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“Not to Worry”: The Anxiety of Pluralism and the Therapeutic Criticism of Stanley Fish

Everyone is obliged to practice the art of persuasion. This includes me, and persuasion is the art 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 critical pluralism as it confronts a theoretical intruder variously named deconstruction, relativism, the new New Criticism or post-structuralism. By tracing the process whereby he “Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Interpretation,”¹ Fish hopes to calm the theoretical anxiety and fear that he believes provoke traditional critics like M.H. Abrams, Wayne Booth and E.D. Hirsch into their periodic assaults on the critical positions of “Newreaders”² like Derrida, Harold Bloom or, of course, Stanley Fish.

My title alludes to the final paragraph of the title essay in *Is There A Text*, and I would like to begin by citing it in full. Fish concludes:

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 ways to limit and constrain interpretation, but . . . 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 (p. 321).

This passage is a brief for the argument elaborated in the whole of *Is There A Text*. Fish begins with a diagnosis of Abrams' and Hirsch's

"fears." He then offers a succinct reprise of his analysis, which is designed to dissolve those fears and centers on the issues of determinant meaning, solipsism and relativism and the problem of constraint or authority. And he leaves us with the consoling message: "not to worry."

Those consoling words are crucial. Fish urges Abrams and company "not to worry" because the therapeutic project of *Is There A Text* is to reconcile pluralist and allegedly anti-pluralist, post-structuralist positions by constructing a reading of post-structuralism that can be assimilated to pluralist discourse. In fact, in *Is There A Text*, Fish is struggling to become a pluralist; in a certain sense, he succeeds.

To put the argument in another form: Stanley Fish and self-professed pluralists like M. H. Abrams and Wayne Booth are generally thought to be theoretical antagonists, if not exemplars of one of the major oppositions which currently seem to divide the literary profession. But in fact, Booth, Abrams, and Fish are all pluralists, each engaged in a different moment of the same project: the assimilation of recent theoretical developments to the pluralist paradigm of English studies.

Before looking more closely at Fish's contribution to this project, I must say something about the phenomenon I've labelled "Anglo-American pluralism." The theoretical usefulness of the concept of pluralism cannot be taken for granted. The term operates in an extraordinarily broad range of contexts. There are technical or quasi-technical uses in literary criticism, philosophy, theology, law and political science. In the United States, there is also a pervasive colloquial use in both political and cultural discourse, where pluralist usually appears as a term of approbation. This colloquial meaning shadows every theory of pluralism.

Within the realm of literary theory, the most pervasive definition of pluralism foregrounds its commitment to methodological eclecticism. Among those writers consciously elaborating a theory of pluralism, Wayne Booth emerges as the most eloquent advocate of pluralism as the openminded and pragmatic pursuit of "critical understanding."³ For Booth, pluralism is a "commonsense, untheoretical" (CU, p. 197) activity that must both resist reductive monisms and provide the foundation for a critical community that rejects "skepticism, relativism, solipsism, impressionism, subjectivism, Derridaesque *glau-sisme*."⁴ His passionate and sustained polemic against these lapses of critical understanding and in favor of a diverse and inclusive pluralism has led many to identify pluralist literary theory with Booth's work or with that of a relatively small and readily identifiable group of critics who acknowledge his influence.

This consensus must be challenged. I will argue that an unarticulated pluralism dominates American literary studies, penetrating even those discourses which seem antithetical to it. Pluralism is in fact an extremely capacious discourse, and includes the theoretical work of critics as various as Paul de Man, E.D. Hirsch, Fredric Jameson and even Stanley Fish.⁵ I by no means intend to suggest that these theorists share identical critical biases or that they form a homogeneous school. But, along with Wayne Booth and M.H. Abrams, they do share a structure of pre-suppositions, a problematic, which I shall call the problematic of general persuasion.

Pluralism is a discursive practice constituted and bounded by the problematic of general persuasion. The pluralist may be a member of any faction in the critical field, from marxist to post-structuralist to reception theorist, so long as s/he practices a contentious criticism founded on the theoretical possibility of general or universal persuasion. That is to say, pluralistic forms of discourse first imagine a community in which every individual (reader) is a potential convert, vulnerable to persuasion, and then require that each critical utterance aim to persuade this community in general, that is, in its entirety. This generality or universality is the essence of the pluralist's humanism and the only absolute pluralism which requires in order to sustain its practice. The theoretical consequence is that the necessity of the founding gesture of exclusion, what Barthes calls the "incoercible bad faith of knowledge,"⁶ is firmly denied.

Pluralism is constituted in this denial, in its failure to acknowledge its own foundational exclusions. Barthes argues that

knowledge, whatever its conquests, its audacities, its generosities, cannot escape the relation of exclusion, and it cannot help conceiving this relation in terms of inclusion, even when it discovers this relation in its reciprocity; for the most part, it reinforces this relation of exclusion, often just when it thinks it is being most generous (p. 170).

Pluralism's generosity is expressed in its model of an essentially unified critical community, a "critical commonwealth" in which, as Booth puts it, "my continued vitality as a critic depends finally on yours and yours on mine" ("Exemplar," p. 420).

In this pluralist commonwealth, a stubborn or irreducible divergence of interests is an unthinkable form of discontinuity. Of course, attempts to persuade often fail in practice, but the pluralist interprets such failures as a measure of freedom, not as the sign of fundamental divisions within the community: "The limits of pluralism, then, are plural," as Booth tells us ("Exemplar," p. 423). The consequence is that no discourse which takes the process of exclusion to be *necessary* to the

production of meaning or knowledge or community can operate within the pluralist problematic.

The definitive turn of pluralist theory comes, then, when it rounds on the question of its audience, reflecting on its relation to other theories or examining the question of persuasion itself. But this formal moment of self-consciousness, if it constitutes itself within the problematic of general persuasion, quickly entails a very familiar content: pluralism then emerges as traditional interpretative pragmatism, an informed reading akin to New Criticism. The informed reader is a unified, coherent and homogeneous subject, the consumer of a (more or less) determinate text which, in turn, is the product of the author, a mirror image of the reader, the originary consciousness whose authority guarantees the stability of meaning. This constellation of reader-author-text appears in a critical community similarly conceived as a homogeneous and unified whole; divisions, conflicts and discontinuities within that community are viewed as superficial misunderstandings, easily overcome. Or, as Fish puts it:

there is never a rupture in the practice of literary criticism. Changes are always produced and perceived within the rules of the game Continuity in the practice of literary criticism is assured not despite but because of the absence of a text that is independent of interpretation. Indeed, from the perspective I have been developing, the fear of discontinuity is incoherent. The irony is that discontinuity is only a danger within the model erected to guard against it; for only if there is a free-standing text is there the possibility of moving away from it (p. 358).

Needless to say, this is not the account of pluralism that self-professed pluralists offer. Even when the pluralist assumes a highly self-reflexive mode, as Booth does in his work, the ideological problematic that generates pluralist practices remains profoundly unconscious. In such a meditation, pluralism must be read as an ideological term; it designates a real set of relations, but entirely in the service of the practical aim of sustaining those relations. A pluralist's account of pluralism will always concern itself with the regulation and reproduction of those real relations rather than with mere knowledge of them.⁷ Booth himself remarks that "the very act of taking pluralism seriously as a possibility was thus already a commitment to it" (p. 218), and in the course of his analysis, he discovers that his "practical reasons [his] pragmatic commitments, run so deep that they are in fact untouched by any one theoretical failure" (p. 216). In fact, Booth claims that although he "cannot distinguish pluralistic theory from the practical value of pluralism," it doesn't really matter because "commonsense untheoretical pluralism works, regardless of our theories" (pp. 218, 197).

The ideological problematic of general persuasion screens both the pluralist and the subject (object) of his criticism from the knowledge that *all* discourses, in the very process of establishing significance, necessarily exclude not only some readings but some readers.⁸ This double-edged mystification of writer and reader does not produce uniformity of "monism" (as a pluralist would call it) in interpretative practice, but it does produce the ideology of an undivided critical community engaged in what Booth calls "our common enterprise" ("Exemplar," p. 421). Within the problematic of general persuasion, then, difference is never a matter of irreducible discontinuities or dispersions. Failures of persuasion are accidental, contingent and, as Booth insists, often merely a matter of two people using the same word in different ways.⁹

This kind of theoretical blindness is obviously not peculiar to pluralism. It is impossible for any critic to acknowledge fully all the forces that constrain the production of her text or to control all its effects. The difference (which is not an opposition) is not between truth and ideology, or even truth and error, but between elaborating a given problematic from within and initiating a break by means of a symptomatic reading, a strategic difference between thinking *in* the pluralist problematic and thinking *of* it.¹⁰

The pluralist's commitment to "our common enterprise" and our common reason and his aversion to ruptures or discontinuities forces him into compromising positions. Booth's efforts to establish the "powers and limits of pluralism" are exemplary. He begins by assigning himself the impossible task of border patrol, claiming to name the *limits* of pluralism. This gesture assumes that such limits might be enforced, that anti-pluralist elements—"whoever they really are," to use Booth's disconcerting phrase ("Exemplar," p. 422)—can be excluded. Thus the threat (though ultimately that is too harsh a term) of Booth's work is that those anti-pluralist critics who would exclude others from the critical community will themselves be excluded.

But setting such limits is a more problematic undertaking than Booth admits. The mundane problem he does not address is that of the procedure by which he (or anyone else) would carry out a sentence of banishment on any particular critic. How could pluralism prevent the spread of "skepticism, relativism, solipsism and Derridaesque *glas-isme*"? Booth responds to this difficulty (without articulating it) by silently shifting the terms of his project. Although he insistently invokes the necessity of a *limited* pluralism (even while acknowledging the oxymoron that seems to be implied in such a notion), Booth ends by calling for the *inclusion* of *all* readers into the new critical commonwealth. He explicitly invites the "meaning multipliers," critics who

write in post-structuralist modes,¹¹ to join this pluralist enterprise. He adds only one proviso: "we" pluralists must "ignore their polemic against the effort to understand" (CU, p. 256).

This move is essential if Booth is to preserve his own pluralist credentials, for the problematic of general persuasion produces pluralism precisely as the refusal to recognize exclusions as necessary or inevitable. Once the pluralist acts to exclude others, he begins to resemble those he would censure. This is the theoretical contradiction of pluralism. Pluralists can threaten to enforce limits, but they must eventually fall back, theoretically and practically, into a polemics for inclusion or assimilation. Despite such polemics, the necessary exclusions are enforced. But the only way for a pluralist to exclude an unacceptable version of post-structuralism is by including an acceptable version. What is really at stake, then, is the form in which something called "post-structuralism" will be put into the discourse of Anglo-American pluralism.

Raymond Williams has observed that many potentially disruptive critical strategies have been welcomed into traditional literary studies "as the guests, however occasionally untidy or unruly, of a decent pluralism."¹² Booth offers the untidy multipliers of meaning just such a guestroom within the pluralist problematic and even sketches a pluralist reading of post-structuralism. But more importantly, he invites critics who identify themselves not with pluralism but with post-structuralist innovation to adapt their theories to the pluralist problematic.¹³ Enter Stanley Fish.

Is There A Text responds to Booth's offer to embrace even the "mysreaders" and "meaning multipliers" in a pluralist commonwealth. In fact, Fish comes close to a statement of the problematic of general persuasion when he claims, "everyone is obliged to practice the art of persuasion. This includes me and persuasion is the art I have been trying to practice here" (p. 368). Pluralists have habitually avoided such blunt admissions of the centrality of persuasion in their discourse.¹⁴ But Fish defines literary criticism precisely as a process in which

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 version of the facts he espouses by persuading us to the interpretative principles in the light of which those facts will seem indisputable (p. 339).

A great deal hinges, of course, on one small word: "seem." The crucial step is establishing an audience. Fish clearly defines his project as a persuasive assault on a series of "anticipated objections" (p. 369), by

which he means anticipated pluralist objections. He observes, somewhat drily:

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, the inability to explain the mechanisms by which interpretations are accepted or 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 (p. 369).

This is an unqualified attempt to address pluralists persuasively. Yet there is a doubleness in this passage and in the whole of Fish's work that results from his having set himself an impossible task, one similar to Booth's. Fish wants to persuade the pluralists in his audience without losing the post-structuralists: he wants to persuade everyone. Indeed, he cannot envision a criticism that attempts anything less than general persuasion.

We can see evidence for this in Fish's handling of the question of interest: "I have been trying to persuade *you* to believe what I believe because it is in *your* own best interests as *you* understand them" (p. 369; my emphases). Interest and the divisions and conflicts associated with it are normally excluded from pluralist discussions of understanding and persuasion. The pluralist tends to claim, as Booth does, that anti-pluralists "kill criticism" when they "reduce [the] effort to discuss reasons to mere expressions of irrational forces" (CU, p. 259). In Booth's view, such forces include the unconscious *and* class (CU, p. 259). But Fish initially insists on the determining power of interests; the persuasiveness of his claims depends upon his reading of putative opponents and their interests.

Is There A Text moves through discussions of determinate meaning, solipsism and relativism and authority in interpretation. Along the way, it touches on the definition of the reading subject, the history of criticism and the status of theory itself. In each instance, Fish offers an articulation of the post-structuralist positions that seeks to reassure pluralists. The one important qualification is that Fish does not want to abandon any of the (apparently) threatening insights of post-structuralism.

The resulting difficulty is captured in the "you" to which Fish explicitly appeals. This character is at once the subject and the object

of Fish's text, and s/he is "fleshed out" with pluralist fears and anxieties. Post-structuralist fears and anxieties and interests (whatever they might be) are never broached. Rather, the pluralist subject is generalized to refer indiscriminately to all readers. But the unacknowledged post-structuralist exerts a constant pressure on Fish's analyses; as a result, he systematically miscalculates as he attempts to assuage pluralist fears.

Fish's discussion of each of the major issues he addresses (determinate meaning, solipsism/relativism, authority) is marked by the silent post-structuralist reader. Fish's commitment to his (version of) post-structuralism causes him repeatedly to mistake the nature of pluralist fears (or more precisely, pluralist objections) and in turn, consistently to offer reassurances that are less than reassuring to his pluralist readers. Due to the constraints of space, I must limit my analysis to a "typical" instance of this pattern.¹⁵

Fish analyses the problem of relativism in terms of the consciousness of the individual critic, the scholar-teacher who is confronted by an infinite regress of possible interpretations and, as a result, fears that "his performance or his confidence in his ability to perform might be impaired" (p. 319). Fish traces the problem of relativism to the loss of the determinate text, but he does not attempt to restore the possibility of literal or determinate meaning.

Instead, Fish argues that the general or theoretical relativism which must be the consequence of recognizing a plurality of norms, standards or texts is actually "beside the point for any particular individual" because "no one can *be* a relativist" (p. 319). For Fish, to be a relativist means to be a critic who can "achieve the distance from his own beliefs and assumptions which would result in their being no more authoritative *for him* than the beliefs and assumptions held by others, or, for that matter, the beliefs and assumptions he himself used to hold" (p. 319). Such a condition, an essentially neutral or uncommitted attitude, is unattainable. At any given moment, one must be in the grip of a determinate set of beliefs (even if one believes in the inevitable aporia of the text): "there is never a moment when one believes nothing, when consciousness is innocent of any and all categories of thought" (pp. 319-320). And for Fish, to have beliefs—or more precisely, to be constituted by beliefs—is to act on them. In a sense, one cannot help but perform.

This reassuring analysis is designed to fend off the anxiety triggered by the recognition that we cannot fix the determinate meaning of the text, and to dissolve the delusive fear that the interpretative play thus engendered may lead to a radical inability to read or write or teach. But its therapeutic effect depends on the accuracy of Fish's diagnosis. Fish

reads the pluralist critique of relativism as a fearful expression of the corrosive power of an unchecked subjectivity operating over a period of time, in the time, or more precisely, in the history of a *particular* critic's *individual* practice. In this account, relativism is dangerous because it may ultimately cripple this reader. Fish explicitly dismisses the "general and theoretical conclusion" that "to have many standards is to have no standards at all" (p. 319) in order to foreground the individual who is the object of his consoling analysis. That analysis fails as consolation because, in fact, pluralists are not primarily concerned with relativism as a private experience culminating in radical self-doubt. Indeed, a more circumspect approach to reading would be applauded by many pluralists; the proliferation and apparently strained ingenuity of the "newreaders" is often the object of pluralist criticism.

Fish's strategy is to console *one* pluralist at a time, assuring each that his or her practice will continue undisturbed by merely general and theoretical conclusions. Indeed, the reader must proceed with confidence, for one believes what one believes, even if the consequences are unpleasant.¹⁶ But in the pluralist polemic, the term relativism does not refer to relativism in the personal history of the scholar-critic. Pluralists "fear"—or object to—relativism in the present moment of our critical collectivity. They recognize it as a rupture, a threatening discontinuity.

Pluralists fear the interpretative (theoretical, social and political) relativism that divides "our" critical community now. Pluralism excludes the "relativists" who justify, even celebrate, the exploitation of ideological schisms in the space of contemporary criticism, critics who court theoretical battles and insist that such struggles are always elements in larger political battles. These relativists, according to Booth, are the critics who kill criticism with their emphasis on "irrational forces (your id, your class, your upbringing, your inherited language)" (*CU*, p. 259). The objection which pluralism presents to such relativists has nothing to do with the fear of interpretative paralysis but everything to do with the recognition that such criticism "risk[s] turning critical battles into politics or even open warfare" (*CU*, p. 5). The language is melodramatic perhaps, but open warfare has a very precise meaning for Booth. Open warfare results when critics break with the problematic of general persuasion, when they begin to trace the play of interests *and exclusions* across the interpretative field.

Fish acknowledges the shaping power of interest when he composes analyses with intent to persuade. He ostentatiously appeals to those interests. But when he interprets pluralist objections, which he perhaps mistakenly calls fears, he forgets about interests and the ongoing

struggle among contending parties, and falls back into what we might call a right/wrong problematic. In this view, pluralists have got post-structuralism “all wrong”; they’ve misunderstood it somehow. How—or rather *why*—is the question Fish doesn’t ask or answer. Instead, he proceeds on the assumption that if he explains it once again, very carefully, perhaps they will “get it right.” Fish looks past the *advantages* of pluralism’s apparent misunderstandings. His consciousness of the power of interest is merely a varnish laid over his greater confidence in the essential correctness of his readings and in the persuasive force of the plain style he employs.

Because of this lapse—a lapse into a pluralist notion of the transparency of argument and the *general* appeal of persuasively articulated truth—Fish never quite sees the strategic power or ideological cunning of certain pluralist “misunderstandings.” For example, he dismisses the pluralist account of indeterminacy or misreading as a “caricature,” when in fact it is a powerful strategy for assimilating post-structuralism to the problematic of general persuasion. Of course, this is what Fish himself undertakes to accomplish. Ironically, the concept that underlies all of Fish’s reassuring analyses is yet *another* caricature: a parodic account of the concept of discontinuity.

It is not uncommon for pluralists who oppose post-structuralist interrogations of the determinate text to argue that such efforts lead to an anarchic universe of absolute free play in which everything is indeterminate, undecidable and misread. Fish rejects this account in the course of developing his pluralist reading of post-structuralism. (This is why I stress that he and Booth are working on different phases of the same project.) But in order to do this, he sets up a rigid opposition between continuity and discontinuity. Continuity is collapsed into the notion of intelligibility. Thus, Fish argues, if you want to be understood—or even if you don’t *want* to be understood, but I understand you anyway because you are making intelligible noises—there is continuity between our discourses. As Fish puts it:

It is . . . 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 of the game (pp. 357-58).

The account of discontinuity that Fish opposes to this very, very broad notion of continuity is strikingly similar in its exaggeration and in its logical consequences to the pluralist account of indeterminacy as pure

anarchy: both terms are glossed as total misreading; the complete breakdown of communication is said to mark both; both are finally—and with obvious relief—dismissed as phantoms, and the critical community is reassured: “not to worry.”

Fish describes discontinuity as a mirage born sometimes of a quixotic desire for revolution, total rupture in the stroke of a pen, and sometimes of timidity, a nostalgic impulse to break out of the interpretative “game” altogether in the name of a “return-to-the-text.” In both cases, he argues that such 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 The price intelligibility exacts . . . is implication in *the very structure* of assumptions and goals from which one desires to be free (p. 355, my emphasis).

The closing words—“the very structure of assumptions and goals”—clearly assume a homogeneous critical field. By construing discontinuity as a necessarily “wholesale” or total challenge, Fish misreads the concept and in the same direction as Abrams and Booth misread Derrida’s account of indeterminacy. Just as Booth is able to accommodate the meaning multipliers first by caricaturing and then by “ignoring” their “polemic against understanding,” Fish is able to include even those most concerned to exclude themselves by means of his caricature of discontinuity.

Of course, the terms “epistemological break,” “discontinuity,” “rupture,” as they appear in the works of Althusser, Foucault and Williams, are never presented as total or pure fractures in history. On the contrary, Williams, for example, stresses that radical semiotics and traditional literary criticism examine the same works, though these works appear as different objects in each (pp. 64-66). Foucault insists on the uneven, dispersed process that only through theoretical work can be realized as “discontinuity,” and he mocks both the notion of a single, sudden rupture, dividing all discursive formations, and the suggestion that arguments for discontinuity necessarily imply that “a whole world of absolutely new objects, enunciations, concepts and theoretical choices [will] emerge, fully armed and fully organized in a text.”¹⁷ Althusser emphasizes, above all, the overdetermined historical conjuncture and theoretical struggle that finally produces a “break,” precisely in the form of the relation between a science and its ideological prehistory.¹⁸ Each of these theorists insists that discontinuity is a product of analysis rather than a brute fact, a natural phenomenon *in*

history. As Foucault puts it, "The notion of discontinuity is a paradoxical one: because it is both an instrument and an object of research" (p. 9).

Fish must construct his continuities through the same kind of interpretative act. But he defines continuity and discontinuity as pure states and reduces the latter to a kind of fantasy attractive to those who are taken in by the rhetoric of so-called revolutionary criticism. Thus, he can argue that continuity is the inevitable or natural condition of all interpretation as such.

As an example of the implacable continuity of our tradition, Fish offers his own career. He argues that, when he became a reader-response critic and attacked the New Critical sanction against the affective fallacy, "the position [he] proceeded to take was dictated by the position that had already been taken" (p. 2). He goes so far as to insist that "to the degree that this argument [for the affective fallacy] was influential . . . it contained in advance the form any counterargument might take" (p. 2).

This is a very peculiar thing for Stanley Fish to say. His formulation here precisely parallels the mainstream pluralist's account of the determinate text as an entity which somehow prefigures, constrains and contains all the readings that are produced of it. In textual analysis, this model posits criticism as an imitation or simulacrum of the text itself. Analysis is repetition, another way of saying what the text has always already said; and this repetition ensures fidelity to the text by excluding idiosyncratic or bizarre interpretations.

Fish essentially adopts this view when he argues that a new interpretative strategy (reader-response criticism) simply fulfills the promise of the original strategy or precursor (the affective fallacy), somehow completing it, providing its rational conclusion in a purely logical development. This account places no emphasis on the reader's response, is completely ahistorical, and runs counter to Fish's already articulated theory of the text. But it does secure the dominance of hegemonic interpretations, which is to say, in this context, the dominance of the problematic of general persuasion. According to such an analysis, even the most "off-the-wall" reading (to use Fish's term) is determined by the readings that precede it. No matter how exotic or marginal the reading, simply "in order for us to conceive of it as an interpretation" it must fall within the parameters of the "game" of "interpretation" as "we" have established it. And Fish insists that "interpretation is the only game in town" (pp. 357, 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. The place of the natural has shifted, but its power has been preserved. The forming of interpretative communities (the making of conventions) is presented as the general or universal category. As an essential category, interpretation functions as an unproblematic unity, much like the pluralist's unified community.

Fish claims that this omnipresent game is not static. He argues, rather, that it provides us with

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* (p. 171-72; my emphasis).

The source of this fragility is unclear, although the shift from a focus on the game (singular) of interpretation to communities (plural) may be a clue. Fear, as I implied earlier, is an important emotion in *Is There A Text*, perhaps the only emotion it addresses. The last remark goes to the heart of pluralist (critical) anxiety: the fear of not being able to talk to one another. Fish's entire "continuist" argument is a kind of theoretical safety net, securing each of us a part in the conversation or game that constitutes "our life together." It works to exclude or silence precisely those discourses—anti-pluralist discourses—that seek to *produce* a discontinuity between the pluralist problematic and their own, thus taking pluralism as an object of research rather than talking or battling with the pluralists themselves.

But Fish deviates from his rigidly continuist view when he addresses one fundamental question: the question of the relation between theory and practice. He writes, near the end of this book: "One wonders what implications [this argument] has for the practice of literary criticism. The answer is, none whatsoever" (F 370). One can see why this remark does not appear in the preface. On this level, 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. Now this *is* consoling. Such reassurance is nearly intoxicating. Fish, at a stroke, provides pluralism with a post-structuralist theory that claims as its practice a *continuation* of Anglo-American literary criticism as it has developed over the last fifty-odd years. The curious thing here is that this consolation renders the other scrupulously constructed reassurances obsolete, including the assurance that everything is part of the interpretative game. It is as if theory had been relegated to the back room.

I have suggested that Fish's analysis of relativism offers to console one pluralist at a time. But even in this gesture, we find that *Is There A Text* points to the very discontinuity it works so hard to conceal. "A Reply to John Reichert" is a very short piece, but in its few pages a gap appears where fear enters in, is even called up by Fish's argument. 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 new essays on "interpretive authority" that close the book, the Reichert piece is perhaps easy to overlook—an impulse that is reinforced by the fact that it is the only reprinted essay in the text to lack a short introduction placing it in relation to Fish's current work and indicating its importance. The curt title leads one to suspect a somewhat *ad hominem* argument. In any case, if one doesn't already know what John Reichert wrote, one hasn't a clue as to what Fish's reply might contain.¹⁹

In "A Reply to John Reichert," Fish responds to some criticisms Reichert offers to the argument of "Normal Circumstances . . . and Other Special Cases." But the counter-argument stops far short of a full rehearsal of Fish's view, and 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* (p. 298, 299; my emphasis).

It was a willingness to confront fears—and a remarkable optimism as to the possibility of banishing them—that had generated the therapeutic project of *Is There A Text*. This passage is an extraordinary admission of the limits of any such persuasive project. Fish continues to make his point precisely in terms of the possibility of persuasion: "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" (p. 299).

This is precisely the moment that pluralism 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* or even to hear, not because meaning is always indeterminate; not because all reading is misreading; but because of the determinate limits of his discourse; because the community is split, and as Barthes says, "knowledge, whatever its conquests, its audacities, its generousities, can never escape the relation of exclusion."

Fish concludes: "Any argument I might make would be received with the belief that it *had* to be *wrong*, and within that belief [Reichert] *could only hear it as wrong*" (p. 299; my emphasis). This is the end of interpretation. Although Fish acknowledges areas of agreement that lead him to take Reichert's point seriously and to reply to it (thus seeming to preserve his *broad* notion of continuity), this short essay is really *only* a proleptic defense of its own failure to "reply" in a way that Reichert could understand or even hear. It is an articulation of its own principle of exclusion. In this essay, Fish has "stopped talking" to Reichert, and to all those readers who stand with him on the far side of a frightening gap—that of a discontinuity in interpretation.

Is There A Text In This Class? is an attempt to persuade pluralists that they can be reconciled with post-structuralist theory, an attempt that hinges on the notion of persuasion itself, on the claim that "everyone is obliged to practice the art of persuasion." But the effect of Fish's argument, with its foregrounding of the problem of persuasion, is ultimately to reveal 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 In This Class?* is not consoling. Fish, as the anti-pluralist, can only re-enact the contradictions which pluralism embodies.

NOTES

1. Stanley Fish, *Is There A Text In This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard U.P., 1980), p.1. Further references to this volume will be given in parentheses in the text.
2. M. H. Abrams, "How to Do Things With Texts," *Partisan Review* XLVI:4 (1979), p. 569 *et passim*. Further references to this essay will be given in parentheses in the text.
3. Wayne Booth, *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979) Further references to this volume will be given in parentheses in the text.
4. Wayne Booth, "'Preserving the Exemplar': or, How Not to Dig Our Own Graves," in "The Limits of Pluralism," *Critical Inquiry* 3:3 (Spring 1977), p. 407. Further references to this essay will be given in parentheses in the text.
5. I pursue analyses of Hirsch, de Man and Jameson in an unpublished manuscript, *Seductive Reasoning: The Pluralist Problematic of General Persuasion*.
6. "Taking Sides," *Critical Essays* Tr. Richard Howard (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 170. Further references to this essay will be given in parentheses in the text.
7. This account of the practical function of ideology is drawn from the work of Louis Althusser. In *For Marx* (Tr. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1977), he argues that "ideology, as a system of representations, is distinguished from science in that in it the practical-social function is more important than the theoretical function (function as knowledge)" (p. 231). See also, James H. Kavanagh, "Marxism's Althusser: Towards a Politics of Literary Theory," *Diacritics* 12:1 (Spring 1982), pp. 25-45.

8. This distinction is the location of a key evasion in Booth's text. He *does* observe that every way of speaking excludes certain readings and certain meanings: "Every mode of speech and thought can be said to forbid certain kinds of further speech and to invite certain other kinds" ("Exemplar," p. 419). But although he is interested in the "proscription of meanings" (a first step towards a core of "determinate meaning"), Booth paradoxically evades the necessary corollary: every mode of speech forbids certain kinds of speakers (listeners) and invites certain other kinds. Pluralism retreats into a humanistic account of the subject to avoid this unacceptable deduction.
9. See *Critical Understanding*, pp. 8-12 *et passim*.
10. Cf. Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: NLB, 1970).
11. The "definition" of the term post-structuralist emerges with more precision in the course of my account of anti-pluralism in a longer manuscript, though the former cannot simply be identified with the latter. For the present, keeping in mind Josué Harari's observation that "post-structuralism—like structuralism—invites a plural spelling" and his warning that no unified definition may be possible ("Critical Factions/Critical Fictions," Preface to *Textual Strategies* Ed. Josué Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 27), I use the term to designate roughly the same diverse group of contemporary theorists which Booth indicates with his list of what "pluralism is not" and which E. D. Hirsch distinguishes with his term, "dogmatic relativists" (*The Aims of Interpretation*, (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 5. The widespread perception that certain critics represent something called post-structuralism is more important to my analysis at this point than a rigorous conceptualization of the definitive characteristics of post-structuralism as such. What is crucial is that pluralism has identified (constructed) a theoretical intruder that seems to embody principles antithetical to the pluralist problematic. Nevertheless, pluralism must incorporate this intruder; that is to say, *pluralism must* read post-structuralism as a pluralist discourse, must include it. Pluralist anxiety and the pluralist construction of post-structuralism are thus not the simple effects of an intrusive foreign substance which might be isolated and named as the cause of the recent intensity in pluralist polemics.
12. "Marxism, Structuralism and Literary Analysis," *New Left Review* 129 (September/October 1981), p. 54. Further references to this essay will be given in parentheses in the text.
13. I deliberately avoid an inquiry into the justice of any critic's identification (either by others or on his own behalf) with post-structuralism. I do not wish to become involved in the search for the true or essential post-structuralist position. The critical controversy turning on the question of which theorists most successfully avoid "domesticating" post-structuralism's "original" formulations seems rather ill-considered, given the prominence of the critique of origins and the concept of the trace in at least some of the texts in question. I do argue that Booth and Fish are at work to construct a pluralist reading of post-structuralism; I do not mean, however, to imply that this reading can be criticized from the perspective of an "original" post-structuralism.
14. I discuss this at some length in relation to E. D. Hirsch in an unpublished manuscript, "Discipline, Persuasion and E. D. Hirsch's 'Logic of Inquiry.'" Hirsch delays *his* consideration of persuasion until the Afterword of *The Aims of Interpretation*.
15. In *Seductive Reasoning*, I pursue Fish's argument, from its strategic opening with the problem of the determinate text, to its extraordinarily consoling conclusion, as regards the secure authority of the established paradigm of literary studies.
16. Fish's example here is a linguist who feels that she must abandon the Katz-Postal-*Aspects* model, but who does it with regret: the "model can't work, and I consider that a great pity" (p. 363), she reports. Still, despite her misgivings, Fish points out that "she can't help herself . . . she can only believe what she believes" (p. 363).
17. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Tr. A. M. Sheridan (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 173 *et passim*.
18. See in particular *For Marx*, *op. cit.* and *Essays in Self-Criticism* (London: NLB, 1976).
19. The other two "replies" in the book do have introductions, and the one that invokes its subject's name, "Facts and Fictions: A Reply to Ralph Rader," has a title which indicates the topic of the dispute.