Fifteen years after its publication, Wayne Booth's *Critical Understanding* remains a major statement on pluralism in literary criticism. In these fifteen years, however, criticism in general has paid less attention to the powers and limits of pluralism than to the pervasiveness of politics—in interpretation, in theory, in the intersection between one's identity and one's critical beliefs and values, especially where matters of race, gender, and class are involved. Furthermore, as theorists have come to regard Orwell's dictum above as a universal truth, they have typically become more dismissive of pluralism. From the perspective of Orwell's epigram, a pluralism such as Booth's is suspect because it pretends to be above politics while its efforts to reduce conflict by advocating the validity of multiple perspectives actually performs the political function of preserving the status quo. In this chapter, I would like to counter such objections by arguing that it is desirable for critics to attend to both Orwell's dictum and Booth's injunction; that, in other words, politically committed critics and pluralists have much to teach each other. For any politically committed criticism to do more than preach to the converted, it must move beyond implicit assertions of the "more-left-than-thou"
variety, and pluralism provides some useful lessons in how to do that. Pluralism, for its part, needs to be more cognizant than it has typically been to the political dimensions of both the general program and any practical application of it. In a sense, then, I am seeking to build on some of the principles of Critical Understanding in order to address an issue Booth never takes up explicitly: the relation between politics and pluralism. I will be working not so much to defend the details of Booth’s pluralist program as to realize a potentiality in its spirit.

Because one of the charges frequently leveled at pluralists is that they are unable to discriminate strong positions from weak ones, I will develop my argument by focusing on the questions that surround the act of evaluating criticism. On what grounds do pluralists evaluate other critics? Are those grounds ultimately political, that is, explainable as the imposition of a privileged set of interests on the other’s discourse? Or are those grounds not entirely explainable in political terms? In other words, what force and emphasis ought pluralists give to Orwell’s dictum as they reflect on their own procedures of evaluation? More generally, what are the politics of pluralism? To give an added twist to the inquiry, I will focus on a specific example of political criticism, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic, considering, first, Toril Moi’s evaluation of it from the vantage point of her feminist stance, and then an evaluation conducted from the vantage point of pluralism.

Because dismissals of pluralism often proceed from an inadequate understanding of it, and because I am less interested in the detailed argument of Critical Understanding than its general project, I would like to begin by clarifying my version of pluralism. My work is indebted to Booth’s, and before him to R. S. Crane’s, though I part company with Booth in his conclusion that there is no philosophical foundation for pluralism and part company with both Booth and Crane with their privileging of understanding over other purposes of criticism. Pluralism is the stance I arrive at through the following chain of reasoning: (1) to engage in critical discourse is to implicate oneself, whether consciously or not, in some theoretical positions. If I utter the apparently unstartling statement that “In Pride and Prejudice Jane Austen created one of the most lovable characters in English fiction,” I imply a theoretical commitment to many ideas that will be seen as startlingly erroneous from the perspective of some other theoretical commitments: authors create the meanings of texts; characters are representations of possible people; readers share responses to texts; fiction is a category distinct
from nonfiction. Thus, (2) to speak critically is to speak with principles and assumptions that both enable and give meaning to the speech; to speak critically is to speak within a mode or a framework. These terms denote an implicit or explicit critical system (which may or may not be internally consistent, well formed, efficient, or effective). A mode includes (a) a characteristic set of questions; (b) some methods for answering those questions; (c) a set of principles and assumptions about such things as the nature of the text, the importance of the author (or authorial function) in the creation of meaning, the role of the reader in interpretation, the significance of history to the creation or interpretation of a work, and the relation between the text and the world outside the text; (d) some general purpose toward which the questions, methods, principles, and assumptions are directed. Answers to critical questions about a given text can be seen as a result of the interaction of these four parts of a mode with the particulars of the text.

(3) Some modes are fundamentally discrete: the questions they ask, the methods they adopt, the principles and assumptions on which they are built, and the purposes they serve are so different that even though they may share some terms (e.g., the “meaning” of the text), they are not offering competing kinds of critical knowledge. A Marxist who asks how a text reveals its relation to the conditions of production within its culture and a psychoanalytic critic who asks how a text reveals the psyche of its author may focus on the exact same textual data but because they interpret that data in light of their discrete frameworks, they offer interpretations that do not compete.

(4) More than one mode is capable of yielding results that are fully adequate to the data it seeks to explain. There are two related points here: first, the different kinds of knowledge offered by different modes can’t always be ranked; one kind isn’t necessarily better or worse than others, it can sometimes just be different. Second, the different kinds of knowledge are not partial in the usual sense of the term. The Marxist may be able to use her framework to explain the whole text with admirable precision—and so may the psychoanalytic critic. Each explanation is itself total, but each explanation occurs within a framework that is one of several possibilities.

(5) Some modes, and especially some executions of a mode, are deficient: there are many ways to be wrong. If a mode’s first principles lead its practitioner to reductive views of data, then the mode will be flawed. If a mode’s characteristic methods lead to distortion of the data or to a kind of reasoning that is severely limited, then the mode will be
inferior to others that are more methodologically sound. Furthermore, if a given practitioner violates principles of the mode or employs the method in a sloppy fashion, then the execution of the mode will yield dubious results.

At first glance the consequences of pluralism for critical practice may seem minor: because pluralism is a metacritical stance, a position on positions, the pluralist must still operate within a single mode when doing practical criticism. The consequences can, however, be very significant, because the pluralist’s understanding of what it means to operate within a mode is radically different from the nonpluralist’s. On the one hand, the pluralist develops a keener sense of the limits of her interpretation: she abandons the belief that her interpretation is the truth about the text and adopts the belief that it is one of multiple truths. On the other hand, the pluralist, believing that there are many ways one can go wrong, becomes much more attentive to the methodology of the mode in which she is working—and to her execution of that methodology. Furthermore, the pluralist will both eagerly welcome and carefully scrutinize the work of other critics. Believing in the validity of more than one mode, the pluralist operating on a particular occasion as, say, a Freudian, will not reject out of hand the interpretation of a Marxist, but will consider such things as whether the Marxist addresses elements of the work that she might have unwittingly neglected within her psychoanalytic approach. At the same time, given the belief that there are many ways to go wrong, the pluralist will pay special attention to the Marxist critic’s execution of the mode, probing for both weak and strong features of the argument. In short, as a practical critic, the pluralist will be at once more modest and more rigorous than the nonpluralist.

Notice that once I talk about rigor and about being wrong, the questions about the relation between pluralism and politics in the task of evaluation immediately and unavoidably emerge. If methodologies vary from one framework to the next, whose conception of rigor do we use? Are there transmethodological tests of methodologies and their execution? If there is no such thing as keeping out of politics, then we also need to ask about the political dimensions of the tests we use—and the political consequences of the results we obtain. I will keep these questions in mind as I turn to Gilbert and Gubar and to Toril Moi.

Gilbert and Gubar’s central question is, “How did women writers of the nineteenth century establish a distinct female literary tradition within
a patriarchal literary culture that wanted to deny them the authority of authorship?” Gilbert and Gubar’s chief methodological steps are to analyze the patriarchal literary culture and the woman writer’s place within it, and to read women’s texts for signs of their resistance to or subversion of the patriarchy and for signs of their awareness of female precursors. More specifically, they conduct their analyses of patriarchal culture by reading the gender politics involved in metaphors about writing employed by male writers as well as the gender politics implied by male writers’ typical representations of women as either monsters or angels. Gilbert and Gubar read women’s texts in three main ways: First, they seek to uncover the textual details that reveal resistance to or subversion of patriarchy, typically finding recurring images of enclosure and escape, disease and health, and fragmentation and wholeness, as well as characters who play off the angel-monster dichotomy; they then use these details to construct their feminist readings of women’s texts.

Women from Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic, works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning. Thus these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards. (73)

Second, Gilbert and Gubar analyze the structure of a narrative text according to what the structure reveals about the nature of men and women’s relations under patriarchy. Third, they employ analogical reasoning to establish connections between women’s texts and their precursors (indeed, sometimes ancestors as well) in both the male and female traditions. For example, they argue that because both texts are crucially involved with the concepts of heaven, hell, and a fall, Wuthering Heights is a response to Paradise Lost.

Gilbert and Gubar’s main assumptions, some of which I have already touched on, are the following: They view the text as the site of a revelation of male–female relationships within the culture in which it was produced. They regard the author as the source of the text’s meaning. They posit an implied reader who can understand the covert story of women’s texts. They assume that history restricts authors but not readers: authors inevitably respond to their cultural moments but readers can move across cultures—Gilbert and Gubar imply that the
meanings available to them in the twentieth century were also available to readers in the nineteenth. Thus, they claim that the women writers themselves were aware of the tradition they describe in the book; Gilbert and Gubar see themselves as uncovering rather than constructing that tradition. They assume further that texts relate to the world by representing and adopting stances toward cultural attitudes, situations, and ideologies.

The purpose of Gilbert and Gubar’s criticism is political. They want to refocus attention on the gender politics of the texts they read, and they want to establish the power of the female literary tradition they uncover. Indeed, by emphasizing the adverse cultural conditions under which women wrote, their history of the female tradition is in part a celebration of women writers’ power of resistance, insight, and creation. By accomplishing these tasks of reading politically and establishing the power of the tradition, Gilbert and Gubar also want to achieve the political purpose of making feminist criticism more important in their own cultural moment of the late 1970s. Their book is not only an analysis of the power of the woman writer in the nineteenth century but also a demonstration of the power of the feminist critic in the twentieth.

In *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Toril Moi praises Gilbert and Gubar’s “often inventive and truly original readings,” but she objects strongly to their assumption that the woman writer is the source of the meaning of her text: Gilbert and Gubar’s insistence, writes Moi,

on the female author as the instance that provides the only true meaning of the text . . . actually undermines [their] anti-patriarchal stance. Having quoted Edward Said’s *Beginnings* with its “miniature meditation on the word *authority*” as a description of “both the author and the authority of any literary text,” they quote Said's claim that “the unity or integrity of the text is maintained by a series of genealogical connections: author-text, beginning-middle-end, text-meaning, reader-interpretation, and so on. *Underneath all these is the imagery of succession, of paternity, of hierarchy.*” But it seems inconsistent . . . to accept with Said that the traditional view of the relationship between author and text is hierarchical and authoritarian, only to proceed to write a book of over 700 pages that never once questions the authority of the female author. For if we are truly to reject the model of author as God the Father of the text, it is surely not enough to reject the patriarchal ideology implied in the paternal metaphor. It is equally necessary to reject the critical practice it
leads to, a critical practice that relies on the author as the transcendental 
signified of his or her text. For the patriarchal critic, the author is the 
source, origin, and meaning of the text. If we are to undo this patriarchal 
practice of authority, we must take one further step and proclaim with 
Roland Barthes the death of the author. (62–63)

From my perspective, the most important feature of Moi’s argument 
is its political nature, and especially its assumption about the relation 
between critical positions and political ones. This assumption becomes 
clearer once we break the argument down into the twin syllogisms at 
its crux:

1. Any critical position that perpetuates patriarchal beliefs is politically 
objectionable.
The belief that authors are the source of meaning is patriarchal. 
The belief that authors are the source of meaning is politically objectionable.

2. The work of critics who subscribe to a politically objectionable posi­
tion should be repudiated.
Gilbert and Gubar subscribe to the politically objectionable position that 
authors are the source of meaning.
Gilbert and Gubar’s work should be repudiated.

Note, first, that the argument as a whole turns round on itself and 
convicts Moi of the same political crime she finds Gilbert and Gubar 
guilty of: her discussion treats them as the source of meaning for their 
book. Thus, either her argument participates in the perpetuation of 
the patriarchy and should be repudiated or her premises need to be 
questioned. I will question one of those premises as I relate it to the 
assumption Moi makes about the relation between critical positions and 
political ones.

Perhaps the most notable feature of Moi’s reasoning is that the linch­
pin of the whole argument, the minor premise of the first syllogism 
(the belief that authors are the source of meaning is patriarchal) is not 
demonstrated but simply asserted. This point has greater force when we 
go back to Gilbert and Gubar and recognize that the apparent support 
Moi gives for the belief—their use of Said’s analysis of the traditional 
image of an author—functions very differently in Madwoman from the 
way Moi claims.
Gilbert and Gubar turn to Said not to accept "the traditional view that the relationship between author and text is hierarchical and authoritarian" but to show that patriarchal culture has adopted the metaphor of author as "father" and "authority" of the text and thereby has given women an anxiety of authorship. At no point do Gilbert and Gubar agree that the patriarchal view accurately describes authorship; not only are they objecting to it from the very first sentence of their book ("Is the pen a metaphorical penis?"), but they are also offering their account of the success of women writers as a refutation of that view. Moi seems implicitly to acknowledge that Gilbert and Gubar want "to reject the model of author as God the Father of the text" and its attendant patriarchal ideology, but she in effect denies the possibility of separating a belief in authors as the source of meaning from a perpetuation of patriarchy. "It is surely not enough to reject the patriarchal ideology implied in the paternal metaphor. It is equally necessary to reject the critical practice it leads to, a critical practice that relies on the author as the transcendental signified of his or her text. For the patriarchal critic, the author is the source, origin, and meaning of the text." In short, Moi assumes that a given critical position—in this case, a belief in authorial meaning—has a single politics—in this case, perpetuation of the patriarchy. This assumption is so deeply embedded in her work that she never questions it and thus never questions—or feels the need to substantiate—the minor premise of the first syllogism.

The assumption is doubly troubling here: not only does Moi fail to offer a warrant for it, but Gilbert and Gubar also implicitly reject it and posit a different relation between critical and political positions. They do not see any necessary connection between a belief in authors as the source of meaning and any specific political belief; for them, the politics derives not from the critical position but from how it is appropriated. In other words, for Gilbert and Gubar the politics of criticism do not inhere in specific critical first principles but in how those principles are used. The nineteenth-century patriarchal culture used the belief in authors as the source of meaning to reinforce patriarchal ideology. Gilbert and Gubar's book works in conjunction with the texts of the women writers they analyze to subvert that ideology. For Moi's case to have force, she would have to take on the task of showing that the belief in authors is not politically neutral. Because she does not do that, she does not genuinely engage with Gilbert and Gubar's book, and thus her commentary tells more about her critical position than about theirs.
Let me engage her position on authorial meaning more fully by ex­amining its specific logic. Moi's view equates authors with authority, authority with the authoritarian, and the authoritarian with patriarchy. The problem arises in the equation of authority and the authoritarian. Proclaiming the death of the author does not eliminate authority but merely transfers it—to the reader or to history or to culture or to the play of signification or perhaps to some synthesis of these forces. If authority is to be equated with the authoritarian, then these other positions are also authoritarian (note, too, that the proclamation of the author's death exercises a strong authority against one kind of reading), and thus, within Moi's logic, equally patriarchal. Gilbert and Gubar's position is no more—and no less—patriarchal than Barthes's. The larger point is that once we recognize that authority will always be located somewhere and thus will always privilege something, we must give up making arguments about the necessary connection between authors, authority, and patriarchy. Whatever is privileged can always be analogized to the male and whatever is marginalized can always be analogized to the female. If, for example, authority is located in the reader, then readers can be seen as in the male position of appropriating and claiming dominance over the work of authors who are in the female position of laboring in the service of the dominant sex. And so on for the other locations. This kind of analysis, of course, is just playing games with terms, games that are themselves authorized by the erroneous assumption that there is a direct link between one's critical and one's political position.

This analysis of Moi's evaluation leads to a larger question: Is her failure to engage meaningfully with Gilbert and Gubar just a local problem, a failure of execution on her part, or something that is more revealing of what happens when we read other critics in terms of our own politics? It is, I think, revealing of what typically, though not invariably, happens. Furthermore, it is typical not so much because it is political but because it is dogmatic. As I have implied above, Moi's failure to engage derives from her deep, unquestioning commitment to her assumption about the relation between critical and political positions. In that respect, she is no different from a critic who is not at all overtly concerned with political positions but who has some deeply entrenched assumption about the nature of texts. For both of them, some direct—or, more frequently, indirect—appeal to that assumption will be sufficient to carry the argument (note Moi's "it is surely not enough" just before she invokes the consequences of her assumption).
The trouble here is the trouble with all such arguments from monism: assertion replaces argument, declaring one's superiority replaces engaging the other's position.

At the same time, despite all my complaints about Moi's analysis, I must recognize that she has brought into focus a significant dimension of Gilbert and Gubar's text that was absent from the account based on my pluralism. While that account acknowledged the overarching political purpose of Gilbert and Gubar's project, it did not address the political dimension of their position on authorship. Moi's attention to the political in combination with the strategies of pluralist reading allow for the recognition that the politics of the principle must, as we have seen, be understood not in the abstract but in the uses to which it is put.

How then would a pluralist evaluate Gilbert and Gubar's book more generally? One way of conducting that evaluation is to go to their answer and assess the case they make for it. Here is the central passage in their argument that the covert story of Jane Eyre is one that makes Bertha Jane's double, the argument that gives them one of their chief warrants for titling their book as they do:

... Bertha has functioned as Jane's dark double throughout the governess's stay at Thornfield. Specifically, every one of Bertha's appearances—or, more accurately, her manifestations—has been associated with an experience (or repression) of anger on Jane's part. Jane's feelings of "hunger, rebellion, and rage" on the battlements, for instance, were accompanied by Bertha's "low, slow, ha! ha!" and "eccentric murmurs." Jane's apparently secure response to Rochester's apparently egalitarian sexual confidences was followed by Bertha's attempt to incinerate the master in his bed. Jane's unexpressed resentment at Rochester's gypsy-masquerade found expression in Bertha's terrible shriek and her even more terrible attack on Richard Mason. Jane's anxieties about her marriage, and in particular her fears of her own alien "robed and veiled" bridal image, were objectified by the image of Bertha in a "white and straight" dress, "whether gown, sheet, or shroud, I cannot tell." Jane's profound desire to destroy Thornfield, the symbol of Rochester's mastery and of her own servitude, will be acted out by Bertha, who burns down the house and destroys herself in the process as if she were an agent of Jane's desire as well as her own. And finally, Jane's disguised hostility to Rochester, summarized in her terrifying prediction to herself that "you shall, yourself, pluck out your right eye; yourself cut off your right hand" (chap. 27)
come strangely true through the intervention of Bertha, whose melodramatic death causes Rochester to lose both eye and hand. (360)

The case is both detailed and concrete; if it holds up to a closer look, it will be very persuasive. That closer look, however, undermines its persuasiveness. The first serious problem arises in the second association they find—Jane's apparently secure response to Rochester's sexual confidences being followed by Bertha's attempted arson. If Jane gives no sign that she is angry (and she says "I had a keen delight in receiving the new ideas he offered, in imagining the new pictures he portrayed, and following him in thought through the new regions he disclosed, never startled or troubled by one noxious allusion"), then how do we know that Bertha's action ought to be associated with Jane's anger? Gilbert and Gubar solve the problem by reversing the direction of their argument: they go backwards from Bertha's action to Jane's response to Rochester. Because Bertha acts Jane must be angry; if she doesn't express the anger it is because she is repressing it. But those inferences will be valid only if Gilbert and Gubar have already established the association they're trying to prove. Their argument at this point is circular and unconvincing. It is failing the test of coherence.

The third association, between Rochester's gypsy masquerade and Bertha's shriek and attack on Richard Mason, again acknowledges that Jane's resentment is unexpressed, and so runs into similar problems. Furthermore, the reasoning here faces the additional problem of dealing precisely with the data: if Bertha is to be seen as acting out Jane's anger toward Rochester, why is Mason the object of the attack? Rochester, after all, would be glad to have Mason out of the way.

With the fourth association, between Jane's anxieties about marrying Rochester and Bertha's appearance, Gilbert and Gubar are on firmer ground, though of course alternative explanations for Bertha's appearance, including foreshadowing, are also possible. With the fifth association, the problems recur and multiply: first, Gilbert and Gubar assert that Jane has a profound desire to destroy Thornfield but they give no evidence that she does. Second, they say that Bertha will act out this desire. But the case they have been making is that Bertha's manifestations are associated with an experience or repression of Jane's anger. Bertha's burning of Thornfield is associated with no such experience—it occurs while Jane is beyond her anger at Rochester, if indeed, that anger ever exists—while she is living with the Rivers and thinking of becoming a missionary. The association also overlooks the fact that after
setting fire to hangings in the room next to her own, Bertha went and set fire to the governess's bed. When placed within Gilbert and Gubar's hypothesis, this detail must be seen as a sign of Jane's self-hatred—again, something we have no evidence for. The reasoning fails the tests of both coherence and correspondence.

Finally, they claim that Jane's disguised hostility toward Rochester is carried out through the intervention of Bertha whose death causes Rochester's maiming. The main problem here is the gap between cause and effect. Bertha provides the occasion for Rochester's maiming but she is not its cause; she does not set fire to him but to the house; it is made clear that he could have easily escaped injury, even after his unsuccessful and unselfish attempt to save Bertha. Instead, he wants to make sure that everyone else is out of the house before him and so gets burned when the beam falls on him. Again, the argument suffers from a lack of precision.

Of course, to conclude that the reasoning in this single, albeit very important, paragraph from a 700-page book is flawed is not to establish that the argument of the whole is flawed. Indeed, although I do think that the analysis I have just scrutinized is far from an isolated example of their reasoning, I also find that in many places their readings become more convincing under such scrutiny. So it might seem that what I should do here is conclude that their work is flawed but not fatally so and then reflect on the politics of this pluralist evaluation. But I am not ready for that step just yet, because the pluralist position asks me to take one more step toward understanding.

Can my reconstruction of their framework tell me something about the sources of the flaws in the argument? Why should readers who are as skillful and sophisticated as Gilbert and Gubar sometimes produce readings that seem as questionable as the one we have analyzed? One powerful feature of their framework is their definition of the text as a site of the female writer's responses—and especially resistance—to patriarchy. Part of the significance of their book is its demonstration of how such a view of the text opens up some understandings of Austen, the Brontës, Eliot, Dickinson, and others, that were not available before. This conception of the text joins with their goal of showing that the women writers themselves created the tradition to lead Gilbert and Gubar into the position of having to offer comprehensive readings of the texts as resistances to patriarchy. Once in that position, however, they are virtually committed in advance to reaching certain conclusions
about their texts. In other words, by implicitly defining the text not just as a political document capable of revealing its author’s attitudes about male–female relations under patriarchy but also as a document that will be more powerful the more it reveals about the woman writer’s \textit{resistance} to patriarchy, they become powerfully predisposed to finding that resistance. And that predisposition leads to some strained readings. If they gave up the predisposition, then they would be less likely to offer such readings. They would, however, also have to give up the conclusion that the tradition they are describing is one that they are \textit{uncovering} from the women writers’ texts because those texts cannot be \textit{comprehensively} read as resistances to patriarchy. Nevertheless, the convincing readings of parts of texts could be recombined into a different kind of narrative, one in which Gilbert and Gubar could take more responsibility for constructing a pattern of resistance in the female literary tradition.

On this view, the flaws in the reasoning have important consequences for our evaluation of the whole project: the flaws detract from the persuasiveness of Gilbert and Gubar’s large claim about the female tradition. At the same time, these flaws do not touch Gilbert and Gubar’s powerful demonstration of how to do literary history when the text is conceived not as a formal object but as a political document. Furthermore, when we step outside their framework and historicize it in the larger context of literary critical politics, the flaws become even less important. By demonstrating in 1979 on a grand scale what a literary history built on the notion of text as political document would be like, Gilbert and Gubar helped to consolidate the growing power and influence of feminist criticism in the academy. Their voices loudly joined those of many other feminist critics to produce a compelling case for the necessity of rereading familiar texts with new principles in order to attain a different kind of knowledge about those texts. Even if one wants to argue with specific readings, their larger case for the importance of reading politically remains intact. As a result, the book has contributed in an important way to the emphasis on political interpretation in the last decade.

What then are the politics of the pluralist evaluations of Moi and Gilbert and Gubar I have conducted in this chapter? This question, I think, needs to be broken down into three separate questions, because politics operates here on three different levels. First, there is the “internal” politics involved in the analysis of the critics’ arguments.
Because I have attempted to conduct those analyses according not to transmethodological standards but to the ones Moi and Gilbert and Gubar implicitly set for themselves, and because those standards involve some conception of the relation between evidence and conclusion in argument, then the politics here are the politics of rational argument. Privilege accrues to those who generate the best reasons according to the standards agreed upon in advance. In Moi's case, the test is whether the inferences she draws are adequately based upon the data that she is working with. In Gilbert and Gubar's case, the test is whether their account of the data is sufficiently precise and coherent to support their inferences about the relation between Jane's anger and Bertha's actions. And for my analysis, in turn, the question is whether I have met them on their own terms and whether my conclusions follow from my evidence. For other critics with different standards, the politics of such "internal" pluralist evaluation would shift and become the politics implied in those standards. Orwell is right that there is no getting outside of politics, but for the pluralist doing internal evaluations of others' arguments, the politics themselves are plural.

The second level on which politics operates here is in my evaluation of Gilbert and Gubar from outside their framework. My case about the significance of their book is based at least in part on an assumption about the importance of their feminist ideology. And that assumption itself is supported by two political positions. One derives from the politics of pluralism, a politics that valorizes the multiplication of critical perspectives for the different kinds of knowledge that they can offer. The second derives from my personal belief in the validity and importance of the feminist ideology itself. That belief arises out of more deeply embedded assumptions about such matters as justice and equality but those, too, of course have a political dimension. It is crucial to recognize, then, that in the final evaluation conducted in the last section both my commitment to pluralism, which prompted the question—why should these kinds of problems develop in this project—and my political commitments to feminist ideology converged.

The third, and most complex, level on which politics operates here is in my choosing feminist criticism as the illustrative case. First, the choice itself reinforces the power of feminist criticism because it assumes that one way to get a hearing for my case about pluralism is to pose the problem of evaluation in this way. At the same time, the structure of the whole chapter privileges pluralism over these feminist positions—they are being evaluated from the perspective of pluralism—and in that
respect the politics of pluralism in this chapter are the politics of any discourse that is trying to establish its own power. But to reduce the politics of this chapter, let alone the politics of pluralism in general, to that stance is to deny the other levels on which politics are operating here. Thus, though there is no getting outside of politics, there is also no good reason to treat discourse only as political. To evaluate our conversations only in light of Orwell's dictum is to impoverish our sense of the work they do; to think of those conversations pluralistically is to enrich our understanding of them. At the same time, to think of pluralism as escaping the realm of politics is to fool oneself; to pay attention to the political dimensions of pluralistic analyses will heighten our self-understandings. And it is these last assertions that form the ultimate message—political and philosophical—of my discourse.

Notes

1. Other important works on pluralism in criticism in this period include Walter Davis, The Act of Interpretation (1978), Paul Armstrong, Conflicting Readings (1990), and James Battersby, Paradigms Regained (1991). For a more general philosophical treatment of pluralism, see Watson.

2. Note, for example, that the special issue of Critical Inquiry (Spring 1986) devoted to pluralism is entitled not “Pluralism and Its Powers” but “Pluralism and Its Discontents” and that the great majority of the contributors (Booth, Richard McKeon, and Kenneth Burke are the exceptions) focus on perceived discontents.

3. I will comment later on the politics involved in the choice of this example.

4. For Crane, see Languages of Criticism. For my detailed assessments of Critical Understanding, see “Data, Danda, and Disagreement,” and “Pluralism and Its Powers.” Booth himself talks about Crane’s tendency to privilege his neo-Aristotelian mode of understanding as the one best way to do interpretation.

5. The mode a pluralist chooses will depend upon the kind of knowledge that he wants to acquire, and thus, the purpose he sets for his act of criticism.

6. Moi has other objections to the book, and some of these strike me as more cogent precisely because she is more successfully engaging with it. When she questions Gilbert and Gubar’s practice of identifying female characters with their authors, she can appeal at least implicitly to the common ground of the authors’ lives and their texts.

7. To take just one example, it seems to me that their analysis of how
Edgar Linton in *Wuthering Heights*, though lacking the physical attributes of the strong male, nevertheless acquires power from his social position as patriarch of Thrushcross Grange, offers a new and powerful insight into the dynamics of the relationships among Edgar, Catherine, and Heathcliff after Catherine gets married.

Bibliography


