Seductive Reasoning
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Published by Cornell University Press

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Seductive Reasoning: Pluralism as the Problematic of Contemporary Literary Theory.

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INTRODUCTION

Criticism is not an “homage” to the truth of the past or to the truth of “others”—it is a construction of the intelligibility of our own time.

—BARTHES, “What Is Criticism?”

We must completely reorganize the idea we have of knowledge, we must abandon the mirror myths of immediate vision and reading, and conceive knowledge as a production.

—ALTHUSSER, Reading Capital

The subject of this book is pluralist discourse in contemporary Anglo-American literary theory. My argument challenges both the common sense definition of pluralism as an affable form of methodological eclecticism and the consensus that literary pluralists are a relatively small and easily identifiable group of critics, centered at the University of Chicago and positioned as the heirs to R. S. Crane and Richard McKeon. I will argue instead that a hitherto unarticulated pluralism dominates American literary theory, penetrating even those discourses that seem antithetical to it. Indeed, at present, pluralism seems endowed with an infinite capacity to recuperate the potentially anti-pluralist discourses that have appeared in literary theory.

In my analysis, this hegemonic pluralism emerges as a double strategy—for reading and for writing—structured around the problem of persuasion. I shall show that the pluralist’s invitation to critics and theorists of all kinds to join him in “dialogue” is a seductive gesture that constitutes every interpreter—no matter what her conscious critical affiliation—as an effect of the desire to persuade. As we shall see, pluralistic forms of discourse first
imagine a universal community in which every individual (reader) is a potential convert, vulnerable to persuasion, and then require that each critical utterance aim at the successful persuasion of this community in general, that is, in its entirety. This demand ensures a conversation in which every critic must address a general or universal audience. This theoretical generality marks the limit of the pluralist’s humanism, and it is the only absolute pluralism requires to sustain its practice.

Defined in these terms, pluralism has relatively little to do with an individual critic’s lack of dogmatism or his tolerance of diverse views. On the contrary, as we shall see, the pluralist may be a partisan of any faction within the critical field, from intentionalist to feminist, myth critic to marxist, so long as she practices (and of course preaches) a contentious criticism founded on the theoretical possibility of universal or general persuasion. Pluralism, then, is not a practical commitment to methodological eclecticism, but an ensemble of discursive practices constituted and bounded by a problematic of general persuasion. As we shall see, the symptomatic moment of pluralist discourse arrives when the theoretical problem of the position of the reader is displaced, rewritten as a question of logic, ethics, or rhetoric. To interrogate the status of the general audience is to risk discovering the interests of readers as a theoretical limit to persuasion, and this is a possibility pluralists must consistently evade, whatever their other critical commitments.

*Seductive Reasoning* offers a reading of pluralism that both stresses its real discursive flexibility and heterogeneity and seeks to articulate the unacknowledged presuppositions, the limits, and, most critical, the exclusions that give it ideological coherence. Previous discussions have failed to uncover this pluralist problematic in part because most analysts have committed their energies to describing the explicit agendas of prominent and self-identified pluralists; the figure of Wayne Booth is a favorite exemplar. In contrast, the texts I have chosen are not drawn solely from the writings of recognized pluralists; most of the critics I address in fact present themselves as (more or less) active opponents of pluralism. My counterargument unfolds
across close readings of five theoretical texts, the products of various hands: E. D. Hirsch, Wayne Booth, Stanley Fish, Paul de Man and Fredric Jameson, and it begins by rejecting the view that Booth is the sole pluralist in the group.

I by no means intend to suggest that the theorists just named share identical critical biases or form a homogeneous school. This book is neither a synoptic introduction to their varied theoretical oeuvres, nor a survey of current developments in literary theory, nor a history of the vicissitudes of the word "pluralist" in twentieth-century North American literary studies. My argument is not structured as a proof that the theorists I read are prototypical pluralists or that their works consistently display the essence of pluralism. In fact, my own reading is grounded in theoretical assumptions which reject the notion that a text or a career can be properly said to have an essence. Rather than trace the history or the meaning of the word "pluralism," I hope to establish the pervasiveness of pluralist ideology and to disclose that ideology's effects and limits. Thus, the individual texts I will examine are the occasion and not the final object of my analysis. The real object of my analysis is this ideological structure, the problematic of general persuasion.¹

¹A critical analysis of the relationship between the pluralism of R. S. Crane and Richard McKeon and the work of "second-generation" pluralists such as Booth is certainly needed, but I will not perform this task of intellectual history in the present essay. Crane wrote that the "critical philosophy" characterizing the Chicago school of critics was an "attitude toward criticism . . . which they have called 'pluralism,'" but he also noted that "the term may be unfortunate" and explained that "what they meant it to convey was simply their conviction that there are and have been many valid critical methods . . . each of which has its characteristic powers and limitations. They have stated this as a middle position between the extremes of dogmatism and skepticism": Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern, ed. R. S. Crane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. iv. Whether the philosophical term was fortunate or unfortunate is a question I will not address. My analysis aims to treat pluralism as a contemporary discursive practice, not as a philosophical stance. Accordingly, I will also bracket the question of the formal parallels that may exist between contemporary forms of critical pluralism in literary theory and the philosophical speculations of such figures as Stephen C. Pepper or Nelson Goodman. Such a "history of ideas" approach fails to account for the specificity of pluralism's instantiation in the academic discourse of literary theory, and it has led some critics into confusion rather than away from it. Bruce Erlich, for example, undertakes to
My immediate aims are thus theoretical: to demonstrate the hegemony of pluralist discourse in literary theory and clarify the nature of that pluralism's contemporary "crisis"; to trace the problematic that constitutes pluralist ideology; to suggest, at least in relief, the lineaments of certain anti-pluralisms. It is best to say at the outset that this last intention remains only partially achieved here and that this partiality is deliberate. This essay aspires to be an instance of anti-pluralist practice, to break with pluralism in the very act of disclosing its ideological ground, but my primary focus is not prescriptive. I am concerned, rather, to delineate as sharply as possible the structure of a hegemonic pluralism, a discourse of power, of the center, or (as pluralists like to think) of the mainstream. Seductive Reasoning is thus emphatically a critique, an effort to disclose the enabling conditions of pluralist discourse, to reveal its ideological effect, and, finally, to denaturalize its most characteristic (and all-too-familiar) gestures.

Such an approach is necessary at this stage of inquiry precisely because the pluralist problematic is now so deeply engrained in the dominant discourses of literary studies that it is generally regarded as a natural rather than a social fact. As a consequence, it retains a massive and largely invisible power; pluralism is that which goes without saying.2 By positing a crit-

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2 Indeed, as a result of its remarkable success at naturalizing its critical assumptions, pluralism has made some inroads into critical discourses such as marxism, feminism and ethnic studies, all of which offer at least implicit resistance to pluralist assumptions. Despite such incursions, pluralism remains overwhelmingly a discourse of dominant groups; it would be a serious misrepresentation of its ideological significance to confuse an analysis of its hegemonic articulations with a reading of its inscription in alternative discourses. Hence my focus here on prominent theorists of the (so-called) mainstream. A typology of
ical community unified by the assumption that every reader is theoretically amenable to persuasion, pluralisms inevitably reinscribe traditional notions of the reader and the author as unified subjects, transparently equals, at work in a homogeneous critical field. These assumptions make an irreconcilable divergence of interests within the critical community an unthinkable form of discontinuity. Armed with this strategy, pluralism can hope to recuperate any critical account (feminist, minority, marxist) that emphasizes otherness, difference, conflict, or discontinuity: within the problematic of general persuasion, the absent or excluded term is exclusion itself. No discourse that challenges the theoretical possibility of general persuasion, no discourse that takes the process of exclusion to be necessary to the production of meaning or community and asserts, with Althusser, that it is the definition of a field which, "by excluding what it is not, makes it what it is," can function within pluralism.3

In practice, the critics who would necessarily be excluded from the pluralist community are those who defy the problematic of general persuasion, those who do not make the theoretical assumption that every reader is available to be persuaded. As Richard Ohmann suggests, these critics refuse to "lift the dynamic of argument out of the lives of the arguer and the audience" or to view persuasion as a "formal matter of shoring up a proposition with the right kinds of support."4 Such critics

3Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, Reading Capital, tr. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1979), p. 27. Further references to this volume (RC) will be given in parentheses in the text.

4Of the many essays and books attempting a radical critique of the institution of "English," Ohmann's English in America: A Radical View of the Profession (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) is the most compelling. My citation is drawn from a section entitled "English 101 and the Military-Industrial Complex," in which Ohmann offers a powerful critique of the protocols and assumptions governing the teaching of freshman English. He stresses that the student, conceived as an individual "without a history and without a place in society," is taught that there is "no prior alignment of people and forces in society that cannot be overcome by a well-conducted argument" (155). This view of persua-
exclude some group or school, some class of readers from their audience, in the sense that they do not seek to persuade them to the (universal) “truth” of their views. This emphasis on the gesture of exclusion is based on a critical awareness that historically irreducible interests divide and define reading communities; that interests and reading are inextricably bound together. To recognize exclusion is to respect the limits that interests impose on the very possibility of persuasion and, in Gayatri Spivak’s phrase, to mark “the irreducibility of the margin in all explanations.”5 The anti-pluralist marks exclusions and only thus escapes the problematic of general persuasion.

This structure is not entirely stable. As my definition suggests, the boundaries that distinguish particular pluralisms from particular anti-pluralisms are always being redrawn. At present, critical pluralism is both defensive—troubled and in some ways discredited—and resurgent, re-emerging in new and often unexpected forms.6 This contradiction remains opaque so long as it

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5The phrase appears in a passage that draws attention “to a feminist marginality, . . . not to win the center for ourselves,” but to insist on this irreducibility. See Spivak, “Explanation and Culture: Marginalia,” In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 107 and passim, for an extended discussion of the logic by which “all explanations . . . claim their centrality in terms of an excluded margin” (106) and of the “feminist deconstructivist’s” ability to “use herself (assuming one is at one’s own disposal) as a shuttle between the center (inside) and the margin (outside) and thus [to] narrate a displacement” (107). Further references to this volume (S) will be given in parentheses in the text. Bell Hooks makes a similar argument in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (Boston: South End Press, 1984). Hooks defines marginality as a form of living “on the edge,” which enables one to look “both from the outside in and from the inside out,” “to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (p. ix). She argues that “it is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony” (15).

6Thus, Critical Inquiry devotes a special issue to pluralism but entitles it “Pluralism and Its Discontents.” Although the essays collected therein originated at a conference carried out in a celebratory mood, editor W. J. T. Mitchell observes: “The original working title for this issue was ‘The Foundations of Critical Pluralism,’ a rubric which assumes that something called ‘pluralism’ has foundations,
is understood as the result of purely logical confusion, a sign
that literary theory has perhaps finally undone itself in a frenzy
of deconstructions. In fact, the paradoxes of literary critical plural­
ism signal a continuity between the theoretical debate within
literary studies and other, more obviously political and historical
struggles in the United States, struggles in which contradiction
is immediately recognized as a condition of social life rather than
a logical dilemma. Acknowledging this continuity enables us to
observe that insofar as literary theory, like literature itself, is a
socially symbolic act, its contradictions, lacunae, and even its
 tropes are also social. If one is concerned to trace the effects of
the pluralist problematic in literary studies, it is essential to com­
prehend the apparent paradoxes of pluralist theory in these
terms, as social contradictions; a rigid opposition between the
theoretical and the practical or the theoretical and the so­
ciopolitical is an insurmountable barrier to analysis.

Just such an opposition figures prominently in the work of
many critics who address pluralism in literary theory. It can take
various forms, but, as we shall see, it frequently appears in the
guise of a systematic neglect of the colloquial meaning of plural­

or (more strongly) that it provides foundations for critical thought. A less explicit
assumption was that this topic was uniquely fitted to a journal that is widely
identified as pluralist in orientation, edited and published at an institution that is
associated strongly with pluralism. The presumption was that pluralism would
be treated as an object of historical inquiry, theoretical refinement, and critical
celebration. All of these things are present in this issue, but something else as
well: a determination to treat pluralism as an object of critical scrutiny from the
standpoint of assumptions which are hostile to pluralism". "Introduction: Plural­

7See Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic
Act (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). Further references to this volume
( PU) will be given in parentheses in the text. As Cornel West observes in a note
to an extremely interesting analysis of Jameson: "the major difference between
Adorno and Derrida (or de Man), between a dialectical deconstructionist and a
poststructural deconstructionist, is that the theoretical impasse the dialectician
reaches is not viewed as an ontological, metaphysical, or epistemological aporia,
but rather as a historical limitation owing to a determinate contradiction as yet
unlodged because of an impotent social praxis or an absence of an effective
historical revolutionary agent": "Ethics and Action in Fredric Jameson's Marxist
Hermeneutics," in Postmodernism and Politics, ed. Jonathan Arac (Minneapolis:
ism. This elision is an index of a general reluctance to consider literary theory in terms other than strictly epistemological ones; when the colloquial is overlooked, one frequently discovers that critical consideration of the social relations of literary theory is also foreclosed. As we shall see, such omissions consistently undermine, even paralyze, efforts to theorize literary critical pluralism. Contradiction is reified, and every theoretical impasse takes on the character of the absolute.

To traverse this impasse, we must acknowledge that the new defensiveness of certain pluralisms, their recent polemical assertiveness, and critical readings of both, have been engendered by events in literary studies that are not "purely" theoretical, events that put the opposition between theory and practice into question. The analysis I offer here would be unthinkable, literally, were it not for a series of theoretical and practical developments within the institutions of the humanities and the university in general over the past twenty years. Most prominent among them are: the re-emergence of feminism and the establishment of women's studies; the ongoing struggle to revise the canon, exposing and correcting its ethnocentric and class biases; the growth of interdisciplinary ethnic and area studies, of Afro-American and Native American studies; the reintroduction of

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8Because I began my undergraduate studies in 1975, these years of transformation coincide with the entirety of my academic life. I mention this not for the sake of introducing anecdotal evidence, but because the critical expectations of literary scholars trained in a period marked by wide-ranging political agitation from the left in concert with disciplinary upheaval, the fall into theory, and a number of consciously politicized critical and theoretical movements are undoubtedly molded by that experience; the critique of pluralism that Seductive Reasoning participates in is a product of this recent history. Scholars of my "generation" will unavoidably rewrite the history of this period as they attempt to redefine the nature of their intellectual work. To cite an example from the field of feminist literary studies, the distinctions between "feminist critique" and "gynocritics" (Elaine Showalter) or between an Anglo-American emphasis on practice, experience, and politics and a French emphasis on theory, the unconscious, and the signifier (Toril Moi) are often written into a narrative of stages, early and late, innocent, then knowing; these narratives simply do not apply in the same way to feminist critics who apprenticed themselves to women's studies and literary theory at the same time—who, indeed, sometimes fruitfully confused the two in their own theoretical and political practices.
marxist analytical tools into critical discourse; the radical critique of literary studies, especially "English," and of the university as an institution. All these developments are in a significant way local; their site is the university. In that arena, they are in the first instance intellectual practices—disciplinary, pedagogical, theoretical—and any analysis must attend to their discursive specificity. At the same time, these transformations are all also clearly political, contestatory efforts to effect changes in our social formation; indeed, all explicitly raise the question of pluralism in its colloquial (which is also one of its political) sense(s). The first successful assault on the liberal myth of the university's political neutrality in the postwar period was the work of the civil rights movement; as segregated schools and universities across the country were compelled, sometimes by the force of arms, to admit black children and black women and men to study, the notion that the university (or any classroom) stood above political questions or outside the structures of power was discredited. The institutional and intellectual developments I name above reiterate this point in various idioms, and they frequently challenge pluralist assumptions.

Revisions in canons, disciplines, and interpretative paradigms cannot be understood simply as "contexts" for theoretical interventions. Nor do such developments represent, for the purposes of this book, the "cultural pluralism" of American society, the background of an analysis that assumes literary theory "reflects" social contexts. These methodological models imply that social contradictions determine and ground theory, rather than conceiving of theoretical contradictions as themselves social. In contrast, I will argue that reading pluralist literary theory as one element of the pluralist conjuncture (rather than as its reflection) engenders a conception of social contradiction as internal to theory, indeed, as constitutive of its structure, and only thus enables us to identify pluralism's literary critical problematic in its specificity.

Negotiating the question of the relationship between the pluralism frequently invoked in the general sociopolitical discourse of the United States and the pluralist problematic within literary
studies preoccupies my next chapter. The project of theorizing literary critical pluralism is threatened at its inception by the sheer heterogeneity of the word, the apparently trivial fact of its extraordinary range of connotations. This threat, which is an index of pluralism's ideological power, must be confronted at the outset. Its dangers can be suggested simply by observing that the very intellectual/institutional/political developments I cite as potentially disruptive of pluralism are seen by some critics as pluralism in practice.  

It is perhaps the insistent and eager recourse to the notion of practice which should attract our attention. The repeated failure of various critics to theorize the pluralist problematic is a striking feature of pluralist discourse and discourse about pluralism. Most analyses work well within the discursive boundaries that pluralists have established for themselves. Commentators rely on the testimony of self-identified pluralists to define pluralism as such, and analysis remains on the level of description and, most important, retains the form of pluralist discourse. Thus, the pluralist problematic remains intact. Such interventions extend rather than interrogate pluralist ideology, and never more so than when they conclude that pluralist theory is "impossible."

Predictably, the collapse of the theoretical project has as one of its corollaries frequent misreadings of literary theoretical pluralism, misinterpretations that are regularly denounced by plu-

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9For example, at my university, a visiting committee on minority life and education entitled its majority report to the president and the trustees "The American University and the Pluralist Ideal." The committee defined the "social condition" of pluralism as a "state of affairs in which several distinct ethnic, religious, and racial communities live side by side, willing to affirm each other's dignity, ready to benefit from each other's experience, and quick to acknowledge each other's contributions to the common welfare" (p. ix). Obviously, no one could oppose this homage to cultural harmony (though one panelist did offer a dissenting report), and the committee's definition of pluralism is entirely different from my own. It is worth observing, however, that courses and programs in "Third World and ethnic-related materials," an Ethnic Studies concentration and an Ethnic Studies Research Institute are prominent among the recommendations the committee offers to enable the university to move beyond "diversity" into "pluralism." See The American University and the Pluralist Ideal, A Report of the Visiting Committee on Minority Life and Education at Brown University and a Dissenting Opinion by Lerone Bennett, Jr. (1986).
ralists themselves. But these misapprehensions of the meaning of pluralism are not aberrant, not simply mistakes, random errors of inattention or sloppiness. As we shall see, they persist, dogging even the best efforts of critical pluralists to clarify their theoretical views, because they are symptomatic both of the status of pluralism in the general discourse of our culture and of the position of pluralists in relation to their own specifically theoretical concerns. These misreadings stage a typical moment in the discourse on pluralism in literary theory. Pluralism is thus characterized by its constant—and constantly unsuccessful—efforts to correct an apparently fundamental misunderstanding about its character. This persistent ambiguity in the concept is an essential and irreducible element of the discourse.

To observe that this impasse is an irreducible feature of pluralist discourse is in effect to claim that pluralism cannot name its own problematic. As we shall see, even the consciously theoretical efforts of a pluralist such as Wayne Booth finally lead him to assert that pluralism is an “untheoretical” practice; with this gesture, he reasserts pluralism’s power precisely by naturalizing it, that is, by opposing it to theory. Booth’s analysis is extremely self-reflexive, but his pluralist’s account of pluralism necessarily returns to the problem of how to regulate and reproduce certain established social relations—what he calls “our life together” as a “community of readers.”

As a pluralist, Booth thinks with/in the problematic of pluralism rather than of it. This positioning of the pluralist as the one who both knows and does not know he knows requires explica-

10Wayne Booth, “‘Preserving the Exemplar’: or, How Not to Dig Our Own Graves,” Critical Inquiry 33 (1977), 420. Further references to this essay (B) will be given in parentheses in the text. As we shall see, this retreat into the persuasiveness of common sense and practice links contemporary pluralism both to cold war pronouncements concerning the “end of ideology” and to more recent polemics “against theory” and on behalf of pragmatism.
tion, and, in the chapters below, I draw on Louis Althusser’s *Reading Capital* for the notion of symptomatic reading that serves as a model for my analysis. For the moment, I will only observe that to propose a “symptomatic” reading of any text is to claim a different position vis-à-vis that text, a new relation, which enables a heretofore unthinkable reading. Barthes indicates the necessity of this difference (and his own distance from pluralism) when he insists that “criticism is not an ‘homage’ to the truth of the past or to the truth of others,” but a “construction of the intelligibility of our own time.” Folding back upon itself, our time informs this construction in unavoidable ways; to escape back to homage, to the truth of the past, is not possible. Criticism thus inevitably claims authority over the objects of its analysis; yet at the same time it can hardly hope to escape its own limits, which are the historical limits of interpretation itself. To conceive of this process as a construction or production is, as Althusser argues, to refuse to ground reading in an essential distinction between homage and critique. Our own time engenders a productivity that shatters the illusion of interpretation as an ideal insight, a revelation on the order of a vision, and criticism emerges as a concrete and often dissident practice.

This book attempts to break with the ideology of pluralism, to think of it, rather than with it, and thus to make intelligible the structure of assumptions that constitute what I have named the problematic of general persuasion. This project is one that can never be completed. As Althusser observes, theory emerges from its ideological prehistory not once, at its inception, but repeatedly, and it “continues endlessly to do so (its prehistory remains always contemporary).” The very productivity and flexibility that I will be at some pains to attribute to pluralist discourse prove to be obstacles to any final and totalizing account of its instances. There are, then, many pluralisms that I have not been able to examine or to anticipate here. But this empirical limitation is not a crippling one; symptomatic analysis,

precisely because it takes as its object the problematic of an ideology, produces effects that do not depend on the compilation of an encyclopedic list of instances. At the same time, my essay does not pose the essentially idealizing question "what is pluralism?" As James Kavanagh points out, this is "a form of interrogation that takes everything, namely the existence of [pluralism], for granted with its 'What is . . . ?'" To formulate the question in such a way is to assume that pluralism is a thing, a substance or unified totality with an unchanging essence. Seductive Reasoning is an effort to put these assumptions into question, to insist that ideology has no essence, while paying scrupulous attention to its real and present effects. I will offer not a descriptive analysis of pluralism as a given object, but a theory of the "production and consumption of those ensembles of effects we experience as" pluralism, a theory that might "displace that experience with its explanation" (K 102-3).

My analysis thus seeks to be definitive but not exhaustive, to name the pluralist problematic and to identify its effects without closing the question of its future forms. Its aim is to uncover the ideological problematic that enables and constrains the heterogeneous work of critics as diverse as Hirsch, Fish, and Jameson, providing the ground for both their agreements and their conflicts. As the metaphor of terrain suggests, the structure in question cannot be interpreted as a center or an essential core; a problematic establishes the limits of a discourse, its boundaries and conditions of possibility. Within the field, a diversity of positions is the rule, and no single content characterizes all the players. Hence the claim that critics as different from one another as Fish is from Jameson and Booth from de Man may all engage the problematic of general persuasion.

Hence also the possibility that an equally diverse group of
critics may break with the pluralist problematic, step beyond its boundaries, and refuse the assumptions of general persuasion. Although my primary concern is to offer a critique of pluralism, my own interpretative efforts obviously entail a theory, or perhaps theories, of reading, and a politics of anti-pluralisms. At present—that is, in retrospect—this book appears to me to offer a reading indebted equally to feminist criticism and to Althusser and a politics rooted in that same feminist discourse, in western marxism, and in the texts of Roland Barthes. This “discovery” is not entirely a matter of an after-the-fact self-consciousness; obviously, there is no innocent beginning and I am not posing as one who stumbled into her affiliations. At the same time, writing is a practice that takes one elsewhere, and the theoretical consequences of that practice must be honored. “At the limit everyone writing is thus taken by surprise.”

The surprise of Seductive Reasoning for its author was the submerged relationship between pluralism and feminism, a relationship I could finally articulate only by addressing the ambiguous relation between pluralism and anti-pluralism; I will return to just that topic below. I am aware of the additional irony of finding in Barthes a political model and in Althusser a concept of textual production. While Barthes’s text remains for me among the most adamant we have in its insistence on the necessity of exclusion, of difference, of the partisan, Althusser’s reading of Capital provides me with a vocabulary to specify the nature and the political effect of the discontinuities I have tried to produce in my analyses. It is somewhat more difficult to name what first drew me toward this theoretical emphasis on the cut, the break, that is, what led me to what I now call a politics of anti-pluralisms. In a sense, only the readings below can adequately answer such a question, but both feminism and marxism figure in the narrative. If becoming a feminist critic taught me the inescapable partisanship of the critical enterprise, my inchoate sense that the

problem of persuasion lay in the path of any effort to engage in political criticism first found its theoretical footing in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. Marx's analyses there—of the failures of persuasion and representation and of the mastery that cloaks those whom we undertake to persuade—are in fact the origin of my argument, if arguments can be said any longer to begin in a single place. These references are admittedly little more than hints; the details of my many intellectual debts will come into sharper focus in the readings to come.

My analysis in the chapters to follow focuses not on forms of anti-pluralism, but on the problematic of general persuasion and the heterogeneity of its instantiations. I have chosen as my proof texts essays by five well-known and influential critics, men (all) whose work has had a major impact on what we commonly call the "mainstream" of literary studies in the past twenty years.\(^\text{14}\) This emphasis is not meant to endorse a reading of literary theory as the private preserve of pluralists; on the contrary, the growing strength of insurgent anti-pluralisms has aroused pluralist polemics and thus thrown the pluralist problematic into sharp relief. Insofar as the texts I have chosen demanded to be included here, it is in part because of their prominence in the dominant discourse of North American literary theory, and in part because of the way they both address and depart from one another, dramatizing the unity and the diversity of pluralist practice. Yet other theorists might have served as concrete examples of pluralism as well as those I have chosen; certainly, many others are available, and the *individual* histories of the figures I consider have only a relative privilege in my argument. The passages I emphasize—from E. D. Hirsch's remarks on persuasion in *The Aims of Interpretation* to a startling footnote in Fredric Jameson's *Political Unconscious*—were chosen as particularly symptomatic of the strategies and displacements of pluralist ideology. The texts I draw on are thus in no sense meant to

\(^\text{14}\)The inclusion of a marxist critic, Fredric Jameson, complicates this in a manner which is precisely to the point and which we will consider below.
constitute a uniquely pluralist canon; rather, they serve the stra-
tegic purpose of enabling me to disclose the structure of the 
problematic of general persuasion.

More precisely, the particular texts I examine below enable me 
to read the problematic of general persuasion as a logic (Hirsch), 
an ethics (Booth), a double rhetoric, of persuasion (Fish) and of 
trope (de Man), and, finally, as a politics (Jameson). Reading 
these texts as *figuring* stages in a pluralist discourse evolving 
under a certain pressure enables me to disclose the pluralist 
problematic as historically contingent; the heterogeneity of the 
texts and the topoi of pluralism is the mark of its positioning in 
the contested critical and political field of the contemporary un-
iversity. Pluralism is not here conceived as an idea that might be 
discredited and thus put aside. Rather, it is an immensely pro-
ductive discourse, and the struggle to displace it has barely be-
gun.