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RESPONSE

CAPITALIZING HISTORY: NOTES ON *THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS*

SAMUEL WEBER

Stanley Fish. IS THERE A TEXT IN THIS CLASS? THE AUTHORITY OF INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Fredric Jameson. THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS: NARRATIVE AS A SOCIALLY SYMBOLIC ACT. London: Methuen, 1981.

In a book first published in 1955, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Louis Hartz advanced a thesis which, if it has been largely bypassed by intellectual historians today,¹ could nonetheless be of considerable interest to English-speaking literary critics seeking to understand the situation of their discipline. Hartz argued that American liberalism, which he considered as the dominant paradigm of political thought, and action, in the United States, could best be understood in terms of the European history from which, at a certain point, it detached itself. As a result of thus being separated from the conflictual dynamics of European history, American liberalism, Hartz affirmed, lost the sense of its own historical and social relativity and came to hypostasize itself as an absolute, a tendency that was reinforced both by the universal and naturalist character of the categories and values of liberalism which Hartz identified with the thought of Locke, and by the real absence of a strong, prebourgeois ("feudal") social tradition in the New World. Thus, the Lockean axiom of the natural liberty of individuals, "born free," which in its European context was endowed with a very non-natural, polemical-strategic significance as an ideological attack upon feudal values, appeared, in the new, American setting, to be rather a statement of universal fact. To use the familiar terms of contemporary speech-act theory, the Lockean paradigm thus lost its performative connotations when it emigrated to America, where it imposed its authority all the more effectively by presenting itself as an essentially constative act. For Hartz, the result was a national history and culture blinded from its birth, as it were, to its own conditions of possibility and dominated by a liberalism that was as absolute and autocratic as its European model had been critical and dynamic.

¹For reasons clearly foreseen by Hartz himself, and which liken the position of his work to that of Freud, whom he obviously knew well, although he refers to him seldom. Concerning the reception of his theories, Hartz predicted that "the liberal society [= Hartzian] analyst is destined in two ways to be a less pleasing scholar than the Progressive: he finds national weaknesses and he can offer no absolute assurance on the basis of the past that

The process of separation, which Hartz later designated as one of “fragmentation,”² thus entailed three interrelated but distinct gestures: universalization, the delegitimization of conflict, and individualization. As far as universalization is concerned, it was not that the Lockean tenet of naturally free individuals claimed universal validity, for that was true of the European paradigm no less than the American. Rather, the implicit but decisive context in which those claims operated was transformed drastically due to the absence of the historical antagonists against which Lockean thought developed its articulations. In short, without Robert Filmer, as the spokesman for a feudally-oriented, aristocratic society, the status of Locke’s thought was altered: it became static precisely for want of the other. Instead of advancing its claims to universal validity within a social and political sphere that was anything but homogeneous, it could present them as being coextensive with that sphere itself (which, in a certain sense, they were, since the emigrating American colonials did not restate the force of the European feudal past, but only that of its burgeoning bourgeois present). The Lockean paradigm thus was able to institutionalize itself as what Hartz calls an “absolutist” or “compulsive” liberalism that dominated – and still dominates – the American intellectual tradition.

The second gesture implied in this process, a correlative of the first, entails the *delegitimization of conflict*, ethically, epistemologically, politically. By thus universalizing itself, American liberalism no longer accepted the necessity of historical and social conflict as had been the case, inevitably, for its European version. As Hartz writes, it lost “that sense of relativity, that spark of philosophy, which European liberalism acquired through an internal experience of social diversity and social conflict” [*The Liberal Tradition in America*, p. 14]. This does not, of course, mean that American liberalism denied conflict entirely – which would have been a rather remarkable feat – but rather, that it redefined the place and the nature of conflict, precisely by placing it *within* a “natural” context, which, *qua* natural, could not itself be considered as subject to conflict or to (legitimate) controversy. Such a context, in turn, implies the existence of an instance or agent construed as being single, undivided and identical-to-itself: in short, as an *individual*, the self-contained origin and arbiter of all conceivable conflict. Thus, the most aggressive competition among private individuals and groups could be encouraged, whereas any challenge to the “natural” hierarchy subordinating public to private was not. Conflict was accepted only as a technical instrument in order to achieve ends which were held to be above (legitimate) conflict.

Whatever the merits of Hartz’s arguments as an explanation of American political culture – and my feeling is that they deserve more serious discussion than they have received – they undoubtedly cast considerable light on the more recent transformation undergone by certain French thinkers as they have been imported into the United States (and, perhaps more generally, into the English-language universe of discourse³). If authors such as Derrida, Foucault and, to a lesser extent, Lacan, have been granted admission into

they will be remedied. He tends to criticize and then shrug his shoulders, which is no way to become popular, especially in an age like our own” [Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, 1955), p. 32]. For a latter-day confirmation of Hartz’s prediction, see Dorothy Ross, “*The Liberal Tradition Revisited and the Republican Tradition Addressed*,” in John Higham and Paul J. Conklin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore and London, 1979), pp. 116–30. Ross, who seeks to demonstrate the superiority of Pocock’s vision of American history, in which “the central issue” is “the survival of the virtuous republic,” over that of Hartz, whose arguments she simplifies to the point of caricature, arrives at the end of her article at a “paradox” that precisely the work of Hartz could do much to explain: “The real paradox of Progressive thought is that historicism, with its desire to secure values within history, ended in an ahistorical social science that had adopted the objective voice and strove to be value-free” [p. 128]. The reading of Jameson in this article may, in this light, be considered as a Hartzian attempt to explain such a “real paradox of Progressive thought.”

This is perhaps as good a place as any to express my gratitude to James Siegel, for calling the work of Hartz to my attention.

²This term was introduced in a second book, *The Founding of New Societies* (New York, 1964), which Hartz published together with a number of collaborators, and in which he undertook to generalize, by the comparative study of a number of emigrant societies (the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada and Australia), the process of fragmentation.

³It would be tempting to try to explain the differences in the reception of current French theory in the different English-speaking countries precisely by referring to the comparative analyses developed in *The Founding of New Societies*.

the American Academy, the price they have had to pay has generally entailed the universalization and individualization of their work, which has thereby been purged of its conflictual and strategic elements and presented instead as a self-standing methodology.

Such a transformation is both ironic and revealing. It is ironic, because one of the most powerful impulses in the development of what in the English-speaking world has become known as “structuralism” and, more recently, “post-structuralism,” was precisely the profound suspicion of *-isms*, beginning with Lévi-Strauss’ critique of the concept of “totemism,” in which he saw the symptomatic effort of Eurocentric anthropology to project its own values and categories, in order to reduce and to appropriate alien, non-Western cultural phenomena. Such a suspicion of universal values did, it is true, coexist for a while with the aspiration of establishing a new system of science with a claim to universal validity, but such aspirations were rather rapidly abandoned. Thus, while the term “structuralism” is not, of course, a translator’s invention, that of “post-structuralism,” it seems, is, and in any case serves to obscure the anti-systematic impulse at work in the thought of the writers thus designated. Indeed, labels such as “deconstruction” and “discourse analysis” serve to arrest the movement of the texts to which they refer by implying that behind those writings there is a stable and static core than can be accepted or rejected as such.

What is revealing about this process of universalization is the institutional context in which it takes place. For the universalization of “post-structuralist” thinkers conforms to the intellectual ethos of the institution that monopolizes almost entirely their American importation: the University. The University universalizes, individualizes, and in the process excludes conflict as far as possible. Or rather, it delegitimizes conflict, in the name of pluralism. Pluralism allows for a multiplicity of coexisting, even competing interpretations, opinions or approaches; what it does not allow is that the space in which these interpretations are thought to take place itself be considered to be conflictual. Its borders are given, and its structure, bipolar. Interpretations are right or wrong, better or worse, strong or weak, true or false, but the category of opposition, used to prescribe such alternatives, is itself held to be beyond dispute, and used to define conflict. The latter, in short, is regarded as one theme among others, rather than an aspect of the process of thematization (or objectification) itself. “Scholarship” and “research” may investigate conflict, but they do not – or must not – as such partake of it. The function of “pluralism” is precisely to deny the structural necessity of irrepressible conflict, in the name of peacefully coexisting diversity.

It may seem dubious to assert that the American university is actively engaged in the maintenance and reproduction of this “universalist” ethos, when it is more or less common knowledge that the temper of Anglo-American thought, as opposed to that of the European continent, has been resolutely “nominalist” for many centuries. But, just as Hartz’s use of Locke suggests, nominalism does not exclude universalism, although it certainly endows it with a different form from that determined by a more “realist” philosophy. As a recent example, I shall cite Stanley Fish’s book, *Is there a Text in this Class?* [(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980)]. At first glance, the position articulated there would seem to be resolutely anti-universalist. Since texts have no intrinsic meaning, but instead are constructed ever-anew by what ever particular interpretive assumptions “happen to be in force” [p. viii], the significance of texts can and does change all the time. There would seem to be, then, little place for universally valid statements. But if this holds for interpretive statements, it would seem not to be the case for the meta-critical assertions that constitute Fish’s own critical position. In a manner that is curiously reminiscent of Sartre, Fish reiterates that text and reader are *always in a situation*, *always engaged in* an institutionally determined activity, etc. The theory thus implied by the “always-in” assertions must claim universal validity.

Fish’s theory of institutional authority thus displays many of the same general tendencies Hartz discerns at work in American Liberalism (although Fish himself might well demur at such a classification), namely: universalization, individualization and the containment (or delegitimation) of conflict. This will doubtless seem a curious assertion to make concerning a critic who has obviously enjoyed and exploited the polemical aspects of the profession more than most, and moreover, one whose entire emphasis is placed upon the non-individual, communal or communitarian aspects of the interpretive process. But the paradox is dissipated when one realizes that the concept of the collective, or the community of interpreters invoked by Fish is ultimately nothing but a generalized, indeed a universalized form

of the individualist monad: autonomous, self-contained and internally unified, not merely despite but because of the diversity it contains. And if there can be no doubt that Fish's own, often highly polemical practice points up the importance of conflict, of the agonistic aspect of interpretation, his *theory* of the authority of interpretive communities functions not to explain such conflict, but to explain it away.⁴ And it explains it away simply by asserting that it is *contained* by whatever monadic set of assumptions, interpretive institution etc. the critic is said to be operating within. If conflict is a part of interpretation, and the latter is always situated *within* an institution, then institutions themselves cannot be subject to the conflict they contain. The institution thus emerges as the condition of possibility of controversy, and hence, as its arbiter.⁵ While the liberal mind has defined itself by the ethical exclusion or rather, by the containment of conflict as a historical process, such liberalism is being increasingly challenged today, even while it reacts with ever-more transparent intensity, and often, intolerance.

In short, the emigration of contemporary French theory to the United States (and to the English-speaking world, in general), far from merely reinforcing the liberal delegitimation of conflict, is also undermining it. And in so doing, this importation calls into question not merely the hitherto prevailing lines of demarcation, but also the manner in which those lines have traditionally been drawn. It is no accident that "margins," "borders," "framing," "exclusions," and Moebius-strips have come to designate, and to disrupt, the convenient opposition of "inside-versus-outside," which, as Hartz's entire analysis implies, dominates the liberal containment of conflict. It is also significant to recall that for the most part those French thinkers whose work has been most influential, have themselves been situated on the margins of the French University system. For it has been the particular, although historically conditioned, genius of French society, deriving directly from its bourgeois revolutionary tradition, to have been able to reconcile institutionalization and change by establishing a series of elite institutions, thus allowing intellectual labor to develop in a climate that is relatively free from what Bourdieu and Passeron have rightly described as the "reproductive" constraints inherent in all *educational* systems. The Collège de France, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, CNRS, Paris-VII – these are the organisms that have enabled what Hartz aptly calls "philosophy" to survive in France. "Philosophy," in his sense, designates not simply a "discipline," but rather a mode of thought that remains imbued with "that sense of relativity . . . acquired through an *internal experience* of social diversity and social conflict" [*The Liberal Tradition in America*, p. 14, my italics]. I emphasize "internal experience" because it is precisely this which the positive disciplines, at least insofar as they are subject to the traditional strategy of legitimation prevalent within the educational establishment, must exclude. They must exclude, or at least reduce the purport of their own inner disunity and internal conflictuality, and above all, of the inevitably conflictual process by which, through exclusion and subordination, disciplines define their borders and constitute their fields. And they must deny such exclusivity in the name of an ideal of knowledge, science and of truth that deems these to be intrinsically conflict-free, self-identical and hence, reproducible as such, and transmissible to students. Ultimately, such an ideal both reflects and supports the self-image of a society that imposes its authority precisely by denying the legitimacy of its structural conflicts, and hence, of its relation to alterity. For the admission of the constitutive importance of such relations would amount to a disavowal of the categories of universality, individualism and consensus that form the foundation of American Liberalism, and of the institutions that perpetuate it.

This, then, explains the challenge of the recent import of certain French thinkers into an American academic scene alternately fascinated, and frightened, by the possible conse-

⁴ I have discussed, briefly, this exigency of enforcement in regard to Peirce's category of "secondness," used by him to describe both experience and actuality (cf. S. Weber, "Closure and Exclusion," *Diacritics*, June 1980, pp. 45–46). The problem thus becomes that of situating the function and structure of the institution with respect to what I have called "conditions of impossibility" [S. Weber, "L'Institution de la pensée," *Recherches Sociologiques*, No. 1–2, 1982, pp. 164–65].

⁵ When Fish, at the conclusion of his book, claims that he has provided "a principled account of change," [p. 367] he states, by antiphrasis, the problem. For his theory of institutional determination is just as unable to account for change as are the theories of the autonomy of literature it sets out to criticize, but whose basic category – that of monadic (individualist) self-identity – Fish preserves, displacing it simply from the "work" to the "institution."

quences of this incursion. For the tendency most visible today goes in the direction of a relegitimization of conflict within the ethics of intellectual activity, and this in turn cannot but affect, more or less profoundly, institutions that define such activity in terms such as “scholarship” and “research,” words which already suggest the substantial self-identity of the “objects” they presuppose. Instead of the serene, detached character of such “scholarship,” based in turn upon a conception of cognition as an essentially constative process—whether construed as “discovery,” “experimentation,” or as “construction”—intellectual activity has come increasingly to define itself as a “performative” language-game, although the notion of “performance” has often been equated with “production,” rather than understood as a form of play.⁶ Nevertheless, the notion of “strategy” as it is applied to theoretical argumentation has begun to cease to be merely a synonym for “instrumental,” as it still is in the writings of a John Searle, for instance,⁷ and to recover its etymological connotation, with a reference to conflicting forces.

If the outcome, or even direction of these transformations are difficult to predict, it nevertheless seems highly probable that the reevaluation of the necessity and the legitimacy of conflict that is currently under way will impose a renewed concern for and confrontation with Marxism. For the latter is a theory not only of the necessity of conflict as an *object* of study, but also as the medium in which thought itself operates. To the extent, therefore, that the liberal paradigm of consensus and conciliation is increasingly challenged, Marxism is bound to emerge as one of the most significant alternative models. If the Hartzian analysis of the liberal image of historical development as a kind of entelechy (the unfolding of possibilities already contained, as it were, in germ, in the individual (or collectively individual) subject) is correct, then it is clear that the Marxist version of Hegelian dialectics, with its emphasis upon struggle and conflict as the motor of all becoming, provides in one sense an extreme counter-image. And yet, as is usually the case with contraries, the Marxian model is often legitimized in terms of the same liberal categories it is attacking: the universality of cognition, of “science,” objective necessity, an individualist conception of subjectivity.

It is precisely this aspect of Marxism, in conjunction with the political and ideological position of the Communist Party in post-war France—with its claim to be the sole legitimate heir of the revolutionary tradition—that explains the critical, often hostile relations of most structuralist and “post-structuralist” thinkers towards Marxism. What is not immediately evident to most Americans, having grown up with the Red Scare, McCarthyism and a virulent tradition of anti-socialist and anti-communist persecution, is the extent to which Communism and Marxism could, within the capitalist society of post-war France, nevertheless have exercised an influence, especially upon the intelligentsia that would have let it appear increasingly more as a *part* of the social establishment than as a challenge to it. Yet, if Marxism was criticized by Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, and implicitly, at least, by Lacan and Derrida, it was not—as was the case for American liberalism—because it insisted upon the inevitability and legitimacy of conflict, but rather because it claimed to resolve it, once and for all (beginning with struggle inside the Party itself).

In the United States, by contrast, the nature in which Marxism has been systematically, and often hysterically, excluded from the pale of respectability, has allowed it to become identified with the process of exclusion itself, particularly inasmuch as the latter has generally been denied to have taken place at all. If Liberalism can be described as that form of exclusion which, wherever possible, denies its own exclusivity, which denies that exclusions are an inseparable concomitant of every possible inclusion, or which accepts exclusions only in order to exclude it (the traditional definition of individual freedom, limited only by that of other individuals), then Marxism is the name of what Liberalism most seeks to exclude, the inevitability of exclusion itself. As a theory of class-conflict, Marxism does not ask *whether*,

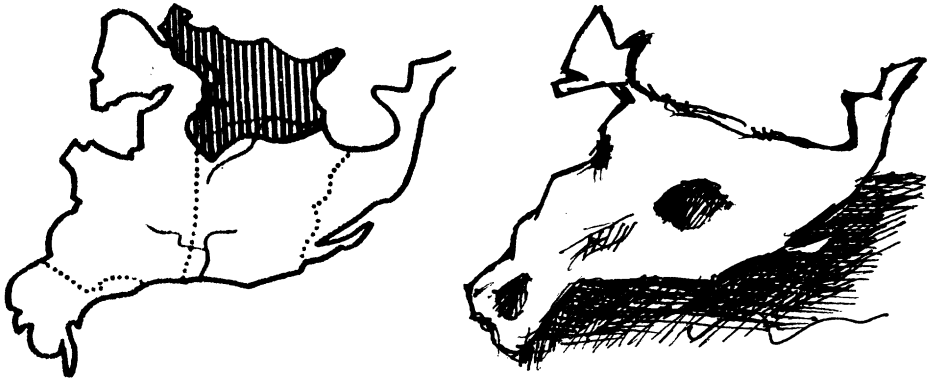
⁶It is interesting to note that in those areas of intellectual activity where social power is directly determined by the production of knowledge, the understanding of the latter is far less “constative” and far more “performative,” even ludic and agonistic; in the Humanities and Social Sciences, by contrast, where the pressures of social justification cannot be answered by direct reference to economic and technological power that results from research (and that determines it as well), a constative notion of “truth” and associated ethical “values” plays a far more conspicuous role.

⁷See Samuel Weber, “It,” *Glyph* 4, Baltimore, 1978, 9ff.

but rather *which* exclusions are necessary. To this, American Liberalism has traditionally responded: Marxism itself.

If this response has been uniquely effective, it is, Hartz argues, for the same reasons that liberalism has been able to install itself as a static and total world-view: the absence of a feudal past. Without Filmer to define and to demarcate the polemical thrust of Locke, the message of Marx loses its meaning.⁸ The liberal notion of the natural liberty of the individual, "born free," expands to cover the entire horizon, leaving little room for socialist (collective) alternatives.

It is in this traditionally small space, but with a momentum drawn in large part from the "post-structuralist" incursion into the liberal enclosure, that Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* [(London: Methuen, 1981)] seeks to drive a wedge. It is a powerful, almost



heroic attempt alternately to entice and to intimidate, to cajole and to browbeat its readers, presumably most or all members in good standing of the English-speaking "interpretive community," whose principal home-base is doubtless American university departments of literature. And the way in which it goes about defining its task indicates that *The Political Unconscious* strives to appeal to the widest number of these colleagues in the broadest possible way: its goal is "to restructure the problematics of ideology, of the unconscious and of desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production" [p. 13]. Nothing less, it seems, is required if "the traditional dialectical code" of Marxism is to be adequately "defended" in the particular arena where Marxist criticism must operate, that of "the intellectual marketplace today" [p. 10]. Marxism may want to replace commodity-relations, but in the meanwhile it must know how to sell itself on the market it hopes, some day, to abolish. Nor is this marketplace to be conceived of too simplistically, as constituting merely the *external* context of Marxist criticism. "Interpretation," Jameson declares, "is not an isolated act, but takes place *within* a Homeric battlefield, on which a host of interpretive options are either openly or implicitly in conflict" [p. 13]. However, this acknowledgment of interpretation as an activity that is not merely *collective*, but also *agonistic*, remains itself "an isolated act" within *The Political Unconscious*, and the grounds for this are already foreshadowed by the word I have placed in italics: "within." Jameson's use of the word here is all the more striking, since one would normally have expected the word "on," battles being usually fought *on*, rather than *within*, battlefields. But this shift responds to an imperative that dominates the theoretical arguments developed by *The Political Unconscious*, one which strangely recalls the position of Fish. Briefly stated, what the two books have in common, despite their many differences, is the priority they assign, axiomatically as it were, to the "in." For Jameson no less than for Fish, the interpretive process and everything that it entails, takes place *within* a space that is

⁸"Socialism is largely an ideological phenomenon, arising out of the principles of class and the revolutionary liberal revolt against them which the old European order inspired. It is not accidental that America which has uniquely lacked a feudal tradition has uniquely lacked also a socialist tradition. The hidden origin of socialist thought everywhere in the West is to be found in the feudal ethos. The ancien régime inspires Rousseau; both inspire Marx" [The Liberal Tradition in America, p. 6].

already delimited, and which therefore allows us, in principle, to comprehend the events that it is held to contain.

To be sure, the consequences that the two critics draw from this common conception are different. For Fish, the fact that the interpreter is *always in* a “situation” points to the role of the institution, of the interpretive community as the ultimate and decisive authority, that defines the situation one is always *in*. The questions that this conclusion leave unanswered are obvious enough. Above all, as Jameson’s statement, and Fish’s practice suggest, there is the question of conflictual, agonistic interpretations and their adjudication or evaluation: do such conflicts indicate *conflicting* “institutions” (or “sets of interpretive assumptions” i.e. a certain *exteriority*), or do they occur “within” an essentially *unified* institution? Can the alternative even be posed without recognizing that the relation between interpretation and institution cannot be the one-way street that Fish’s affirmations tend to imply: you interpret as you do because you *are already in* an institution, *already* indebted to a set of (i.e. single, unified) assumptions, etc. In short, a theory of *interpretive conflict* is required, and precisely this, Fish’s “principled account of change” [p. 367] does not, and probably – given its own axiomatics, its *parti pris* for the Inside and for the Insiders – cannot offer.

If Fish, then, seeks to avoid the problems of historical and social conflict by reducing them to a discrete succession of self-contained, monadic moments (first this, then that etc.), Jameson’s strategy is to try to sell Marxism as the most powerful Insider of them all (albeit one that has been largely ignored and neglected until now):

The priority of a Marxian interpretive framework . . . is here conceived as that “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. [p. 10, my emphasis]

Again, the pitch here recalls Fish’s peroration at the end of *Is There a Text in this Class?*: “We have everything that we always had – texts, standards, norms, criteria of judgment, critical histories, and so on . . . it is just that we do all those things within a set of institutional assumptions that can themselves become objects of dispute” [p. 367]. The last phrase, of course, points to the essential problem that Fish’s position denies, rather than addresses. And it is this problem that Jameson seeks to resolve, in a sense by presenting “Marxism” as the operator that both reverses the question of Fish’s title, and also transforms it, substituting for its question mark, a resounding exclamation point: “There *Is* a Class in this Text!” Jameson assures us, and “Marxism” alone can tell us what it is, since only Marxism contains it. We will still have everything we have always had, everything that we have been taught and that we teach others, everything that gives us our daily bread and our (dwindling) privileges. For everything is “at once cancelled and preserved”; “apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations” are put in their proper places; that is, we are put in *our* proper places that are “assigned” to us as our *property* in exchange – for there is always a price, to be sure – for our accepting the authority of Marxism.

The deal is tempting, no doubt. And all the more so, since it comes cushioned in a most attractive, self-critical, gift-wrapping: The ideological critique [of Marxism] does not depend on some dogmatic or “positive” conception of [itself] as a system. Rather, it is simply the place of an imperative to totalize, an imperative, Jameson adds, that can also be directed at Marxism itself, in its various forms, in order to reveal “their own local ideological limits or strategies of containment” [p. 53]. As ideological criticism, then, Marxism is “simply” the place of the imperative to totalize, nothing more, nothing less. But can that place be so simple to find, especially if its name can often be distorted or disguised by forms of Marxism which themselves must be subjected to “the imperative to totalize”? If Marxism can transcend such deficiencies, if it can be criticized in *its own name*, it is only because its own “place” is coextensive with another space which bears *another* name, that of History. Writ large. And it is with this gesture, capitalizing History, that Jameson takes up the challenge of “post-structuralist” thought, which, as is clear throughout *The Political Unconscious*, is both the most immediate adversary and the (more or less) silent partner.

The “post-structuralist” challenge to History, as I have already suggested, entails its persistent suspicion of the teleological perspective of totalization in which historical “develop-

ment" has traditionally been conceived. This suspicion goes back at least to Nietzsche who, in *The Genealogy of Morals* for instance, argued that the "assigning" of "purposes" as the "meaning" of a phenomenon is nothing but a mode of interpretation that seeks to impose itself by masking its particular, partisan character in the guise of the thing itself. A process which is not merely "performative," but agonistically and violently so, dislodging the previously dominant interpretive scheme in order to take its place. Such a process can present itself as the mere "constatation" of a teleological, or entelechical movement of its object, of which it is the simple *porte-parole*. History, then, whether as ethnocentrism (Lévi-Strauss), phallogocentrism (Derrida), the genetic/developmental stages of object-development (Lacan), or as a strategy of power operating by the exclusion of discontinuity (Foucault), has been subjected to a reexamination that has tended both to question the qualities of self-identity, universality and objective necessity hitherto attributed to it, and to redefine that attribution itself as part of a strategy that seeks to impose itself precisely by denying its own strategic, partisan character.

It is evident that such a move bears certain resemblances to the conception of thought as ideology developed by Marxism. The difference, of course, is that whereas Marxism retains the oppositions of "science" and "ideology," of true and false consciousness, as well as the notion of historical objectivity as their indispensable and constitutive dividing-line, most of the thinkers mentioned either explicitly or implicitly include all of these categories in the agonistic process itself.

Jameson's response to this challenge is to perform precisely the gesture that he seeks to exclude by attributing it to "ideology": that of attempting to "contain" the adversary. This "strategy of containment," which the ideology-critique of Marxism, Jameson asserts, seeks to expose through its "imperative to totalize" (but is not such an imperative itself already the mirror-image of what it seeks to contain?), consists of two gestures: acknowledgment and incorporation.

Acknowledgment:

The Political Unconscious accordingly turns on the dynamics of the act of interpretation and presupposes, as its organizational fiction, that we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or – if the text is brand-new – through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions. . . . [Hence,] our object of study is less the text itself than the interpretations through which we attempt to confront and to appropriate it. [pp. 9–10, my emphasis]

After this, one might have expected a study of the procedures, mechanisms and approaches of interpretation in terms of their strategic, agonistic operation on "the academic marketplace." But such a discussion, presumably, would not simply "cancel and preserve" all competing critical positions, it would not simply assign them their proper place – it would displace them in a space that could no longer be safely contained by the "discipline" of literary studies, as we know it today. The analysis of the literary text, not as a self-identical *object*, but as an element in a highly conflictual, ambivalent power-struggle, would have consequences for the organization and practice of the discipline of literary studies, as it is institutionally established, of which not the least disruptive would be the redefinition of its "borders," its relation to other disciplines and above all, to other modes of thought, whether these have been disciplined already or not. What would ultimately be raised is the issue of the existing definition and delimitation of knowledge, as well as the conditions of its practice: in short, the discipline and the university.

But the acknowledgment of the dependency of texts upon their interpretation remains just that: an *isolated* act without any further consequences.⁹ Perhaps this is because the

⁹In *Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety*, Freud describes "isolating" as one of the "techniques" that the ego can substitute for repression, to attain similar results. Instead of the objectionable idea being simply excluded from consciousness, "its associative connections are suppressed or interrupted." Freud emphasizes that such a tendency is to be found in normal thought as well, where "concentration provides a

informing intention is not to disrupt “the academic marketplace today,” but rather to stake out the claims of Marxism “within” it. In any case, the terms in which the relation of texts to interpretation, and hence, to the “Homeric battlefield” *within* which the latter is said to take place, already announces what is to come: if texts are only given to us “through” sedimented layers of previous interpretations, “through” sedimented reading habits, then they still remain what they are, in and of themselves, even after passing through those layers of sedimentation. The text may be *mediated* by its interpretations, but its meaning is not structurally constituted by these readings; rather, it is *contained* in the text, just as the text itself is contained within the space of History.

And it is here that the second gesture, *incorporation*, emerges. History in *The Political Unconscious* names that space which contains and comprehends everything else, including first and foremost, the “text.” Hence, Jameson’s insistence on the fact that History and text are inseparable, but also non-identical:

History is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but . . . an absent cause [which] is inaccessible to us except in textual form. . . . Our approach to it and to the Real necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious. [p. 35, author’s emphasis]

The text, then, is something that we must necessarily pass *through*, on our way somewhere else, to something as “prior” to the text as the latter is prior to our “approach to it”: History, as “absent cause.”

Viewed from a formal perspective – which is not necessarily the same as a formalist one – Jameson’s defense of Marxism is caught in a double bind: it criticizes its competitors for being ideological in the sense of practicing “strategies of containment,” that is, of drawing lines and practicing exclusions that ultimately reflect the particularities – the partiality and partisanship – of special interests seeking to present themselves as the whole. But at the same time its own claim to offer an alternative to such ideological containment is itself based on a strategy of containment, only upon one which seeks to identify itself with a whole more comprehensive than that of its rivals.

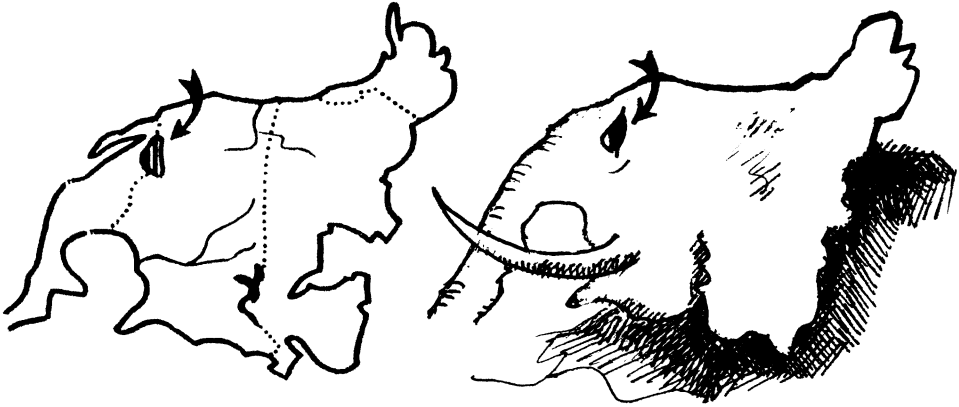
If there is a difference, then, between “Marxism” and “ideology,” it cannot be determined purely at the level of *form*, since both seek to contain and to comprehend their competitors in the name of a certain objectivity. The difference, rather, must reside in the kind of objectivity appealed to. Which is why, towards the end of the long, introductory theoretical chapter, Jameson finally, after telling us what History is *not* (a text, a narrative), attempts to tell us what it is:

History is therefore 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; it is therefore a narrative category . . . a retextualization of History [p. 102, author’s emphasis]

If the Marxist comprehension of History is distinct from ideological strategies of containment, it is not, strangely enough, because of the *contents* of that History, but because of its *form*. Marxism, it turns out, *is* form after all, or rather, a certain kind of form. Not that of narrative as such, but that of a particular type of narrative, that which tells us “why what happened . . . had to happen the way it did” [p. 101]. Necessity, then, the experience of which defines History, is that form of narrative which is ultimately, and in principle, self-identical; the story it tells could not be told otherwise, could not be changed, altered or modified, without being falsified and losing its necessity. If History is thus the “absent cause,”

pretext” – or an occasion – “to keep away not only what is irrelevant or unimportant, but, above all, what is unsuitable because it is contradictory.” *Contradiction, here, excludes dialectical synthesis [S. Freud, Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety, Norton Library edition, New York, 1959, pp. 46–47]. I have discussed the more general implications of “isolating” in my Legend of Freud, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1982, Part I.*

Necessity is the equally “absent story,” the Idea (in the Kantian sense) of a Story, of a Text, of a Narration that could not be told otherwise than it is – and hence, which “is” not, which is absent, functioning only as a kind of regulative idea. But this idea is no mere fiction since through its putative absence it can be *invoked* to produce or to justify very real effects and practices: for instance, the legitimacy of judging actual, mundane narratives in terms of a text that is identical-to-itself, but whose identity is never immediately present-as-such. As an “absent cause,” such identity – whether it is called “History,” “Literature,” “Work,” “Author” or whatever – always requires an intermediary, a *critical* spokesman in order to be *heard*. It cannot speak for itself, but must be spoken for. And yet, it must also provide the basis for distinguishing between true and false spokesmen, for is this not the essence, and justification, of the critical project and its practices?



And yet, if this is so, then the most dramatic of Jameson’s attempts to provide a positive definition of History – “History is what hurts . . . what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis” [p. 102] – raises the question: hurts *whom*? The readers of *The Political Unconscious*? Its author? The brokers in the academic marketplace? Their customers? But what if all of these were searching precisely for some instance that might set “inexorable limits” to their “praxis,” which, for want of authorized limits, was in the process of losing its sense of self-legitimacy? What, in short, if critics *desired* to be “hurt” in this way, as a lesser evil, rather than to court the risks of being left beside themselves, “beside the point,” by desires they no longer controlled? Would “History,” Jameson’s History, still simply “hurt,” or simply “refuse desire”? The desire, for instance, to capitalize (on) History?

It seems likely, on the contrary, that a good many of those whose existence is tied to the academic marketplace would be neither hurt nor frustrated by a History which can be described as follows:

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. [p. 102]

Not to be forgotten, even by “alienating necessities,” may yet be preferable to the current uncertainties traversing the profession in regard to its social status and its institutional future. To hear that “History as ground and untranscendable horizon needs no particular theoretical justification” is doubtless music to the ears of many scholars and critics for whom recent theoretical discussion has rendered the ground upon which the discipline has been based less than solid, and its horizons anything but clear or “untranscendable.”

Like Fish’s “institution” or “interpretive community,” then, Jameson’s History recommends itself as the best means of Saving the Text (and those who live by it):

It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity. [p. 20]

And, we might add, it is here that it also “finds” much of its appeal; like Fish, Jameson could assure his readers (if he so chose), that the Marxism of *The Political Unconscious* will not be an engine of expropriation, but of appropriation: that it will help them in their efforts to appropriate the text, to enrich themselves by enriching the texts, that we will “have everything that we always had,” only more, better and safer than before. It is no accident that Jameson recommends Marxism in terms of its superior “semantic richness,” which in turn is directly related to its conception of History. The methodology outlined in *The Political Unconscious* capitalizes directly upon this notion of History:

Such semantic enrichment and enlargement of the inert givens and materials of a particular text must take place within three concentric frameworks, which mark a widening out of the sense of the social ground of a text [p. 75]

These three “frameworks” – the “symbolic” or “political” (in the narrower sense of events); the “social,” and the “historical” – can be described as “concentric” only because their center is identified with the “inert givens and materials of a particular text” – a text, in short, whose particularity coincides with its *inertia*, the fact that it is, once and for all, in its proper place *within* History, that is within a story waiting to be told, once and for all, in the one and only way. Like the movement of Capital itself, this story is never finished, but its end is always in sight. It is, Jameson suggests, a “single, great collective story” with “a single, fundamental theme . . . the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity.” This great struggle produces “vital episodes in a single, vast unfinished plot” [pp. 19–20]. It is this plot, then, that *The Political Unconscious* suggests it is the critic’s business to discover. It is a plot that promises to keep critics in business indefinitely – on the condition that its unity, singularity and self-identity are not themselves seen as an effect of interpretation, of narration, of “textualization” but rather as their center and frame, their ground and horizon.

But this plot, with its lure of limitless enrichment, contrasts strangely with the story it tells, and *The Political Unconscious* constantly returns to it like a criminal to the scene of the crime. The reader is thus led to reflect upon the tension that pervades *The Political Unconscious*, between the “struggle” that is said to constitute the ultimate subject-matter of texts and of their interpretations, on the one hand, and on the other, an essentially “constative” or “contemplative” conception of the process of interpretation itself. For notwithstanding the early remark about its agonistic, conflictual character, interpretation is described as a more or less faithful reconstruction, reproduction or resuscitation of the “buried reality” – or treasures – of the text. Conflict is thus confined to the thematic element of literature, leaving its hermeneutical discovery to pursue its mission of “semantic enrichment” without any of the trials and tribulations associated with primitive accumulation as described by Marx.

The reason for this, of course, is that the problems faced by *The Political Unconscious* are determined not by the needs of primitive accumulation, but by the crisis of over-accumulation. Translated into the particular area of literary criticism, this is manifest in the fact that the problems of the discipline arise not from a scarcity of interpretive productivity, but from its excess. The problem is not so much how to interpret, but how to valorize interpretation, at a time when it is in danger of asphyxiation from its uncontrolled proliferation. And it is here, in its response to this problem, that *The Political Unconscious* is most revealing, of its own strategies and of the “battlefield” *within* which they are designed to operate.

In order to judge and evaluate individual interpretations, however, there must be standards available that are themselves more than purely individual in character. Thus, the problem of arbitration leads inevitably to one of the major concerns of *The Political Unconscious*, the necessity of rethinking the relation between *individual* and *collective*. “One of the most urgent tasks for Marxist theory today,” remarks Jameson, towards the end of the book, “is (to construct) a whole new logic of collective dynamics, with categories that escape the taint of some mere application of terms drawn from individual experience” [p. 294]. It is from this standpoint that Jameson interprets the structuralist and post-structuralist critique of subjectivity; however, he does not seem to realize that the rapprochement could work the other way as well: that the problem of “individualism” might well be reinterpreted in terms of the aporias of constitutive subjectivity, a move that has been attempted by Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, but also, before them (albeit in a more Hegelian vein), by Adorno and

Horkheimer. In this perspective, what could be more individualist than the notion of History as a “single, vast unfinished plot” ready to appropriate everything – all otherness – as a part of itself? What could be more individualist than the notion of Historical Necessity as a story that cannot be told otherwise (and yet which, necessarily, always is)?

What Hartz describes as the ambivalent, self-contradictory core of American Liberalism, with its pretension to be the Whole, finds an exemplary manifestation in *The Political Unconscious* when Jameson describes the figure of *unity* implied by the collective self-fulfillment which he interprets as the *telos* of the Marxian conception of History:

The unity of the body must once again prefigure the renewed organic identity of associative or collective life Only the community, indeed, can dramatize that self-sufficient intelligible unity (or ‘structure’) of which the individual body, like the individual ‘subject,’ is a decentered ‘effect,’ and to which the individual organism, caught in the ceaseless chain of the generations and the species, cannot . . . lay claim. [p. 74]

Despite the massive explicit emphasis on History, time, struggle and narration, there can never be any question but that the synchronic perspective has the first, and last, word. To determine History as totalization, as a single, self-same narrative, as a process of unification and of integration – ultimately, in short, as a movement of *identity* and of *presentation* – is to assume a point of view from which the whole can be comprehended, a position, therefore, that must be essentially detached from and outside of what it seeks to contemplate. And such a position, in turn, is only conceivable if that which it identifies is already, intrinsically and spontaneously, self-identical: that is, if its defining limits are held to be the product of that which they contain, a product of the interior they protect but do not constitute (for otherwise, the process of delimitation itself would intrude and disrupt every possible determination of an object, thus excluding any possibility of a position being simply exterior to that which it posits).

It is here, then, that the category – although not necessarily the object – of individuality becomes a strategic necessity. To construe the collective or community in terms of a “self-sufficient, intelligible unity,” is merely to universalize the individual, held to be the source and the goal of its being. Every such gesture rewrites the Declaration of Independence, as the independence of the self from the other, of identity from alterity, of sameness from difference. And the ambivalence inherent in all such hypostases of individualism becomes particularly evident and illuminating when Jameson takes us to the place in Marx’s writings where this notion of a utopian, collective unity is foreshadowed. It is in the figure of the Oriental despot, described by Marx in the *Grundrisse* as the incarnation of a social unity that totally subordinated the differences of its constitutive members. It is here, Jameson asserts, that “the problem of the symbolic enactment of collective unity” is inscribed in the Marxian corpus, “by Marx himself” [p. 296]. What is of interest here is not merely the fact that the model of collective unity seems situated at such a distance from the liberal individualism that dominates our political and social thinking, but rather, that despite this apparent distance – or perhaps because of it – it seems so close to us.

But just what is it that “Marx himself” writes? Given Jameson’s notion of Necessity as the Story of What Could Not Have Happened Otherwise, the response is particularly remarkable. For textually, there are *at least three* different versions in play here. First, there is the text of Marx “himself,” who, in German, remarks that the “*Gesamtheit*” – the collective unity – “is realized in the (Oriental) despot as the Father of many communities” (“. . . der Gesamtheit – die im Despoten realisiert ist als dem Vater der vielen Gemeinwesen”) [*Grundrisse* (Berlin, 1953), p. 377]. Then, second, there is the English translation used by Jameson, in which the term “despot” is rendered as “*the form of the despot*” (“. . . a unity realized in the form of the despot”). And finally, there is a third version, that which occurs in Jameson’s commentary, placed in quotation marks although it does not correspond exactly to either of the other two texts. For Jameson *alters* the other versions once again, this time to read: “the ‘body’ of the despot” [p. 295].

Where, now, one is tempted to ask, is the “absent cause” that can justify these alterations, and establish their “necessity”? Where, except in a powerful *desire* to see History and

Necessity as the *body* of the father, the body, that is, of a patriarch who is father of all but son of no one, and hence whose body, unlike that of “the individual organism,” is precisely *not* “caught in the ceaseless chain of the generations and the species” [p. 74], but is the Immortal Body of the Father.

Is it not this desire, to escape that “ceaseless chain,” which determines at once the rejection of a certain *enchaînement* characteristic of the “metonymic” impulse of “post-structuralism,” and the effort to replace it by a body which would be single, sane and whole?

Needless to say, this is not – despite the connotations of the book’s title – the body that psychoanalysis teaches us to expect, unless we identify psychoanalysis with the ego-psychology of the autonomous subject so dear to American liberal culture. If Freud insists that the ego is emphatically “a bodily ego,” [*The Ego and the Id* (New York: The Norton Library, 1960), p. 16] this body has little to do with the patriarchal body of the Oriental Despot. The latter only becomes meaningful, for Freud, in the perspective of the parricide of *Totem and Taboo*, as the unattainable and ambivalent fantasy that only ceases to be destructive, precisely, by becoming part of a symbolic chain. In this symbolization the body is that which it has always been, “a place from which both external and internal perceptions may spring. It is seen like any other object, but to the *touch* it yields two kinds of sensations, one of which may be equivalent to an internal perception” [ibid., p. 15]. If the body, in *The Political Unconscious*, but not only there, to be sure, is thus introduced as a *prefiguration* of communal identity and unity, it is to help us forget that the body we *feel*, and *touch* – as distinct from that which we see, expose or present – is neither whole nor unified, but a surface or limit in which external and internal perceptions are confounded and never entirely differentiated. The body is thus, as undifferentiated surface, the *matrix* of an ego whose perceptual-projective identity never fully escapes its ambivalent origins, but rather develops in function of them.

The notion of such a “body-ego,” although first articulated by someone working in the sphere of what is commonly known as “individual psychology,” is, therefore, considerably less “individualistic” in its categories than are the “Durkheimian or Lukáscean vocabulary of collective consciousness” to which Jameson resorts, in the putative absence of that non-individualist, “whole new logic of collective dynamics” he anticipates and demands. But quite apart from the fact that such a “logic” is unlikely ever to arrive if we content ourselves with simply waiting for it, while continuing to use terms derived from the very individualism we hope, one day, to supplant – the very notion that such a mode of thought would be “wholly new” belongs to the same individualist thinking that construes sameness and otherness in terms of simple, and mutually exclusive, opposition (even if “dialectical”).

Rather than waiting for the New, we would probably do better to reexamine the Old, under the suspicion that this theory – if we can even conceive of its possibility – is probably at work already, not as such or full-blown, but in bits and pieces. To recognize it, however, we may well have to adopt a perspective quite different from that developed in *The Political Unconscious* – mindful, of course, of the fact that different is not the same as unrelated. Indeed, the following formulation of Jameson’s perspective indicates, albeit indirectly, how such a differential relation, of New to Old, may be conceived:

This perspective may be reformulated in terms of the traditional dialectical code as the study of Darstellung: that untranslatable designation in which the current problems of representation productively intersect with the quite different ones of presentation, or of the essentially narrative and rhetorical movement of language and writing through time. [p. 13]

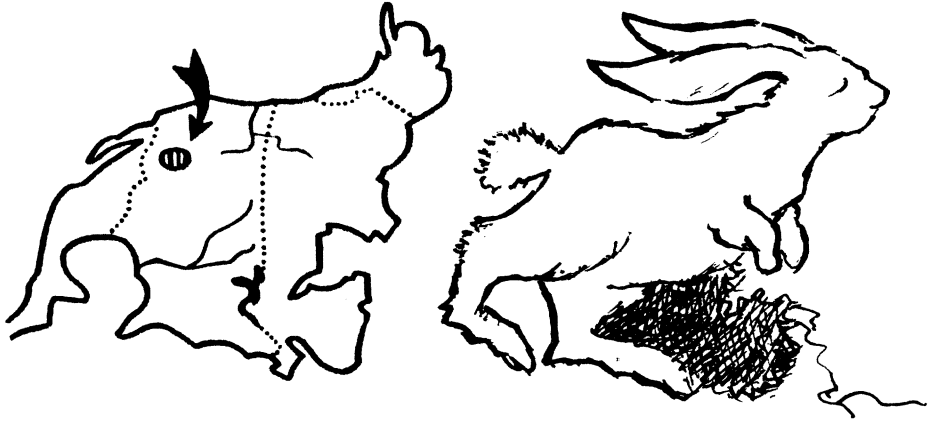
Indeed, the dialectical notion of *Darstellung*, combining both the movement of representation, and that of presentation, adequately names the hermeneutical perspective of *The Political Unconscious*, for which time is in fact a medium “through” which language “moves,” and which construes the act of interpretation as an act of reconstruction, or rather, resuscitation:

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 entirely alien to it. [p. 19]

But if the interpreter here, in the light of Marxism, recovers some of the sacral power of the priestly function out of which interpretation originally developed, this is also entirely compatible with a more serene, more bureaucratic and technocratic depiction of the interpretive activity, for instance, as it is said to characterize that third and widest of Jameson's three concentric frameworks of interpretation, the Historical:

Within this final horizon the individual text or cultural artifact . . . is here restructured as a field of force in which the dynamics of sign systems of several distinct modes of production can be registered and apprehended. [p. 98]



The interpreter here "restructures" with the aim of *registering* and *apprehending*, words whose disciplinary overtones are difficult to ignore. The purpose of such restructuring is precisely to render the force-fields, the struggle and conflicts of History, appropriable by a contemplative, detached spectator, the traditional subject of scientific observation. History is thus to be made safe for cognition. Conflict is objectified but the process of objectification itself is held to be outside the Melee.

How different the picture of interpretation that emerges in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where, it is true, the "dialectical code" in which the notion of *Darstellung* is at home, is replaced by something more difficult to name, if not with the word used by Freud himself: *Entstellung*, displacement, disfigurement, dislocation. The interpretive process that it designates, however, provides a striking contrast to the academic serenity described in *The Political Unconscious*. "It should not be forgotten," Freud writes,

that the work of interpretation must struggle against the very psychic forces to which we owe the distortion of the dream (welche die Entstellung des Traumes verschulden). It thus becomes a question of the relation of forces whether one's intellectual interest, capacity to overcome one's self, (Selbstüberwindung), psychological knowledge and skill in dream-interpretation enable one to master internal resistances. [The Interpretation of Dreams (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 563]

Interpretation, for Freud, does not reconstruct and resuscitate so that we may register and apprehend; it partakes of, and in a process of conflict that no totalization can ever comprehend. Which is why its effect is not simply the primitive or teleological accumulation of wealth, nor the "semantic enrichment" of the phenomena it interprets, but their impoverishment as well. Or rather, a transformation in which enrichment and impoverishment become very difficult, perhaps impossible, to distinguish. This is why, when Freud chooses a word to articulate the relation of *Entstellung* to "the forces" from which it proceeds, it is derived from "debt," *Schuld* (verschulden). The hermeneutics of *Entstellung* thus inscribe itself in a tradition which can be retraced to *The Genealogy of Morals*, in which both history and inter-

pretation are conceived as forms of a debt that is impossible to repay. By contrast, Freud—here and elsewhere—adds the implication that the debt in question cannot be construed as a static and stable obligation, but rather as an ambivalent and unresolvable tension. If the psychic conflict that structures the subject of desire precludes any enduring resolution, any kind of totalization, neither can the process of interpretation simply renounce such aspirations. For every interpretation (including, of course, this one) must necessarily seek to arrest and to dominate the conflictual process of symbolization it seeks to comprehend. In the text just cited, the ambivalence can on the one hand be retraced to the exigency of *Selbstüberwindung*—a term which means practically the opposite of its translation in the Standard Edition, which reads: “self-discipline,” since what is both required, and stated, is the overcoming-of-self, i.e. of the ego—and on the other, to the fact that such “overcoming,” the “mastering of internal resistances,” still inevitably entails mastery, control, discipline, and hence, as such, appeals to the very ego that it seeks to “overcome.”

It is only in the *assumption* of such ambivalence, and in the articulation of its social and institutional consequences, that the notion of “history”—but also that of “text”—may be brought into play, in a game whose rules are neither those of the “academic marketplace today,” nor of the Liberal Tradition in America. For, in contrast to that tradition, to its compulsion to universalize, to individualize, and to delegitimize conflict, the players of this game will not have to ignore the fact that the rules themselves are at stake. And perhaps that, for once, will allow us to care about something other than just winning.