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Critical Discussions

BAD WRITING'S BACK

by Mark Bauerlein

In January 1999, when *Philosophy and Literature* announced that Rhetoric professor Judith Butler had won its fourth annual Bad Writing Contest, nobody was much surprised. Many had pointed out the solecisms of Butler, runner-up Homi Bhabha, and previous awardees, and the abstract, twisting grandiloquence of critical theory with a progressive slant was already well known in academic circles. But the contest did have an unusual fate outside the academy. It became news. *Philosophy and Literature* editor Denis Dutton wrote an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* (February 5, 1999), a startling forum for the treatment of academic prose. Articles in the *New York Times*, the *Weekly Standard*, and *Lingua Franca* appeared, and the *New Republic* and *Salon* issued attacks on Butler's ideas as well as her sentences. That made for a readership of millions and another humiliation for educators (after the Sokal Hoax, History Standards, Ebonics . . .). The contest hit a popular nerve, gratifying not only formalist critics, empirical historians, and scientists—all of whom had been targets of theory discourse—but also journalists, public intellectuals, and informed readers who found the language and attitude of critical theory obnoxious and overblown. Indeed, so far as I know, not a single voice outside the academic theory

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realm rose to defend the professors. Butler responded with an apologia for obscurity in the *Times* (March 20, 1999), and was in turn roundly criticized in the letters columns. A few observers denounced Dutton et al. as reactionary hacks (Marxist art historian T. J. Clark compared them in the *Times* to House Republicans bent on impeaching Clinton), but for the most part the contest's ridicule went unchallenged. Beyond the campus walls the 1999 Bad Writing Contest did its job, solidifying the image of theorists as an aimless coterie of pseudo-radicals playing to one another and inflicting shopworn countercultural messages on their captive students.

Now, claiming to be the latest and most learned salvo in the controversy, we have *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, a collective rejoinder by theorists to the charge of bad writing. The list of contributors includes some of the most powerful and renowned figures in the field—Jonathan Culler, Gayatri Spivak, Barbara Johnson, Peter Brooks, and Butler herself—who represent the leading theoretical schools of the last forty years. As might be expected, their essays broach the issue in a scholarly and theoretical way, not as polemic or forensic but as rumination upon the premises of the affair. None of the contributors denies the label "bad writing" or aims to show that theoretical prose is good writing. That's the conservative or common sense application, and the theorists know better than to accept its conditions. Rather, as Culler and Kevin Lamb's introduction puts it, the entries "are less about proving innocence than contesting the terms of the allegations, exposing to interrogation the history, conventions, and assumptions underlying the designation 'bad writing' and its almost inarguable efficacy" (p. 1). The intention sharpens the contrast between *Philosophy and Literature*'s tactics and the professors'. Whereas *Philosophy and Literature* solicited specimens of bad writing, licensing curmudgeons and adjuncts to vent and feeding the media juicy bits of campus nastiness, critical theorists step back and weigh the implicit meanings and values of the initial set-up.

The reflective turn works backward into the history and ideology of bad writing charges, not forward into the consequences for the humanities once the press takes over. Some discussions are historical: Margaret Ferguson on Dante and the vernacular, Robin Valenza and John Bender on Hume's evolving prose style. Others are theoretical: John McCumber on the "metaphysics of clarity," Rey Chow on the performative dimension of theoretical speech. Still others are observational: Brooks on the status of theory in U.S. culture, Spivak on

scattered aspects of her own career and contacts. They seek to prove, variously, that:

(a) bad writing allegations are as old as Socrates' denunciation of the Sophists, figures who, Ferguson recalls, "were foreigners, 'provincials' (in the eyes of Athenians) who lacked legal standing in Athens" (p. 15);
(b) the Bad Writing Award is unfair and high-handed, "a matter of bad faith to take a single sentence out of context and charge it with obfuscation" (Culler, p. 43);
(c) the clarity Dutton et al. prize is, in fact, an unstable political concept, always begging the question, Michael Warner notes, "Clarity for whom?" (p. 115); and
(d) the language of "good writing" is inadequate to "the experience of women and minorities" (McCumber, p. 66), who are bound to speak an unfamiliar language as they acquire equal rights and political power.

One might disagree with these conclusions, but however predictable the identity politics embedded in them, they do pose reasonable questions about bad writing judgments. The problem is that the contributors express them in precisely the manner that exposed them to the Bad Writing tag in the first place. They speak as academics presenting historical/theoretical answers to other academics. Despite the volume's subtitle, none of the contributors wonders whether customary stylistics and citations are appropriate to general questions of idiom and audience. The contributors claim to reflect broadly upon clarity, common sense, adversarial criticism, and the like, but it was the Bad Writing Contest and its consequent publicity that forced the issue and spawned *Just Being Difficult?* The whole affair shows that in fact bad writing is a joint academic/public matter, and to broach it as one would in a professional journal article or seminar presentation is to continue to theorize as if theory were never in doubt. In "interrogating the terms" of "bad" or "difficult" indictments, the contributors follow an academic routine, sometimes very well, but they miss how the hubbub challenged the social and political meaning of their work.

The academic habit leads them to overlook many salient aspects. For one thing, five years have passed since the Bad Writing Contest hit the press, and the time lag is unfortunate. The back cover says that the volume "provides scholarly, thought-provoking examination of the debate over difficult academic writing," but in truth there is no more

debate. Outside the tiny group of academic theorists, the question is closed. When Barbara Johnson writes that "the role of academic literary criticism . . . is always to risk a certain 'badness'" (p. 166), she speaks only for herself and a few colleagues. Of course, the prestige and security of the professorial life lighten the gloom of isolation, and the notion that "badness" belongs to good criticism puts "bad" critics in a special place in modern society. But they shouldn't pretend that any non-theorist cares enough to ponder the issue anew.

The editors compound the isolation by inviting not a single dissenting voice to weigh in. The back cover proclaims an equable attempt "to inform and deepen the debate by asking what values, history, politics, and stylistics are implicated, on both sides," but everyone here is a theorist, believes in theory, and resents anti-theory tastes. The editors might have asked a critic of bad writing to repeat the case or compose a reply, but a few paragraphs of their introduction reveal that they don't consider their antagonists worth the time. Conservative positions turn up in caricature or in snotty asides. Rey Chow reduces them to a "theory-attacking ritual" in which "Language exists . . . only in order to be a conduit" (p. 95). When in *Lingua Franca* James Miller observes that good writing promoter George Orwell's novels sold over forty million copies, Warner remarks, "You can almost hear the Berlin Wall being brought down, like the walls of Jericho, by the chirping of the cash registers at Barnes and Noble" (p. 110). David Palumbo-Liu thinks a petty politics lies behind it all: "The criticism of bad writing has less to do with lofty moral issues than with social practice and power. Students are to be cured of their ignorance, but equally important for the critics of 'bad writing' is the reproduction of healthy bodies, not only to legitimate their own endeavors but to add to their numbers" (p. 175).

The cheap partisan spirit reinforces the point made by Dutton, David G. Myers, Katha Pollitt, and others that the jargon and bloat of theory prose excludes every readership but other theorists—a damning claim given that the theorists purport to labor for social justice. The theorists counter that the writing they do isn't bad; rather, it's challenging, and that challenging-ness is precisely what makes it valuable to society at large. Ferguson, Brooks, and Warner concede that some godawful prose appears in the quarterlies, but affirm that those instances are merely incidental to the practice of theory. Bad writing is one thing, difficult writing another: "I want to evacuate the question of 'bad writing' and leave it for what it is, bad writing, to get on to the more interesting question of difficult writing" (Brooks, p. 130). The

former stems from sloppiness and laziness, they insist, the latter from a philosophical outlook and critical strategy. But the distinction doesn't always hold. Awhile back, in the MLA ballot for At-Large Members of the Executive Council (2001–04), candidate Judith Butler wrote a statement of purpose that began:

> The MLA has an obligation to make clear the value of literary studies to the broader public and to counter the anti-intellectualism and sloganeering that threatens the critical thought within the academy. Perhaps most important is to show that a culturally complex range of writing and thinking compose the world of literary studies today . . .

Two sentences, two subject-verb disagreements. Another candidate, Rey Chow, stated,

> It is against this unfriendly global trend that the MLA must continue to reconceptualize its leadership for scholars specializing in the study of languages and literatures. Such leadership should consist, as it always does, in fostering a strong sense of community among its members at a critical time.

An organization reconceptualizes its leadership for scholars (whatever that means), a process confounded by the nonsensical phrase "should consist, as it always does."

Given their vulnerability to the *bad* writing charge, the theorists would profit from a dose of humility or, even better, humor. One reason for the popularity of the Bad Writing Contest was its antic nature. The very idea of a scholarly journal singling out one sentence for a mock award brought snickers from every adult who'd ever endured a semester with an ideologically-rigid, self-involved literature professor. Dutton solicited nominations on the Internet, consulted experts, and broadcast the final tally as if it were a Hollywood press release. This was in keeping with academic celebrity culture, recast in a dunciad mode, and observers got the joke immediately. Instead of laughing at the process, though, the theorists turn indignant. True, a serious subtext ran through the contest—namely, the decline of eloquence, wit, and learning—and Dutton spoke earnestly against it in his *Wall Street Journal* editorial. But the theorists found something else serious in the contest—the loss of their prestige—and so their responses imparted more pique than argument. To Dutton's comment that "Kitsch theorists" don't do "serious intellectual work," Culler huffs, "I think this is

complete rubbish, actually. I wonder *who* it is who has failed to do serious intellectual work—such as read Butler's three-page article" (p. 45). Culler calls it irresponsible to pull sentences out of context, but why should this distinguished professor who studies literary genres expect Dutton's contest to play fair? Indeed, given the high-handed, decontextualizing treatment theorists have given to conservative and traditional scholarship, one can hardly take Culler's invocation of responsibility seriously. This was the satirical trap of the contest, and the Award winners and their defenders fell right into it. Even if we do take Culler's point at face value, it is a challenge to imagine any context in which Butler's winning sentence would not be an example of bad writing.[1] Culler's explanation may give it some sense, but it still sounds windy, pretentious, and clogged.

The other essays have the same humorless tone. Resentment and gall clutter their comments whenever Dutton, Martha Nussbaum, and other critics of bad writing come up. Beneath their arguments seethes a disbelief that such a shoddy venture should have captivated the intellectual world for a trimester. No doubt, some non-intellectual motives spurred the popularity of the Bad Writing Contest. Journalists, writers, artists, and other culture workers envy the cushy labor conditions of humanities professors, and free-market types fume that academics use their state-supported privilege to denounce individualism, capitalism, and the United States. More generally, the insularity of the college world makes outsiders of all kinds suppose that humanities faculty have no accountability, no sense of responsibility to the society at large. The Bad Writing Contest invoked a standard—clear prose—upon which all of them could agree and sublimate other irritations.

But for theorists to attribute the publicity entirely to personal or ideological factors and never to mention their own personal or ideological agendas, though a common enough tactic in humanities disputes, only makes things worse here. Non-academic intellectuals aren't as easily cowed as are professors, and they will hold up every such accusation as evidence of the elitist, smug world of the ivory tower. The controversy called for more humor and less hauteur, more admission and less theoretical wriggling. That would require theorists to thicken their skins and behave with modesty and balance, a tough act for people who in their own small universe run seminars, departments, and lecture series with the surety and vanity of pop culture icons. The evidence of this collection indicates that nothing has changed within the theorists' ranks, except for an increased sense of defensiveness. The

basic charges (hokey jargon, bad grammar, airy radicalism) have been assimilated to existing lines of cultural critique (against common sense, bourgeois publics, conservative taste-making), and theorists still refuse to grant public commentators any valid and fundamental criticisms of the field. The appearance of *Just Being Difficult?* so long after the fact proves that the Bad Writing episode hit home, damaging the theorists' self-image as a prized vanguard of social critics. But it also confirmed a parallel self-image, the conceit of a gadfly band braving public scorn to dismantle settled notions and foul practices. What the theorists lost in public prestige was balanced by their enhanced adversarial conscience. Like the theories they embrace, theorists absorbed hostile responses as signs of their own righteousness, and while the world moves on they now make the same arguments, cite the same texts and master theorists (de Man's "Resistance to Theory" surfaces several times), and trust that their interrogations are sure to make a difference beyond the classroom and the department.

Still, despite the mannered presentation, *Just Being Difficult?* and previous pro-theory statements do forward responses that deserve a hearing. Theorists devote long paragraphs to them, but they can be distilled into blank assertions and treated as hypotheses. They are:

(1) *Many great philosophers wrote obscurely—why not today's theorists?* This is a valid premise. German Idealism and phenomenology, French post-structuralism, and even the Anglo-American tradition (C. S. Peirce, for instance) have their examples, and Heidegger, Lacan, and Derrida made stylistic uncanniness a strategic concept. (The technicians of analytic philosophy are exempted from consideration. Their discourse is a different, though no less problematical matter.) But how many of them will last? Kant, Hegel, Marx, Peirce, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger, yes, because of the force of their ideas and despite their style. Only a genius gets away with clotted prose for very long. Readers lose patience unless they sense a profound conceptual payoff that will alter their deepest beliefs. Geniuses of that order come along once in a generation or two, but in citing them as forebears, theorists would have us believe that geniuses populate the theory ranks in the dozens.

(2) *Scientists have their jargon—why can't theorists have theirs?* Again, this is a valid question with a simple pragmatic answer. The public tolerates scientific jargon and not theory jargon because it believes that scientists need jargon to extend their researches and produce practical knowl-

edge that benefits all. Only when scientists appear to abandon the common good does their language come under attack (for example, Swift's portrait of mathematicians in Book III of *Gulliver's Travels,* or contemporary ridicule of sociologese and psychobabble). Come the day when the theorists are able to demonstrate that their jargon enhances human life, and isn't just pretension and science-envy, public mistrust of them will end. Constantly claiming to foment social justice isn't sufficient.

(3) *Critics of bad writing target only Leftists, but many Right-wingers write poorly, too.* True, perhaps. If *Philosophy and Literature* had included a conservative among its winners, it would have kept theorists from making political countercharges. I presume it didn't because Rightist bad writers disdain the progressivist pretense, and Dutton et al. were targeting the pose as much as the jargon and grammar. However, it should be noted that some Left-wing writers and critics joined in deriding the theorists for their academic chic.

(4) *It is unfair to wrest sentences from context and judge them alone.* In one sense, yes; in another, no. The language of criticism usually derives from a more or less established tradition and focuses on a text at hand. To hold up for scrutiny a single sentence with no indication of that tradition and text is inadequate. If a student did so in a paper, we'd ask for a rewrite. Then again, in the case of the Bad Writing Contest winners, context provides but a partial, semantic justification for the sentence. It only explains the meaning of the terms. The meandering syntax, hyper-abstraction, radical persona, tacked-on qualifiers, and imperious tone that were the targets of the contest—none is excused by context.

(5) *The United States is an anti-intellectual nation, and its national publications follow the trend.* Most theorists take American anti-intellectualism for granted, and Brooks suggests that cultural journals have adopted the Right-wing view, although "there is perhaps no point in lamenting the decadence of the serious cultural journals since journals of any sort mainly go unread at present" (p. 137). This is silly academic parochialism as its most cocksure. Theorists who lament the absence of serious criticism in the magazines and newspapers should limit their point to the fact that *their* version of criticism has no public venue. In truth, learned criticism appears in magazines and newspapers all the time.

The *New Republic* (circulation 100,000 a week) publishes lengthy review-essays on scholarly subjects by humanities professors (e.g., David Bromwich, David Freedberg, and Lawrence Lipking), as does the *New York Review of Books. The Nation* publishes art criticism by Arthur Danto and literary essays by Morris Dickstein; and reviews in *Atlantic Monthly* by Benjamin Schwarz and others meet high intellectual standards. *Wall Street Journal* editor Erich Eichman allows academic reviewers 800 words on university press books covering unusual subjects, and the *Los Angeles Times* and *Boston Globe* have deliberately raised the content of their weekly reviews. Moreover, although *Commentary* and *The New Criterion* haven't the subscriptions of the others, like the now-closed *Partisan Review* in earlier times, their influence reaches to politicians and public intellectuals. Dutton's own webpage, *Arts and Letters Daily*, receives over two million page views per month. I could go on, but suffice it to say that the notion that public discourse in the U.S. is vulgar and decadent is an absurdity that academics should give up immediately.

(6) *Critics have a duty to break up common sense beliefs, and disrupting the norm of clarity effectively does so.* As Butler put it in her *Times* op-ed, "scholars are obliged to question common sense, interrogate its tacit presumptions and provoke new ways of looking at the world." Because common-sense presumptions and world views—many of them "nefarious" (Butler's example is slavery)—trickle down into language and abide there as clear and natural expressions, critics contest them by eschewing declarative sentences, coining neologisms, juxtaposing familiar things and unfamiliar descriptions (Adorno: "Man is the ideology of dehumanization"), hyphenating terms (Spivak: "geo-graphy"), and the like.

This is the weightiest rejoinder to the bad writing charge. As many in *Just Being Difficult?* note, the antisocial language strategy derives from the modernist avant garde and from the cultural theories of the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno. In "Bergson's Theory of Art," T. E. Hulme maintained that a "double difficulty" is faced by the artist: "not only has his mind habits, but that language, or whatever medium of expression he employs, also has its fixed ways. It is only by a certain tension of mind that he is able to force the mechanism of expression out of the way in which it tends to go." Adorno, a better model for theorists, turned the task to the politics of style. He scorned the "ideologies" of "lucidity, objectivity, and concise precision" (quoted by Ferguson, p. 19), and so "wrote sentences that made his readers pause

and reflect on the power of language to shape the world" (Butler, *Times* op-ed). Today's theorists carry on the legacy. Brooks: "The coming to America of continental 'theory' in the 1970s created a new avant-garde of sorts—a genuine one, I think" (p. 133).

Nobody can deny the import of modernist poetry and Frankfurt thinking, and the theorists wisely cite them as precursors. But the process modernists and Adorno envisioned had two steps, an intention and an effect, and the theorists act as if the first implies the second. Just because a bit of theory prose violates grammatical rules and stylistic tastes doesn't mean that a norm has been toppled. A norm may or may not fall; that depends on what actually happens with specific attempts. The process is complete only when the violation takes hold. With Hulme, creative artists break down the "standardised perception," then "induce us to make the same effort ourselves and make us see what they see." He doesn't consider the case of the artist who works alone, forever estranged from the crowd. Adorno doesn't talk about social success in the same way, but we can judge his effect simply by naming the people he influenced. These include not only contemporary theorists but also mid-century mass culture critics Dwight Macdonald, Clement Greenberg, Irving Howe, and others centered around *Partisan Review*—an audience skeptical and dogged enough to verify his brilliance.

We should apply the pragmatic test to today's theorists. What if in the end nobody abandons common sense and adopts the theory habit? Butler aims to "provoke new ways of looking" and Culler repeats Emerson's dictum, "Truly speaking, it is not instruction but provocation that I can receive from another soul," but what if nobody is provoked? This is not quite the same verdict that Leftist critics of bad writing such as Katha Pollitt, draw, namely, that the theorists' recondite language cuts them off from real politics. Rather, it recalls the simple truth that, as a matter of historical record, only certain disruptions thwart common sense and alter the world. In a word, the "anti-styles" only work if they create as well as destroy. If ordinary language is a repository of naturalized values, then the artist/critic's counter-language must supply other values in infectious, admissible ways: one common sense world collapses only if another takes its place. If you propose to explode certain attitudes and beliefs, and to do so by disrupting their proper idiom, then you must compose a language compelling, powerful, memorable, witty, striking, or poignant enough to supplant it. Your language must be an attractive substitute, or else nobody will echo it.

Needless to say, the theorists haven't achieved that and never will. A

genuine displacement comes about through an original and stunning expression containing arresting thoughts and feelings, not through the collective idiom of an academic clique smoothly imitated by a throng of aspiring theorists. The writings of Pound, Mallarmé, Faulkner, and H.D. each form a unique signature and inspire theorists to daring interrogations, but few idioms are as conventionalized as 1990s critical theory. In her op-ed, Butler mentions slavery as a common-sense notion that had to go (Warner echoes the self-inflating comparison), but none of the abolitionists followed the "difficult writing" strategy. Frederick Douglass was a dazzling rhetorician, and Warner's example, Thoreau, composed epigrams honored for their pithy brilliance. By comparison, theory prose is a clunker. Its success in the academy lies not in surprising conversions of common-sense minds, but in quick and easy replication by AbDs. If critics assume a duty to undermine common sense, very well, but they need to devise a different counter-speech, not insist on the value of their current one.

With this collection, theorists stay with the prevailing manner, and they'll probably continue to do so. Stuck in an attitude that combines the adversarial with the self-congratulatory, they mingle avant-garde visions with a protest conception of the university, turning crisis, notoriety, and alienation into a triumph and ignoring the diminishing status of the humanities. Here is Cathy Davidson, vice provost for interdisciplinary studies at Duke University, musing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (24 October 2003) on current conditions:

> Even today, some of the best sellers at university presses are the ones that many (not I, by the way) would call "jargon-laden" and "narrow." . . . I find this to be one of the most interesting and vital times in scholarship in my career. I appreciate the melding of the theoretical with the historical, the turn to the genuinely interdisciplinary, the opening up of history to cultural studies and mass culture, and the very lively writing I am finding in so many first books, in particular.

So much for Leslie Fiedler, George Orwell, Raymond Aron, and dozens of other cultural theorists who preceded the theory revolution; so much for the hundreds of manuscripts that press readers return every year for developmental editing; and so much for the fact that, as a Yale Press editor admitted recently in a public lecture, twelve years ago university presses could count on 1000 guaranteed sales—now it's 200.

Until humanities professors acknowledge just how much the enter-

prise has dwindled, they won't regain outside respect. The Bad Writing Contest ran its course, but other undignifying stories will arrive in turn. This is the worst consequence of efforts like *Just Being Difficult?* They defend an endeavor that profits only theorists and that only theorists esteem. In crude terms, if these theorists win, the humanities lose. The more their practices spread among graduate students and junior faculty, the more irreverence creeps in among science faculty, university administrators, the media, and the interested public. Theorists may preserve their own standing among their colleagues, but what about tomorrow's needs? Every spring and fall, practitioners must justify humanities inquiry to people who haven't been acculturated to the theory outlook. When future professors present to deans their hiring plans, recruit undergraduates to the major, answer questions from journalists, and submit research proposals to foundations and government agencies, will today's theorists have supplied an effective, noble agenda?

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1. Here is Butler's winning sentence: "The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power." This and other winners can be found at http://aldaily.com/bwc.htm.