Seductive Reasoning
Rooney, Ellen

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

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EPILOGUE

Within the enclosure, by means of indirect and always perilous maneuvers, risking constantly a relapse back into what one intends to deconstruct, our task is to encircle the critical concepts with a prudent and scrupulous discourse, to note the conditions, the context, the limits of their effectiveness, to indicate in a rigorous manner their adherence to the mechanism which they themselves will enable us to deconstruct.

—DERRIDA, Of Grammatology

The identifying mark of a symptomatic reading is that it works to disclose an unacknowledged problematic, a structure that is precisely not the essence of a thought. Insofar as a problematic is constituted in part by the absence of problems, concepts, and questions, this structure cannot be uncovered by an empirical, generalized reading but only by means of a symptomatic analysis. This practice of reading rejects the notion that the text itself can tell us how it should be read. On the contrary, as Macherey argues, “we must go beyond the work and explain it, must say what it does not and could not say.” The very possibility of a symptomatic reading depends on the view “that although the work is self-sufficient, it does not contain or engender its own theory; it does not know itself” (M 77, 83–84).

Most of the theorists I have examined do not identify themselves as pluralists. It has not been part of my exposition to offer synoptic accounts of their careers or to summarize the pluralist “content” in each critic’s work. Rather, I have tried to isolate the concrete pluralist effect of each text and to trace those effects back to the problematic of general persuasion. The pluralist
problematic constitutes the enabling conditions for the logic, ethics, politics, and even the competing rhetorics we have read in works by Hirsch, Booth, Jameson, Fish, and de Man; the obvious diversity of its instances is both a sign and a cause of its hegemony, and, as I indicated when I began, these five theorists could easily have been replaced by others.

Pluralism's history is one of spectacular success in enforcing its limits upon the discourses of literary studies. Pluralists have rarely drawn back from their opponents; indeed, pluralist discourse may still succeed in containing its critics, quite literally by including them, with some adjustments, of course, much as Booth will accommodate the "deconstructionists" and "myth-readers" as untidy guests in his critical commonwealth, provided he can disregard their polemic against understanding. But the resistance to pluralism is ongoing and perhaps even growing in some critical traditions. Some strains of feminist criticism have been fairly consistent in their wariness of the blandishments of general persuasion. Gayatri Spivak, for example, has warned:

to embrace pluralism (as [Annette] Kolodny recommends) is to espouse the politics of the masculinist establishment. Pluralism is the method employed by the central authorities to neutralize opposition by seeming to accept it. The gesture of pluralism on the part of the marginal can only mean capitulation to the center. It is not a question of the choice of methodologies but rather of who is officially in power. However pluralist its demeanor, American liberal masculism (alias humanism) will never declare that it is merely one of many plausible choices.¹

For Spivak, the question of pluralism is primarily a question of power: a pluralism of the margins is a kind of oxymoron, and feminist criticism must insist on the place of margins despite the promises of the "central authorities."

Spivak's criticisms, like Jane Marcus's, are directed at Annette Kolodny's essay "Dancing through the Minefield." Kolodny argues that feminist discourse should take up the pluralist model

of M. H. Abrams and "initiate nothing less than a playful pluralism, responsive to the possibilities of multiple critical schools and methods, but captive to none. . . . Only by employing a plurality of methods will we protect ourselves from the temptation of so oversimplifying any text—and especially those particularly offensive to us—that we render ourselves unresponsive to what Scholes has called 'its various systems of meaning and their interaction.'"  

Kolodny's accommodating, unifying, and apparently inclusive, pluralist view of feminism has been the subject of several sharp critiques. Spivak's rejection of her position is unambiguous and practical: pluralism is a strategy of power, for the powerful. And like all the strategic or pragmatic gestures we have considered, this claim has theoretical significance. Spivak doubts the possibility of a successful feminist pluralism (save as a capitulation to the authorities) because she envisions feminist criticism, in part, as the effort to expose the phallocentric movement by which "all explanations . . . claim their centrality in terms of an excluded margin." She argues that feminists will be invited into the center only at the price of adopting the language of centrality, the language of general persuasion.

The conflict between Spivak and other critics of "playful pluralism" on the one side and Kolodny and her defenders on the other reveals the ambiguity of feminism's relation to the problematic of general persuasion and raises the question of whether pluralism can in fact ever be a strategy of the margin. Can the


4 See Spivak, In Other Worlds, pp. 201–6 and passim. It is important to recall that the feminist figure here is also a deconstructive critic.
power of pluralist discourse (to exclude, silence, and objectify its others, as well as to produce, adapt, and incite those very others to discourse) be run in reverse, turned, in a Foucauldian figure, against its apparent masters? Or are the effects of general persuasion always in the service of hegemonic discourses? Would a feminist pluralism be, as Peggy Kamuf has asked, just another such discourse of power, "reverting to the very terms of opposition which feminist theory has sought to undo?"\(^5\)

Feminist criticism presents a particularly rich field for investigating a positive inscription of anti-pluralism, the obverse of the negative critique I have presented here, and for exploring the relations between pluralist and anti-pluralist instantiations of a "single" discourse. Feminist literary studies are extremely diverse; pluralisms and anti-pluralisms, each in several forms, contend for authority even as they question the possibility (and the desirability) of a definitive feminist discourse. The special status of the concept of difference within feminism seems to me to work as a brake on its assimilation to the hegemonic pluralist problematic. But this is not to say that feminist theory is essentially anti-pluralist. Indeed, it is the recurring problem of essentialism that draws feminists to the problematic of general persuasion.

Naomi Schor has recently observed that women in feminist theory persistently return to the possibility of a "femininity beyond deconstruction"; she points out that "no feminist theoretician who is not also a woman has ever fully espoused the claims to feminine specificity, an irreducible difference."\(^6\) The assertion of irreducible difference is, in my terms, an anti-pluralist strategy, a strategy of the break or of discontinuity. The problematic of general persuasion requires a general reader, and that reader, despite the formal neutrality of his gender, is in fact a masculine reader; the feminist critic responds by insisting on her "difference of view."

At the same time, the assertion of specificity frequently threat-

ens to lapse into a new pluralism, ever so slightly more local than that which characterizes the problematic of general persuasion, but largely recuperated by pluralist models, especially by a pluralist essentialism; the disruptive "difference" of woman is asserted, only to be essentialized in turn. Feminism then threatens to become another humanism, reinscribing pluralist strategies and a pluralist model of the general woman reader within its boundaries. Elizabeth Berg warns against this tendency, urging feminist critics to "insist on the partial nature of sexual identity, to [remember] that gender is not the only difference among people, nor even the essential difference, that the move to privilege gender as the primary defining characteristic of people participates in the same logic of oppression as the masculine philosophy one criticizes."7

The hegemonic discourses of feminist theory and women’s studies have been challenged in turn by the differences among women. Bell Hooks, in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, points out that the white, heterosexual, middle-class feminist all too often makes "her plight and the plight of white women like herself synonymous with a condition affecting all American women. In so doing she deflect[s] attention away from her classism, her racism, her sexist attitudes towards the masses of American women."8 In the terms I have been developing in this book, Hooks exposes the process by which feminist discourse reinscribes pluralism, even in a contestatory concept of difference such as sisterhood: "the vision of Sisterhood evoked by women’s liberationists was based on the idea of common oppression. Needless to say, it was primarily bourgeois white women, both liberal and radical in perspective, who professed belief in the notion of common oppression, [which] was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality" (43–44). The assertion of difference seems all too easily recuperated by the seductions of a pluralist center.

7Elizabeth Berg, "Inconoclastic Moments," p. 220.
Schor points to the tendency essentialisms and anti-essentialisms have of attracting each other and suggests that feminists abandon their polemics against essentialism, not in order to embrace it, but to try to understand its persistence and its intimate relation to anti-essentialism; to ask, for example, “how and why a Cixous and an Irigaray deconstruct and construct femininity at the same time”. Simultaneously, she calls for the “multiplication of all differences—national, racial, sexual and class”. It is in such a practice that feminist criticism might develop an exemplary discourse, or exemplary discourses, of anti-pluralism. As Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty point out, this multiplication of differences as a strategy for undermining pluralism’s essentialism can be as politically and theoretically powerful as the “vigilante attacks on humanist beliefs in ‘man’ and Absolute Knowledge” mounted “from the ranks of antihumanist intellectuals.” They describe Minnie Bruce Pratt’s autobiographical narrative in *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* in these terms: “the perspective is multiple and shifting, and the shifts in perspective are enabled by the attempts to define self, home, and community that are at the heart of Pratt’s enterprise. The historical grounding of shifts and changes allows for an emphasis on the pleasures and terrors of interminable boundary confusions, but insists, at the same time, on our responsibility for remapping boundaries and renegotiating connections. These are partial in at least two senses of the word: politically partial, and without claim to wholeness or finality” (193). Like Elizabeth Berg, Martin and Mohanty emphasize partiality, the insistence on limits which is impossible within the problematic of general persuasion. They privilege Pratt’s text over some of the “more abstract critiques” of anti-humanists because of “the political limitations of an insistence on ‘indeterminacy’ which implicitly, when not explicitly, denies the critic’s own situatedness in the social, and in effect refuses to acknowledge the critic’s own institutional home” (194). We observed the political limitations of this denial of situatedness in

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de Man's inability to acknowledge Edith's exclusion. But in my analysis of de Man, I left the question of sexual difference in suspense. What is the connection between the problematic of general persuasion and the effacement of femininity?

*Seductive Reasoning* is a book written by a feminist. But is it a feminist book? And what is the relation between its feminism and its desire for anti-pluralism? In the opening pages of *Reading Lacan*, Jane Gallop asks a similar question about her own work in the course of a reflection on the ambiguity of the genitive: "women's studies": "I was at work on the present book, a book on Lacan. Not a recognizably feminist project, since Lacan is not a woman, nor have I been concerned in this book explicitly to address Lacan's relation to feminism or women, which I have already done in another book. Perhaps naively, I had not considered this a feminist project but had thought of it as a 'straight' book on Lacan, a study that addressed the general question of how one could possibly read Lacan's text."¹¹ While I was at work on *Seductive Reasoning*, my naivety ran in the opposite direction from Gallop's. I thought of my book as an obviously feminist project, in that my critique of pluralism seemed to me to draw consistently on what feminism had taught me. Feminist theory and practice introduced me to the critique of humanism and the hermeneutics of suspicion, to the politics of interpretation and the inevitability of theoretical entanglements, to theories of the subject and the interestedness of academic discourses, the disciplines, the canon, theory, advertising, fashion. You see. It appeared to me as I wrote that this book was unthinkable without my training as a feminist critic.

Yet Gallop points out that Lacan is not a woman, and the same must be said of Stanley Fish, Wayne Booth, Fredric Jameson, and so on. (I have nothing fancy up my sleeve.) But while none of the pluralists I centered my attention on are women, my break with the problematic of general persuasion seemed to assume my positioning as a feminist. Feminism thus appeared to me in the form of an anti-pluralism.

Gallop began to rethink the status of her "straight" book after

receiving a report from a referee who objected both to her use of a generic “she” and to her refusal to claim a position of mastery over Lacan’s text: “the main objection was that I was not in command of the material and I admitted it.” These two practices may seem of a different order, but Gallop writes: “Thanks to their joint appearance in my reader’s report, I have come to consider that they are, theoretically, the same gesture” (19). This connection in turn engenders Gallop’s questions about what constitutes feminist criticism: “Extremely attracted to the notion of women’s studies as a force that could revolutionize the very structures of knowledge, I wish to pose the question of what a feminist practice of study might be, beyond the recognizable themes: women and sexual difference. For example, what would be a feminist criticism that neither read women’s texts nor read for the representation of women? If women’s studies involves an epistemological revolution, how would it effect realms other than those in which women are already the object of knowledge?” (18). Gallop’s reasons for considering her Lacan book a straight study and her subsequent questions suggested to me the possibility that some readers would not view Seductive Reasoning as a feminist essay. Although in fact my referees were less dismissive than the one Gallop invokes, each called for an extension of my remarks on feminist discourse and a clarification of the place of feminism in what one reader saw as the primarily Althusserian frame of my book. In revising my work, I realized that I had tacitly offered two feminisms to my readers: the anti-pluralist feminism I “assumed” in my own analyses and a potentially pluralist feminism that was unrepresented but might indeed have taken its place alongside the pluralist figures I critique here. I have not belatedly attempted to exfoliate this double reading. Rather, I have aggravated this doubleness in order to dramatize the question of anti-pluralism.

12Schor has suggested that “the most active site of the feminine resistance to the discourse of indifference is a certain insistence on doubling, which may well be the feminine mode of subverting the unitary subject: mimeticism (Irigaray and Kolodny), the double and even double double identification of the female film spectator (Mulvey, Doane, De Lauretis), women’s writing as palimpsest (Gilbert and Gubar), female fetishism (Kofman, Berg, Schor), the foregrounding of the ‘other woman’ (Gallop)”: “Dreaming Dissymmetry,” p. 110.
Anti-pluralisms are "subversive," that is, they offer resistance to a powerful discourse of domination; the fields for their subversions are multiple without being infinite. But I am still seeking to specify the limits of those fields. At a certain point in my work, it occurred to me that anti-pluralism was really nothing but my umbrella term for everything I saw as subversive (or at least potentially subversive). My analysis of the limits of pluralism is finally a kind of negative inscription of the deconstructive potential of anti-pluralisms. The temptation was strong, given the nature of my reading, to conclude it by establishing pluralism and anti-pluralism as binary opposites, antagonists facing off across the discursive discontinuities I have tried to produce. But an unusual and absolutely critical feature of anti-pluralisms, which once made plausible the thought that they were nothing but a grab bag of resistances, renders such specular drama impossible.

Anti-pluralisms are inflections or versions of discourses that can also be spoken—in fact, often are spoken—in nonsubversive forms, that is, in pluralist forms. This is the meaning of the claim that the pluralist may be a member of any faction in the critical field, so long as she practices a contentious criticism founded on the theoretical possibility of general or universal persuasion. Thus, marxism can be a pluralism or an anti-pluralism, depending on its relationship to the problematic of general persuasion. Feminism can be a pluralism or an anti-pluralism; indeed, in the United States today, it is both. Any discourse can take up a place within the problematic of general persuasion.

This is a radically anti-essentialist view of theory. I would like to invoke Edward Said's phrase, "traveling theory," because it captures the importance of locale, of the determining force of location, on theory, and, of course, on resistances. This form of anti-essentialism can complicate the process of marking limits, both the limits of pluralism and the limits of anti-pluralisms. If anti-pluralisms are subversive, they are subversive only in particular places, and it is crucial to name those places. Both subversions and compromises must be localized, tied to specific

13See The World, the Text and the Critic, pp. 226–47.
audiences, and recognized as mortal—always already in the process of breaking down or reaching their limits. These limits do not have to be identified because we are perverse, or committed to a kind of formal pessimism; we are not forced to find them as a matter of principle, given our knowledge that limits exist as logical or structural necessities (no matter what the cost in terms of our own political and theoretical demoralization).

On the contrary, we need to identify the limits of local subversion in order to find the place of the subversion of subversion, the point at which we need to shift strategies, to disrupt the game. Delineating this limit, then, might be an optimistic project, implying, as it does, a certain confidence that we can play more than one game, that we have more than one option: anti-pluralisms. But whatever its mood, this process is especially difficult when localities themselves lose their stable boundaries and seem to merge and run together, as they inevitably do. This problem is particularly acute in the case of pluralism in the United States, especially when the question at hand concerns the relation between pluralism and heterogeneous feminisms. This is because feminisms combine a critique of essence and a deconstruction of the stereotypes of sexual identity with the assertion of woman’s difference and the constant temptation to “risk” essentialism. The appeal of general persuasion is always an appeal to the essence of critical community.

Thus, while in certain locations or inflections, feminism is an exemplary anti-pluralism, in others, the process of accommodation and recuperation is very far advanced, and feminists stand among those issuing polemical calls for pluralism. From this perspective, Seductive Reasoning is both feminist and not feminist: feminist insofar as feminism articulates a position outside the problematic of general persuasion and not feminist in that it resists (even as it hopes to intervene in) the movement of some feminisms into the pluralist community.

It would be an unwarranted anticipation of a certain historical

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process (that is, it would be wishful thinking), for me to risk a prediction as to the configurations of theory, reading, and critical community that will characterize either literary or feminist studies in the future. The problematic of general persuasion, as I have tried to show, is as flexible and innovative as it is pervasive. At best, one can only propose that the struggle to recognize discontinuity plays across a critical field of difference and is one that admits of no closure. Audre Lorde warns that the price of belonging to the pluralist’s community may be the fortification of those very structures feminism names as the sites of oppression: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” The conditions that nurture anti-pluralisms are as shifting as our own alliances and conflicts; thus, our efforts to dismantle pluralism cannot adhere to a single plan, and they are constantly besieged and tempted by the promise of persuasion. To resist is first to refuse homage to those who hope to master otherness in the figure of persuasion; conceiving knowledge as productive work, we can then undertake to fashion our own tools.