1 READING PLURALISM
SYMPTOMATICALLY

The age of pluralism is upon us. It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism is.

—ARTHUR C. DANTO, “The End of Art”

I

The colloquial meaning of the term “pluralist” shadows all our theories of pluralism. Paradoxically, those very critical discourses that set themselves the task of explicating the pluralist project in literary studies have most successfully eluded recognition of this fact. The resulting elision has the quality of an eloquent absence, a necessary silence, which enables pluralism to persist and develop even while thwarting efforts to break with its problematic. To attend to this silence is to begin to trace the limits of pluralism, to mark the colloquial as figuring that which literary critical pluralism cannot contain.¹

In the American idiom, pluralism is an ordinary word, a non-technical term, an integral part of ordinary language and popular consciousness. Despite its current appeal to some literary theorists, it is most characteristic of the quotidian cultural and social discourses of the mass media. Americans commonly speak of ethnic and religious pluralism, pluralist economies, and the virtues of their own pluralistic society. In all these uses, “pluralist” is an honorific. The very notion of pluralistic society

¹See Pierre Macherey, A Theory of Literary Production, tr. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 60 and passim. Further references to this volume (M) will be given in parentheses in the text.
is often identified with the United States as such, and, simultaneously, it is consistently associated with U.S. foreign policy. One can gloss this colloquial usage in a personal inflection as: “This is a free country. I can do (or say or believe) whatever I please.” But the idiom also appears in presidential speeches on the need for “political pluralism” in Central America and in *New York Times* articles describing the National Endowment for Democracy with headlines that announce: “Missionaries for Democracy: U.S. Aid for Global Pluralism” and “U.S. Pays for Pluralism.”

I begin with the colloquial both in order to introduce the question of exclusion and to signal a certain historical conjuncture as the place of the analysis to follow. The exclusion of the colloquial from both celebratory elaborations and critical evaluations of pluralism is in fact only the first in a series of strategic exclusions or repressions: of the political, and of marxisim in particular, of discontinuity, of resistance, of the possibility of exclusion itself, which together constitute the problematic of pluralist discourse in American literary studies. These elisions and the subsequent collapse of pluralism’s theoretical project actually promote the pluralist agenda; these are essential oversights, the enabling conditions of pluralism’s persistent ideological power. The practical and theoretical consequences of these silences, the determinate manner in which what is absent or not said structures what is or can be said, occupy a pivotal position in the argument that follows.

The difficulties that trouble any effort to discuss pluralism in literary theory can be glimpsed in the following exchange. In a 1980 interview, Ken Newton put this question to Derrida:

> It might be argued that *deconstruction inevitably leads to pluralist interpretation* and ultimately to the view that any interpretation is

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2*New York Times*, 1 June 1986, pp. 1 and 16. As we shall see, the politics of pluralism are frequently cold war politics. W. J. T. Mitchell points to pluralism’s function “as a code word for American hegemony” in “Pluralism as Dogmatism,” *Critical Inquiry* 12:3 (1986), 502.
as good as any other. Do you believe this and how do you select some interpretations as being better than others?

Derrida replied:

*I am not a pluralist,* and I would never say that every interpretation is equal, but I [JD] do not select. The interpretations select themselves. I am a Nietzschean in that sense. You know that Nietzsche insisted on the fact that the principle of differentiation was in itself selective. The eternal return of the same was not repetition, it was a selection of the more powerful forces. *So I would not say that some interpretations are truer than others. I would say that some are more powerful than others.* The hierarchy is between forces and not between true and false.³

The ironies of this particular dialogue are certainly not lost on those literary theorists who call themselves pluralists. It would come as no surprise to Wayne Booth, for example, that Derrida declines to join his company. In fact, contemporary pluralists frequently accuse others—Derrida prominent among them—of championing just the brand of interpretative irresponsibility Newton's question identifies with pluralism itself.

Indeed, it would be difficult to exaggerate the number of self-described pluralists who seem to view Derrida as the chief representative of that critical practice which is the antithesis of pluralism.⁴ Their most energetic polemics are directed against him and his epigones, as they are called, and against everything that can be made to answer to the name he let loose into critical discourse: deconstruction.⁵ To cite only a few examples: Booth;

⁴It is typical of the pluralist problematic that this antithesis is seen as “monism” rather than as a form of resistance to pluralism, that is, as an anti-pluralism. Obviously, the opposition monism/pluralism does not govern my analysis; I will return to this matter below.
⁵Derrida suggests that he did not anticipate that the word itself would become the focus of such polemical energy: "the word 'deconstruction' has always bothered me. . . . when I made use of this word (rarely, very rarely in the beginning—once or twice—so you can see that the paradox of the message transformed by the addressees is fully in play here), I had the impression that it was a
though openly reluctant to post "the limits of pluralism," readily informs us that "pluralism is not . . . Derridaesque glasisme" (B 407). In a similar gesture, M. H. Abrams opposes his historicist’s pluralism to Derrida’s and Nietzsche’s "deconstructionist principles." He names deconstruction as "one limit to what, according to [his] pluralist views, [he] would accept as a sound alternative history to [his] own," insisting, "I would not accept a history genuinely written according to radically deconstructionist principles of interpretation." E. D. Hirsch derides the "decadence," "anti-rationalism," "extreme relativism," and "cognitive atheism" he associates with the names Derrida and Foucault. These instances are typical, and the list might be extended almost indefinitely. To cite only one second generation commentator: Paul Armstrong argues that pluralism must "chart a middle way between the anarchists and the absolutists," but anarchism and (what Armstrong sees as) nihilism are unquestionably his main concerns. He vigorously opposes the view he paraphrases as "all interpretations are necessarily misinterpretations—that no criteria exist, within the text or outside, for judging any reading the 'right' one." He adds: "I have in mind, obviously, the Yale deconstructionists and their mentor, Jacques Derrida, but Norman Holland and Stanley Fish hold similar views."6

Given the evidence of these pluralist readings, one could conclude that Newton's suggestion that "deconstruction" might lead to pluralism, may in fact be a form of pluralism, is simply absurd, an index of his unfamiliarity with the current critical use of the terms. But Derrida answers "I am not a pluralist" without questioning Newton's premise. In fact, the breezy gloss of pluralism as "the view that any interpretation is as good as any other" is bound to seem plausible to large numbers of readers for whom the word denotes only a generalized tolerance of diversity, the view that any opinion (or individual) is "as good as any other." Thus, in contemporary literary theory, a self-conscious pluralism has positioned itself, in part, through its polemical opposition to deconstruction; and yet it remains possible to consider the proposition that Derrida may be a pluralist. We enter here a terrain wherein it is not unusual to discover that some critics apply the term "pluralist" to figures and practices that others—critics in the "same" field—regard as the incarnation of the evil pluralism resists. The discrepancy between these two perspectives discloses a critical question: what are the limits of pluralism? Where—and how well guarded—is the border that separates the pluralist from his others? This is not a strictly empirical problem to be settled by means of a survey of the content of pluralist discourses. What is at stake is the principle of exclusion, and, not surprisingly, exclusion is both a practical and a theoretical problem for pluralism.

Pluralists, that is, self-described pluralists, have of course attempted to define their position, to correct this discrepancy. The most widely disseminated definition of pluralism within literary theory foregrounds a commitment to methodological eclecticism and an ethic of tolerance and intellectual openness. This view is
drawn to a surprising extent from the work of one critic: Wayne Booth. Among those figures consciously elaborating a pluralist theory, Booth emerges as its most eloquent advocate. He conceives of pluralism as the generous and ultimately pragmatic pursuit of "critical understanding" and resolutely opposes "the view that any interpretation is as good as any other," or, as Arthur Danto puts it, that it "does not matter any longer what you do." According to Booth, the literary critic, working as she does with texts that can manifestly bear the burden of more than one "correct" interpretation, must avoid the fanatical and dogmatic rigidity of "monism," without falling into the anarchic free-play of "relativism."7 Pluralism, in Booth's texts, is a compromising reaction formation; it endorses a plurality of interpretations and methods, but stops well short of infinite textual dissemination. This "limit" is never, however, conceptualized as a monism. On the contrary, in Booth's view, "the limits of pluralism are plural" (B 423). (It is worth noting here that Booth's vision is informed by a political metaphor. He sees the critical field as a "commonwealth" in which "my continued vitality as a critic depends finally on yours, and yours on mine" [B 420]. This commonwealth bears a striking formal resemblance to the classic liberal polity, and this should alert us to the discursive register Booth shares with U.S. newspaper editorialists and politicians, the register of the colloquial.)

Booth's sustained polemic against lapses in critical understanding (reductive "monisms" such as "glasisme") and in favor of a diverse and inclusive pluralism has led many to identify pluralist literary theory wholly with his work or with the work of critics who acknowledge his influence. My argument is directed to unsettling this identification. At the same time, the fact

7See Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). Further references to this volume (CU) will be given in parentheses in the text. An extended analysis of these terms and Booth's project appears in Chapter 3 below. For the moment, we can schematically render "monism" as the view that a single true interpretation (method) exists, and "relativism" as its mirror opposite, the claim that an infinite number of equally true (and thus "relative") interpretations are available or, in fact, necessary.
that Derrida can be asked to dissociate himself from something called pluralism (and that he complies) is symptomatic of the profound confusion surrounding the use of the term in literary critical discourse. The "misreading" of pluralism that construes it as mere relativism, the absence of principled constraints, is pervasive, and pluralists are compelled to defend themselves against it regularly; it is thus very frequently acknowledged, even if only to be rejected. As I suggest above, these misreadings are an irreducible element of pluralist discourse; the impossibility of overcoming the ambiguity of the concept seems to define pluralist theory as such.

Given this apparently fundamental ambiguity, the theoretical usefulness of the concept of pluralism cannot be taken for granted. This formulaic warning is itself very nearly a cliché of contemporary criticism, which finds its quintessential gesture in the claim that no theoretical position can simply be assumed, taken for granted. Obviously, I do not want to shield my observation from its resonances with the larger difficulties confronting literary theory, even supposing such a thing were possible. But in the case of pluralism, this remark has a double meaning. Before we can consider the significance of the uncertainties engendered by any theoretical effort whatsoever, we must address a problem that appears to be entirely practical.

When I suggest that the theoretical usefulness of the concept of pluralism cannot be taken for granted, I have a mundane, even banal, reference in mind: pluralism means so many things. I have already observed that this heterogeneity of usage may threaten or derail theoretical projects. The word echoes across enormous discontinuities in the public discourse of the United States, and this resonance inevitably suggests a practical alibi for the frustration pluralists meet as they attempt to refute or correct commentators like Newton, Derrida, and Danto, theorists who take pluralism to sanction the absence of principled (we might say, theoretical) restraints.

The sheer volume of material possibly relevant to an inquiry into pluralism is undeniably dizzying; anyone not inclined to produce an encyclopedic anatomy must make some deliberate
exclusions, thus confronting the astonishing range of references, if only by negation. Booth, for example, explains in the opening pages of *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism*: “But I have had to resist, for obvious reasons, the temptation to complicate matters with illustrations (which of course I have ‘in my files’) from the fields of sociology, psychology, linguistics, political science, anthropology, law, history, philosophy, or rhetoric” (xii). This is a fairly exhaustive catalog of that which is not to be touched upon. But conspicuous by its absence from Booth’s list is any reference to the pervasive colloquial use of the word “pluralism” in its political sense, which, as I have observed, in the United States is not confined to the disciplinary discourse of political science. Booth’s remarks do not reveal whether or not he maintains files illustrating these more colloquial, essentially honorific uses of the term, but his text obscures what we might call the ordinary politics of pluralism by making no reference to this colloquialism.

Considerations of the vicissitudes of ordinary language, of efforts to include or exclude the shades of colloquial meaning, may seem remote from the theoretical matters with which we should immediately be concerned. After all, the opposition between the colloquial and the technical, the (allegedly) vulgar and the elite, is essential to the conventional practice of scholarship. The work of the academic critic is skewed toward isolating the conceptual force of such terms as “pluralist” and “critical pluralism.” To give these terms the kind of precision we demand of theory is inevitably to set certain rigorous limits on their use, to discipline them, by fixing them as elements in a technical vocabulary. This scholarly project can typically be distinguished by the rigor with which even (or especially) the most pervasive “ordinary language” sense of pluralism—the colloquial meaning operative in the discourse of presidential speeches or the editorial pages of our newspapers—is excluded or forgotten.

I do not invoke the colloquial as a prelude to the suggestion that we abandon our theoretical project to (what seem to be) its ambiguities. My account of the pluralist problematic is articu-
lated in terms that doubtless seem remote from the common-sense significance of pluralism; my texts are drawn from technical works of literary theory, rather than from products of mass culture or the rhetoric of the U.S. State Department. But disciplinary projects are always haunted by the impurity of academic discourse itself. Ken Newton and Derrida are in a sense only speaking colloquially when they associate pluralism with the view that any interpretation is as good as any other. Certainly, their exchange could be cited as evidence that the appropriation of the term pluralism by “ordinary language” disables all efforts to define it with a rigor sufficient to our theoretical needs. From this perspective, the refusal to confront directly the colloquial discourse of pluralism would be viewed as a strictly practical matter. As is often the case, however, this practical exclusion has a striking effect at the theoretical level. The seemingly casual inscription of the colloquial within theory discloses an unexamined conjuncture, which in its turn can be read to reveal a theoretical impasse. The colloquial is a clue to the exclusions that lend theory the grounds for rigor.

Those who “misread” critical pluralism as a loose tolerance, a rejection of both limits and standards, are assimilating literary discourse to the ordinary colloquial and political uses of the word in the United States. The myth of political pluralism as sheer freedom has been subjected to various and fairly numerous critiques, but its social power echoes in the misreadings of those who consistently mistake pluralism for the absence of restraints on interpretation, thus reading the critical pluralist colloquially. Yet the pluralist critic cannot afford to broach the politics of this mésalliance. Booth goes so far as to omit the colloquial even from his list of omissions (thus offering us an allegory of pluralism’s exclusion of exclusion). Pluralism’s defenders seem curiously unwilling to accuse those who claim pluralists are relativists of thinking pluralism in its colloquial (and thus political) sense.

The pluralist critic is paradoxically caught between his desire to delineate pluralism as a concept and, thus, necessarily, to limit its significance, and the equivocal value of the colloquial or,
rather, the value of the equivocation of the colloquial, which enables him to advocate a pluralism that names no limit. To honor the conventional opposition between the theoretical and the colloquial is to escape responsibility for addressing another opposition, one which structures the theoretical and the colloquial discourse of and on pluralism, that is, the opposition between pluralism and marxism. Any adequate theory of the pluralist problematic in literary studies must acknowledge the critical historical relation between pluralist and marxist discourse in the United States. In this relation, the problems of exclusion and persuasion surface as both political and theoretical issues. The elision of the relation established between marxism and pluralism by the colloquial discourse of democratic capitalism, which is effected by the wholesale repression of the colloquial, allows critical pluralists to evade the problem of marxist theory and with it the urgent question it asks, the question of exclusion.

The world-historical opponent of pluralism is often named totalitarianism; but figures such as Jeane Kirkpatrick (an academic and a diplomat), Elliott Abrams, and Ronald Reagan have recently clarified the series of substitutions whereby “totalitarian,” instead of referring to a range of state practices from Nazism to apartheid to stalinism, has come to signify any “marxist” state—and only marxist states. This reduction of heterogeneous marxisms to a monolithic stalinism is always achieved in the name of pluralism. Thus, the Times editorializes on “The Sandinista Road to Stalinism” with the narrative of pluralism betrayed: “By these incremental steps, the pluralist revolution seems hopelessly betrayed. Instead of responding to the contra attacks by broadening their support, the Sandinistas use the war to justify breaking their promises to respect a vital private sector of the economy and to coexist with a lively political opposition.

They are well down the totalitarian road traveled by Fidel Castro.⁹

This “pluralist” rhetoric accuses its opponents (the Sandinistas and Castro and Stalin) of a monolithic totalitarianism—the exclusion of pluralism—precisely in order to exclude them; it recalls the cold war decades, a period characterized by a liberal consensus against communism and marxist thought and one of enormous productivity for the first generation of pluralist thinkers. There are parallels between those decades and the 1980s, parallels which pass unremarked so long as we retain a narrow definition of critical pluralism, but which become obvious once we allow the colloquial to resonate in our analysis. To speak in the vernacular, we once again find ourselves in a period of reaction. In the dominant political discourse of the United States, as the president recently reminded the world, the “problem of evil” is marxism-leninism. The absolute incompatibility of marxism and democracy is an article of faith; political pluralism, “American-style,” is nothing but the exclusion of marxisms, both in domestic politics and abroad.

In Nixon Agonistes, Garry Wills describes the cold war period as an era when an “American consensus,” what Booth might term an “understanding,” coalesced around the dominant view that “our ‘tradition’ was a response to the ‘givenness’ of the American situation; realistic contact with the land’s given things has made theory unnecessary and downright evil.”¹⁰ He observes

⁹Garry Wills, Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man (New York: Signet, 1971), p. 509; see especially the chapters on the intellectual marketplace. Further references to this volume (NA) will be given in parentheses in the text. See also Louis Hartz, The Liberal Tradition: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) and Wills’s analysis, pp. 508–18; Daniel Boorstin, The Genius of American Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); William E. Connolly, ed. The Bias of Pluralism (New York: Lieber-Atherton, 1973); Theodore J. Lowi, The End of Liberalism, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1979). There are, of course, extensive bibliographies within the disciplines of political science and history which treat the problem of democratic pluralism, where the term pluralism refers to a political system characterized by some form of interest-group politics. While I strongly suspect that politi-
that this consensus evolved as the “theorists of the fifties launched an effort to describe America in terms that preclude theoretical conflict” (508) and proceeds to a brilliant analysis of the crisis that accompanied the disintegration of this view in the face of the intellectual and political rebellions of the sixties. Wills argues that “to understand what happened, we must watch the currents of ‘mainstream’ thinking converge—in history (the consensus historians), in political science (the end-of-ideology movement), in social psychology (the status-politics school of thought), in sociology (the reconsideration of individualism)” (508). The fifties consensus thinkers defended their claim that theoretical conflict was irrelevant in the United States on the grounds that the political (and social) field was “united by a common (and laudable) lack of philosophy. America has had no great political theorists because it has had no political theory at all” (509). The categories of philosophy, theory, ideology, and dogma merge in this discourse, and the rejection of theory is represented as an escape from ideology as such; “ideologies are ‘universal systems’” and “all systems of thought are ‘bad’” (314–15). Those celebrating the end of ideology characterized it as essentially nonideological; the anti-theory intellectuals of the fifties claimed to exclude the theoretical for ideologically neutral reasons: “These [totalist systems] are not, notice, excluded because they are false but because they are exclusionary. Their fault is a methodological one, and can be detected and condemned on grounds of procedure, without value prejudice.\footnote{These lines, like Wills’s claim that the consensus thinkers saw theory as “unnecessary,” provide a proleptic description of the terms used by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels in their polemic “Against Theory,” \textit{Critical Inquiry} 8:4 (1982), 723–42. Knapp and Michaels assure us that their “discussion of [belief and intention] is thus directed not only against specific theoretical arguments but against theory in general. Our examples are meant to represent the central mechanism of all theoretical arguments, and our treatment of them is meant to indicate that all such arguments will fail and fail in the same way. If we}
that can be excluded are things that would exclude" (318, my emphases).

_Nixon Agonistes_ captures pluralism's paradoxical effort to exclude exclusion, especially as it concerns dissent within the university, and Wills underscores the connections between this pluralist posture, the rejection of theory, and certain political exclusions, specifically the exclusion of marxism. The "consensus" insistence on the exclusion of exclusion masked a deeper consensus concerning the correctness of the status quo: "'consensus' and 'the end of ideology' made it possible to say that one should neither accept nor reject capitalism as an ideology. Therefore 'tough-minded' pragmatism could sneak free-market thinking back onto the 'Left' side of American politics" (525). As Wills observes, "anyone who would submit gracefully was being herded into the great cleared space in the Middle" (518).

The emphasis on givenness and the concomitant reluctance to enter into theoretical practice, as well as the contradictory polemic that enforces exclusions in defense of inclusiveness, are revived by contemporary pluralism. Wills's book focuses primarily on politics, the student activism of the sixties, and the career of Richard Nixon, but it nevertheless provides the immediate context for my essay in that it links the political turmoil within the university, which generated many of the critical discourses, programs, and fields of study I cite above as essential to the critique of pluralism, to more general political questions and are right, then the whole enterprise of critical theory is misguided and should be abandoned" (724). Further references to this essay (KM) will be given in parentheses in the text. See also Stanley Fish, who identifies liberalism with pluralism in "Interpretation and the Pluralist Vision," _Texas Law Review_ 60:3 (1982), 496. For a discussion of Louis Hartz and the problematic of exclusion as it functions in American liberalism, see Samuel Weber, "Capitalizing History: The Political Unconscious," _Institution and Interpretation_ (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 40-59. Weber echoes Wills, describing liberalism as that "form of exclusion which, whenever possible, denies its own exclusivity," and marxism as "the name of what liberalism most seeks to exclude, the inevitability of exclusion itself" (45, 46). Weber's reading of _The Political Unconscious_ foregrounds psychoanalysis and doesn't address the question of persuasion, but his conclusions about the problematics of inclusion in Jameson's work are similar to my own.
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to the twin issues of theory and of exclusion. Wills's discussion of the “intellectual marketplace” emphasizes the discontinuity that the radical critique of the liberal academy opened up between students and faculties. The practical hegemony of the pluralist problematic within the university was first genuinely shaken by the radical movements—intellectual and political (though that distinction was not much respected)—of the sixties and seventies. These movements questioned received canons, and, as Wills makes clear, these interrogations could not avoid the questions of theory and of exclusion. Theory threatens to force pluralism to announce its own systematic exclusions; on those grounds alone, it must be avoided if at all possible. As I write, twenty-five years after the initial fracture in the pluralist facade, the reaction, which began in earnest with the Age of Reagan, is very active, powerful, and committed to reasserting pluralism's anti-theoretical consensus and the problematic of general persuasion.

Contemporary pluralist neglect of the question of the colloquial is an expression of pluralism's resistance to theory. Of course, when the very existence of theory as such is under attack, to question the theoretical usefulness of a particular concept such as pluralism is a minimal gesture, possibly even a conservative one. In a period of pervasive hermeneutic suspicion and vigorous theoretical polemic, such an interrogation echoes with sterner warnings from a wide spectrum of theorists. Paul de Man has observed that “the possibility of doing literary theory, which is by no means to be taken for granted, has itself become a consciously reflected-upon question.” Terry Eagleton’s recent work illustrates de Man’s point. At the close of an extraordinarily popular “introduction” to literary theory, Eagleton concludes that his “book is less an introduction than an obituary” because literary theory is in fact an “illusion.” Working in a rather different critical idiom, Stanley Fish shies away from the notion of illusion; but even in the very act of theorizing, he insists that theory has no practical consequences whatsoever, which is certainly one way to suggest that the connec-
tion between literary theory and critical practice is illusory.\textsuperscript{12} Perhaps the most extreme expression of this tendency to regard literary theory, shall we say, skeptically, is Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels's polemic "Against Theory," which concludes that "theory is nothing else but the attempt to escape practice. . . . It is the name for all the ways people have tried to stand outside practice in order to govern practice from without. Our thesis has been that no one can reach a position outside practice, that theorists should stop trying, and that the theoretical enterprise should therefore come to an end".\textsuperscript{13} From this apocalyptic perspective, the narrower question of the theoretical usefulness of pluralism as a concept would simply cease to be an issue.

In the case of the resistance to theorizing pluralism, the empirical difficulty and the theoretical one cohere. The contemporary avatar of literary critical pluralism generally contributes to a subtle anti-theory polemic, and its resurgence coincides with the spread of (no longer subtle) attacks on the possibility of doing theory at all.\textsuperscript{14} An awkward if not troubled relation to theory is

\textsuperscript{12}Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory," \textit{Yale French Studies} \textbf{63} (1982), 7. Further references to this essay (R) will be given in parentheses in the text. Terry Eagleton, \textit{Literary Theory: An Introduction} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 204. Stanley Fish, \textit{Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 370. Further references to this volume (F) will be given in parentheses in the text. See also Fish, "Consequences," \textit{Critical Inquiry} \textbf{11:3} (1985), 433–58.


\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Critical Inquiry} has been the site of both influential "theory debates" and crucial exchanges on pluralism, including the Booth-Abrams-Miller colloquy published under the title "The Limits of Pluralism." Several chapters of Booth's
central to the pluralist problematic. Ironically, despite its protestations of pragmatism, pluralism can appear as the most exaggerated instance of the theoretical will to govern practice that such “theorists” as Knapp and Michaels would condemn to oblivion. In fact, in a certain reading, one based on the work of a Chicago pluralist like Wayne Booth, pluralism is nothing but the desire to adjudicate other theories and thus other practices from above. And even Booth grumbles about the spectacle he presents writing “a long book of what current jargon might well call meta-meta-meta criticism” (CU xii).

But even the meta-meta-meta-critical pluralist polemic returns inevitably to a pragmatic argument, to Booth’s suggestion that “common-sense untheoretical pluralism works” (197). It is not Booth’s explicitly theoretical discourse that strains most visibly “to govern practice from without.” Rather, it is his anti-theoretical, or pragmatic, discourse that produces “an account of interpretation in general” that is meant to apply universally to the interpretation of particular texts. The effects Knapp and Michaels want to assign to the theoretical enterprise are here generated from within (as) practice, or, as Booth puts it, from a position that cannot distinguish theory from practical values, from what I will designate as an ideological position. To assert that it is impossible (or unnecessary) to distinguish a theoretical moment is to assume that the problems before us are in a certain sense “given” rather than constituted by specific (theoretically interested) inclusions and exclusions. Both assumptions work to enable pluralism to continue to govern critical practice and to ground interpretation in the problematic of general persuasion.

Ultimately, the refusal to recognize pluralist literary theory as an element in a dominant social/political discourse undermines

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15See Mitchell, “Pluralism as Dogmatism.”
any effort to describe the structure of its problematic—its theoretical limits—and thus ensures its continued force. Pluralism stubbornly retains all its honorific significance, the trace of the colloquial, while efforts to disclose its ideological effects are blocked by the term’s astonishing social authority. What is at issue here is exactly the question of power and efforts to theorize that question. The exclusion of the resonances (and the history) of ordinary pluralist politics in the United States has immediate consequences for attempts to grasp the formal structure of the pluralist problematic; the peculiar inconclusiveness that attends contemporary efforts to theorize pluralism is due to this exclusion, which thwarts theorists’ efforts to disentangle their practice from this very colloquialism. The most common result is an analysis that stalls at the claim that critical pluralism betrays its own ideals primarily because it neglects to reflect on its political situation.16

The call for a merely contextualizing reading in fact disables any symptomatic analysis of the pluralist problematic as such. Rather, the current deployment of critical pluralism is rigorously condemned for its political myopia while a commitment to its basic structure is reaffirmed; the so-called critique amounts to nothing more than the complaint that pluralism is not pluralistic enough. This approach issues in a polemical demand for reform; pluralists are asked to correct their oversights by becoming more inclusive, by making additions: the solution to the inadequacy of pluralism is to extend its scope.17 This scenario discloses one of pluralism’s primary strategies for recuperating its critics. Such a “critique” repeats the form of pluralist discourse and cannot even conceive of an analysis that would expose the systematic and concrete affiliations that bind critical and political pluralism together as the elements of a heterogeneous yet hegemonic dis-

16A typical instance was enacted at the Foundations of Critical Pluralism conference. Bruce Erlich’s lecture, “The One and the Many: The Ethics and Politics of Pluralism,” urged pluralists to attend to the “influence of social power upon the [critical] encounter of voices.” See Erlich’s “Amphibolies,” p. 541.

17Here the literary critical argument repeats precisely the arguments of the State Department.
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course. Rather than exposing pluralism as a discourse that mystifies the irreducibility of exclusions, this would-be reform actually deepens that mystification.

The difficulty cannot be overcome by subjecting pluralism in literary studies to a more sustained political analysis. This strategy often produces an uncritical blurring of the distinctions between a literally political terminology and the concepts necessary for a political critique of pluralism as a discursive practice. Fredric Jameson argues forcefully that the political interpretation of literary texts constitutes "the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (PU 17), but he is always acutely aware that undoing the opposition between theory and practice or between the academy and politics is not a matter of asserting that everything is political. When we talk about the politics of pluralism in the university, we must talk about what Hayden White describes as "that politics which is endemic to the pursuit of truth—the striving to share power amongst interpreters themselves."¹⁸ This discursive strife can no longer be conceived in ethical terms which pertain to individuals (e.g., "irresponsibility"); nor can it be explained solely as a side effect of the "larger" reality of power. Rather, we must conceptualize the political as an internal or structural feature of literary critical discourse.

I am not belittling the importance of power relations broadly conceived. The critique of pluralist discourse demands an analysis of all the social and political constraints on discursive power. But the insight that we must acknowledge the force of social power can lead us to impute a kind of irreality to the academic practice of pluralism: the analysis never touches the specificity of pluralist discourse in the university. Pluralism remains opaque, even faintly mysterious, in such an interpretation. We can trace the theoretical consequences of this opacity in the tendency of some commentators and even some practitioners of pluralist theory to draw away from the concept _qua_ concept.

This partially explains the difficulty pluralists have theorizing their own project. W. J. T. Mitchell, for example, suggests that "pluralism is not a coherent philosophy," and he recommends, as one solution to the intellectual contradictions of pluralist theory, that we simply "stop using the term 'pluralist' as the name of a position, a theory, a philosophy," reserving it for use "only as an adjective, signifying an attitude of amiable tolerance toward other positions, an attitude of curiosity, openness, and liberality." This view abandons the possibility of theorizing pluralism while endorsing its programmatic claims about its practical effects. In a similar gesture, Booth himself carries the argument of Critical Understanding to an apparently definitive theoretical impasse and concludes (half-way through his text): "Surely, then, my quest for a pluralism has failed. And since few are likely to work harder at it than I have, it seems probable that there really can be no such creature as a true pluralist in my sense" (210). Nevertheless, he refuses to allow this failure to close down his project. Booth discovers that his theoretical problems, "viewed properly," are "evidence for pluralism, not against it" and proceeds to abandon not pluralism but his putatively theoretical project, concluding: "I cannot distinguish pluralistic theory from the practical value of pluralism" (211, 218). He presents his practice as a kind of embarrassment to theory: "common-sense untheoretical pluralism works, regardless of our theories" (197).

I would call Booth's position "anti-theoretical," though it predates recent polemics "against theory." Mitchell describes it as "pragmatic" (I 4), and Booth places this discussion in a section entitled "The Pluralist as Pragmatist." Pluralists tend to become nominal "pragmatists" on the question of theory, which they regard as always engaged in a flirtation with dogmatism; their "anti-theory" polemics complicate subsequent attempts to theorize pluralist practice from the outside or to defend the specifically theoretical usefulness of the concept of pluralism. The fail-

19W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Ideology of Pluralism," unpublished ms., p. 2. Further references to this essay (I) will be given in parentheses in the text.
ure to distinguish theory from practice functions to shield theoretical commitments from analysis; they can thus operate as if in the state of nature. Hence the ambiguous term “value.” Theoretical effects are never achieved so securely as when they come naturally, that is, in the form of common sense, values, or “mere” practice, and this is nowhere more evident than in the contemporary debate on reading.

For pluralists in literary studies, the problem of theory is frequently figured as a problem of reading. From this perspective, the recent critiques directed at the possibility of theory are only a special case of a more generalized anxiety of interpretation, an anxiety captured in de Man’s stricture that “the possibility of reading can never be taken for granted.” This anxiety of reading has a special relevance to my analysis; in part, pluralism has been aroused from its relative quiescence since the cold war period to respond to—or rather to resist—the suggestion that reading is “impossible.” This is one way to gloss the apparent agreement among pluralists that deconstruction is not pluralism; deconstruction is targeted for censure because it is associated with the claim that reading may be impossible. In the analysis that follows, I will argue that the polemics on the question of the possibility of reading actually mask anxieties concerning the possibility of persuasion. Pluralism’s contention that its primary antagonist is a Derridaesque glasisme is a serious one, but it does not tell the whole story.

In certain pluralist scenarios, the resistance to theory is explicitly linked to resistance to the view that reading is impossible. (Both are seen as contravening common sense.) But Wills’s argument suggests that what is at stake in the peculiarly American consensus against theory, against “the evil of system,” and for the exclusion of things that would exclude, is not the possi-

20Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2d ed., rev. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), p. 107, my emphasis. The context for this remark is the question of theory: “Prior to any generalization about literature, literary texts have to be read, and the possibility of reading can never be taken for granted.” Further references to this volume (*BI*) will be given in parentheses in the text.
bility or impossibility of reading per se. The pluralist focuses debate on the question of the possibility of reading in order to displace the problem of exclusion and, with it, any questions concerning persuasion. Wills demonstrates that the question of reading can never be addressed innocently; he insists that the exclusions that make reading practical were and still are political. Reading is thus neither possible nor impossible, but practical under certain political and theoretical conditions; it is here that the question of the limits of persuasion becomes critical. The politics of the colloquial lead to the question of reading; the distance is much shorter than we might have imagined.

II

As there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of. . . . a philosophical reading of Capital is quite the opposite of an innocent reading. It is a guilty reading, but not one that absolves its crime on confessing it. On the contrary, it takes the responsibility for its crime as a "justified crime" and defends it by proving its necessity. It is therefore a special reading which exculpates itself as a reading by posing every guilty reading the very question that unmasks its innocence, the mere question of its innocence: what is it to read?

—ALTHUSSER, Reading Capital

When no known language is available to you, you must determine to steal a language—as men used to steal a loaf of bread. (All those—legion—who are outside Power are obliged to steal language.)

—BARTHES, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes

In her essay “Man on Feminism,” Nancy Miller asks a “speculative question” about Denis Donoghue’s “lurid representation of feminist critical theory as massively Derridean”: “to what extent is Donoghue’s attack on feminism as bad literary criticism,
and feminism as the theory of phallocentrism not about feminism at all, but instead an attack on ‘Deconstruction’ and [on] political criticism in the name of common sense?” I would like to suggest that this displacement may (also) run in the opposite direction: pluralist attacks on deconstruction may in fact have less to do with the play of the signifier than with the problem of sexual (or racial or class) difference. Although certain forms of deconstruction can undeniably be read as threatening the pluralist problematic, post-structuralism often appears in pluralist polemics as a screen for less exotic but more immediately threatening critical developments, specifically, the appearance of feminist, marxist and minority movements in criticism and in theory. All these critical movements have the potential to bring the


22Possible relationships between these developments and deconstruction—which would explain a certain slippage in pluralist attacks—have been observed by many critics. As a marxist, feminist, deconstructivist, Gayatri Spivak speaks very forcefully for the interconnections among these positions. See her In Other Worlds. In Resistance Literature (New York: Methuen, 1987), Barbara Harlow suggests that “given . . . the current intensity of the debate and the rapid developments in contemporary literary critical theory in the West (structuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, Marxism, etc.), it is important to examine the applicability of these theoretical structures and modalities outside the cultural tradition which produced them. Can they be deployed in analyzing the literary output of geopolitical areas which stand in opposition to the very social and political organization within which the theories are located and to which they respond? Is there, to take just one example—that suggested by the Moroccan writer Abdelkebir Khatibi in his book Maghreb pluriel—more than chronological coincidence to connect ‘deconstruction’ and ‘decolonization’? Khatibi, at any rate, claims ideological affinities for the two movements and sees critical potential in developing their association” (p. xvii). In Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory and French Realist Fiction (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), Naomi
pluralist problematic into crisis, to expose the limits of general persuasion; the pluralist polemic responds primarily to this threat, and Althusser’s account of the guilt of reading can help us trace this displacement. If there is no innocent reading, how does the guilty reader justify her crimes?

Jonathan Culler marks the connection between the so-called crisis in criticism (often associated by its interpreters with the advent of deconstruction) and theories of reading by opening *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* with a chapter entitled “Readers and Reading.” Culler takes feminist criticism as his example, thus acknowledging that the appearance of women’s studies and feminist literary theory have contributed to the current crisis of interpretation (and of pluralism). He observes that critics and theorists across the ideological spectrum “have concurred in casting the reader in a central role, both in theoretical discussion of literature and criticism and in interpretations of literary works” (31) and argues that the “impact” of feminist criticism is “in part due to its emphasis on the notion of the reader and her experience” (42).

Schor writes: “It is difficult but I think important—if only to ‘bear witness’—to communicate to younger critics, especially the feminist, who have come of age in the relatively permissive intellectual climate of post-structuralism, the subtle oppression exercised by structuralism at its least self-critical and most doctrinaire on a reader who bridled at bracketing herself, who felt stifled in a conceptual universe organized into the neat paradigms of binary logic, and who ultimately found it impossible to accept the claims to universality of models of intelligibility elaborated without taking gender into account. It was not until Derrida began to deconstruct the major paradigms/hierarchies of Western metaphysics at their linguistic foundations that feminist criticism became possible in the context of departments of French in American universities. The fact that, as is becoming increasingly obvious, the relationship of deconstruction and feminism is complex and fraught with controversy, should not obscure the immense significance of early Derrida for French neo-feminisms and, by the same token, their American spin-offs” (p. ix–x). The most ambitious and interesting examination of this controversial conjuncture is Alice Jardine’s provocative analysis of the “woman-effect” she calls “gynesis,” the problematization or putting into discourse of “woman” in the texts of modernity/post-modernism. See *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

23Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 31–83. Further references to this volume (OD) will be given in parentheses in the text. Culler marks the link between deconstruction and feminism in part by
In a similar gesture, though this time from the side of a self-conscious pluralism, M. H. Abrams names our critical epoch the “Age of Reading”; he then denounces Derrida, Stanley Fish, and Harold Bloom specifically in their roles as “Newreaders,” practitioners of “Newreading,” “a principled procedure for replacing standard meanings by new meanings.”24 This overthrow of standard meaning, of consensus, is extremely disturbing to pluralism. In an earlier essay, “Rationality and Imagination in Cultural History,” Abrams explains the centrality of the problem of reading to the pluralist polemic when he warns that “if one takes seriously [J. Hillis] Miller’s deconstructionist principles of interpretation, any history which relies on written texts becomes an impossibility. . . . the elementary assumption that a cultural historian must make is that he is able to understand, in the sense that he is at least able to approximate, the core of meanings that certain writers at certain times expressed in their writings” (A 458, my emphasis). For Abrams, this elementary assumption depends on the possibility of right reading or understanding.

the authors cited wrote, not in order to present a verbal stimulus (in Roland Barthes’ term, un vide) to the play of the reader’s interpretive ingenuity, but in order to be understood . . . . though the sentences allow a certain degree of interpretive freedom, and though they evoke vibrations of significance which differ according to the distinctive temperament and experience of each reader, the central core of what they undertook to communicate can usually be understood by a competent reader who knows how to apply the norms of the language and literary form employed by the writer. [A 457, my emphases]

Communication and understanding are theoretically the achievements of any (and every) competent reader, defined here as a

24M. H. Abrams, “How to Do Things with Texts,” Partisan Review 46:4 (1979), 566, 568. Further references to this essay (PR) will be given in parentheses in the text.
critic committed to the possibility of reading. Allegedly speaking for the critical opposition, and in direct response to Abrams, Hillis Miller concedes that “deconstructionist principles” could reveal that “a certain notion of history or of literary history, like a certain notion of determinable reading, might indeed be an impossibility,” and he agrees that “the impossibility of reading should not be taken too lightly.”

The significance of this claim hinges on the meaning of the term “(im)possible.” The resurgence of critical pluralism coincides with the anxiety of reading in the age of the newreaders; it also coincides with the appearance of a powerful, new kind of theoretical practice closely associated with speculation on the impossibility of reading. On one level, pluralism thus appears as a form of resistance to the claims “deconstruction” allegedly makes about reading. This account is not flatly wrong; pluralists are indeed responding to the challenge of certain post-structuralisms. As we shall see, some of the pluralist polemics of recent years can be read as strategic interventions that attempt to assimilate post-structuralism to the pluralist paradigm that dominates North American literary studies. But a significant portion of the anxiety of reading stems from the interpretative practices of those newreaders not generally named in lists that mention Derrida, Fish, and Bloom as incarnating the threat to pluralist harmony (hegemony). These resisting newreaders also suggest a certain impossibility of reading, but their interventions are often obscured, screened, in fact, by polemical debates that appear more purely theoretical and therefore more fundamental, while they are in fact only less immediately threatening to the pluralist.

Critics on both sides of the debate seem careful to address the (im)possibility of reading as a strictly formal or epistemological problem. (Both sides in this argument are ultimately pluralist.) When theorists confine the question of the (im)possibility of reading to epistemological terms, they displace the local, historical, political and theoretical crises that enable and limit both possibility and impossibility. Their efforts to cast the question of reading in terms of the binary possible/impossible, rewrite a generalized and extremely unsettling debate about what reading should be—rather than what it is—and about what exactly we should read, a debate engendered in large part by a powerful critique of the history and canons of literary studies and engendering an explicitly political program, as an epistemological struggle between those who believe reading is possible and those who believe it is not. This formulation of the argument elides precisely the critical role of the resisting newreaders, black literary critics, marxist literary critics, feminist literary critics, and others, who suggest an impossibility of reading by exposing the interests that ground “standard meanings.” (I think Derrida belongs with this group, but he is not its leader.) This elision necessarily reaffirms the possibility of pluralism, that is, of general persuasion; indeed, this reaffirmation may be the most significant effect of the entire debate. The Anglo-American pluralist rewrites (or misreads) his indigenous opponents’ challenges to the possibility of persuasion as an “imported” poststructuralism’s insistence on the impossibility of reading. The difference between these two formulations is a political difference. In the work of those critics who represent a potential break from the pluralist problematic, those whose work can be read as refusing the imperatives of general persuasion, determinate limits and the irreducibility of the discontinuities within the critical community are political and theoretical facts; reading is neither possible nor impossible, but interested or, as Althusser would insist, guilty. And guilt is associated with persuasion. The possibilities and impossibilities of persuasion reveal the play and struggle of interests.

The model of reading I employ in Seductive Reasoning originates in the work of Louis Althusser. The response to Al-
thussur’s work has been both slow and uneven in the United States, particularly when contrasted with the reception accorded other French theorists of his generation, including some of his students.\textsuperscript{28} Recently, references to his work on ideology and theoretical practice have become more common, in part thanks to the work of such British feminists as Michèle Barrett,\textsuperscript{29} but it is still relatively rare for commentators in the United States to observe the degree to which his earliest work emphasizes a theory of reading: “I dare maintain that only since Marx have we had to begin to suspect what, in theory at least, reading and hence writing means (veut dire)” (RC 16). Although his subject matter is remote from my own, in the course of Reading Capital Althusser generates the concepts that are critical to my analysis of pluralism: problematic, symptomatic reading, theory and ideology. In fact, his account of the relation between Marx and his predecessors in political economy stands as a model for the relationship I hope to establish between my discourse and the discourse of critical pluralism, a relationship produced by the practice of symptomatic reading.


\textsuperscript{29}See Michèle Barrett, Women’s Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis (London: Verso, 1980).
Althusser argues that Marx founds a radical theory and practice of reading by refusing the ideology of innocent "reading which makes a written discourse the immediate transparency of the true, and the real discourse of a voice" (16). He claims that "this immediate reading of essence in existence expresses the religious model of Hegel's Absolute Knowledge," and he aligns it with "all the complementary religious myths of the voice (the Logos) speaking in the sequences of a discourse; of the Truth that inhabits its Scripture;—and of the ear that hears or the eye that reads this discourse, in order to discover in it (if they are pure) the speech of the Truth which inhabits each of its Words" (17). The myths of the Logos and of Truth support the fiction of transparent expression, of a meaning that can be read "at sight," innocently.

Many contemporary literary theorists have advanced critiques of the ideology of innocent reading. This position against innocence is, for example, essential to the work of feminist criticism, where I first encountered it in Mary Ellmann's Thinking about Women. Yet, the fiction of first reading returns again and again in pluralist discourse, as the figure of innocence is constantly revised. "Critical understanding" in the pluralist commonwealth requires the innocent eye of a reader defined only by his competent sight reading. The pluralist polemic against theory is ultimately a defense of the innocence of reading.

Althusser argues that the Marx of Capital abandons both the posture of innocence and the theory of expression and, with these renunciations, establishes historical materialism as a theory of history.

Marx could not possibly have become Marx except by founding a theory of history and a philosophy of the historical distinction between ideology and science. . . . this foundation was consummated in the dissipation of the religious myth of reading. The

30Mary Ellmann, Thinking about Women (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovano-vich, 1968). Roland Barthes offers a strong version of this view in S/Z, tr. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974): "We must further accept one last freedom: that of reading the text as if it had already been read. . . . rereading . . . contests the claim which would have us believe that the first reading is a primary, naive, phenomenal reading . . . there is no first reading" (15–16).
Young Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* read the human essence at sight, immediately, in the transparency of its alienation. *Capital*, on the contrary, exactly measures a distance and an internal dislocation (*décalage*) in the real, inscribed in its *structure*, a distance and a dislocation such as to make their own effects themselves illegible, and the illusion of an immediate reading of them the ultimate apex of their effects: *fetishism*. It was essential to turn to history to track down this myth of reading to its lair. . . . the truth of history cannot be read in its manifest discourse, because the text of history is not a text in which a voice (the Logos) speaks, but the inaudible and illegible notation of the effects of a structure of structures. [RC 17]

This passage posits the young, “pre-marxist” Marx as a humanist, at once an idealist and an empiricist.31 According to Althusser, the author of the *1844 Manuscripts* believed in a universal human essence, an idealized humanity, alienated by its fall into history. Alienation appears as a transparent fact, a truth spoken in the manifest discourse of history; one has only to look in order to see it. “In Marx’s early works . . . the proletariat in its ‘alienation’ represents the human essence itself” (FM 221). For Althusser, this “illusion of immediate reading” remains the “apex” of bourgeois ideology: fetishism.

He contrasts this young humanist to the Marx of *Capital*. The “break” in Marx’s work entails his rejection of the religious myth of *reading*. Indeed, in Althusser’s account, the question of the possibility of reading—and of newreading—marks the crisis of historical materialism as vividly as it now highlights the crisis of literary studies. Reading ceases to be an innocent act at the very moment that history enters a new theoretical problematic. The rejection of the myth of innocent reading opens a chasm between “Logos and Being; between the Great Book that was, in its very being, the World, and the discourse of the knowledge of the world; between the essence of things and its reading”; “once we have broken these ties, a new conception of *discourse* at last becomes possible” (RC 17). A new practice and theory of reading

31“An empiricism of the subject always corresponds to an idealism of the essence (or an empiricism of the essence to an idealism of the subject):” Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism,” p. 228.
and of history emerges, in which reading is an anti-essentialist (and anti-pluralist) practice. Althusser employs the vocabulary of vision, blindness, and oversight to describe this new theory; or, rather, he defines the break Marx inaugurates as a critique of the epistemology in which “all the work of knowledge is reduced in principle to the recognition of the mere relation of vision” (19).

Althusser embraces the terms in which M. H. Abrams attacks the “newreaders”: Marx’s reading of Adam Smith in Capital is a “double reading.” The first remains trapped within the illusory metaphor of vision. “Marx very often explains [Smith’s] omissions by [his] distractions, or in the strict sense, his absences: he did not see what was, however, staring him in the face, he did not grasp what was, however, in his hands” (RC 19). Althusser insists this reading finally produces nothing but a “summary of concordances and discordances”; rather than explaining the oversights in Smith’s text, Marx’s first reading obliterates them, filling in the lacunae. This process “reduces Marx to Smith minus the myopia” (19). This “logic of sighting and oversight” also reduces every weakness in the system of concepts that makes up knowledge to a psychological weakness of “vision.” And if it is absences of vision that explain these oversights, in the same way and by the same necessity, it is the presence and acuteness of “vision” that will explain these “sightings”. What Smith did not see, through a weakness of vision, Marx sees: what Smith did not see was perfectly visible, and it was because it was visible that Smith could fail to see it while Marx could see it. We are in a circle—we have relapsed into the mirror myth of knowledge as the vision of a given object or the reading of an established text, neither of which is ever anything but transparency itself. [RC 19]

This is the religious myth of expression and of reading at first sight, reasserting the transparency of the text, the givenness of the object of knowledge. This ideology of “givenness” reappears in pluralism’s consensus against theory.

Althusser argues that the Marx of Capital discloses a second quite different reading when he reveals that the “combined ex-
existence of sightings and oversights in an author poses a problem, the problem of their *combination* (RC 19). The combination of insight and oversight is not random; on the contrary, their interrelation is a "symptomatic" effect of the problematic that structures the text as a whole. When this "combination" is the focus of analysis, the status of both insight and oversight is fundamentally transformed. Reading must account for the determinate relation between absence and presence. Oversight is no longer an accidental omission, but an *essential* repression, a determinate exclusion, the "necessary effect of the structure of the visible field" (20). The first reading, the disclosure of concordances and discords, is abandoned. Instead, the text must be compared with itself, "its non-vision with its vision," in order to discover the "connexion between the field of the visible and the field of the invisible" (21, 20). As Francis Barker suggests (in another context): "the point is not to supply this absence, to make whole what is lacking, but to aggravate its historical significance."32

Althusser pinpoints Marx's break with political economy at the moment when he identifies a *question* in Smith's text.

In the course of the questions classical economics asked about the "value of labour" something very special has happened. Classical political economy has "produced" (just as Engels will say . . . phlogistic chemistry "produced" oxygen . . . ) a correct answer: the value of "labour" is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the reproduction of "labour." A correct answer is a correct answer. Any reader in the "first manner" will give Smith and Ricardo a good mark and pass on to other observations. Not Marx. For what we shall call his eye has been attracted by a remarkable property of this answer; it is the correct answer to a question that has just one failing: it was never posed. [RC 22]

This "remarkable property" has been the object of considerable theoretical speculation since the sixties.33 What transforma-

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33Derrida's work provides just one example. Irene E. Harvey points to passages such as the following from *La voix et la phénomène* (Paris: Presses Univer-
tions—of the myth of reading and our concept of knowledge—result from the claim that a text answers a question that it never asks? How does this possibility redirect the question of the impossibility of reading?

In his first reading of Smith, Marx exposed what was “perfectly visible” but somehow overlooked, in order to “make whole” the argument. In his new reading, the not seen, the invisible, is an absence within Smith’s work; it is both present and (although this metaphor is no longer adequate) invisible. Althusser describes this new problematic as follows:

what classical political economy does not see, is not what it does not see, it is what it sees; it is not what it lacks, on the contrary, it is what it does not lack; it is not what it misses, on the contrary, it is what it does not miss. The oversight, then, is not to see what one sees, the oversight no longer concerns the object, but the sight itself. The oversight is an oversight that concerns vision: non-vision is therefore inside vision, it is a form of vision and hence has a necessary relationship with vision. [RC 21]

The paradoxes of this passage revolve around the notion that one may see something and not see it, simultaneously: blindness is not pure lack but a form of vision. It is precisely this form of “vision” at work in the pluralist texts I read below: general persuasion is what every pluralist sees but does not see.

This argument overturns the conception of knowledge that rests on the metaphor of vision, of seeing or not seeing objects of knowledge which are simply given: “we must abandon the mirror myths of immediate vision and reading, and conceive knowledge as a production” (RC 24). The model of production

sitaires de France, 1967): “When empirical life or even the pure psychic region is placed in parenthesis, it is again a transcendental life . . . that Husserl discovers. And thus he thematizes this unity of the concept of life without however posing it as a question” (9–10, Harvey’s translation), and she argues that Derrida “tends to focus on what he calls the ‘unasked questions,’ which seem to necessarily arise in the arguments he analyzes but which seem to have been ‘hidden from the view’ of their respective authors. The significance of the ‘unasked questions’ is always revealing for Derrida.” See Harvey, Derrida and the Economy of Differance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 45, 48.
allows us to conceptualize the process by which a discourse can shift terrain, change the very terms in which a problem is articulated, and produce new objects of knowledge, new answers, without acknowledging the process of knowledge production itself (without posing questions). Such a discourse enacts a production, without reflecting upon or theorizing it, and "it is the classical text itself which tells us that it is silent: its silence is its own words" (22). Althusser observes:

what political economy does not see is not a pre-existing object which it could have seen but did not see—but an object which it produced itself in its operation of knowledge and which did not pre-exist it: precisely the production itself, which is identical with the object. What political economy does not see is what it does: its production of a new answer without a question, and simultaneously the production of a new latent question contained by default in this new answer. . . . It made "a complete change in the terms of the" original "problem," and thereby produced a new problem, but without knowing it. . . . it remained convinced that it was still on the terrain of the old problem, whereas it has "unwittingly changed terrain." Its blindness and its "oversight" lie in this misunderstanding, between what it produces and what it sees, in this "substitution," which Marx elsewhere calls a "play on words" (Wortspiel) that is necessarily impenetrable for its author. (RC 24).34

34Althusser's position differs in interesting ways from the apparently similar view Paul de Man puts forward in Blindness and Insight. The problematics of reading and vision also intersect in Derrida's texts: "The reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should produce [my emphases]. . . . To produce this signifying structure obviously cannot consist of reproducing, by the effaced and respectful doubling of commentary, the conscious, voluntary, intentional relationship that the writer institutes in his exchanges with the history to which he belongs thanks to the element of language; "if it seems to us in principle impossible to separate . . . the signified from the signifier, . . . we nevertheless believe that this impossibility is historically articulated. It does not limit attempts at deciphering in the same way, to the same degree, and according to the same rules . . . what we call production is necessarily a text, the system of a writing and of a reading which we know is ordered around its own blind spot": Of Grammatology, pp. 158, 159, 164. Deconstruction might be described as the unveiling of a word play that is similarly impenetrable to its author.
This account of the production of knowledge as an “unwitting” shift in terrain provides the crucial figures for Althusser’s account of reading. Political economy obscures “production itself,” the (theoretical) operation that engenders a new object of inquiry and a new problematic. This term designates the historically determinate structure of presuppositions that constitutes a discourse, its enabling conditions. The problematic of a discourse is a conceptual matrix that defines objects within the field, fixes lines of inquiry, sets problems, and thereby determines the “solutions” that can be generated within its limits. According to Althusser, any given discourse “can only pose problems on the terrain and within the horizon of a definite theoretical structure, its problematic, which constitutes its absolute and definite condition of possibility, and hence the absolute determination of the forms in which all problems must be posed, at any given moment” (25). This definition suggests how remote his position is from pluralism. For Althusser, the appearance of an object of knowledge is determined by the structure of its theoretical problematic. “Vision” ceases to be a “religious privilege” of mysterious insight: “it is literally no longer the eye (the mind’s eye) of a subject which sees what exists in the field defined by a theoretical problematic: it is this field itself which sees itself in the objects or problems it defines” (25). Ideology is characterized above all by its refusal to confess to the theoretical work that produces the objects of its inquiry and thus robs it of its innocence.

Althusser models the process by which a critic discloses a text’s problematic on “the ‘symptomatic reading’ with which Marx managed to read the illegible in [Adam] Smith” (28). My analysis of pluralism will take this form. Just as the problematic defines and structures the visible terrain of a discourse, so it “structures the invisible,” that which is “defined as excluded by the existence and peculiar structure of the field of the problematic” (26). The excluded is no longer conceived as a random set of objects that were overlooked. On the contrary, “the invisible is the theoretical problematic’s non-vision of its non-objects, the invisible is the darkness, the blinded eye of the theoretical prob-
lematic’s self-reflection when it scans its non-objects, its non-problems without seeing them, in order not to look at them” (26). Exclusion is determinate and determining: “the invisible is defined by the visible as its invisible, its forbidden vision: the invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible (to return to the spatial metaphor), the outer darkness of exclusion—but the inner darkness of exclusion, inside the visible itself because defined by its structure” (26). Thus, a given problematic is defined as much by what it excludes, by its “outside,” as it is by its content: “the field of the problematic . . . defines and structures the invisible as the defined excluded, excluded from the field of visibility and defined as excluded” (26). To break with the pluralist problematic is to identify its unposed question, the symptomatic absence that structures its discursive field and the objects therein as given, precisely by rendering its “non-objects” invisible. In the case of pluralism, this unarticulated question inevitably concerns the possibility of general persuasion.

The articulation of the unposed question inaugurates an “epistemological break,” a definitive shift in the theoretical terrain. This break produces the controversial relation between ideology and theory (or science) which is so important in Althusser’s work and which has been criticized by both marxist and non-marxist readers. Althusser argues that a science emerges from an ideological prehistory and “continues endlessly to do so . . . by rejecting what it considers to be error, according to the process which Bachelard called the ‘epistemological break’” (SC 114). “Every science, in the relationship it has with the ideology it emerged from, can only be thought as a ‘science of the ideology’” (RC 46). In his later work, especially in Essays in Self-Criticism, he cautions that the term “science” should not be taken as the sign of a “relapse into a theory of science (in the singular). . . . Science (in the singular) does not exist,” and insists that the epistemological break cannot be understood in the “rationalist terms of science and non-science” (SC 112, 119); it offers no new epistemological guarantee. On the contrary, it must be explained precisely as a “historical fact in all of its dimensions—social, political, ideological and theoretical”
In *Reading Capital*, Althusser warns that we must protect “the decisive distinction between science and ideology . . . against the dogmatic or scientistic temptations which threaten it” (*RC* 45). We must not “make use of this distinction in a way that restores the ideology of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, but on the contrary, . . . treat the ideology which constitutes the prehistory of a science, for example, as a real history with its own laws and as the real prehistory whose real confrontation with other technical practices and other ideological or scientific acquisitions was capable, in a specific theoretical conjuncture, of producing the arrival of a science, not as its goal, but as its surprise. (*RC* 45). For my purposes here, theory is this symptomatic analysis of the problematic of a “precursor” text, a text which is thus produced as ideological. My book takes the text of pluralism as just such a precursor. To claim either innocence or a purely *epistemological* priority for this reading would be to ignore the main thrust of the Althusserian intervention.

The relationship between ideology and theory bears critically on my efforts to read the pluralist problematic. In Althusserian terms, ideology does not name an articulated world view or set of ideas or consciousness in general. Althusser stresses that the problematic of a discourse is unconscious: “one thinks in it rather than of it” (*RC* 25). Ideology is not false consciousness, or illusion, or error (*SC* 119–25); rather, it designates a profoundly unconscious, “lived” relation to the real. Ideology works practically, within institutions or ideological state apparatuses. It spontaneously constructs “reality” for the “subject,” including the reality of subjectivity itself, without requiring the support of self-conscious reflection. As Althusser puts it, “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”

who “innocently” see the objects of ideology as given, as objects in the world. “Men ‘live’ their ideologies as the Cartesian ‘saw’ or did not see—if he was not looking at it—the moon two hundred paces away: not at all as a form of consciousness, but as an object of ‘their’ world, as their world itself” (FM 233). Its practical functions make ideology “a structure essential to the historical life of societies, . . . an organic part of every social totality” (232). In the case of pluralism, as we shall see, this process of ideological “interpellation,” whereby pluralist “ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (LP 173), produces a particular kind of reading and writing subject. The subject of pluralism assumes an infinitely persuadable (general) audience even as he neglects to theorize general persuasion.

This view of ideology installs a new concept of science or theory. If ideology is neither a lie nor an error, it will not be swept away in some utopian future. The relationship between the ideological and the theoretical thus lacks the drama of a simple opposition, with theory taking the part of Truth. Rather, ideological and theoretical practices are different “social instances,” distinct operations in the production and reproduction of social relations. The relation between a particular ideology and its theory is thus always a matter of determinate historical practices. James Kavanagh observes that “the difference between ideological and scientific practices is the difference between those [practices] which re-produce and re-adequate the subject’s “lived” relation to the real,’ and those which install the subject . . . in a process of production of knowledge.” 36 Ideological practice aims to reproduce some aspect of social life as a set of practices and structures of feeling; in contrast, theoretical practice aims at the production of knowledge (of ideology). “An ideological concept . . . really does designate a set of existing relations, [but] unlike a scientific concept, it does not provide us with a means of knowing them” (FM 223). Neither theory nor ideologies exist “in general”; specific theoretical practices work

36 Kavanagh, “Marxism’s Althusser,” p. 28.
in determinate relationships with the specific ideological practices they take as objects of knowledge. Althusser's work thus suggests that theory is not an epistemologically or ontologically privileged Archimedean point; rather, it is a strategy of reading, a strategy pluralists fiercely resist, particularly when it emphasizes exclusion and threatens their innocent notion of the given as (merely) common sense. Theoretical practice "breaks" with a particular ideology by interrogating the apparently spontaneous, lived relation ideology constructs and, ultimately, by exposing the "problematic" that structures the ideological and, in turn, is concealed by it.

This book is an instance of "theoretical practice" precisely in the sense that it works to break with the ideology of pluralism and thus to produce the problematic of general persuasion. My aim is not to "govern" pluralist practice (in the sense Michaels and Knapp condemn) but to theorize it, to deprive it of its innocence and, thus, to disable it, to disrupt the ideological effects by which pluralism reproduces its social practice and the subjects appropriate to that practice. This undertaking requires that we pose as a question what pluralism consistently offers as a solution: we must pose the problem of persuasion.

III

The cry goes up that one is murdering history whenever, in a historical analysis . . . one is seen to be using in too obvious a way the categories of discontinuity and difference, the notions of threshold, rupture, transformation. . . . One will be denounced for attacking the inalienable rights of history and the very foundations of any possible historicity. But one must not be deceived: what is being bewailed is the development that was to provide the sovereignty of the consciousness with a safer, less exposed shelter than myths, kinship systems, languages, sexuality or desire; . . . It is as if it was particularly difficult, in the history in which men retrace

37See Althusser, "Marxism and Humanism," and "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."
their own ideas and their own knowledge, to formulate a
general theory of discontinuity, of series, of limits. . . . As
if, in that field where we had become used to seeking
origins, . . . and to having constant recourse to
metaphors of life, we felt a particular repugnance to
conceiving of difference, to describing separations and
dispersions. . . . As if we were afraid to conceive the
Other in the time of our own thought.

—MICHEL FOUCAULT, The Archaeology of Knowledge

Abrams . . . claims that deconstructionist readings will
destroy history. His test at that point is not primarily
cognitive but pragmatic. Stop, you're killing me!

—WAYNE BOOTH, "Preserving the Exemplar: Or, How
Not to Dig Our Own Graves"

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 an incoherent one.
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.

—STANLEY FISH, Is There a Text in This Class?

Seductive reasoning appears to be an oxymoron. But as the
phrase itself signals, appearances, words in this case, are treach­
erous and can deceive us, especially if we are innocent or inex­
xperienced. If an oxymoron is a figure that conjoins contradictory
terms—makes marriages of odd bedfellows—but nevertheless
frequently makes sense, indeed, is "more pointedly witty for
seeming absurd," as the Greek *oxy* (sharp) and *mōros* (stupid)
suggest, then seductive reasoning is not an oxymoron; nor is it
used as such in the ordinary idioms of English. Unlike the
obscurity of a darkness visible or the monstrousness of the fiend
angelical or even the common bitterness of the bittersweet, the
contrary epithet “seductive” is generally understood to overpower and thus negate the rationality of the word “reasoning”: seductive reasoning is not reasoning but seduction. Worse yet, it is seduction disguised in reason’s garments, a hypocritical seduction.

Seductive reasoning, then, is an epithet in the secondary, narrow, and disputed sense of “an abusive or contemptuous word or phrase.” Some would suggest that the word “seductive” is always already an epithet in this narrow and disputed sense, that is, always already a term of contempt. In this perspective, seduction is always hypocritical and always distinguished from reason for this very fault; seduction is by definition duplicitous. Even in a period of relative sexual freedom—as tenuous and embattled as that freedom may be at this moment, it is still relatively real—“seductive” is not yet a common term of praise or celebration. Those rare occasions when it is used in a positive sense seldom involve questions of intellectual argument or analysis; only fictions seem genuinely praised when reviewers invoke their seductive powers. Even those who take “seductive” to be a neutral or affirmative term hesitate to praise a critical text for its seductive reasoning. On the contrary, this epithet commonly announces a demystifying project; it nods in the direction of the cunning with which wrong-headed if not flatly false arguments are introduced, but remains uncompromisingly committed to exposing the pretense, the sham of reasoning, that seduction tries to work. Seductive reasoning, then, is an epithet that inscribes a reluctant and ambivalent admiration for the scam we didn’t fall for, the confidence trick we have successfully exposed.

There have been attacks on this devaluation of seduction, attacks that insist alternatively on the omnipresence of seduction and its value or power. In The Daughter’s Seduction, Jane

38 My citations are from the American Heritage Dictionary. The definition proper names oxymoron “a rhetorical figure in which an epigrammatic effect is created by the conjunction of incongruous or contradictory terms.”

Gallop figures the mutual seduction of psychoanalysis and feminism, the father and the daughter, as “the introduction of heterogeneity (sexuality, violence, economic class conflict) into the closed circle of the family.”

Gallop argues that this heterogeneity undermines resistances and reveals the father’s “impassive self-mastery” as a cloak for his desire; the operation of seduction makes static and rigid roles “more complicated, more equivocal, more yielding” (xiv). In her analysis, the disavowal of seduction is a disavowal of desire that grounds the imposture of phallic mastery and authority; the ostentatious refusal of seduction “gains [the father] another kind of seduction (this one more one-sided, more like violation), a veiled seduction in the form of the law” (70). Thus, the law masks its own omnipresent seduction; feminist discourse must both unveil and embrace seduction, including “the seductive function of the law itself” (75), in order to undermine and disrupt that law.

Gallop’s analysis is very suggestive, but I want to take a slightly different tack concerning the figure of seduction. Seductive reasoning is the practice of pluralism: the problematic of general persuasion imposes a regime of general seduction or seductive reasoning which is in a certain sense not veiled. Indeed, Althusser’s insistence that we abandon the metaphors of vision implies that the figures of veiling and unveiling may not account for the way in which pluralism produces seductive reasoning, that is, produces reason as a universal seduction. Pluralism defines reason itself as the assumption of the theoretical


41Gallop is reading and revising the “phallic proportions” of what she calls “Lacanian conceit” (15–32). In her analyses of theorists ranging from Juliet Mitchell and Ernest Jones to Lacan, Irigaray and Kristeva, she stresses the subversive power of seduction as a strategy of unveiling and argues that what must be unveiled is seduction itself. Throughout, Gallop’s readings turn on Lacan’s account of desire and his claim that the phallus is a privileged signifier that “can play its role only when veiled.” See Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus,” *Ecrits: A Selection*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 287–88 and passim.
possibility of general persuasion, that is, of the possibility of absolute seduction, seduction without exclusions, without contingencies. To refuse the seductive, to decline to attempt to persuade a universal audience, to assume veils, is thus the unmistakable sign of irrationality; as Booth puts it, “criticism stops and reductive vilification begins.” Within the problematic of general persuasion, reasoning is always already seductive; indeed, it must be uniformly or consistently seductive, seductive without exception. An unseductive reason is a contradiction in terms.

In the pluralist idiom, then, “seductive reasoning” is redundant rather than oxymoronic. But to escape the pluralist problematic is neither to celebrate seduction, revising its connotations, nor to reverse the current pluralist problematic, refusing seduction entirely, thus returning to what Gallop describes as the rigidity of veiled, phallic roles. Such an escape would be nothing less than a reversal, a mirror image of pluralism’s assertion of general persuasion. Anti-pluralisms do not embrace so much as displace the play of seduction, engaging in partial, contingent, and interested seductions, playing favorites. 42

Feminist criticism provides an example of critical practice which resists the claims of seductive reasoning without falling into simple opposition to them. In “Iconoclastic Moments: Reading the Sonnets for Helene, Writing the Portuguese Letters,” Elizabeth Berg defines “iconoclastic” or “partial” reading and writing. She argues that “a writing project based on identity sets up one of two possible relationships to the reader: one of seduction or one of confrontation. That is, the reader may accept what is set down by the writer and be seduced (or persuaded) over to the writer’s side, or else the reader may refuse the writer’s determination and set himself up in opposition to the text. In either case, the relationship is one of specularity, where the reader can

42In this field of displacements, the veil no longer figures an abstract, phallic bar to the universal subject’s gaze. Rather, veiling reappears as one of many figures for social and political discontinuity; the opposition veiling/unveiling is displaced by the concept of the veil as a partial strategy, one that marks the place of the subject who gazes out from behind it.
only mirror the writer." 43 In contrast, Berg argues for reading and writing "as iconoclastic activities, as activities that undo images of identity, of truth and of authority" (208). She advocates a deliberate refusal to grant the authors of texts the authority they seek to control interpretation. Berg refuses to be seduced, even when the text demands the reader's seduction; but she also refuses to refuse to be seduced—in other words, she reserves the right to follow her desire elsewhere, to pursue some other path. In the terms I will be developing in my argument, Berg rejects general persuasion.

Faced with a group of students who refuse, as she puts it, to take Baudelaire seriously, Berg first chastizes them; but she eventually acknowledges the force of their "frivolous" reading. She concludes: "a writer's power resides only in the referential aspect of his or her work: only in its claim to represent and affect reality. In refusing that referential aspect, the reader disarms the text. . . . The authority of literature is grounded in a pact between writer and reader to read the text as if it were real; in reading the text as fiction the reader claims his or her power to determine the meaning and significance of the work" (212–13). Fiction is the term that allows Berg to assert (to produce, in fact) a discontinuity between her discourse and that of the text she reads. Her refusal to grant the referential power of the text is also a refusal of its persuasiveness and of its authority. Berg refuses to take up the position of the reader of general persuasion. She defines the difference or discontinuity she effects by abandoning the "pact" between writer and reader as the "partiality" of her reading.

Partial reading "undermines the power of the text simply by reading it as fiction, by not taking it seriously, by displaying . . . indifference to what is being said" (219, my emphases). Indifference, as we shall see, is a stance that the pluralist problematic must disallow: the indifferent are not vulnerable to persuasions. Berg's "frivolous reading neither accepts nor rejects the image

put forth by the text; instead it ignores the rules set down by the
text in order to extract from it what it wants. *It eliminates confron-
tations as well as seductions* by displacing the relationship, by
stepping out of the reader's appointed place in order to defy
fixed battlelines" (214, my emphases). This different relation-
ship is not a simple reversal because the partial reading makes
"no claim to exclusivity, truth or universality." This is the quin-
tessential gesture of anti-pluralism. The very possibility of posi-
ting a general audience, that is, of pursuing the project of general
persuasion, requires that the reader/critic assert the truth *and*
universality of her views. Without this grounding, the specular
process that universalizes both author and reader is inter-
rupted—a veil is tossed across the mirror. As Berg observes: "in
the absence of a universal, transcendent standard, their relation-
ship is also transformed: they are no longer in opposition, seek-
ing to impose the universal for themselves" (213).

The "partiality" of this positioning of the reading subject al-
 lows for unanticipated "exchanges, intersections, possible con-
gruences." Berg's partial reading exposes the myth of impar-
tiality and acknowledges both difference and indifference in its
interpretative practice. Partial reading reveals a certain desire,
but it resists the problematic of general persuasion; it asserts
discontinuities and in that respect resembles symptomatic read-
ing. Its seductions can never be universal. *Seductive Reasoning* is
a partial reading in so far as it argues that pluralism's claim to
impartiality can never be realized; it is an iconoclastic reading in
its insistence on the discontinuity between the identity plural-
ism espouses and the partial one it is assigned herein; it is an
anti-pluralist reading in its effort to acknowledge the irre-
ducibility of its margins, to read beyond the problematic of gen-
eral persuasion.

As a partial or anti-pluralist reading, this book must recognize
the limits of its own persuasiveness. The power of pluralism is
not simply or even primarily a question of the suppression of a
particular voice or content, much less of a specific interpreta-
tion. On the contrary, pluralism's power lies in its extraordinary
productivity and in the form this productivity takes. Pluralism's hegemony is due in part to its broad, generous invitation to all comers to join the "dialogue," that is, to try to persuade all the other members of the pluralist community. Thus does the problematic of general persuasion screen both the pluralist and the subject (object) of her criticism from the impolitic knowledge that all discourses, in the very process of establishing significance, necessarily exclude not only some readings but also some readers. This distinction is the location of a key evasion in a text such as Booth's. He does observe that every way of speaking excludes certain readings and meanings: "Every mode of speech and thought can be said to forbid certain kinds of further speech and to invite certain other kinds" (B 419). But he is interested in and therefore conscious of the "proscription of meanings" only because this is the first step in the process of establishing the existence of a core of determinate meaning. Paradoxically, he manages to evade the necessary corollary: every mode of speech forbids certain kinds of speakers and invites certain other kinds. As we shall see, pluralism inevitably retreats into a humanistic account of the subject to avoid this unacceptable conclusion, and it encourages everyone who writes to fall back beside it.

The double-edged mystification or screening of writer and reader does not produce uniformity or "monism" (as Booth would call it) in the content of critical practice. The substance or content of one's critical position does not guarantee immunity to pluralism's seductions. But an explicitly theoretical inquiry into the operations of pluralism risks turning its attention to the problem of failures of persuasion. The ideology of an essentially undifferentiated critical community is thus endangered, not by the fact that persuasion frequently fails, but by the theoretical analysis that threatens to reveal the systematic and determinate lines of that failure. To theorize that failure, in Althusser's sense, is to disclose its problematic.

Practical agreements are elusive, but the generality or universality of the pluralist invitation is reinscribed elsewhere, in the
theoretical imperative that every critic attempt to persuade the community in general. Anti-pluralism must do more than point to individual cases where persuasion fails. In the pluralist community, gender, race, class position, sexuality, nationality, and material interests are all accidents to be excluded in the construction of the general reader/writer. Booth actually identifies efforts to theorize exclusion in critical discourse as a form of "critical killing": "When I reduce your effort to discuss reasons to a mere expression of irrational forces (your id, your class, your upbringing, your inherited language), I make it impossible for you to reply—except, of course, with similar charges. Criticism stops and reductive vilification begins" (CU 259). Notice the gap where race, gender, and religion might appear on the list. (Class is an easy concept to exclude from our critical discourse since so few North Americans believe in it, much less write seriously about it.) Critical killing is defined here as a reductive emphasis on "irrational" or accidental differences among readers, differences within the critical community, partiality. All forms of political discourse are by definition guilty of this reductive obsession with irrational forces or accidental differences, simply because all the myriad types of political interpretation assume that interests play as significant a role as reasons in the production of powerful interpretations. Predictably, Booth warns against the temptation to politicize the discourse of literary studies. In Critical Understanding, he opposes "prophet-ic" polemics in pursuit of "the function of criticism at the present time"; such criticism "risk[s] turning critical battles into politics or even open warfare" (5).

In a certain sense, my aim here is to "open" what has been a secret war—not by an unveiling, but by a partial indifference, which begins by reading against the grain and against the interests of the text. The contradiction that threatens contemporary pluralism is its coupling of a polemic for inclusion with a commitment to essential exclusions, in particular, the exclusion of exclusion, and, as Garry Wills argues, of those who would exclude. As Barthes might observe, it is precisely at the moment of its greatest generosity, in its most persuasive mode, that pluralism
“reinforces this relation of exclusion.” To take the example that has historically been most significant in the United States, the exclusion of marxist theory (which defined pluralism in its earliest articulations) is theoretically essential because marxism itself theorizes the necessity, indeed, the inevitability, of exclusions; but it must be practiced by means of a discursive strategy that privileges inclusion in the form of general persuasion and denies the very possibility of exclusion, of partial seductions. The problematic of general persuasion struggles at this conjuncture to inscribe all discourse within the boundaries of pluralism’s commonwealth.

Anti-pluralist discourses attend to the partiality of persuasion and to the exclusions partiality implies. As I have suggested, marxism is a discourse that privileges exclusions; class is one of the many limits to general persuasion. In this regard, marxist discourse is paradigmatic of the kind of critical intervention that most threatens pluralist hegemony, and, in the United States in particular, it has long served as the major target of pluralism’s polemic. But more recently the possibility of general persuasion has been attacked and the necessity, really, the inevitability, of making exclusions affirmed in texts from sources as diverse as Foucault and Afro-American studies, radical feminisms and Derrida. These anti-pluralisms are not distinguished primarily by what a pluralist such as Booth might call metaphysical or methodological monism; indeed, as we shall see, monism is no threat to the problematic of general persuade. The recognition of the irreducibility of the margin in all explanations, the foregrounding of interests, with exclusions as the inevitable and clearly articulated consequence—these are the marks of anti-pluralisms.