Seductive Reasoning

Rooney, Ellen

Published by Cornell University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/47558

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1845160
6 THIS POLITICS WHICH IS NOT ONE

The greatest difficulties, theoretical or otherwise, which are obstacles to an easy reading of *Capital Volume One* are unfortunately (or fortunately) concentrated at the very beginning of Volume One, to be precise, in its first Part, which deals with "Commodities and Money." I therefore give the following advice: put the whole Part One aside for the time being and begin your reading with Part Two: "The Transformation of Money into Capital." In my opinion it is impossible to begin (even to begin) to understand Part I until you have read and re-read the whole of Volume One, starting with Part II. This advice is more than advice: it is a recommendation that, notwithstanding all the respect I owe my readers, I am prepared to present as an imperative. Everyone can try it out in practice for himself. If you begin Volume One at the beginning, i.e. with Part I, either you do not understand it, and give up; or you think you understand it, but that is even more serious, for there is every chance that you will have understood something quite different from what was there to be understood.

—ALTHUSSER, Preface to *Capital, Volume One.*

You cannot just write the truth; you have to write it for somebody and to somebody; somebody who can do something with it.

—BRECHT, "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties"

The "baffling figure" who both grounds and troubles de Man's rhetoric of general persuasion reappears in a most un-
likely place—in Fredric Jameson’s *Political Unconscious*. As in de Man’s text, the scene is one of resistance, specifically of the “reluctance” of some readers to “acknowledge the obvious.” But in Jameson’s text, the situation is somewhat ambiguous: his judgment of his reluctant reader is peculiarly tentative, neither wholly dismissive nor genuinely forgiving. This contradiction is symptomatic of Jameson’s unique historical and theoretical predicament, the dilemma of a “Marxist pluralism”1 in the U.S. academy. Jameson struggles to “unearth” the political unconscious of general persuasion, to “restor[e] to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of [its] fundamental history” (*PU* 20), but he ends by rewriting that history in the discourse of pluralism.

Jameson’s hesitation toward his readers is especially surprising, given that his tone of authority often rivals that of de Man. Consider this frequently cited formulation from *The Political Unconscious*, in which Jameson informs his readers: “This book will argue the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts. It conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today—the psychoanalytic or the myth-critical, the stylistic, the ethical, the structural—but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation” (17). The absolutism here is unmistakable. But this passage also hints at some of the sources of Jameson’s ambivalence toward his resisting reader(s). The inclusive list of critical methods is quintessentially Jamesonian, as is the unambiguous insistence on the possibility and the desirability of establishing a horizon, an “absolute” boundary, to contain and thus to enlist those methods, both critically and politically.

These features articulate Jameson’s theoretical “respect [for]

---

1To my knowledge, this phrase is first applied to Jameson by Jane Marcus in “Storming the Toolshed,” *Signs* 7:3 (1982), 626. Further references to this essay (ST) will be given in parentheses in the text. Marcus points out Jameson’s pluralism and his “refusal to deal with gender” (626) only in passing; her critique centers on Annette Kolodny’s celebration of the “playful pluralism” of feminist theory in “Dancing through the Minefield.”
the methodological imperative implicit in the concept of totality or totalization” (57). This commitment to a “dialectical or totalizing, properly Marxist ideal of understanding” (10) is as absolute as the projected horizon of reading and interpretation. Many commentators have observed its intellectual roots in Lukács, whom Jameson calls “the greatest Marxist philosopher of modern times” (13) and in the Hegelian prehistory of marxist theory. It is the Lukácsian Jameson who argues:

only Marxism offers a philosophically coherent and ideologically compelling resolution to the dilemma of historicism. . . . Only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential mystery of the cultural past, which, like Tiresias drinking the blood, is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak, and to deliver its long-forgotten message in surroundings utterly alien to it. This mystery can be reenacted only if the human adventure is one. . . . These matters can recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story; only if, in however disguised and symbolic a form, they are seen as sharing a single fundamental theme—for Marxism, the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity; only if they are grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot. [PU 19-20]

The philosophical antecedents of this apparently single-minded line of reasoning are clearly in the Hegelian-Lukácsian tradition I have already invoked. But if marxism, armed with its totalizing dialectical method, is the only possible response to the “dilemma of historicism” (a formulation some pluralists would disparage as “monistic dogmatism”), at the same time, in Jameson’s account, that marxism is itself an infinitely open sequence, “a single collective story,” but one so “vast” as to be perpetually “unfinished,” all-inclusive, but endlessly weaving episode upon episode and employing every conceivable weapon (psychoanalytic, myth-critical, stylistic, ethical) in its totalizing and collectivizing project.

This passion for inclusiveness, for an absolute horizon that excludes nothing, cannot be understood (much less dismissed) solely as an effect of Jameson’s intellectual lineage. It must also
be read as an expression of his commitment to or his inability to escape from a fundamentally pluralist model of political community. This model invades The Political Unconscious by way of Jameson’s own difficult relation to his audience, and it persists despite his self-conscious efforts, as a marxist, to historicize and politicize that relation. The problematics of exclusion and inclusion are entangled at every level of Jameson’s text; here, more dramatically than in any of the instances we have considered thus far, we find a potentially anti-pluralist discourse in direct confrontation with the pluralist problematic. Jameson’s resistance to pluralism as such is more explicit and rigorous than that of any of the other theorists we have considered. But ultimately The Political Unconscious remains within the problematic of general persuasion, as the latter extends its field of play even to the once forbidding terrain of marxism.

Pluralism persists in The Political Unconscious insofar as Jameson allows himself to lose sight of the irreducibly partial operation of truths, that is, insofar as he allows himself to believe that a marxist hermeneutics can disclose a truth which is not, as Brecht puts it, for some body, some particular bodies, who will do some things with it, but for every body, an “absolute” truth. The Political Unconscious is an astonishingly heterogeneous text—in some ways, in spite of its author’s totalizing project—and pluralism is only one of its important tendencies, but it ultimately exerts an overwhelming pressure on such crucial Jamesonian concepts as necessity, history, utopia, and the political unconscious itself. Pluralism persists in The Political Unconscious because Jameson retains a pluralist’s model of audience and of the theoretical possibilities of persuasion.

Jameson rewrites Booth’s concept of the “critical commonwealth” as a utopian space where political community, “achieved collectivity,” appears (or more precisely, is read) as a trope: “all class consciousness of whatever type is Utopian insofar as it expresses the unity of a collectivity; yet it must be added that this proposition is an allegorical [my emphasis] one. The achieved collectivity or organic group of whatever kind—oppressors fully as much as oppressed—is Utopian not in itself, but only insofar
as all such collectivities are themselves *figures* for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society" (290–91). Jameson’s allegorical moment differs in telling respects from de Man’s. When Jameson announces that “interpretation is here construed as an essentially allegorical act” (10), he means to challenge the anti-interpretative thrust of most contemporary post-structuralisms, including de Man’s. Furthermore, whereas de Man eschews politics, the appeal of Jameson’s figural analysis is an explicitly political one: it is as an allegory of “collective solidarity” (291) that he offers the figure of utopia to his readers. These differences are of enormous theoretical and practical significance and should not be trivialized. Yet pluralism is the most tenacious and heterogeneous discourse of American literary theory; the fundamental divergences between de Man’s text and Jameson’s testify to that heterogeneity even as they allow us to isolate and examine an essential critical continuity. Jameson offers his readers a politics (or a political allegory) of reading, a rhetorical strategy of interpretation with a utopian aim. Critically speaking, “collective solidarity”—by which Jameson means the solidarity of the “human adventure”—is an effect of adopting the utopian as a ruling trope for interpretation. But the reader to whom this critical/political appeal is addressed is familiar to us: he is the reader of general persuasion.

2As he observes later: “Still, to describe the readings and analyses contained in the present work as so many *interpretations*, to present them as so many exhibits in the construction of a new *hermeneutic*, is already to announce a whole polemic program, which must necessarily come to terms with a critical and theoretical climate variously hostile to these slogans. It is, for instance, increasingly clear that hermeneutic or interpretive activity has become one of the basic polemic targets of contemporary post-structuralism in France, which—powerfully buttressed by the authority of Nietzsche—has tended to identify such operations with historicism, and in particular with the dialectic and its valorization of absence and the negative, its assertion of the necessity and priority of totalizing thought. I will agree with this identification, with this description of the ideological affinities and implications of the ideal of the interpretive or hermeneutic act; but I will argue that the critique is misplaced*.* The Political Unconscious, p. 21.
Jameson’s position is an uneasy one, both theoretically and politically. Precisely because he is a marxist, pluralism raises especially acute problems for his argument. On the one hand, he unhesitatingly addresses both politics and history, topics that pluralists generally belittle or shun. As the passage above suggests, he is unambiguous about the privileged position he assigns marxist discourse; in fact, read together, the two passages I have cited indicate that the “priority of the political interpretation of literary texts” is, for Jameson, equivalent to the priority of marxist interpretation. As he argues in a reference that clearly reflects on his own political affiliations:

Only an ethical politics . . . will feel the need to “prove” that one of [the] forms of class consciousness is good or positive and the other reprehensible or wicked: on the grounds, for example, that working-class consciousness is potentially more universal than ruling-class consciousness, or that the latter is essentially linked to violence and repression. It is unnecessary to argue these quite correct propositions; ideological commitment is not first and foremost a matter of moral choice but of the taking of sides in a struggle between embattled groups. In a fragmented social life—that is, essentially in all class societies—the political thrust of the struggle of all groups against each other can never be immediately universal but must always necessarily be focused on the class enemy. [PU 290, my emphases].

Here, as he does throughout his work, Jameson takes sides, acknowledging the political ground of his (and every) position. In this passage, argument is deemed “unnecessary” (if not inadequate) to the task of justifying political commitment, and the demand for proof is put aside as an ethical rather than a properly political concern. But we should recall that in his prophetic account of marxism’s priority, history seems to replace “the political thrust of the struggle.” Jameson focuses there on marxism’s “philosophically coherent and ideologically compelling resolution to the dilemma of historicism” and its adequacy as an
"account of the essential mystery of the cultural past." In this argument, the turn to marxism proves necessary to solve the problem of history.

Indeed, "Always historicize!" is the "slogan" that inaugurates The Political Unconscious. Jameson regards this commandment as "the one absolute and we may even say 'transhistorical' imperative of all dialectical thought" and observes that it, "unsurprisingly," "turn[s] out to be the moral of The Political Unconscious" (9). The category of the moral will be subjected to a thorough deconstruction by the conclusion of his text, 3 but it asserts itself unproblematically here, where the political appears in the guise of history, and Jameson seems to displace the slogan "Always politicize!"

The tension between history and politics, paralleling the tension between inclusion and exclusion, permeates The Political Unconscious. Finally, it seems that history is indeed the "moral" of Jameson's theoretical story, and that this is a direct consequence of the ambiguous or contradictory status of his concept of audience. Juggling history and politics, The Political Unconscious negotiates a remarkable series of displacements around the figure of the reader. Under the pressure of his effort to appeal to his theoretical audience, Jameson rewrites both history and politics in a pluralist idiom and thus constructs a new and persuasive pluralist politics, a politics whose enemy is reification and whose weapon is the totalizing strategy of utopia.

To interrogate the "baffling figure" of a reader's resistance is to confront Jameson's dilemma in concrete terms. The Political Unconscious opens with a masterly work of theoretical synthesis, transcoding, and speculation, "On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act." It is no surprise to discover that this chapter begins with a lengthy discussion of Althusser and the problems of structural causality, mediation, historicism. As Jameson points out almost immediately, "the enterprise of constructing a properly Marxist hermeneutic must necessarily con-

front the powerful objections to traditional modes of interpretation raised by the influential school of so-called structural or Althusserian Marxism” (23). This “so-called” Althusserianism is in many ways part of the anti-hermeneutical problem Jameson hopes to solve, and his relationship to Althusser’s oeuvre is particularly important. Indeed, *The Political Unconscious* represents a major critical response—on one level, already noted, from the position of Lukács, and, on another, equally determining, from the perspective of the United States—to the Althusserian intervention in marxist theory.4

From this point of view, the hermeneutic Jameson develops and refines throughout *The Political Unconscious* rests on the force of the initial criticisms he offers of Althusser’s views, and he naturally gives them a prominent place in his discussion. What is surprising—indeed, perhaps baffling—is the footnote opening that discussion, barely half a dozen pages into the chapter, a footnote addressed to the resisting reader.

The issues raised in this section, unavoidable ones for any serious discussion of the nature of interpretation, are also unavoidably technical, involving a terminology and a “problematic” which largely transcends literary criticism. As they will inevitably strike certain readers as scholastic exercises within the philosophically alien tradition of Marxism, such readers may be advised to pass at once to the next section (below, p. 58), in which we return to a discussion of the various current schools of literary criticism proper. It should be added that not all the writers described as “Althusserians,” at the level of historical generality which is ours in the present section, would accept that characterization. [PU 23, my emphases]

This is a note to give readers pause, “certain readers,” at least. I find it quite difficult to interpret, knotted as it is with conflicting references to such readers, alien traditions, transcendence, the proper, and, most important, an elusive “we.” The complexity

of Jameson’s rhetoric makes what purports to be helpful (if somewhat obtrusive) advice puzzling to the point of obscurity. I want to offer a very close analysis of this passage; the gestures of inclusion and exclusion entwined here form an emblem of the persistence of pluralism, even in the anti-pluralist environment of a marxist text.

A glance back at de Man’s treatment of his resisting readers may illuminate Jameson’s reticence. The former’s exasperation with those so contrary as to be “(un)willing to acknowledge what [they are] bound to notice” is not veiled, and de Man leaves no doubt as to his judgment on the reluctant. He dismisses the details of these readers’ resistances and declines absolutely to make a polemical response. There is, from de Man’s point of view, simply no point in trying to correct the misunderstandings and errors of such critics.

De Man’s rejection of polemic grounds his pluralist rhetoric of general persuasion. Jameson’s footnote seems to participate in a similar kind of anti-polemic, even to exaggerate it, insofar as he shies away from any straightforward criticism of (even some of) his readers. Yet unlike de Man, Jameson defends the polemical, at least, in principle. He insists that “the unavoidably Hegelian tone of the retrospective framework of *The Political Unconscious* should not be taken to imply that . . . polemic interventions are not of the highest priority for Marxist cultural criticism. On the contrary, the latter must necessarily also be what Althusser has demanded of the practice of Marxist philosophy proper, namely ‘class struggle within theory’” (12). But rather than launching *The Political Unconscious* as an opening skirmish in the struggle Althusser demands, Jameson’s apologia for the unavoidable accents of Hegel warns us that polemic is not to be the characteristic mode of his text. Indeed, he indicates that although *The Political Unconscious* might “appropriately” be recast as a “methodological handbook,” “such a manual would have as its object *ideological analysis*.” Jameson unhesitatingly asserts that such analysis “remains . . . the appropriate designation for the critical ‘method’ specific to Marxism.” But, he continues, “for reasons indicated above, this book is not that manual, which would
necessarily settle its accounts with rival ‘methods’ in a far more polemic spirit” (12). Unthinkable as it is, this comment seems to suggest that Jameson’s method in *The Political Unconscious* will not be “specific to Marxism”—or will not be simply that.\(^5\) We shall consider his reasons for bracketing the operation of ideological critique in some detail in the coming pages, but first we must observe that he does not adduce as a reason one that may in fact be determining: his desire to avoid the polemical itself, with its inevitable exclusions.

Jameson’s remarks about the necessary but (necessarily) bypassed polemic of ideological analysis precede a direct address to some of his readers. Having reiterated his allegiance to Althusser’s view that “class struggle in theory” is the work of the marxist philosopher and that “polemical intervention” remains “the highest priority for Marxist cultural criticism,” Jameson continues: “For the non-Marxist reader, however, who many well feel that this book is quite polemic enough, I will add what should be unnecessary and underline my debt to the great pioneers of narrative analysis” (12). This “non-Marxist reader” is rarely again so directly evoked, but he is a constant presence in *The Political Unconscious*. He is certainly the unnamed addressee of the footnote, and it seems in this passage to be for his benefit alone that Jameson underscores his intellectual debts to theorists including Northrop Frye and A. J. Greimas. Why should the other reader, the marxist reader, be less concerned with this indebtedness? Or, rather, what is the theoretical effect of Jameson’s desire to reassure the non-marxist reader of his (non-marxist) intellectual debts?

Jameson avoids the style of a handbook of ideological analysis, in part, because this decision allows for a substantial lessen-

\(^5\)Jameson states flatly that his “theoretical dialogue with [the great pioneers of narrative analysis] in these pages is not merely to be taken as yet another specimen of the negative critique of ‘false consciousness’ (although it is that too, and, indeed, in the Conclusion I will deal explicitly with the problem of the proper uses of such critical gestures as demystification and ideological unmasking)”: *The Political Unconscious*, p. 12. While I would not endorse the category of false consciousness, my book is precisely a specimen of critique.
ing, if not the exclusion, of specifically marxist polemic, of the class struggle in theory. This exclusion is intimately connected to Jameson's rendering of his relation not only to Greimas and Frye, but to all the theoreticians and critics who crowd the pages of *The Political Unconscious*, and it lays the foundation for his largest methodological claims, as we shall see. The absence of marxist polemic allows Jameson to read (and to be read) as a marxist pluralist, theoretically (and politically) vulnerable to the persuasive force of every text he encounters. Just as important, it opens an avenue into *The Political Unconscious* for the reader of general persuasion.

This decision also affects the specific content of Jameson's theory, and he is not unaware of this fact. His concluding chapter, "The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology," opens by acknowledging the relation between the absence of polemic and the theory: "The conception of the political unconscious developed in the preceding pages has tended to distance itself, at certain strategic moments, from those implacably polemic and demystifying procedures traditionally associated with the Marxist practice of ideological analysis. It is now time to confront the latter directly and to spell out such modifications in more detail (281). Although Jameson specifically cites the concept of the political unconscious, *The Political Unconscious* as a whole is distanced from implacable polemic and thus from one of marxism's traditions. Jameson here refers to this move as strategic and local, but it seems actually to be a systematic feature of his argument, and, in any case, the unforeseen theoretical consequences of strategic gestures can be considerable. Despite his reference to strategy, Jameson indicates that this distancing has been a controlled development in his theory, one leading directly to "modifications" in marxist practice, particularly as it concerns questions of ideology and utopia.

Jameson's disinclination to emphasize the explicitly polemical burden of marxism derives from his conceptualization of his audience. In the body of his text, Jameson tends, when he acknowledges his audience at all, to address an indeterminate reader, as, for example, when he warns "the reader what *The
This Politics Which Is Not One

Political Unconscious is not" (10). The extraordinary difficulty (perhaps the impossibility) of establishing the political position of this indeterminate reader, who is finally the reader of general persuasion, produces the profound ambiguities both in Jameson's footnote and throughout his text. What, after all, does such a reader want? What are the theoretical grounds for his or her inclusion? Or exclusion? More to the point, what does he or she want from a "specifically" marxist critic?

It is perhaps not accidental that in his initial address to his readers, when he is establishing just what The Political Unconscious is not, the first expectation Jameson puts aside is one that could only be aroused in his marxist audience: "The reader should not, in the first place, expect anything like that exploratory projection of what a vital and emergent political culture should be and do which Raymond Williams has rightly proposed as the most urgent task of a Marxist cultural criticism" (10). This is a curious statement, conceding Williams's proposal as to the "the most urgent task of a Marxist cultural criticism" in the act of deferring it. Jameson offers a number of "good and objective historical reasons" for contemporary marxism's (and The Political Unconscious's) failure to rise to Williams's challenge: the "sorry history of Zhdanovite prescription in the arts," a "fascination with modernisms and 'revolutions' in form and language," indeed, even the fact of "a whole new political and economic 'world system,' to which the older Marxist cultural paradigms only imperfectly apply" (11). But he neglects to cite the more local, historical, and political pressures of his positioning as a marxist critic in the Age of Reagan, or, to be less topical, of his legacy as an American academic, heir to one of the more virulently anti-marxist and resolutely (and inventively) pluralistic discourses in the West. Taking this situation into account, which is to say, taking the problematic of general persuasion, in all of its genuine diversity and cunning, as the immediate political and theoretical context for The Political Unconscious, allows us to begin to read Jameson's dilemma and its inscription in his unusual footnote.

To return, then, to the note. It is nothing short of perverse for
a critic to suggest, a half dozen pages into his opening chapter, that some readers may (want to) just skip the next thirty-five-page section of his book. The most general effect of such a remark can hardly be in the service of persuasion. Reading for the traces of anti-pluralism, that is, for some challenge to the hegemony of the problematic of general persuasion, we might be tempted to cite this footnote as a startling instance of just the kind of rejection of general persuasion that we have been looking for. One might see Jameson as a critic more than happy to divide his audience explicitly into the included and the excluded, those who skip being the excluded, of course. Read in this way, Jameson betrays no pluralistic concern to persuade or even to encourage all his readers, much less to construct his audience within the theoretical confines of the problematic of general persuasion.

But this analysis takes the message of this passage at face value, smoothing over the contradictory movement of Jameson’s prose in order to extract an unproblematic set of instructions for reading the text. In fact, even if we should accept this simplifying strategy, the message doesn’t gloss easily. If, for example, we take Jameson to be trying to theorize the exclusion of certain readers, tracing out the limits of persuasion and inscribing those limits into his theory, we face an embarrassing contradiction. For far from excluding readers, this footnote goes to some lengths to include them, to reassure them that even if they do take its advice and pass on to page fifty-eight, they will not be excluded. On the contrary, they are specifically included, if on somewhat unusual terms. Whatever the subject matter of the thirty-five optional pages, Jameson’s footnote claims that it is not necessary to entertain any aspect of it in order to be included, to be part of the intended audience of The Political Unconscious. Indeed, the solicitude of the note leaves open the possibility that the readers who will (or would prefer to) pass over pages twenty-three through fifty-eight are none other than that intended audience.

Everything I have said so far assumes that Jameson expects at
least some readers to accept his blessing and cheerfully skip thirty-five pages. My own unscientific survey failed to uncover a single such person, although I did discover that numerous readers have no memory whatsoever of the footnote. One colleague argued that no one would even consider following Jameson’s advice: “it would be like walking out of a room while everyone is talking—no one likes to be excluded.” I have read “On Interpretation” without the (apparently expendable) pages and found that it is not an implausible exercise. Jameson sutures his elision convincingly, picking up the thread of his remarks about Deleuze and Guattari and the critique of hermeneutics and moving easily into his discussion of master codes and Freud. But I cannot say with certainty whether or not he actually intends his readers to take him at his word and skip well over a third of his first chapter. The footnote may be an ironic warning, simultaneously signaling that Jameson realizes some of his readers would like nothing better than to ignore part of the assignment and daring them to try it. This indeterminacy is itself revealing, symptomatic of the oblique and tentative gestures he makes toward his audience and, consequently, toward the theoretical problem of persuasion.

Generally, Jameson declines to make his readers a theme in the body of his text or a factor in his theory. The question of audience is acknowledged only in the note, placed to the side, insofar as that is possible. At the same time, the question apparently cannot be ignored entirely. Jameson is somehow concerned, but doesn’t admit to being baffled by these readers, even though he seems to believe that they are unwilling to acknowledge the “unavoidable” importance of Althusserian theory for “any serious discussion of the nature of interpretation” (23). In purely intellectual terms, such recalcitrance is mystifying, as de Man points out, and this particular remark seems calculated to offend. If the issues to be raised are “unavoidable” for “any serious discussion” of interpretation, and not simply for a serious marxist discussion, then anyone who plays the truant for thirty-five pages is by definition a person who is not
serious, someone whose discussion is unavoidably frivolous. And yet this is Jameson’s prescription: that some readers should avoid the unavoidable.

Despite these equivocations and the space they open for implied disapproval, Jameson is rather too understanding of his readers’ reluctance. He refuses to judge, much less to condemn or dismiss, any of his potential readers. Rather, he provides an apologia for their failure to meet the minimum requirements for serious discussion. He concedes that the thirty-five page section to come is “unavoidably technical,” and, unlike de Man, he does not invest this technical language with the highest intellectual value. On the contrary, he admits that the technical discourse of a marxist involves a foreign “terminology” and a “‘problematic’ which largely transcends literary criticism,” and that these drawbacks are serious barriers to reading (or at least, to some readers). Jameson genially assumes that literary critics are professionals with certain limited competencies, genuinely comfortable only with their own professional terminology, at home in “literary criticism proper.” (As we shall see below, literary criticism is a category Jameson does not sufficiently disturb.) And he also accepts—in fact, he volunteers—the suggestion, really a cover story, that their resistance to marxism is merely practical, a matter of vocabulary and disciplinary problematics.

The reader who reads this alien section is understandably surprised when in the course of it Jameson endorses the view that Althusser’s “notorious and self-serving attempt to reinvent a privileged place for philosophy proper” is “a renewed defense of the reified specialization of the bourgeois academic disciplines, and thereby an essentially antipolitical alibi” (38–39).6 In his footnote, Jameson himself concocts just such a disciplinary

6Jameson is referring to Althusser’s claim that “philosophy represents the people’s class struggle in theory,” serving “the master function of philosophical practice: ‘to draw a dividing line’ between true ideas and false ideas”: Lenin and Philosophy, p. 21. Jameson ignores Althusser’s claim to be struggling with “the beginnings of the ability to talk a kind of discourse which anticipates what will one day perhaps be a non-philosophical theory of philosophy” (ibid., 27) and apparently endorses at least part of E. P. Thompson’s argument in The Poverty of Theory (London: Merlin, 1978), especially pp. 374–79.
alibi for certain of his readers. At the end of the optional pages, he refers to the section as a “lengthy digression” (58). Indeed, he claims that his technical analyses will “inevitably strike certain readers as scholastic exercises within the philosophically alien tradition of Marxism.” “Inevitably” is a word that snare a reader interested in anti-pluralism, in the irreducible limits of general persuasion. But here the necessity expressed in that word is immediately undermined by the amorphous and contingent adjective “certain.” A rejection of the “alien” and the “scholastic” is inevitable. Yet the readers who will act so decisively remain uncertain and unspecified, save insofar as they are proper literary critics. Who are these “certain readers”? Jameson’s answer is a tautology: they are readers who will certainly respond in “such” a manner to the “scholastic exercises” of an “alien tradition.” These are readers who are at their ease with Derrida, but find Althusser “alien,” who find the nuances of hermeneutics in Freud and Frye compelling, but the subtleties of the relations between mediation and structural causality “scholastic.” Jameson is, of course, ventriloquizing his audience when he uses the epithets “alien” and “scholastic,” but it is dismaying nonetheless to see him inscribe these charges in his text, to find him so tolerant of this parochialism (what Gayatri Spivak has called “sanctioned ignorance”) and so reticent about discussing its fundamentally political significance.

Jameson’s acquiescence to the proper literary critical view of the alien (un-American) marxist critic and his scholastic (dogmatic) quarrels becomes even more problematic when it develops that his diffidence works practically to excuse readers from attending to the portion of “On Interpretation” which addresses marxist theory as such. His footnote all but concedes that the most compelling debates in marxist studies are beside the point for (“transcend”) literary criticism. Jameson provides an escape from the improper problematics that exceed the boundaries of

They bear an uncanny resemblance—in their facelessness—to the anonymous figures Wayne Booth attempts to shrug off with the phrase “whoever they really are.” De Man similarly lacks in any interest in naming names, and Hirsch gives only those that clearly stand as synecdoches for whole traditions.
literary criticism: “such readers may be advised to pass at once to the next section (below p. 58).” This is certainly not an unambiguous piece of advice. The passive voice removes Jameson from the scene: he doesn’t address his readers directly. “May be advised” is a common idiom; “are advised” is available, but he chooses the less positive formulation. “Advised” is in any case an ambivalent verb. Jameson’s tone is almost musing as he reflects on certain readers’ predilections, their “inevitable” limits, and the strategic exclusions by which they may accommodate or, to use Jameson’s term, “manage” them.

But perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Jameson is accommodating these limitations. This formulation recalls Raymond Williams’s suggestion that pluralism often happily welcomes marxism as an “unruly guest.” The generalizing imprecision of Jameson’s references to “such readers” and “certain readers” is wholly within this accommodating pluralist idiom. In this reading, Jameson’s footnote is a characteristically pluralist gesture, an invitation that arouses the anxiety of exclusion only to put it more soundly to rest. The excluded—certain readers—are finally not excluded. Instead, they are excused, and excused specifically from the burden of Jameson’s marxism, from the specifically marxist polemic of his text. That burden is here rendered inessential; in effect, it is itself excluded. Jameson poses the dilemma of reading in strictly pluralist terms, as a pragmatic issue, just as Booth and Fish would, and he blocks any political analysis of the tensions between the literary critic and the alien, not unlike de Man. Ironically, Althusser, the polemics surrounding his work, and Jameson’s own contribution to them are thus excluded, clearly marked off as an aspect of the text which is not irreducible or essential to Jameson’s largest claims. This happens despite the latter’s insistence that a marxist hermeneutic “must necessarily confront the powerful objections” of Althusserian marxism. The “polemic” that speaks unhesitatingly against the anti-hermeneutic of post-structuralism in general can apparently be offered to certain readers without a detailed analysis of that anti-hermeneutic’s marxist instantiation: the fig-
ures of Deleuze and Guattari can stand in here for Althusser, a substitution that must give us pause.⁸

I will return to Althusser’s place in The Political Unconscious, but first I want briefly to contrast Jameson’s footnote with the superficially similar passage from Althusser’s Preface to Capital that I have taken as an epigraph. Althusser also asks his (Marx’s) readers to skip a portion of the text. He offers his opinion in the strongest possible terms: “This advice is more than advice: it is a recommendation that, notwithstanding all the respect I owe my readers, I am prepared to present as an imperative” (LP 81). Althusser gives reasons for advising an elliptical reading of Capital rather different from Jameson’s apparent motives for warning off some of his audience. In Althusser’s view, the elision is only a temporary one, but it is essential in order to understand Marx’s argument. Eventually, the reader will return to Part One, “Commodities and Money,” but to begin at the beginning is to take an enormous risk: “either you do not understand it, and give up; or you think you understand it, but that is even more serious, for there is every chance that you will have understood something quite different from what was there to be understood” (LP 81). Understanding, as we have seen, is the pluralist trope that grounds general persuasion and thus enables theoretical commitments to its operation to survive in the face of unremitting evidence of the practical failures of persuasive efforts. Jameson’s footnote stays well away from the question of understanding, though his remarks enable us to speculate that any lapse or lack of understanding would be explained by reference to his alien terminology. He is careful not to suggest that his thirty-five-page discussion of Althusser’s intervention in marxist theory might not be “understood” by some of his

⁸In another interesting note, Jameson enumerates the contributors to the “critical and theoretical climate variously hostile” to interpretation as such. The list names Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard and eight different texts, before concluding: “and last but not least, Louis Althusser, et al., Reading Capital” (21).
readers or that such failures—should they occur—might be neither accidental nor purely intellectual.

In the sharpest possible contrast, Althusser unambiguously defines understanding—and thus reading—as both a theoretical and a political process. As he observes, citing one of the difficulties of reading *Capital*:

*Difficulty No. 1*, absolutely and massively determinant, is an ideological difficulty, and therefore in the last resort a political difficulty.

Two sorts of readers confront *Capital*: those who have direct experience of capitalist exploitation (above all the proletarians or wage-labourers in direct production, but also, with nuances according to their place in the production system, the non-proletarian wage-labourers); and those who have no direct experience of capitalist exploitation, but who are, on the contrary, ruled in their practices and consciousness by the ideology of the ruling class, bourgeois ideology. The first have no ideologico-political difficulty in understanding *Capital* since it is a straightforward discussion of their concrete lives. The second have great difficulty in understanding *Capital* (even if they are very "scholarly," I would go so far as to say, especially if they are very "scholarly") because there is a political incompatibility between the theoretical content of *Capital* and the ideas they carry in their heads, ideas which they "rediscover" in their practices (because they put them there in the first place). That is why the Difficulty No. 1 of *Capital* is in the last instance a political difficulty. [LP 74]

Althusser's stark account of the politics of understanding, including the politics of understanding theory, contrasts with Jameson's cautious and contradictory advice. Althusser renders Marx's (and his own) audience(s) historically and politically

9To pursue Althusser's argument in its own terms would involve us in a lengthy examination of Difficulty No. 2. He calls this the "theoretical difficulty" and connects it to the claim that *Capital* is "a work of pure theory," rather than "a book of 'concrete' history or ... 'empirical' political economy" (76). I would like to suggest, however, that he does not essentialize class positions; the difficulty of grasping the argument of *Capital* is not the same as the impossibility of understanding it; Althusser stresses that the problem/process of overcoming these difficulties is always both political and theoretical.
concrete by specifying the terms of their relation to capital. The political limits or difficulties of understanding are acknowledged, and they carry both practical and theoretical weight. Jameson’s footnote is a kind of revision of Althusser’s warning to the readers of Capital, but it cannot address its pluralist audience as class actors. Jameson’s references to “such” and “certain” readers retain none of the dangerous political polemic that characterizes Althusser’s comment. Whereas the latter concludes that readers with no direct experience of capitalist exploitation will have great difficulty understanding Capital (“especially if they are very ‘scholarly’”), Jameson represents “certain” readers’ disaffection from the tradition of an alien marxism as a problem of scholarship, that is, of insufficient scholarship and thus of unfamiliarity with marxist terminology and problematics. More scholarship might actually solve Jameson’s dilemma. If “such readers” would acquaint themselves with the scholarly tradition of marxism, his footnote could be deleted.

Ironically, Jameson’s representation of “such readers” defies his own insight into the urgency of constructing a “whole new logic of collective dynamics, with categories that escape the taint of some mere application of terms drawn from individual experience” (PU 294). Rather than address the theoretical question of his audience and its resistance in terms of the dynamics of class—or of some other kind of collective struggle—Jameson here thinks of his readers as individual literary critics who need to do more research. But they should begin somewhere other

---

10Althusser himself is revising Marx, specifically a letter Marx wrote, in March 1872, to Maurice La Châtre on the occasion of the publication of Capital in a French serialization. It reads, in part, “Dear Citizen, I applaud your idea of publishing the translation of Das Kapital as a serial. In this form the book will be more accessible to the working-class, a consideration which to me outweighs everything else. This is the good side of your suggestion, but here is the reverse of the medal: the method of analysis which I have employed, and which had not previously been applied to economic subjects, makes the reading of the first chapters rather arduous, and it is to be feared that the French public, always impatient to come to a conclusion, eager to know the connexion between general principles and the immediate questions that have aroused their passions, may be disheartened because they will be unable to move on at once.” Cited in Althusser and Balibar, Reading Capital, p. 9.
than these thirty-five pages of *The Political Unconscious*. The practical shortcomings of individual readers are of course pluralism's category for understanding (that is, pluralism's alibi for) the recurring failures of persuasion. Hence the pluralist's lack of interest in theorizing the irreducible specificity of any group of readers in detail. If we hope to pursue Jameson's marxist hermeneutics beyond the boundaries of general persuasion, we must struggle to give his readers faces and names and political places.

II

The example of Jameson, of a "marxist pluralism," is especially important to my argument in part because the locution itself is nearly an oxymoron. As I observed in my opening chapter, marxism is one discourse that privileges exclusions; class is one of many potential limits to general persuasion. In this sense, 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. The fact, then, that a marxist pluralism is possible, that *The Political Unconscious* remains trapped within the problematic of general persuasion, alerts us, first, to the extraordinary flexibility and power of pluralism in academic discourse in this country, and, second, to the ambiguity of various theoretical discourses, including marxism, in relation to the opposition pluralism/anti-pluralism.

I have already discussed the way in which the colloquial meaning of the word "pluralist"—and its cold war political resonance—shadows every theory of pluralism. Jameson tries to turn this resonance back on itself, speaking of pluralism disdainfully, almost with contempt, in *The Political Unconscious*. The very appearance of the word in his discourse sets him apart from most of the other theorists we have considered. He criticizes the "various contemporary ideologies of pluralism" for their "unexamined valorization of the open ('freedom') versus
its inevitable binary opposition, the closed (‘totalitarianism’)" (31). But Jameson’s references are basically casual ones, and his use of the word pluralism often approaches colloquialism. Despite his suspicions about “the ideological climate of . . . contemporary American pluralism” and its “openness,” the degree to which he endorses pluralism’s account of its own character, even in the act of attempting to discredit it, is disturbing. Thus, he informs us that marxism “must compete in the ‘pluralism’ of the intellectual marketplace today” (10), and he stresses that “pluralism means one thing when it stands for the coexistence of methods and interpretations in the intellectual and academic marketplace, but quite another when it is taken as a proposition about the infinity of possible meanings and methods and their ultimate equivalence with and substitutability for one another” (31). While we must reject the notion of infinite meaning (here, as in Ken Newton’s conversation with Derrida, the general absence of standards is identified as pluralism), it seems that Jameson finds pluralism’s marketplace philosophy of intellectual discourse plausible and relatively benign. His concern to counter the anti-hermeneutic view of dissemination and free play distracts him from a critical consideration of pluralism’s more mundane discursive proclivities. To agree to “compete” without first thoroughly deconstructing the field that pluralism calls us to is to concede the contest before it has begun. Pluralism certainly stands for coexistence, if “stands for” means “symbolizes” or “champions.” But its concrete discursive effects are quite another matter. One consequence of Jameson’s lack of systematic interest in pluralist discourse is the reinscription of its effects in his text. If we want to break with the pluralist problematic, we must interrogate its notion of competition and the operation by which methods and interpretations coexist in an academy conceived as a marketplace.

Jameson’s willingness to employ the pluralist metaphor of the marketplace is symptomatic of his text’s complicity with pluralist problematics. In fact, marxism cannot simply “coexist” in the intellectual marketplace except insofar as it is rewritten in pluralist terms; rather, marxism, in literary theory as in political econ-
Seductive Reasoning

omy, throws that market into radical question and interrogates its enabling conditions. That Jameson has not pursued this question very far is clear from his view that pluralism itself is primarily a brake on interpretative activity, rather than a constant incentive to interpret. He suggests that "the program to which the various contemporary ideologies of pluralism are most passionately attached is a largely negative one: namely to forestall that systematic articulation and totalization of interpretive results which can only lead to embarrassing questions about the relationship between them and in particular the place of history and the ultimate ground of narrative and textual production" (PU 32, my emphasis). Although I agree that pluralism is always anxious to block certain "systematic articulations," it is disappointing that Jameson evokes history here rather than politics. Historicism is not per se hostile to pluralism. As Terry Eagleton observes, "'Always historicize!' is by no means a specifically Marxist recommendation; and . . . though Jameson would no doubt gladly concede the point . . . , such a concession merely blurs the specificity of Marxism itself, which is not at all to 'historicize' (any more than ideology is always and everywhere naturalising), but, in a word, to grasp history as structured material struggle."11 Jameson almost seems to take history as an unproblematic ground for marxism's challenge to pluralism. He might have demanded an inquiry, not into "ultimate groundings," but into the dirty secret of pluralism in the United States, which is class conflict. His twin concerns—to point out that pluralism blocks certain systematic analyses and to discredit what he sees as post-structuralism's self-indulgent fascination with the play of substitution—lead Jameson to overlook the fact that pluralism pursues positive projects as well and is not confined to the strategy of disarming systematic totalizations. The productivity of pluralist discourse is unlimited, and the problematic of general persuasion may even operate by projecting totalizations. That is in effect the strategy behind Booth's concept of the critical commonwealth and Fish's account of inter-

interpretation as "the only game in town." And, in *The Political Unconscious* as well, totalization is the vehicle of general persuasion.

If we are to pursue the special case of "marxist pluralism," the reading of the pluralist problematic I have offered so far must be extended somewhat in the direction of an "external" critique, a turn toward the larger social formation of which the pluralist problematic in literary studies is only one element. Such an investigation would ultimately seek to trace in detail the forms and the history of the affiliations that connect the critical pluralism of literary theory and the university at large to the political and cultural pluralism that is such a powerful force in the United States. Jameson's remarks about the coding of pluralism and its other as "freedom" versus "totalitarianism" indicate that he is well aware of the relations binding the apparently innocent "'pluralism' of the intellectual marketplace" to other social and political institutions. His persistent use of scare quotes around the word pluralism implies his distance from the term and from the ordinary politics of pluralism in the United States. But Jameson's adoption of that same marketplace imagery (and logic) indicates that he has not escaped the seductions of general persuasion.

Like most other commentators, including those who examine literary critical pluralism in considerable depth, Jameson doesn't address the discourse of contemporary political pluralism directly; obviously, his focus is elsewhere. Many observers have remarked on the striking coincidences of imagery and narrative between Adam Smith's account of the operations of the market and the liberal democrat's account of the workings of his state; even the briefest comparison is illuminating. In both stories, the individual is the agent of all significant action, and his right to act is secured against all objections, save the direct claims of another individual's rights. Each narrative posits such individuals as coherent, rational beings, acting "selfishly" in pursuit of their own interests (so long as the chase does not interfere with the rights of others) in a realm that is defined as a *market*. Garry Wills writes: "Laissez faire means, in effect, let the other man do
what he wants, and the whole point of liberalism was this de­
ference to others, the elaborate arrangement that made every­
one keep “hands off” everyone else. The market, in order to
work, must invite people in, encourage (in that sense) participa-
tion, stimulate the widest possible competitive initiative. But all
those who enter the game must abide by its outcome” (333).
Booth almost seems to parody these terms when he urges us
both to pursue one chosen monism as best we can and to give
the other guy’s monism a fair shake, and Fish’s claim that “inter-
pretation is the only game in town” all but does away with the
need to “invite” or “encourage” participation: he simply defines
everyone, willy-nilly, as part of the game, as does de Man, by
other means. Jameson implicates himself in the outcome of this
pluralist game when he accedes to the metaphor of the market.
As Gayatri Spivak suggests, pluralism operates precisely by “in-
viting [us] into the center at the price of exacting from [us] the
language of centrality” (S 106).

That Booth’s and Hirsch’s strictures, their guidelines for right
reading, as well as Fish’s therapeutic rhetoric, are necessary at
all reveals a certain perturbation in the critical marketplace. The
interference of the police function in this marketing apparatus is
ideally to be kept to a minimum. The beauty of the model of the
market is that it seems to work “all by itself,” just as, according
to Althusser, the subjects of ideology work “all by themselves”
(LP 181). Indeed, tinkering (sometimes known as planning) is
regarded as a hubristic attempt to fix something that, by defini-
tion, can never be broken. (Current traditional polemics against
theory might be read in just this light.) As Wills observes, “the
claim of the Market is that actions undertaken for self-interest
are concatenated by Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ to bring
about universal benefit” (NA 230). In the political market, “the
‘random’ unpredictable act of altruism” baffles the system.
Robert Paul Wolff suggests, “it is essential to the success of this
proposal that everyone vote selfishly. If too many people, out of
a misguided concern for the general good, vote for what they
think will benefit society as whole, then the result will be an
opinion about the total happiness rather than a measure of it”
This Politics Which Is Not One

(NA 230). "Misguided" individuals who jam the system lose sight of the fact that a liberal state speaks for everyone, that is, "for the people," but listens to or recognizes those people only in the terms of their individuality, one at a time. In this way, liberalism blocks the very perception of significant differences among the people (of classes, for example), first, in order to generalize them in a homogeneous and unified whole, the better to represent them (pun intended), and, then, to prevent them from forming disruptive combinations, collectivities in pursuit of the general good, which would complicate if not destroy the essential, totalizing fiction of the unity of the people.

The parallel structures of the capitalist market and the liberal polity are repeated in the problematic of general persuasion. We can hear the echo of the declaration that government should be "of the people, by the people, and for the people" when M. H. Abrams insists, against the claims of what he calls deconstruction, that the reader interprets "determinably meaningful texts by, for, and about human beings" (PR 588). The metaphor of the market also clarifies Booth's difficulty in remaining a pluralist while actively defending pluralism's model of interpretation. The root of the embarrassment that surrounds any pluralist polemic lies in the knowledge that if pluralism's account of interpretation is correct, there should be no need for the authorities to enforce it. (Fish makes this point.) The trouble, both for the political system Wills and Wolff describe and for the interpretative model of pluralism, is dogma, that is, ideology and theory.

A dogmatic commitment to a program for the general good leads certain misguided individuals to vote unselfishly and, at the same time, self-consciously; both qualities are completely antithetical to the operation of the market. The "natural" sense of belonging to a national community, of being an American, is problematized by the very effort of thought that leads, on the one hand, to the rejection of individualism and, on the other, to the rejection of Americanism. Theory makes the same troubling double play against the reader of general persuasion. The theorist withdraws, self-consciously, from the natural practice of reading and dogmatically imposes a series of mediations that
fragment the critical commonwealth (create “schools”). The anti-pluralist aggravates this disruption. In her practice, the rejection of innocent reading and the emphasis on system is focused by the question of exclusion; her double reading, the symptomatic reading that privileges the “break”—between reader and text and among readers—enables a critique of general persuasion. In a certain sense, this is the central project of marxist ideology critique, which explains its obsession with theorizing mediations. The intellectual market, as Wills calls it, resists such interventions because they expose discontinuities—resisting readers—in the apparently homogeneous field; suddenly, the reader sees that the market is made.

Wills’s analysis of this intellectual market in *Nixon Agonistes* is superb. I have already invoked his observation that in the post-war years the American academy reached a consensus that excluded the “evil of system,” that is, the dangerous and unnecessary dogmatism of theory, which threatens, because of its totalizing power, “to close the market.” As I also observed above, marxism can stand as paradigmatic of the system that excludes and must therefore be excluded. Indeed, the broader historical analysis of pluralism of which this book is only a small part would have to trace the twentieth-century history of the theoretical and political confrontations between marxism and pluralism in the United States. We might follow the lead of political scientists who have been explicit about the importance of the exclusion of marxism to the constitution of pluralism. As Theodore J. Lowi puts it, pluralism “made a major contribution by helping to break down the Marxian notion of solidary classes and class-dominated government.” Lowi also observes that “the strength of pluralism rest[s] in very great part upon the proposition . . . that a pluralist society frees politics by creating a discontinuity between the political world and the socioeconomic world.”

Pluralists are committed to the mystifying proposition that critical pluralism frees interpretation by creating a discontinuity between the academic world and power. In both arenas,

---

pluralists generally defend the view that persuasion can be insulated from the impurities of power. And in both, power is aligned with theory or dogma. The flight from theory is represented as an escape from power into community, from history into nature, from conflict and discontinuity into a critical "commonwealth" where "interpretation is the only game in town."

The persistence of anti-theoretical themes in pluralist discourse suggests a relation between the rise of pragmatism and the unrelenting pressure of the critiques confronting pluralism. It may be that an "anti-theory" position now seems the only one available to the defenders of pluralism. From the perspective of pluralism, pragmatism has the attraction of seeming to appeal neither to (special) interests nor to irrational desires, but to the critical community as an organic whole. Richard Rorty observes:

of course the non-Kantian is a parasite—flowers could not sprout from the dialectical vine unless there were an edifice into whose chinks it could insert its tendrils. No constructors, no deconstructors. No norms, no perversions. Derrida (like Heidegger) would have no writing to do unless there were a "metaphysics of presence" to overcome. Without the fun of stamping out parasites, on the other hand, no Kantian would bother to continue building. Normal philosophers need to think, for example, that in forging the powerful tools of modern analytic philosophy, they are developing weapons to ensure victory in the coming final struggle with the decadent dialecticians. *Everybody needs everybody else.*

These are the kinds of needs Wayne Booth can accommodate in his "critical commonwealth"; indeed, these are the very needs

---

he needs. This is also a utopian vision. Rorty's logic recalls Jameson's claim that deconstruction's assault on totalization is in fact an ironic confirmation of the totalizing gesture itself.

This negative and methodological status of the concept of "totality" may also be shown at work in those very post-structural philosophies which explicitly repudiate such "totalizations" in the name of difference, flux, dissemination, and heterogeneity. . . . If such perceptions are to be celebrated in their intensity, they must be accompanied by some initial appearance of continuity, some ideology of unification already in place, which it is their mission to rebuke and shatter. . . . We will therefore suggest that these are second-degree or critical philosophies, which reconfirn the status of the concept of totality by their very reaction against it. [PU 53]

Cornel West has observed that this "slippery" attempt to "disarm" the opposition is not persuasive argument but "a defensive recuperative strategy that co-opts the deconstructionists."14 But what is most striking to me is the echo of the (non-marxist) Stanley Fish asserting the impossibility of discontinuity in literary studies; Jameson's totalizations are similar defenses against difference and discontinuity. What remains to be seen is why he perceives these interpretative (or anti-interpretative) strategies to be such a profound threat to the marxist enterprise—and how pluralism enables his defense. How does it happen that pluralism and the resistance to pluralism, for certainly The Political Unconscious participates in the latter, arrive at the same destination, even merge? How do Jameson's appropriation of the figure of the marketplace, his commitment to totalization, and his utopian allegory combine to implicate him in the pluralist problematic and bind him to the reader of general persuasion?

It would be a serious error—a characteristically pluralist mistake, as well—to read the crisis of pluralism solely as a moment in the history of ideas, to formalize it and thus obscure its contingency. The resistance to general persuasion includes the in-

intellectual and political critique mounted from the margins of pluralism's own (allegedly) "common enterprise." The population of the university has changed in the last forty years; those once utterly excluded now form part of the audience pluralism seeks to generalize and discipline in the figure of the pluralist reader/critic. Questions of race, class, and gender have disrupted pluralism's complacency, and, as Jameson points out, these questions introduce notions of the collective which are quite heterogeneous to pluralism. This aspect of anti-pluralism threatens general persuasion much as any political discourse threatens a discourse seeking to confine itself to an ethical problematic. Most pluralists respond to this political intrusion by reading it as essentially extrinsic, as merely contextual; by trying to reduce the substance of its critique to a matter of ethics; and by displacing their anxieties about resisting readers into debates wholly devoted to the (im)possibility of reading at all. But these strategies meet more and more resistance. Anti-pluralisms bring the problem of politics within the confines of literary studies and thus force us to confront power, not as a polluting or compromising influence on our discourse, but as an enabling structure or economy internal to it.

Jameson's position in this conflict is different, as one might expect. His work is always explicitly aligned with the forces that threaten pluralism, and he has in fact contributed to the current crisis of pluralist discourse. Jameson is consciously reflecting on the political situation in the United States, and his reading of this situation informs both his understanding of his own political task and his theory. In The Political Unconscious, however, his discussion of these questions does not form part of the general argument of the book. It is largely confined to another footnote. Jameson argues:

The critique of totalization in France goes hand in hand with a call for a "molecular" or local, nonglobal, nonparty politics: and this repudiation of the traditional forms of class and party action evidently reflects the historic weight of French centralization (at work both in the institutions and in the forces that oppose them), as well as the belated emergence of what can very loosely be
called a "countercultural" movement, with the breakup of the old cellular family apparatus and a proliferation of subgroups and alternate "life-styles." In the United States, on the other hand, it is precisely the intensity of social fragmentation of this latter kind that has made it historically difficult to unify Left or "anti-systemic" forces in any durable and effective organizational way. Ethnic groups, neighborhood movements, feminism, various "countercultural" or alternative life-style groups, rank-and-file labor dissidence, student movements, single-issue movements—all have in the United States seemed to project demands and strategies which were theoretically incompatible with each other and impossible to coordinate on any practical political basis. The privileged form in which the American Left can develop today must therefore necessarily be that of an alliance politics; and such a politics is the strict practical equivalent of the concept of totalization on the theoretical level. In practice, then, the attack on the concept of "totality" in the American framework means the undermining and the repudiation of the only realistic perspective in which a genuine Left could come into being in this country. [PU 54]

It is difficult to object to Jameson's suggestion that the American Left must privilege a politics of alliances. But The Political Unconscious offers us the theoretical equivalent of alliance politics, alliance theory, as it were, and the theoretical allies Jameson is willing to enlist are far more "diverse" than the political ones he lists here. Alliance theory is pluralist politics: a diverse and inclusive critical community, with a place in its structure for everyone, including the nominal marxist, struggling together for "our life together."

Even if there were not such a striking similarity between the pluralist ideal and alliance theory, Jameson's account would be problematic. In the first place, the relationship he describes between politics and theory is one of expressive causality; alliance politics is "the strict practical equivalent of the concept of totalization on the theoretical level." Structurally, the two instances are homologous, and Jameson is reasserting the very model of mediation that he works so brilliantly in the rest of his text to dismantle and complicate. The relations between politics and theory are in fact discontinuous, shifting, and unpredictable—not unlike alliance politics, in some ways. But this homology
leaps over the complexity of the mediations at work, the better to assert the necessity of totalizing theories of cultural production.

Equally troubling is Jameson’s diagnosis of the problems that continue to divide the so-called American Left. His explanation for the welter of interest groups and sects in the United States is rather terse. Given the importance of the decisions to be made, a fuller consideration would seem to be in order. “Social fragmentation” is at best an extremely limited explanation of a phenomenon that certainly also needs to be referred to such matters as the enormous size and strength of the U.S. economy, and, hence, of U.S. capital, and the violent and tremendously effective suppression of left activists and organizations, first in the thirties and (especially in the academy) again in the fifties.

Furthermore, had Jameson examined the practical situation of any of the various “‘antisystemic’ forces” he lists, he might have encountered a rather different analysis of their shortcomings and a different prescription for overcoming factionalism and division. To take the example of feminism: feminist theory and political polemic are currently alive with criticism, not of the left as a whole, for failing to achieve totalization, but of feminist theory and practice itself, precisely for practicing a premature (if not wholly unwarranted) totalization around the notion of woman. Feminists from all parts of the movement are offering critiques of the tendency in much of their critical and theoretical oeuvre and their organizing for “woman” to signify white, middle-class, and heterosexual and, thus, to obliterate the differences among women and erase the specificity of the lives of women who are black or working-class or lesbian. In many of these texts, the failure of alliance politics is interpreted as the

result of totalization; alliances have collapsed because the parties did not recognize one another’s differences, or acknowledge the discontinuities between their stories, and thus failed to construct solidarity across those differences in the pursuit of specific ends. The very last thing that might enable feminist discourses to contribute to the construction of an effective alliance politics—by means, for example, of an intersection of the concerns of black and white women or working-class and middle-class women—would be a totalizing theory.

Jameson doesn’t consider feminism or any other case in particular. The magic of expressive causality is that it saves one the task of investigating specific instances of social practice in their details. One can project back and forth across the social field, with a fair amount of confidence that one will find “strict practical equivalents.” But Jameson’s oversight may have been overdetermined. By not looking too closely into the internal politics of the actual constituencies that might be expected to form this alliance, Jameson can again bracket the problem of audience; this footnote, not unlike the earlier one, protects him from having to consider the precise nature of that audience, politically or theoretically, and enables him to continue to address a general (pluralist) reader.

III

Jameson’s diagnosis of the fragmentation of the American left leads him directly to alliance theory. He produces marxism as a method of methods, a master hermeneutic that reveals History as a “single great collective story” (PU 19). The inclusiveness of The Political Unconscious is one of its most prominent formal features; it uncannily recalls the efforts of Wayne Booth, in a very different book, Critical Understanding, to allow his opponents to live on his pages. Of course this very gesture of inclusiveness can rewrite opponents as unwitting accomplices; but, for his part, Jameson does not acknowledge that any significant distortion is necessary to accomplish his appropriations. “Marxism
subsumes other interpretative modes or systems; or, to put it in methodological terms, . . . the limits of the latter can always be overcome, and their more positive findings retained" (47, my emphases). This belief that limits "can always be overcome" extends from Jameson’s reading of other interpretative modes to his reading of other readers and of himself as a reader. Limits are thus never really limits.

Jameson refuses, theoretically and politically, to exclude any interpretative strategy from the totalizing project of marxism. In his formulation, “positive findings” are not to be read symptomatically, to be interpreted as the trace of another class’s interested efforts to construct history, but to be “retained.” The “positive findings” of other methods are just that: positive and essentially accurate (accurate in their essence). They require the historicizing contextualization that (apparently) only marxism can provide, but Jameson seems to believe that no critical approach represents the historical forces ranged against marxism in such a way as to bar its effective appropriation by contemporary marxist readers. He gives no quarter to Bakhtin’s suggestion that prior to any act of “appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language . . . , but rather it exists in other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own.”16 Bakhtin offers what I would call an anti-pluralist argument; in his view, “there are no ‘neutral’ words and forms. . . . All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party” (293), and there are limits to what tropes and forms can get away with. While no word or method has an essence, an unchanging meaning or effect, to take a word is not always possible: “many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them; they cannot be assimilated into his context and fall out of it; it is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker” (294).

The question of method may seem to be a purely formal matter, but Jameson reveals that it always concerns readers. He writes:

Marxism cannot today be defended as a mere substitute for such other methods, which would them triumphalistically be consigned to the ashcan of history; the authority of such methods springs from their faithful consonance with this or that local law of a fragmented social life, this or that subsystem of a complex and mushrooming cultural superstructure. In the spirit of a more authentic dialectical tradition, Marxism is here conceived as the "untranscendable horizon" that subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them. [PU 10].

This concession to "undoubted sectoral validity" is an appeal to the general reader of the pluralist problematic. It refers to the process of preserving the positive findings of even antagonistic methods, but it goes further than that position in that it explains how validity is achieved. Non-marxist methods acquire their "authority" from "their faithful consonance with this or that local law of fragmented social life." This faithfulness is apparently not implicated in the class struggle; Jameson does not address the way in which politics and power are inscribed within theory, even within method, and thus within all efforts to read the local laws of the social. Indeed, his position amounts to an assertion that it is possible to escape politics and somehow be faithful to the literal fragmentation of the social.

Theoretically, this position returns to the model Althusser locates in the early Marx, to the transcendent myth of reading at first sight. The social text is fetishized as given, and alienation or fragmentation is simply present in social life to be read off. The politics of reading becomes something extrinsic. A properly marxist political orientation is appended to another method, one that has already "faithfully" rendered some "local law of a fragmented social life." The reader's, that is, the critic's political positioning does not enter into the calculation. But Jameson does acknowledge the problem of audience. He indicates that
“Marxism cannot today be defended as a mere substitute for such other methods” (my emphases). This remark doesn’t refer to Jameson’s argument as such, but to his readers; such a defense of marxism—one that “triumphalistically” consigned other methods to “the ashcan of history”—would not be persuasive to most of them “today.” But Jameson doesn’t pause over this insight into the theoretical significance of audience. He soon begins to sound eerily like the other pluralists in the marketplace, each accommodating the needs of others, each contributing to the general good by pursuing “sectoral validity.”

The invocation of the “authentic dialectical tradition” works for Jameson much as the invocation of dialogue functions for Booth, or interpretation for Fish; it establishes a homogeneous field for the play of general persuasion. This is a marxist criticism so eager for alliances that it graciously includes all methods and thus makes a generous appeal to all readers. Jameson is unwilling to mark the exclusions that constitute his marxist audience in its particularity. He does argue that interpretation takes place on a “Homeric battlefield” and that “only another, stronger interpretation can overthrow and practically refute an interpretation already in place” (13). (One wonders if the Homeric reference stands in for a revolutionary one. In the Iliad, Athens and Troy share a cultural cosmos; the war is underwritten by the continuity between their social fields.) But when Jameson outlines the strength of marxist interpretation, he refuses to assign any significance to the limited and specific interests or desires of the audience that confronts it. The question of what constitutes “strength,” and for whom, is addressed in the most general and metaphorical terms. Rather than cite the particular interests to be served — and thwarted—by a marxist hermeneutic, Jameson takes refuge in the metaphor of scales: “the metacommentary thus has the advantage of allowing us to measure the yield and density of a properly Marxist interpretive act against those of other interpretive methods—the ethical, the psychoanalytic, the myth-critical, the semiotic, the structural, and the theological—against which it must compete in the “pluralism” of the intellectual market place today. I will here argue
the priority of a Marxian interpretive framework in terms of *semantic richness*" (10, my emphases). The form of the list reappears, reiterating Jameson’s concern with marxism’s relationship to all other forms of literary criticism. It is somewhat disconcerting to find Adam Smith’s metaphor employed with no effort to unpack its ideological imposture. I do not want to question in absolute terms the “semantic richness,” “yield” or “density” of marxist analysis. I hope it is clear by now that the possibility of any such “absolute” questioning is one of the objects of my critique. What must be put into question here is the existence of a scale that might measure such qualities. This scale represents the utopian aspect of Jameson’s literary theory; the pluralist moment, outside politics, when marxism can establish its priority in quantifiable terms. The scale transcends the divisions between certain readers and the alien marxist reader. Now it is marxism’s chance to claim a faithful consonance, not to local laws, but to the law of History itself.

Jameson asserts the “priority” of marxist interpretation as the politics of general persuasion, that is, he asserts its general priority, its theoretical persuasiveness, for every reader and every critic. He thus achieves a familiar pluralist indifference to the interests that must divide his audience. James Kavanagh has suggested that Jameson’s discourse is “effective” precisely because “it continually produces a Marxism that is recognized as something else—as something that can comfortably digest (Jameson might say ‘complete’) and be digested by, any and every other discourse.”17 Jameson produces marxism within the problematic of general persuasion, and he conceals both the exclusions and the acknowledgment of exclusion that constitute the marxist audience as distinct and revolutionary. Instead, *The Political Unconscious* speaks in the pluralist marketplace to the “universal audience” it longs for. It respects the limits of general persuasion.

It is not surprising, then, that *The Political Unconscious* concludes with a utopian celebration of the utopian. The reader of

general persuasion is one who does not take sides, a general reader, a reader with no particular position, no place, as it were. When Jameson tells his reader that "all class consciousness of whatever type is Utopian insofar as it expresses the unity of a collectivity," he is, as he admits, offering an "allegorical" interpretation. As he puts it, "the achieved collectivity . . . of whatever kind—oppressors fully as much as oppressed—is Utopian not in itself, but only insofar as all such collectivities are themselves figures for . . . an achieved Utopian or classless society" (291). Cornel West reads this passage as "utopianism gone mad" and "Marxism in deep desperation." I read it as pluralism. It posits an audience of general readers for whom the figure of the Utopian can appear as figure, really as pure form, regardless of its historical content—fascism, for example—and without reference to the politics of readings. Jameson makes no reference here to the politics of the readers of this figure—or to the possibility that figuration and politics are always mutually determining. Uncannily like de Man, a figure who does not appear in The Political Unconscious, Jameson seems to assume an unconstrained reader for whom the allegory cannot help but be legible; limits can always be overcome. Utopian reading is for the reader of general persuasion.

In de Man's case, of course, figuration was the ruin of history. Taken as a group, the pluralist texts that we have considered suggest that the refusal of any "literal" history is one of the necessary effects of the problematic of general persuasion. To invoke the historical is not, however, sufficient as a critique of pluralism. The flight from history that characterizes pluralist discourse, whether it is viewed as a logic (Hirsch), an ethics (Booth) or a theory of rhetoric (Fish and de Man), alerts the critical reader to the significance of history in the pluralist problematic and tempts her to press historical claims before all others. There is a certain level on which this temptation must be resisted. Jameson's account of history places him at a considerable distance from other pluralists; and yet it seems that for him history, rather than signifying politics, actually replaces politics, just as the reader of general persuasion replaces the marxist and
the potentially marxist reader. Suzanne Gearhart warns that a critique of de Man cannot be offered "from the standpoint of a theory of history that would claim to be the ultimate ground or context in which all events and objects, including literature, would be situated." She alerts us to the fact that a "theory of history that takes for granted its categories (time and space), its language, and its own metaliterary, metaformal (and ultimately metahistorical) status is not 'post-de Manian,' but 'pre-de Manian.'"18 This warning is crucial. What Jameson calls the "necessity" of history must be approached cautiously if we are to avoid slipping into the very pluralist polemic I have been at such pains to describe.

Jane Marcus's critique of Annette Kolodny's feminist pluralism offers one model of the resistance to a pluralist invocation of history as ground. She charges:

Kolodny's liberal relaxation of the tensions among us and the tensions between feminists and the academy reflects a similar relaxation on the part of historians and political activists. What this does is to isolate Marxist feminists and lesbians on the barricades while "good girl" feminists fold their tents and slip quietly into the establishment. There is a battlefield (race, class, and sexual identity) within each one of us, another battlefield where we wage these wars with our own feminist colleagues (as in Signs), and a third battlefield where we defend ourselves from male onslaughts both on our work and on the laws that govern our lives as women in society. It is far too early to tear down the barricades. Dancing shoes will not do. We still need our heavy boots and mine detectors. [ST 623]

Marcus's invocation of an internal battlefield briefly echoes my analysis of de Man as a theorist who internalizes the warring forces of polemic and projects them into his text. But in her model, aporia is not only or even primarily a narrowly defined linguistic event; the warring forces meet in every conceivable textual instance. Her multiplication of overlapping and conflicting fields of struggle demonstrates her refusal of any homoge-

18Gearhart, "Philosophy before Literature," 73.
nizing or generalizing strategies and of any of the conciliatory tactics of pluralism. Marcus makes it clear that Kolodny's image of the minefield actually functions to conceal conflicts among women. This minefield is laid by men and external to feminism—the floor beneath our dancing feet or the ground of our discourse—and it is external to each woman. This totalizing figuration enables Kolodny to attribute unity to women by opposing them to men. Marcus exposes and refuses this strategy, both practically and theoretically. Marcus reiterates that the battlefield, irreducible difference, and the consequent conflicts are everywhere, within subjects, among women, between women and men; she thus prevents any single site from acquiring the status of an origin, the ultimate ground for all other battles. Her shifting sense of the place of battle is strategic; the ground is an effect of the struggle rather than a field that precedes and thus completely contains it.

Jameson's sense of the battle is less flexible. He argues that "history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise" (PU 35). Rather,

History is . . . the experience of Necessity, and it is this alone which can forestall its thematization or reification as a mere object of representation or as one master code among many others. Necessity is not in that sense a type of content, but rather the inexorable form of events. . . . History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its "ruses" turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention. But this History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force. This is indeed the ultimate sense in which History as ground and untranscendable horizon needs no particular theoretical justification: we may be sure that its alienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them.

[PU 102]

Given the importance of the question of history and the controversy that surrounds it, this seems like an odd moment to assert that theoretical justification is beside the point. (This may be the only antitheoretical passage in the text.) Jameson's account of
history gives up the terrain Marcus claimed by refusing to locate necessity on any single field. "Necessity," as Jameson describes it, is History, and History is understood entirely as the "inexorable form of events" which can never be eluded, though it may be ignored. History excludes no one from its Necessity.

The word "necessity" should arouse our concern. Jameson's use of the term resembles de Man's more than it does Althusser's or, for that matter, Derrida's. Rather than take necessity as the product of historical struggle, Jameson attributes to History the totalizing power to impose its Necessity as an Absolute. He leaves the critic the task, not of guiltily producing necessity, but of belatedly trying to comprehend it. Most important, this hermeneutic process is identical for every reader, just as necessity itself is. The reader of general persuasion appears in Jameson's text to register, in the sense of decode, the necessities of History and not to generate them. Thus every reader and every method is capable of generating "positive findings," able to uncover one of the "local laws" of historical necessity.

In the pluralist texts we have considered, the (implicit or explicit) invocation of the necessary is coupled with a view of interpretation and understanding that excludes genuine historical determinations, that is, politically conflictual determinations. For example, de Man cites Hölderlin to suggest:

"what is true is what is bound to take place." And, in the case of the reading of a text, what takes place is a necessary understanding. What marks the truth of such an understanding is not some abstract universal but the fact that it has to occur regardless of other considerations. It depends... on the rigor of the reading as argument. Reading is an argument (which is not necessarily the same as a polemic) because it has to go against the grain of what one would want to happen in the name of what has to happen; this is the same as saying that understanding is an epistemological event prior to being an ethical or aesthetic value. This does not mean that there can be a true reading, but that no reading is conceivable in which the question of its truth or falsehood is not primarily involved. [DH xi]

De Man's position is repeated in some form by each pluralist we have considered. E. D. Hirsch defends the "logic of inquiry" on
the grounds that the epistemological problem of understanding as such precedes all the ethical and political questions privileged in the “sociology of knowledge.” Wayne Booth excludes the accidental matters of race and class and sexuality because they are contingencies, “irrational forces,” that “kill criticism,” blocking the act of “critical understanding.” Stanley Fish sees all of us as obliged to practice the art of persuasion, to work polemically, “arguing] for a way of reading which if it became accepted, would be, for a time at least, the true one” (F 16). But de Man’s remarks also echo with Derrida’s comments on pluralism and deconstruction. Derrida’s rejection of that label was linked to his rejection of the problematic of truth: “I am not a pluralist, and I would never say that every interpretation is equal, but I do not select. . . . 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.” Derrida’s refusal to conceive his readings in terms of truth and falsehood critically distinguishes his position from de Man’s and, simultaneously, aligns him (roughly to be sure) with Althusser and Barthes on the questions of power and reading.

De Man never claims that truth is marked by an abstract universal; rather, truth is “what is bound to take place,” “a necessary understanding” which “has to occur regardless of other considerations.” Althusser also cites “necessity” in his account of reading. Yet in his case, necessity is linked, not with truth, but with crime, with guilty as opposed to innocent reading. The guilty reading is not absolved—as it would be if it stood in the guise of truth. But the guilty reading is “justified” and theorized by the “necessity of its contingency” (RC 45).

Necessity, for Althusser, is historical, whereas for Jameson, History is Necessity. In *The Political Unconscious*, the “Homeric battlefield” within which interpretations struggle is again externalized and grounded; it resembles Kolodny’s minefield rather than Marcus’s range of uneven displacements. And this battlefield, despite the conflicts within it, is a homogeneous space; Necessity reigns unchallenged there, and Necessity “hurts” us all equally as readers, imposes on us all equally as critics.

I have argued that to defend the infinite substitutability of one
signifier for another is to elide the historical limits on what “tropes can get away with” and thus to obscure the resisting reader. Jameson criticizes substitution, the anti-hermeneutic play of differences, from the perspective of Necessity. History’s Necessity operates for him as the ground that limits possible meanings and thus imposes on all of us a story that, as Samuel Weber notes, could “not be told otherwise, could not be changed, altered, or modified, without being falsified and losing its necessity.”¹⁹ But in his account of History as the experience of Necessity, Jameson once again displaces the political. He allows a generalizing history to elide the discontinuities in his audience, the uneven play of limits. As Neil Lazarus has pointed out, it is not “History” which “Hurts” or “refuses desire”; it is unequal power, tyranny. But Jameson avoids this polemical position; it threatens to involve him in the kind of exclusions the pluralist problematic cannot support. Only History conceived as Necessity allows him to put aside the task of theoretical justification and to assert that we are all inscribed within “the unity of a single collective story.”

This is precisely the crux where Althusser would insist that there are many necessary—and necessarily guilty—readings; history is their conflict with one another and the discontinuities among them. The outcome of their struggle awards one the appearance of an absolute necessity but that appearance is a posture of false innocence, a naturalizing appropriation of truth. For Althusser, the guilty reading takes responsibility for its operations by acknowledging its historical necessity, and, thus, its power. The historically necessary reading of a marxist declines the posture of innocence, which always refers its necessity to truth or falsehood. Rather, it points to the play and hierarchy of powerful forces, and it confesses that its reading is the reading it needs. The historically necessary reading can never be understood as what is bound to take place because it has abandoned the problematic of general persuasion. What is bound to take place is a matter of struggle.