert polemic by
overt polemic) as an inessential development that will have no
consequences for pluralist practice. Pluralism's historical and
ideological commitment to a demonstration model is explained
as an unnecessary encumbrance generated by a misunderstan-
ding as to what would be sacrificed if it were abandoned.

This process of strategic reevaluation, separating the essential
from the inessential, always to the end of reassuring pluralists
that no fundamental violence is being done to their practice, is
the characteristic gesture of Is There a Text. As I have pointed
out, it produces an opposition between theory and practice that
allows for the adoption of post-structuralist theoretical postures
and the maintenance of pluralist practices—and pluralist ideol-
ogy. Obviously, this result is consoling to pluralists. It may,
however, prove provoking to other post-structuralists. In my
reading, the theoretical claims of post-structuralism imply a
methodology that could transform the practice of literary crit-
icism; the object of knowledge (and the knowing or knowledge-
able subject) is being radically redefined. Consolation seems to
be possible only via the weakest rendering of this theory. But
the words "possible" and "could" must be heavily qualified. I
will not counter Fish's analysis with a reading that predicts only
"dire consequences" for pluralism should a post-structuralist
idiom thoroughly permeate literary critical discourse. (Many
would argue that this has in fact already happened.) Rather, I
assume that Fish's reading of post-structuralism as pluralism

1Roland Barthes, Mythologies, tr. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill &
could take hold. It isn’t simply unbelievable. It could be believed and, consequently, become an effective truth and an extremely useful one for pluralists like Booth. (Thus, the term “weakest,” which I use above, is perhaps a premature label.)

Fish anticipates this formulation of the process by which an interpretation acquires force or credence. At the conclusion of “Interpreting ‘Interpreting the Variorum,’” he summarizes his position: “Rather than restoring or recovering texts, I am in the business of making texts and of teaching others to make them by adding to their repertoire of strategies. I was once asked whether there are really such things as self-consuming artifacts, and I replied: ‘There are now.’ In that answer you will find both the arrogance and the modesty of my claims” (180). What is now really true of self-consuming artifacts could become true of the consoling analysis of *Is There a Text*, though one should mark the irony of the qualification embodied in the word “now”—one can answer such questions only in the short term. Much as Booth’s strategy waits upon the recognition post-structuralists are able to give to the image he offers of their discourse as a form of pluralism, Fish’s analysis depends on the ability of pluralists to adopt his readings of an ineffectual post-structuralist theory and an invincible pluralist practice.

Certain questions remain: How adequately does Fish’s post-structuralist text answer pluralism’s requirements? Is Fish’s persuasive practice contained by the problematic of general persuasion? I have already suggested that by dismissing the difference between a consciously (overtly) polemical discourse and an unconsciously (covertly) polemical discourse, Fish misreads the “demonstration” model, dismissing as inessential the very element that produced its pervasive domination. But this strategic point is a conclusion that rests in turn upon a series of similar, though local readings, each of which claims to separate the essential from the inessential within pluralist ideology. In order to specify and evaluate the interpretative strategy at work in *Is There a Text*, we must begin with these enabling steps. *Is There a Text* is a strategic reading. I suggest that it depends upon a misreading of Fish’s pluralist colleagues, their fears, their mo-
tives, their politics, a misreading which, despite his intentions and his protests, undermines Fish's benevolent interpretation of post-structuralist theory. Though the consolation encapsulated in the words "none whatsoever" could be extremely useful to the distressed pluralist audience Fish addresses, the rigor of his own post-structuralist practice ultimately forces his reading outside the problematic of general persuasion; consolation lies beyond the limits of pluralism.

II

The title of this chapter alludes to the concluding paragraph of the title essay of *Is There a Text*:

Of course, solipsism and relativism are what Abrams and Hirsch fear and what lead them to argue for the necessity of determinate meaning. But if, rather than acting on their own, interpreters act as extensions of an institutional community, solipsism and relativism are removed as fears because they are not possible modes of being. That is to say, the condition required for someone to be a solipsist or relativist, the condition of being independent of institutional assumptions and free to originate one's own purposes and goals, could never be realized, and therefore there is no point in trying to guard against it. Abrams, Hirsch, and company spend a great deal of time in a search for the ways to limit and constrain interpretation, but if the example of my colleague and his student can be generalized (and obviously I think it can be), what they are searching for is never not already found. In short, my message to them is finally not challenging, but consoling—not to worry. [F 321]

This passage is a brief for the argument elaborated in *Is There a Text*: a diagnosis of Professors Abrams's and Hirsch's fears, a succinct reprise of the analysis—centered on determinate meaning, solipsism/relativism, and the issue of authority or constraint—which dissolves those fears, and the consoling message, "not to worry." The passage is openly and self-consciously reassuring and addresses a very specific pluralist audience. The
issue of persuasion is raised in the closing words, which point toward a reconciliation between pluralism and the post-structuralist theory that powers *Is There a Text*. "Not challenging, but consoling," Fish means to persuade his opponents.

He opens with the problem of determinate meaning. Determinate meaning is at the center of the pluralists' concept of the stable text, and Booth, Abrams, and Hirsch are united by their commitment to a core of determinate, literal meaning which limits or constrains the interpretations a text will—or should—bear. Pluralists recoil at the prospect of a textual universe of free play where all significance is indeterminate and "'no text can mean anything in particular'" (305). Fish agrees to the extent that he too believes "it would be disturbing indeed if the norm were free-floating and indeterminate" (307). The unremarked shift from literal meaning to "norm" is crucial. Fish proceeds to argue that the necessarily acontextual state in which the norm could be indeterminate can never be realized, and he introduces the central concept of the interpretative community to provide a contextual constraint that continually interrupts free play to fix determinate norms.

Fish denies that this normative power is located in language itself, systematically discrediting the essentialist position on literal meaning wherever he discerns it in any form. There is no literal or determinate core of meaning in words (texts) themselves, independent and context-free. But Fish quickly moves to reassure his readers: "There is a text in this and every class if one means by text the structure of meanings that is obvious and inescapable from the perspective of whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force" (vii). The pursuers of the transcendental signified may seek out the simplest component of meaning, even unto the molecular level (331), and never discover a literal core of determinate meaning. But they will always find an interpretation—and an interpretative community—awaiting them.

Thus, while literal meaning remains eternally elusive, the text always has a determinate meaning, a norm, ensured by the power of interpretative communities. But can this norm satisfy
the pluralist bent on unearthing a literal meaning? Interpretative communities guard against the kind of paralysis or chaos pluralists seem to fear; in Fish’s argument, the existence of the interpretative community means that indeterminacy, in the sense of confused undecidability, or “unintelligibility, in the strict or pure sense, is an impossibility” (307). Fish characterizes his position as congruent with pluralism’s essential requirements: “I want to argue for, not against, the normal, the ordinary, the literal, the straightforward, and so on, but I want to argue for them as the products of contextual or interpretive circumstances and not as the property of an acontextual language or an independent world. . . . language does not have a shape independent of context, but since language is only encountered in contexts and never in the abstract, it always has a shape, although it is not always the same one” (268). “Determinate meaning” is always already available; more, it is unavoidable, coextensive with the deceptively simple act of perception. But in Fish’s vocabulary, “determinate meaning” signifies “shape.” This shape must change over time, dependent as it is on the presently recognized strategy of interpretation that produces it, but there can be no escape from some form of intelligibility, some determinate shape.

The most urgent question at this point should be “intelligible to whom?” But I shall put that matter aside for a moment in order to consider Fish’s remarks from a conventionally pluralist perspective. This notion of determinate meaning as a shape that changes over time departs significantly from the common pluralist conception. For the pluralist, determinate meaning is precisely that which does not change. Fish is very conscious of this distinction. He observes that “for many people determinacy is inseparable from stability: the reason we can specify the meaning of a text is because a text and its meanings never change” (268). He represents this connection “many people” have forged between determinacy and stability as an instrumental one. Stability makes determinacy; the fact of stability over time, from context to context, creates and ensures determinacy. But once this causal chain is established, Fish’s analysis exposes the link-
age as an error. In practice, "change is continually occurring but... its consequence is never the absence of the norms, standards and certainties we desire, because they will be features of any situation we happen to be in" (268–69). Readers can always specify meaning, or rather, they cannot avoid specifying meaning, because contexts—situations—are omnipresent; "interpretation cannot be withheld" (173). Pluralism can thus dispense with stability of meaning. Determinacy requires no prop. If our intention is to preserve the interpretative process and the possibility of knowledge and authority within our scholarly institutions, determinacy alone is quite adequate to our needs.

As an argument for the inevitability of interpretation, this formulation is quite elegant. But the accuracy of the model as a general account of interpretation is precisely not the issue. We are concerned with the consolation this reading of determinate meaning offers to those pluralist readers who have long associated determinacy with stability. Considered in this light, Fish's analysis falls short of consolation; to the degree that it dismisses pluralist anxiety about the stability of meaning, it feeds rather than calms pluralist fears.

The urgency that infuses pluralist arguments for determinate meaning is not merely a symptom of pluralist anxiety, born, in turn, of a misunderstanding of post-structuralist theory. Abrams, Hirsch, and Booth rest relatively secure in the knowledge that they will not awaken one morning in a critical universe where they can neither understand nor be understood, decide or determine. Pluralists have seized upon the issue of indeterminacy or undecidability because they judge it to be the weakest link in the post-structuralist argument. The issue of indeterminacy provides the ground for a strategic pluralist (mis)reading of post-structuralism; this "caricature" is an enabling misunderstanding that produces a pluralist post-structuralism by invoking and then discrediting the specter of that limit to community which the problematic of general persuasion cannot admit. In fact, pluralist arguments for determinate meaning are offered in order to defend the stability of meaning and of the reading community; the instability of meaning reintroduces
the nightmare of a limit to understanding and persuasion, a
determinate misunderstanding. For Hirsch and Booth, deter­
minacy makes stability, and this stability must be preserved.

Pluralists demand stability of meaning for a complex set of
reasons, combining ideological, political, and professional con­
cerns. They consistently celebrate (or betray) their longing for
continuity with the body of texts that constitute the Tradition.
Hirsch invokes a critical practice modeled after Arnold’s exam­
ple; Abrams avows his preference for Milton’s original mean­
ings over those of more ingenious contemporary rereaders;
Booth insists upon humility before the canonized genius he
would have contemporary critical practice honor. None of these
critics defends an abstract or purely theoretical stability. The
engine propelling Hirsch and Booth through their polemics is
not determinacy of just any meaning, guaranteeing the stability
of just any meaning. The question then becomes why is this
segment of the critical community so radically committed to the
stability of particular meanings, despite Fish’s proof that literary
criticism, interpretative authority, and knowledge can be sus­
tained in some form without recourse to an epistemologically
flawed theory of determinate meaning as a timeless essence.

One answer to this question lies wholly in the realm of the
content of those significances that the traditional pluralist critic
wishes to stabilize. Tradition—or the canon—is not a formal
category here; it is not an empty set that holds a place in the
theoretical model pluralism defends. In a historical and critical
sense, these scholars occupy the canonical texts and the canoni­
cal readings they seek to preserve. Indeed, one might say they
occupy the concept of the canon as the repository of traditional
western values and these values are identified as human val­
ues—universal and timeless. Any critical voice—such as Ma­
cherey’s or that of contemporary feminist theory—which threat­
en the celebratory and confirmatory mode of accounting for
that canon, on any level, is a serious threat to the pluralist prob­
lematic. A new reading is a challenge because it might displace
these critics even as it establishes its difference.

Of course, it is not only possible, but easy and politic and,
hence, very common, to offer new readings that do not seek to displace the dominant pluralist readers, new readings precisely addressed to these readers, that is to say, “pluralist” new readings. Fish turns to this kind of local, fundamentally conservative new reading when he argues that the process by which a new interpretation must place itself in relation to previous readings makes continuity inevitable and the fear of discontinuity incoherent. Ultimately, he argues that the kind of radical discontinuity or displacement that I suggest as one source of Anglo-American criticism’s interest in defending the stability of meaning is not possible. But he cites curiously oblique examples of radical criticism in order to support this claim. We shall examine them in detail when we consider the problem of authority or constraint, but for now it is sufficient to observe that Fish sees an implacable continuity in the history of criticism, and he views this continuity as one way to reassure pluralists. He offers his own work in reader-response criticism as a striking example: “the position I proceeded to take was dictated by the position that had already been taken. . . . To the degree that this argument [for the affective and intentional fallacies] was influential, . . . it constrained in advance the form any counterargument might take” (F 2). Fish’s formulation here seems to parallel the mainstream pluralist’s account of the text as an entity that somehow prefigures, constrains, and contains the readings that are produced of it. In textual criticism, this model proposes a criticism that reproduces a pre-established meaning. As Macherey observes, such criticism is a “simulacrum. Analysis is a repetition, another way of saying what has already been said; reading complements writing. This repetition ensures a certain fidelity. . . . we are told that this is not entirely futile because it produces a new meaning; this is obviously a contradiction” (M 143, 152). In Fish’s account of the prefigurative power of a prior interpretative strategy, analysis becomes merely the means to articulate a silent presence already in the text. The new strategy fulfills the promise of the original, completes it, providing the rational conclusion to the “position that had already been taken” in a purely logical development. Here, too, there is a certain
continuity in Fish's argument; this notion of the "development" of critical discourse is ahistorical. History transforms every argument in a manner that cannot be anticipated or "contained in advance"; in fact, it is precisely those developments that cannot be predicted that work transformations. Paradoxically, Fish's theory of interpretative communities (like Hirsch's account of Literature) aspires to a kind of historicism, a defense against the charge of ahistoricism. His rhetoric gives no quarter to essentialism, though he does offer a caveat in the words "to the degree that this argument was influential." Influence, of course, is the prerogative of interpretative communities, not arguments, and there is a historical question wherever there is a question of influence. But this influence cannot be contained in advance; like the continuity of the trajectory of a critical career, it can be produced only in retrospect.

Fish argues that the continuity he sees between his own work and that of his theoretical precursors is characteristic of the practice of interpretation in general. Even the "off-the-wall interpretation" that would challenge a dominant interpretation dictates the forms of counterargument that will be addressed to it.

It is, in short, no easier to disrupt the game (by throwing a monkey wrench into it) than it is to get away from it (by performing independently of it), and for the same reasons. One cannot disrupt the game because any interpretation one puts forward, no matter how "absurd," will already be in the game (otherwise one could not even conceive of it as an interpretation); and one cannot get away from the game because anything one does (any account of a text one offers) will be possible and recognizable only within the conditions the game has established. [F 357-58]

Thus it appears that pluralists like Hirsch and Booth need not fear the constant transformation of determinate meaning. The instability of meaning is of no consequence to pluralism; it cannot endanger critical discourse. In fact, this instability—and our attempts to negotiate it—are critical practice and have been historically. As Fish notes, "There are disagreements and . . . they can be debated in a principled way: not because of a stability in
texts, but because of a stability in the makeup of interpretive communities” (171). We have seen how volatile these communities have become. But Fish argues that even instability is no cause for pluralist anxiety.

Of course this stability is always temporary (unlike the longed for and timeless stability of the text). Interpretive communities grow larger and decline, and individuals move from one to another; thus, while the alignments are not permanent, they are always there, providing just enough stability for the interpretive battles to go on, and just enough shift and slippage to assure that they will never be settled. . . . the fragile but real consolidation of interpretive communities . . . allows us to talk to one another, but with no hope or fear of ever being able to stop. [F 171-72, my empha­ses]

The remarkable and, for the pluralist, critical thing about this passage is how calmly it contemplates the decline of specific interpretative communities. There is no trace of concern as to which community will dominate, which fade from the field. This serenity is partially explained by Fish’s claim that “individ­uals move from one [community] to another.” Given a high degree of flexibility in individual critics and a low correlation between literary critical orientation and other ideological com­mitments (the commitments that structure the “self”), one can pos­it a perpetual critical dance in which individuals regularly change partners. One can always hope to align oneself with a growth industry. Booth seemed to concur with this view: “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.” But his willingness to innovate was highly circumscribed and, finally, a strategic gesture.

This critical mutability can serve as a counter to the claim that traditional pluralist critics cling to the stability of canonical readings (texts) because they occupy them, or establish their identities in them, as I have suggested. If new readers drive the traditionalists out, the latter have only to become new readers in turn to find themselves reoccupying their old (if strangely unfamiliar) haunts. Unfortunately, perhaps, this kind of critical flexibility is extremely rare. Abrams presents a more familiar spectacle when
he cries, "Stop, you're killing me." Of course, as Foucault ob-
serves, it is not history itself that is murdered by the discourses
of discontinuity and difference but rather that "ideological use of
history by which one tries to restore to man everything that has
unceasingly eluded him for over a hundred years." But for
Abrams and for pluralists like him, this distinction is a (meta-
physical) irrelevance. The point is that this murdered history is
Abrams's history, is history for Abrams, with the proper name
Abrams standing here as a synecdoche for the pluralist literary
critic. This is as much a professional and finally a personal mat-
ter as a theoretical one; this murdered history is pluralism, its
practice, its histories. Pluralists may find it impossible, that is,
unthinkable, to desert the interpretations built upon this notion
of history, to abandon the old interpretative community and
move in with the new readers.2

C. S. Lewis, in his debate with the anti-Miltonists, themselves
critics who could not adapt to a clearly overwhelming critical
tide, remarked of his opponents in the dispute: "I hardly expect
to convert many of those who take such a view; but it would be a
mistake not to make clear that the difference between us is essen-
tial. If these are my errors they are not errors into which I have
fallen inadvertently, but the very lie in the soul. If these are my
truths, then they are basic truths the loss of which means imagi-
native death."3 Lewis names one absolute limit to his discourse.
That he could do this makes him an anomaly both among the
participants in the Milton controversy and among pluralists in
general.4 Lewis was never trapped in the purely formal debates
that largely constituted the Milton controversy because his per-
spective was essentially ideological and historical. This is not to

2See Hayden White, "Historical Pluralism," Critical Inquiry 12:3 (1986), 480–93,
for a critical account of pluralist invocations of history as an "effectively secured"
discipline that can ground literary critical claims (484).
3C. S. Lewis, A Preface to "Paradise Lost" (London: Oxford University Press,
1942), p. 52.
4Lewis's "authoritarian Christianity" is not pluralist, as Milton's Christianity
was not. Both men would most likely have run afoul of Booth's distaste for
critics who accuse other authors of being "less generous, less devoted to truth,
justice and the enhancement of life" or "less politically aware" than they.
suggest that Lewis was a historical or theoretical critic in the contemporary senses of those terms. On the contrary, he was a conscious anachronism; his Christian humanism and his Miltonism were unproblematically one for him. As he remarks elsewhere in the Preface, Dr. Leavis “sees and hates the very same that I see and love. Hence the disagreement between us tends to escape the realm of literary criticism. We differ not about the nature of Milton’s poetry, but about the nature of man, or even the nature of joy itself” (134). Lewis acknowledges the limit that pluralists cannot admit, and he does it by means of the eloquent assertion that his critical truth and his imagination are coextensive. Ironically, with his image of imaginative death, he suggests the fate of those critics who cannot take up a new practice, critics who continue to read according to some method of which the critical community at large remarks, “‘no one reads that way anymore’” (F 172).

When a critic cannot shift his interpretative allegiances, the decline of his interpretative community ceases to be a neutral event. The evolution Fish describes with such equanimity becomes the “loss . . . which means imaginative death.” Alignments that are not permanent may shift and change so radically that, contrary to Fish’s assurances, the “fear of ever being able to stop” talking to one another becomes a nightmarish reality.

Fish seems to dismiss this possibility. It is a delicate matter, to be sure, for to pursue the question of fading communities in any practical detail could lead to indiscreet (even unkind) remarks about the steadily declining relevance of certain critical perspectives; such blunt discussion of a colleague’s professional future—or lack of professional future—is outside the conventions of literary discourse. (It is gossip, perhaps.) Fish evades the matter by the use of the abstract and general term “us.” One or another of “us” is sure to survive and to be able to talk to another survivor; the touchy issue of who will survive is made to seem irrelevant. But Fish’s reticence is not simply a tactful reflex. Nor does he harbor an overly optimistic view of the capacity of individual critics to leap from one interpretative community to another in pursuit of a rising star.
The calm that settles over Fish’s discussion of the rise and fall of interpretative communities is fatalistic. It is possible to assess shifts in critical loyalties, to discern why one critic can move from one interpretative community to another, and more important, why another critic cannot make the same move. It is even possible to analyze how this is done if, by how, we mean by what particular series of transformations, compromises, and exchanges. This kind of analysis occupies a large portion of Fish’s book in the form of the history of the development that led him from the question “Is the reader or the text the source of meaning?” to his theory of interpretative communities, from “Literature in the Reader” to “Is There a Text in This Class?” But when Fish projects the growth and decline of interpretative communities in the future, he does not examine the possibility of strategic shifts in critical allegiance and the threat of imaginative death with any urgency, because these events cannot be controlled. A critic does not choose her interpretative community; rather, it chooses her. To choose another is not an easy matter. On the contrary, to choose another is unthinkable.

Fish develops this point as he begins to shift the focus of his argument from determinate meaning to the problems of relativism and solipsism. Pluralists project the problem of the individual reader through this double optic. Both pejoratives find their way onto Booth’s list of discourses that “pluralism is not” (B 407), and Hirsch’s harshest denunciations are aimed at the “anti-rationalism” of “cognitive atheists” (H 13). Fish’s notion of the reader-subject as an extension of the interpretative community responds to these attacks and to the anxieties that fuel them, but it first surfaces in the “Introduction,” where he sketches his own critical autobiography. At several points in the narrative, he remarks: “what I didn’t see” or “though I didn’t know it at the time” (F 7, 10). The historical process by which Stanley Fish became the critic who wrote Is There a Text is presented as a series of transformations over which he did not preside. He could neither speed nor slow the process significantly; indeed, he comprehends it only now, retrospectively. As for future shifts in his critical perspective, Fish attempts no augury: “if the
rehearsing of this personal history has taught me anything, it is that the prosecution of that [critical] task will also be, in ways that I cannot now see, its transformation" (17, my emphases). There is no room in this economy for sympathy or anxiety directed toward those who remain behind as interpretative communities grow and decline; one must "believe what one believes," whatever the professional cost, and "one teaches what one believes even if it would be easier and safer and more immediately satisfying to teach something else" (364). There is no escape from the "firmness with which we hold our beliefs, or, to be more precise, [from] the firmness with which our beliefs hold us" (362).

For the pluralist committed and confined to a paradigm steadily losing its hold on domination, this is hardly a reassuring prospect. Lewis admits that his beliefs hold him—simultaneously constitute his imagination and constrain him—in just the way Fish suggests. But the problematic of general persuasion does not allow for any such determinate limit upon the capacities of the human reader. Booth calls the infinitely malleable flexibility that pluralism mandates by the modest name of understanding, "molding our minds in shapes established by others" (B 422); Hirsch, more explicitly addressing the matter of cultural and social difference, insists that "it is within the capacity of every individual to imagine himself other than he is, to

5The notion of teaching what one believes despite the threat such teaching may present to satisfaction, ease, and safety has a political referent Fish doesn't choose to invoke. His examples include a linguist who can no longer teach Chomsky as she once did ("No matter how convenient it would be if she still believed in the Aspects model—convenient for her teaching, for her research, for her confidence in the very future of her discipline" [363]) and a literary critic (Stanley Fish) whose changing sense of pastoral makes it impossible for him to teach Spenser's Shepheardes Calender as he was wont ("when I now look at the Calender I no longer see what I used to see " [364]). The examples Fish neglects are those in which threats to safety and ease have to do with the politics of teaching what one believes and with the very concrete threat of being denied the right to teach at all because one's teaching challenges some aspect of the political status quo. Such examples exist in every discipline and field, and pluralism is frequently invoked to justify dismissals. For a discussion of the explicitly political purging of the United States academy in the 1950s, see Ellen W. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
realize in himself another human or cultural possibility" (H 47).
Neither critic would accept the anti-humanism implicit in Fish's position, or the dogmatism of Lewis.
Thus, with this account of the subject as an effect of discourse or belief, Fish seems to take a crucial step away from pluralist ideology. The anti-humanism of post-structuralism is perhaps most notoriously enacted in its attack on the classical conception of the unified and originating subject. (This conceit has become so pervasive, at least on the verbal level, that *Newsweek* can entitle an essay on video arcades: "Games That Play People.")
Any theoretical account of the subject as an effect of language, a matrix of discontinuous codes that speak the "individual," discredits everything pluralism seeks to preserve. Fish flirts with such an anti-pluralist position when he argues that the reader can never act as an independent agent, that she is always a social product, an extension of her interpretative community, and thus constrained by its limits. He concludes: "If the self is conceived of not as an independent entity but as a social construct whose operations are delimited by the systems of intelligibility that inform it, then the meanings it confers on texts are not its own but have their source in the interpretive community (or communities) of which it is a function" (F 335). Yet despite this clear identification of the self as "a social construct," Fish backs away from the abyss of the deconstructed subject: the Fishian self is an effect of discourse, a function, but in a crucial move, Fish declines to notice the discontinuity of its processes. One looks in vain for the rhetoric of the fragmented or deconstructed self in Fish's work. Perhaps the choice of the word "function," rather than "effect," is symptomatic. In Fish's model, "systems of intelligibility" are always functional, and the self is a continuous, functioning, intelligible unit.

Nevertheless, there is a real sense in which Fish's reader is not an individual at all. And consequently, radical individualism, the absolute otherness that is solipsism, is impossible. "An individual's assumptions and opinions are not 'his own' in any sense that would give body to the fear of solipsism. That is, he is not their origin (in fact it might be more accurate to say that they
are his)" (F 320). In this model, every interpreter must speak the social codes that structure his subjectivity and produce the effect of individuality; no interpreter can achieve real—threatening—idiosyncracy. "The shared basis of agreement sought by Abrams and others is never not already found, although it is not always the same one" (F 318). This line of argument is clearly consoling to pluralists. But pluralism's "Arnoldian fear" is not the sum of its relationship to subjectivity. Although it is true that pluralism regards radical subjectivity or solipsism as an ever-present danger, the unified and independent self, the individual, is essential to its subject-centered, humanistic discourse. Fish can banish the troublesome specter of solipsism, but apparently only at the cost of the humanist's concept of the self.

Pluralists generally seem to prefer to treat post-structuralism's anti-humanism indirectly, countering it with their own humanist ethic, but rarely naming the enemy. For example, Abrams protests that, although he is not a deconstructionist, neither does he subscribe to the mimetic view of language that Derrida and Miller would seem to ascribe to him. He insists his view of language is Wittgensteinian, based on concepts such as tact and community. What Abrams elides is that the subject as a coherent, stable, and general phenomenon lies at the core of all pluralist views of language, including his own. This unified subject is the reader of a "determinably meaningful text, by, for, and about human beings" (PR 587); he is "a man speaking to men" [sic], the author as originary consciousness, the authority that guarantees the stability of meaning and the homogeneity of human experience prior to its "representation" in language. This constellation—the author, the reader, and their shared, determinable meaning—constitutes the theoretical imperative for the stability of meaning. If the reading subject is to be preserved in his unified, general, and universal character—which is absolutely essential to general persuasion—the author must be projected as his mirror image, the original site of subjectivity. Au-

thorial intention is the talisman of this subject-author, and the reader pursues intention as stable and original meaning. The self-identical totality is reproduced in the form of the reader himself, the author himself, and the reading (text) itself. Post-structuralism may threaten this subject, in all his avatars: the reader, the author, the stable text. When Fish offers a shelter from solipsism in the notion that "the self does not exist apart from the communal or conventional categories of thought that enable its operations" (F 335, my emphases), he seems to break with the problematic of general persuasion.

But Fish responds to the contradiction in pluralist discourse, a subject-centered discourse obsessed with the fear of subjectivity, by producing its mirror image at another level of his argument. Whereas he dissolves the problem of solipsism with an anti-humanist account of the reader as the extension of the interpretative community, he replies to the charges of relativism entirely in terms of consciousness and the status of the reader as constituent subject. Fish anticipates that pluralists, robbed of the stability of determinate meaning and faced with a plurality of interpretative communities, will respond suspiciously. Confronted with an apparently relativistic universe composed of an infinite historical regress of equally valid, determinate meanings, his audience may panic and refuse consolation: "It will do no good, they say, to speak of norms and standards that are context specific, because this is merely to authorize an infinite plurality of norms and standards: . . . to have many standards is to have no standard at all" (F 318–19). Fish grants that this objection is "unassailable as a general and theoretical conclusion" (319). He then argues that it is not only general and theoretical, but essentially irrelevant to practice. The subject who was caught up and dissolved in a social process reappears now placed at the center of an existential stage. Where the interpretative community, discourse itself, had once been the object of Fish’s analysis, now we find that the personal biography of the individual critic

7De Man makes a similar move. In "The Resistance to Theory," for example, he stresses that he does not anticipate an end to the resistance to theory; his theoretical intervention will not change this aspect of our practice.
sets the terms of the argument, and the problematic of general persuasion is reasserted.

General, theoretical conclusions are “beside the point for any particular individual” (319, my emphases). The whole weight of Fish’s analysis swings from the deformations that an infinite plurality of norms and standards might produce, to the conscious anxieties of particular, individual critics as they try to write or teach. Such an individual may fear “that his performance or his confidence in his ability to perform would be impaired” (319). He may suspect that he will be “unable to do practical criticism” (370) in the face of proliferating interpretative communities and the absence of any asituational norm by which to distinguish among them. But Fish is reassuring.

While it is generally true that to have many standards is to have none at all, it is not true for anyone in particular (for there is no one in a position to speak “generally”), and therefore it is a truth of which one can say “it doesn’t matter.”

In other words, while relativism is a position one can entertain, it is not a position one can occupy. No one can be [Fish’s emphasis] a relativist, because no one can achieve the distance from his own beliefs and assumptions which would result in their being no more authoritative for him [Fish’s emphasis] than the beliefs and assumptions held by others, or, for that matter, the beliefs and assumptions he himself used to hold. [F 319, my emphases]

This consolatory move is remarkably similar to Fish’s earlier treatment of determinate meaning. Now, as before, he offers an account of critical practice built on a key insight into the nature of pluralism’s resistance to post-structuralism. In fact, for those pluralists who resisted post-structuralist innovation because of a conviction or fear that relativism would lead to critical paralysis, this is a consoling passage. The passage does not, however, respond to the true character of pluralist anxiety (and indignation, in Hirsch’s case) about relativism.

Fish locates pluralism’s fears about relativism in the personal history of an individual critic because he reads them as a form of apprehension about the corrosive power of unchecked subjectivity operating over a period of time, in the time of particular
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critics' individual practices. In this model, the movement—which "feels like" progress but, in fact, can never be truly progressive—of one critic from interpretative community to interpretative community appears as the relativism pluralists find so objectionable. We can see one sense in which this movement does threaten pluralism; it suggests the dispersion of the subject in discourse, undermining the figure of the sovereign subject manipulating discourses from some high vantage. But this is not a point Fish stops to mention. He seems to view such fragmentation as relatively insignificant, if not utterly irrelevant. He can take such a complacent view because, as he repeats again and again, no one will "feel" the discomfort of fragmentation in practice. By privileging here the feelings of the very subject he previously threw into question, Fish closes the gap between poststructuralist claims and pluralist desires. Although the subject and his feelings have been defined as effects of discourse, they remain the center of the analysis.

A more significant lapse in Fish's effort to solve the problem of relativism for pluralists is his failure to recognize that they are not primarily concerned with relativism as a private experience culminating in self-doubt. Fish consoles one pluralist at a time, assuring each that his practice will continue undisturbed, indeed, that the reader must proceed with confidence, for one believes what one believes. But in the pluralist polemic, relativism does not refer to relativism in time, in the personal history of the scholar-critic. Pluralists fear relativism not in the history of a single career, but in the present of the collectivity, the community. Pluralism rejects the relativism that justifies— theorizes—ideological schisms in the space of contemporary criticism, the social and political relativism that acknowledges the community's division into hostile camps.

Pluralists tend to label any position that critiques the "logic of inquiry" relativistic. Booth, for example, makes this charge in Critical Understanding. Hirsch, taking this line of argument, finds himself opposing relativists who span critical eons, from Marx to Kuhn to Foucault. What unites these disparate figures is their willingness to posit limits—ideological, theoretical, epistemo-
logical, political—that divide the community along lines of conflicting interests. Pluralism insists on an undivided critical community, a community that shares the logic of inquiry, or the ethics of the communal, a community with no barriers to persuasion. The true name of the "relativism" of Marx or Foucault, then, is "anti-pluralism." Interpretative communities with determinate boundaries, communities that do not recognize a higher and general standard of interpretation—indeed, communities that reject the very prospect of such general and neutral norms—are what Hirsch and Booth condemn. Relativism, then, lies not in the distance one takes from one's own beliefs over the span of one's career, but in the distance communities of anti-pluralists (communities of relativists) produce between their beliefs and the problematic of general persuasion. This distance neutralizes pluralist objections, denying pluralism the authority (or jurisdiction) to criticize even before it has formulated an attack. The very rules of discourse are shifted.

The interpretative community founded upon uniform acceptance of the logic of inquiry flounders when that logic is withdrawn. The power to generalize meaningfully or concretely about the community-at-large fades. As Hirsch argues, "to the extent that this sense of the communal enterprise collapses, so does the discipline itself collapse as discipline. . . . The health of a discipline as a discipline depends upon the devoted allegiance of its members to the logic of inquiry" (H 152, 154). The problematic of general persuasion demands that the reading community operate as the general subject of interpretation. Theoretical schismatics who reject that subject and refuse to address their criticism to the entire community denature and confound pluralism.

Fish represents his defense against the charge of relativism as continuous with his defense against the charge of solipsism. Because the reader's mind is constituted by social categories, because the reader is these categories, there is no gap for relativism to occupy between the self and the beliefs of the self. But this view places Fish in contradiction with pluralism's humanism. He insists that "the mental operations we can perform are
limited by the institutions in which we are already embedded. These institutions precede us, and it is only by inhabiting them, or being inhabited by them, that we have access to the public and conventional senses they make" (331–32). This "limit" is ominous for pluralism, and for Fish's consolatory project.

III

Despite his reference to the police state, Fish seems to underestimate the will to authority (and knowledge) that lurks beneath all of pluralism's calls for stable and determinate meaning and an end to solipsism and relativism. His theory of interpretative communities is offered as a balm to pluralist fears, yet it begins to resemble an incitement, the very challenge Fish vows not to make. Of course, if pluralists have been misled by their own "caricature" of post-structuralism, genuine consolation will inevitably resemble (at least briefly) the very thing they have most feared. Once it is clear "how little we lose" (367) by embracing post-structuralist theory, this difficulty should fade. Fish comes closest to achieving the reconciliation he seeks when he addresses the problem of authority by way of the concept of continuity.

Initially, it seems that the kind of authority Fish offers to pluralists, authority confined within interpretative communities, authority entirely dependent upon contexts or situations and, finally, recognizing differences, would simply not satisfy the requirements of the problematic of general persuasion. At the same time, he makes very strong claims for the authority of the individual interpreter—often figured as a teacher—within the persuasion model. The text persists as an "obvious and inescapable" structure of meanings; "the shared basis of agreement sought by Abrams and others is never not already found": "students always know what they are expected to believe." Such statements seem to contradict other remarks that stress that interpretative communities are determinate and limited. The possibility that immediately comes to mind from the title story of Is
There a Text in This Class?, that is, the possibility that there might be *two* texts in one class, is never seriously addressed. And its theoretical consequences are ignored. The concept that resolves these apparent contradictions is continuity; continuity governs all relationships *among* interpretative communities in a pluralist commonwealth.

I have pointed out that Fish sees an inevitable continuity in the practice of literary criticism. Whereas Raymond Williams argues that certain forms of radical semiotics fall outside the dominant paradigm of literary studies altogether, Fish argues that even the most radical form of interpretation must have *some* relation to the center of the interpretative community, even if that relation comes under the title of "off-the-wall" interpretation. An outside is defined, first of all, by its relation to an inside. "There is never a rupture in the practice of literary criticism" (358). Furthermore, no matter how exotic or marginal the reading, simply in order to be conceived of as an interpretation, it must fall within the parameters of the game of interpretation. Hirsch says, play by the rules of the logic of inquiry or the discipline will cease to exist as a discipline, and then where will we be? Fish recognizes that if disciplines cease to exist as a disciplines, they will reappear elsewhere as something else, or rather, as more of the same: "interpretation is the only game in town" (355).

Several things are in play here. On one level, Fish has essentialized interpretation, *naturalized* it. Where the bourgeois critic argues for the unmediated perception of a "natural" world, Fish argues for the "naturally" mediated perception of a conventional world, or as the Barthes of *Mythologies* might put it, he naturalizes the mediation of perception. The forming of interpretative communities (the making of conventions) is presented as a general and universal practice. As such, interpretation functions as an unproblematic unity. The absence of distinctions we observe when Fish discusses the growth and decline of interpretative communities reappears. (If Hirsch's discipline is transformed into some other form of interpretation, will Hirsch be one of its
practitioners? When a community declines, what happens to its workforce?) The interpretative community emerges as the ahistorical subject of the history of interpretation, and interpretation itself is self-identical. The force of the claim that there is never a rupture in the practice of literary criticism is sharply reduced to the circular claim that “interpretation” is continuous with “interpretation.” And interpretation is still the only game in town.

Fish produces a metatheory of interpretation that seeks to encompass both pluralism and post-structuralism. But the apparent absence of distinctions—the appearance of even-handedness—is misleading. His theory ultimately respects the limits of general persuasion; he is a kind of super-pluralist, and his position is a new articulation of the problematic of general persuasion: “in literary criticism, . . . everyone’s claim is that his interpretation more perfectly accords with the facts, but . . . everyone’s purpose is to persuade the rest of us to the interpretive principles in the light of which those facts will seem indisputable” (339). Fish eschews the Hirschian posture of prophet of chaos and dissolution. Nor does he merely suggest, as Booth does, that “our life together” will be best served if we all read and write within the ethical terms of the problematic of general persuasion. Fish argues that it is impossible for any other situation to arise. In a sense, history stops here. It is impossible to fall out of the pluralist game, or to escape it. “There are no moves that are not moves in the game, and this includes even the move by which one claims no longer to be a player” (355).

I began by observing that Fish takes pluralism’s anxiety about the outsider as his object and attempts to cure it. By the conclusion of Is There a Text, the outsider is obliterated, lost, in a cognitive sense indistinguishable from the insider. Fish argues that “the production and perception of off-the-wall interpretations is no less a learned and conventional activity than the production and perception of interpretations that are judged to be acceptable. They are, in fact, the same activities enabled by the same set
of in-force assumptions about what one can say and not say” (357, my emphases). The outsider was really an insider all along. The powers of the police state would be redundant here.

But the character of the examples Fish brings forth to support this image of the continuous discourse of interpretation weakens his extremely consoling claim. The examples “challenge” the dominant paradigm at a variety of levels. What is most remarkable about the Eskimo reading of “A Rose for Emily” is that it in no way constitutes a new strategy for interpretation; instead, it represents a very old (and in some circles outdated) strategy—the use of the author’s biography as revealed in his letters. The discovery of a Faulkner letter and the subsequent introduction of that letter as evidence for new readings of Faulkner’s oeuvre do not constitute a new “Eskimo strategy” of literary analysis. The Faulkner letter is a new object to be examined, but one that is perfectly congruent with other objects already established in the domains of literary criticism and Faulkner studies. In the context of pluralism’s essentially positivist practice (the demonstration model), the challenge presented by the discovery of a heretofore missing object is qualitatively different from the production of a new theory. The very least one expects from a new theory is that it produce new, that is to say, heterogeneous objects for analysis. The discovery of a new (in the sense of another) object functions precisely as an empirical advance in pure, non-theoretical knowledge and never as a repudiation of past theory. Indeed, it is an application and thus a reinforcement of the theoretical problematic that characterizes the status quo. This is certainly not an instance of a theoretical challenge to pluralist hegemony.

According to their own testimony, it is precisely a new theory that so disturbs such pluralists as Hirsch, Booth, and Abrams, post-structuralist theory. Fish’s choice of Stephen Booth’s Essay on Shakespeare’s Sonnets as an exemplar of a challenging reading is again rather disappointing. Booth is chosen because he “self-consciously locates and defines his position in a differential opposition to the positions he would dislodge” (F 352). “Position” is an unfortunately vague term. Fish points out that despite his
oppositional rhetoric, Booth "manages to claim for his interpretation everything that certifies it as acceptable within the conventions of literary criticism," foremost among these, its superiority to earlier criticism, which is insufficiently literary, and its commitment to get "back-to-the-text." Fish observes that both these moves are attempts to "disavow interpretation in favor of simply presenting the text" (353), and he points out several other basically conservative literary assumptions that go unchallenged in Booth's essay.

Fish's analysis reveals that despite his subsequent "revisionary" claim that the Sonnets should be examined not as spatial objects but as temporal experiences, Booth relies heavily on traditional literary assumptions that in turn undermine his claim to radicalism. But Fish softens his apparent criticism of Booth by confessing that it is "beside the point." (This passage recalls the peculiar "modesty" we observed earlier.) Though Booth is not "truly radical," Fish's point is that "he couldn't be. Nor could anyone else" (F 354). This is because the very intelligibility of Booth's essay depends on the availability of the shared conventions of literary analysis. "A wholesale challenge would be impossible because there would be no terms in which it could be made; that is, in order to be wholesale, it would have to be made in terms wholly outside the institution; but if that were the case, it would be unintelligible because it is only within the institution that the facts of literary study . . . become available. In short, the price intelligibility exacts . . . is implication in the very structure of assumptions and goals from which one desires to be free" (354–55). These conclusions are in one sense inescapable, although they depend on a common-sense gloss of the term "intelligible," which I have been at some pains throughout this book to problematize. At the same time, there are interpretative positions—contemporary marxism, radical feminism, Lacanian psychoanalysis—that present challenges considerably more "radical" than Booth's. As a proof text, an interpretation that declined the critical posture of innocence, that openly theorized the literary work as an object that cannot "know" itself, that rejected the category of "Literature," would offer more resis-
tance to Fish’s effort to assimilate it to the institutional paradigm.

By focusing on Booth’s “aggressive humility” (F 355), Fish avoids several difficult questions. Having abandoned the mission of demonstrating the enduring value of the text and the universal insight of its author; having embraced an interested criticism, perhaps even a programmatic, prescriptive criticism; having made the ideological complicity between the canon and its critics a matter of political significance; a “radical” critic (in this broader sense) presents a challenge to pluralism which, though still not wholesale, is entirely different from the one Booth’s argument for the temporal experience of the poem offers. The critical point is that Booth accepts pluralism’s general reader and attempts to persuade him. The radical new reader refuses the general reader, both in the critical texts he critiques and as the ground of his own reading. In his place, he posits a fundamentally divided “community” composed of irreducibly differentiated readers. At the present time, within the institution of Anglo-American pluralism, radical criticism is necessarily anti-pluralist criticism.

We have seen the panic with which Hirsch and Booth regard the advent of this sort of anti-pluralist reading. The Aims of Interpretation is bent upon containing the significance of transformations in the composition of the critical community, assimilating new strategies of reading to Arnold’s critical model, fixing their (implicit) critique of aestheticism within the narrative of the classical mean. Booth gestures disapprovingly toward these critics when he chastises those who would accuse others of being less generous or less politically aware. But Fish sees no danger here. He reads the challenge presented by an anti-pluralist or radical reader in the same terms as the Eskimo reading and Booth’s reading of the Sonnets. Different in scale, perhaps, but all of the same kind. On every level, the pattern of revisionism and complicity repeats itself, and this necessary historical relation ensures against ruptures and discontinuities, preserving the pluralist’s tie to the future.

Fish’s concepts of continuity and discontinuity parallel the
pluralist’s “caricature” of indeterminacy. By construing discontinuity as a necessarily “wholesale” challenge, Fish misreads the concept and in the same direction that Abrams (according to Fish) misreads Derrida’s account of indeterminacy. The “epistemological break,” “discontinuity,” “rupture,” as they appear in the works of Althusser, Foucault, Williams, are never presented as total or pure fractures in history. On the contrary, Williams stresses that common “works” are at the center of radical semiotics and literary criticism, though these works appear as different “objects”; Foucault insists on the uneven, strategically dispersed process that only through theoretical work can be realized as “discontinuity”; Althusser, also, emphasizes the overdetermined historical conjuncture and the theoretical struggle that finally produces a “break” in the form of new problems and a new practice. All these theorists of discontinuity insist that it is a product rather than a natural phenomenon in history. Discontinuity is a theoretical object in each of their discourses. “The notion of discontinuity,” Foucault argues, “is a paradoxical one: because it is both an instrument and an object of research.” Fish’s continuities are similarly products of his theoretical model. By defining discontinuity as a pure state and then concentrating his examples illustrating the continuity of literary discourse on those kinds of interventions that are not particularly frightening to pluralists, Fish can establish a kind of safety net for pluralists like Booth and Abrams. Continuity appears as the natural and inevitable condition of all interpretations that are recognized as such. But anti-pluralist discourses tend to resemble Althusser’s and Foucault’s practices; they produce discontinuity, in part so as to take pluralism as an object of inquiry. The gaps they establish are enabling and disabling, not wholesale, but strategically. One sign of the presence of this discontinuity is a tendency to acknowledge pluralists only as those who fall outside of one’s potential audience. Although this gesture is essential if one wishes to break with the problematic of

general persuasion, it is not without risks. It could be suicidal, given that pluralism may retain its position at the center of interpretative power, a position which, Fish suggests, gives it a peculiar capacity to anticipate all the developments that may rise up against it. As Booth observes at the close of “Preserving the Exemplar,” we cannot yet predict who will survive the current conflict. I have tried to suggest the opposite of Fish’s view: pluralism is uniquely disabled in that it can never explicitly name the character of its anti-pluralist opponent.

Fish, however, does name it, and in that moment his discourse transgresses the boundaries of the pluralist problematic. Although he argues throughout Is There a Text for the continuity of interpretations and for the normative power of interpretative communities, Fish also consistently invokes the limits of those communities. In this notion of the limit, we can locate the anti-pluralism of his text. There are hints of Fish’s willingness to name the limits of persuasion throughout his argument. Thus, he briefly addresses the problem of the class with not one but two texts when he relates that he has told the anecdote “Is there a text in this class?” “to several competent speakers of the language who simply didn’t get it” (312). He also emphasizes that there is no way to be certain that anyone who listens to the story will be able to understand it. One wonders, for example, what the consequences are when the teacher is the competent speaker who doesn’t get it. Fish’s programmatic statement of this view bluntly admits that “what was normative for the members of one community would be seen as strange (if it could be seen at all) by the members of another” (15–16, my emphases). This is precisely the limit—the limit of persuasion and understanding—pluralism can never admit.

In his own discourse, Fish dramatically enacts an anti-pluralism far more radical than his theory suggests. The essay “A Reply to John Reichert” is a short piece in relation to the other essays in the collection. Sandwiched between the tour de force of “Normal Circumstances, Literal Language, Direct Speech Acts, the Ordinary, the Everyday, the Obvious, What Goes Without Saying, and Other Special Cases” and the four essays on “Inter-
pretive Authority” (including the title essay) that close the book, the Reichert piece is perhaps easy to overlook. This impulse is reinforced by the fact that it is the only reprinted essay in the book lacking a short introduction to place it in relation to Fish’s work or to indicate its importance. In his “Reply,” Fish responds to some of the criticisms Reichert offers to “Normal Circumstances . . . and Other Special Cases,” but his counterargument stops well short of a full defense of his views. He concludes with something like a theoretical shrug. “I am not, however, optimistic that Reichert will ever become a convert because the fears that impel his argument are so basic to his beliefs. . . . Reichert’s commitment to what he would like to be able to do and his conviction that if what I say is true he will be unable to do it make it impossible for him to regard my position as anything but perverse and dangerous” (298–99, my emphasis). The pessimism of these lines is more significant than the rehearsal of earlier arguments that makes up the bulk of Fish’s reply. This resignation represents what Booth wants to exclude: the naming of a limit to persuasion in the form of a reader who can neither be persuaded nor made to understand, not because meaning is indeterminate, but precisely because meaning is determinate, because of the limits of discourse, and because the community is split. Fish continues: “Any argument I might make would be received within the belief that it had [Fish’s emphasis] to be wrong, and within that belief [Reichert] could only hear it as wrong” (299, my emphases). With this statement, the distinction between persuasion and understanding dissolves; right and wrong are functions of the capacity to believe. The statement “I understand but am not persuaded” (with its equivalent epithet: “eloquent persuasive nonsense”) takes on the character of a statement of allegiance rather than a judgment of truth-value. In his reply to Reichert, Fish employs the notion of the unthinkable that pluralists avoid: “unless someone is willing to entertain the possibility that his beliefs are wrong, he will be unable even to hear an argument that constitutes a challenge to them” (299, my emphases). There is some trace of voluntarism and the pluralist value of openmindedness in this remark. But when Fish offers
himself as an example of such deafness, the implication that Reichert is perhaps merely stubborn fades: "When Reichert, or anyone else identifies something—an object, a text, an intention—as being available independently of interpretation, I know in advance that it could not be so and I look immediately for ways to demystify or deconstruct it. I always succeed" (299). These are the words of pluralism's "bad reader," the reader who does not read to be persuaded. "A Reply to John Reichert" appears as an instance of the bad reader's writing: although Fish insists on areas of agreement that lead him to take Reichert's point seriously and to reply to it (thus preserving his notion of continuity), the piece is really a proleptic defense of its own failure to "reply" in a way that could convince Reichert or make him understand. It is finally only an articulation of its own principle of exclusion.

_Is There a Text_ seeks to persuade pluralism that it can be reconciled with post-structuralist theory, and this attempt hinges on the rhetoric of persuasion itself, on the claim that "everyone is obliged to practice the art of persuasion." Despite this promising remark, Fish does not escape the problematic of general persuasion. Even as he appeals to pluralists in particular and acknowledges the interests of readers, he continues to address the general audience pluralist ideology posits and to assume a pluralist concept of persuasion as such. In his analysis, persuasion is a radically empirical matter of assembling the facts most convincing to a reader, not the object of theoretical interrogation. At the level of practice, Fish ignores the possibility that to speak consolingly to the pluralist is to exclude the anti-pluralist. Indeed, had he conceded this point, he would not necessarily have been forced to abandon the problematic of general persuasion; as I have argued, practical failures alone are not sufficient to disrupt pluralist ideology. More important, Fish celebrates rather than questions the very object of pluralism when he argues that the imperative to persuade guarantees pluralism's recuperative powers; persuasion thus remains the answer to an unposed question. Yet the final effect of Fish's argument and his foregrounding of the rhetoric of persuasion is to make explicit those
conditions under which one must fail to understand and fail to be persuaded, the conditions under which one must abandon the problematic of general persuasion. His elaboration of his ideal reader produces, in relief, the image of the reader for whom *Is There a Text* is not consoling: the anti-pluralist.

Fish's text demonstrates the dangers—for pluralism—of explicitly addressing the rhetoric of persuasion. From this vantage point, Hirsch's circumspection, his evasion of the problem of persuasion until the closing pages of his text, takes on the stature of a cautious but farsighted policy. Fish takes the defense of general persuasion into uncertain terrain and slips, at least momentarily, over the border of the pluralist problematic. The very discontinuity Fish's theory strains to exclude suddenly emerges, in the figure of Reichert, as an intractable reality; Fish and Reichert enact the pluralist nightmare of not being able to talk to one another.

But the transgression is hardly a fatal one. Fish's representation of the figure who can neither understand nor be persuaded as an individual, one John Reichert, rather than as part of a class or group, is symptomatic. (This move anticipates the existential argument, centered on the individual teacher-critic, that Fish wields to banish pluralist anxieties about solipsism.) He thus names the limits of pluralism in the narrowest possible terms, quite literally as the problem of one man, a person(al) problem, really. This makes it easier to fold the anti-pluralist figure back into the pluralist problematic. He remains the answer to a question the pluralist cannot ask. And so, we must read *Is There a Text* in general and "A Reply to John Reichert" in particular as revealing the limits of any pluralist discourse that attempts to confront the rhetoric of persuasion directly. A strategic retreat becomes essential.

IV

Toward the close of the introduction to *Is There A Text In This Class?* Fish summarizes his theoretical efforts to calm the fears of
the pluralist audience. He describes his own conclusion as a reading of the relationship between rhetoric and literary theory. We might say he conceives his practical task as a work of rhetoric even as he conceptualizes his current position as the theoretical recognition of the essentially rhetorical nature of all literary critical discourse. Fish confesses that at a certain juncture in his career he resisted his opponents' efforts to characterize his work as an attempt "to persuade [others] to a new way of reading"; but, as we have seen, he eventually discovers that "what I was trying to persuade them from was not a fundamental or natural way [of reading] but a way no less conventional than mine and one to which they had similarly been persuaded, if not by open polemics then by the pervasiveness of the assumptions within which they had learned how to read in the first place" (16). Fish's deconstruction aims at the opposition between "open polemics" for a new way of reading and "fundamental" reading conceived as merely doing what comes naturally. In his model, all discourse emerges as a form of polemic—either operating openly or as a function of "the pervasiveness of the assumptions within which" we learn, work, read, write. To the extent that he insists that interpretation is "the only game in town," Fish must argue that polemic, in turn, is the only way to play, with the qualification that strategies will differ: overt moves or covert moves may predominate in any given situation.

Fish assimilates the term "rhetoric" to the notion of persuasion, that is, to the polemical. The introductory narrative of his critical autobiography concludes: "In the end I both gave up generality and reclaimed it: I gave it up because I gave up the project of trying to identify the one true way of reading, but I reclaimed it because I claimed the right, along with everyone else, to argue for a way of reading, which, if it became accepted, would be, for a time at least, the true one. In short, I preserved generality by rhetoricizing it" (16, my emphases). In Fish's analysis, pluralists fear that a loss of generality is the necessary corollary to any deconstruction of literal meaning; from their perspective, to give up the core of determinate meaning is to abandon the critical community to skepticism, relativism, and subjectiv-
ism. In order to calm those fears Fish wants to preserve pluralism's generality, but without compromising on the question of the text itself. In *Is There a Text*, to "rhetorize" generality is to disclose the omnipresent rhetorical process that produces a "true" (general) reading. Generality is the product of persuasive rhetoric, a rhetorical effect (or a trope), and not the result of the discovery of a pre-existing determinate meaning, but this rhetorical process itself is general, that is, universal. Although Fish gives up determinate meaning, he relocates the possibility of generality elsewhere, in the unavoidable procedures by which the community of readers produces meaning. I have argued that in Fish's work the generalization of rhetoric constitutes itself precisely as a post-structuralist instance of the problematic of general persuasion. Fish is a super-pluralist, arguing that we must all "practice the art of persuasion" and taking the signs of resistance to his argument as misunderstandings and caricatures, vulnerable to the clarifying force of his own persuasive explanations.

But there are other readings of rhetoric in contemporary American literary theory. In the opening chapter of *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man seeks to distinguish rhetoric from what he regards as mere persuasion. He will frequently use rhetoric to designate the study of tropes and figures "and not in the derived sense of comment or of eloquence or persuasion."9 Yet de Man, Tzvetan Todorov is only the most recent historian of rhetoric to argue that the equation of rhetoric with eloquence represents a historical shift from a prior identification of rhetoric and persuasion; it is not to be taken for granted that eloquent means "persuasive." As Todorov observes, "the new eloquence differs from the old in that its ideal is the intrinsic quality of discourse rather than its aptitude for serving an external purpose": *Theories of the Symbol*, tr. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 65. At the moment when persuasion ceases to be the work of rhetoric, the latter is identified solely as eloquence or beauty: "If eloquent speech was once defined by its efficacy, now, quite to the contrary, it is useless speech, speech without purpose, that draws praise" (p. 67); "thus useless, inefficacious speech is to become the object of
too, works to “preserve generality by rhetoricizing it,” even as he moves decisively away from the polemical arena Fish so relishes. De Man’s decision to privilege the rhetoric of tropes over the rhetoric of persuasion is not unambiguous, as we shall see. His claim, in the most frequently cited sentence from the text, that “rhetoric is a disruptive intertwining of trope and persuasion” [AR ix] will lead him to the verge of antipluralism—in a gesture remarkably similar to Fish’s. But the apparent distaste with which he puts aside the “derived” sense of rhetoric is symptomatic of a critical tendency that cuts across his text. It signals his desire to escape the problem of derivation itself, which always reinscribes itself in his work as the problem of history. This flight from history is profoundly entangled with de Man’s rejection of polemic, in theory and in practice, and with the form of his deconstruction of the “rhetoric of persuasion.” It is also, as we have seen, a pluralist signature. By pursuing the question of de Man’s polemic—or perhaps what we shall have to call his anti-polemic—we can reveal an unsuspected conjunction of general persuasion and the allegory of reading.

In de Man’s rhetoric of tropes, we discover a more cautious pluralism. Subordinating chronology to the logic of pluralism’s discursive strategies, I will argue that his contribution to the problematic of general persuasion represents a retreat from the exposed position Fish stakes out at the limits of pluralism. De Man successfully displaces the question of polemic and thus produces a new and less vulnerable inscription of the rhetoric of general persuasion.

rhetoric, and rhetoric itself becomes the theory of language admired in and for itself” (p. 68). Any identification of rhetoric as persuasion and eloquence over against rhetoric as trope is at the very least premature.