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Just Being Difficult?

Academic Writing in the Public Arena

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On Difficulty, the Avant-Garde, and Critical Moribundity

ANY REFLECTION on the languages and the possible audiences of criticism demands an agile dialectical performance. I want neither to subscribe to dominant current practices in academic writing nor to endorse the generally mindless critique of them. I find it difficult to come to rest in any one position. I hope, then, that what follows will be read as a restless interrogation of the problem rather than a prescriptive conclusion.

One can pick up at random almost any extra-academic cultural journal and find the uncontested assumption that literary and cultural commentary produced by the academy is tendentious, politicized, jargon filled, and generally rebarbative in that it places between the reader and the beauty of the literary or artistic work an ugly and self-regarding prose. Not long ago, for instance, the *New York Times Book Review* had a piece by one Ron Rosenbaum that used a recent meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America to proclaim a reformation of criticism by way of the end of theory.[1] "Theory" in the piece is unproblematically equated with bad writing, and the sample of the latter cited by Rosenbaum—from an essay by Linda Charnes on *Hamlet*—indisputably deserves the label:

> Mass culture is being increasingly "quilted," to use Lacan's term, by the *points de capiton* of what I would call the "apparitional historical." It is therefore no accident that *Hamlet* is the play to which contemporary culture most frequently returns. Hamlet-the-prince has come to stand for the dilemma of historicity itself. . . . But the subject of affective time is incommensurable with the order, and the nature, of events. This was one of Lacan's greatest insights, and one of his advances over Freud: his assertion that the true subject of the "impossible real" isn't constituted by her narrative reconstruction of her "story" but rather by the *failure* of that story to "include" its *affective* event-horizon—its epistemological starting- and end-point. As Joan Copjec has recently written about the Lacanian gaze . . .[2]

With apologies to Linda Charnes for prolonging her ordeal as victim of the day—many others could be found for the sacrificial role—one is tempted to make a *distinguo*: this is bad writing not because it is theory but because it is lazy, in-group, sloppy prose that uses allusion to deities and demi-deities of the moment and half-digested theoretical terminology—ripped from context and yoked in half-analyzed ways (see those *points de capiton* conjoined to quilting, for instance)—to make the simulacrum of an argument rather than the real thing.

There is far too much of this kind of writing produced by academics but not because it is "doing theory." On the contrary, it is prose that can't shoot straight enough to be theoretical. And post-theory and antitheory don't necessarily fare any better. Rosenbaum's diagnosis is of course hopelessly out of date; more reliable commentators will tell you we entered "post-theory" at least a decade ago, with the turn to new historicism and postcoloniality, and the same kind of prose is with us.

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. The issue may be stated in this form: must critical writing put certain notions of common sense into question, unsettling the grammatical frame of understanding and reference by which we usually proceed? And if so, what is the relationship of this critical unmooring of common sense to the responsibility that we, as scholars, have to communicate effectively to a wider audience and to those who are not necessarily schooled in the same idiom? These queries suggest that certain ideas and arguments may need to violate standards of decorum, clarity, even grammatical and syntactical conventions, in order to convey, or rather to *do*, something new and unsettling. How can you speak the old idioms if you are trying to make a revolution? Yet, if the revolution is to be effective—reach a wider public—how can you sacrifice the common language?

This question has plagued the avant-garde since its inception. It is part of what Guillaume Apollinaire called the "long quarrel . . . of Order and Adventure."[3] Misunderstandings between the artistic and political avant-gardes have often turned on the issue of language and communicability. Political avant-gardes historically tended to want to promote the language of ordinary men, to make the linguistic sign transparent. The clear moral and political messages of melodrama, delivered in an emphatic rhetoric, suited the French revolutionaries, and it is no accident that after the Bolshevik Revolution Maxim Gorky attempted to revive melodrama as a genre: he knew it was an effective vehicle for mass communication. The artistic avant-garde, however, from Mallarmé onward, chose a hermetic language that required apprenticeship, a novitiate, if one wanted to enter the chapel.

One could argue about which form of avant-gardism has more permanently affected our cultural lives, but it is wrong simply to equate them and to assume the compatibility of their goals. And the assumption one sometimes finds among academics—that practices deconstructive of meanings-as-usual in the world work to subvert the established political and moral order of things—needs critique as well. Subversion for whom, if communication with the nonadepts is lost? And to the extent that the language of the priesthood eventually enters a more public kind of speech, circulates among the laity—witness the term *deconstruction*, which has by now become a journalistic commonplace, applied to everything from architecture to clothing—it is inevitably in a parodistic version of its original contextual meaning and force.

As someone educated when the avant-garde of high modernism still held sway, I was initiated into the belief that difficulty was a positive value in art and that the explication of that difficulty was a worthwhile enterprise. It was worthwhile first of all because unpacking, making perspicuous, and trying to understand the difficulties of a Mallarmé sonnet or Eliot's *Four Quartets* took one to what those poems were "about." They were, among other things, about the difficulty of expression in a language that needed to be made new to be faithful to the new, to the unsaid and unthought. "For last year's words belong to last year's language / And next year's words await another voice."[4] And then it was worthwhile because the explication of difficulty allowed one to exchange the understandings gained with others—they became the basis of a sharing of precious knowledge gained, incipiently the foundation of a community of understanding. (I remember that this sometimes took the form of one of the early Mike Nichols–Elaine May dialogues: "Yes, you've read . . . *Zarathustra?*" "Yes, yes. It was as if the heavens had opened.") So that exegesis was valued—in the classroom, in critical writing—not only because it appeared the royal road to understanding—of things we sensed were important to understand—but because it educated us as finer sensibilities, and indeed created that "us," as partakers in a knowledge worth having.

Northrop Frye could argue in 1957, in his "Polemical Introduction" to *Anatomy of Criticism*: "Everyone who has seriously studied literature knows that the mental process involved is as coherent and progressive as the study of science."[5] And in this belief there is more of a continuity between New Criticism and the French structuralist theories that came to contest its hegemony in American universities than is often perceived. If the notion of a "science littéraire" violated the genteel exegetical traditions of New Criticism, it nonetheless promoted what was essentially another kind of formalism. Both formalisms believed that the patient discernment of literary form and structure were steps on the way to understanding. If New Criticism believed the object of understanding was the poem itself, and structuralism preferred the genre or the overarching notion—such as "narrativity"—they

were united in the faith that knowledge of literature, what it meant and how it meant—the conditions for the creation of meaning—was knowledge worth having and worth constructing a curriculum on.

To be sure, our recent culture wars were partly about a nostalgia—on the part of extra-academic cultural commentators, joined by the cultural right within the academy—for a polite, gentlemanly exegesis of great literary works, expressed in a language that didn't need much more technicity than *sestet* and *metaphor*. Whereas the public is perfectly willing to concede that the languages of the sciences—and perhaps even the social sciences—may evolve in response to the imperatives of research, produce new conceptual difficulties and even neologisms, the humanities ought to remain the realm of the true, the tested, indeed of the eternally true. Like "human nature" itself the subject matter and language of literary study and philosophy should not change. Since we humanists still write about Sophocles and Shakespeare, why need we invent new difficulties in the talk about them? Let the humanities remain the place of cultural truisms.

Nonetheless, even if we protest the terms given to the debate by the cultural right, I think we are forced to recognize a true crisis in the notion of difficulty. For one thing, it has lost its moorings in the notion of the avant-garde as a socioculturally valid group and practice and object of attention. It is not that there won't always be art that is misunderstood, that is in advance of public understanding and acceptance—although the recuperative powers of the media and of popular culture have become astonishing, and it now takes precious little time for the challenging art object to be recycled in MTV form. It is that the sociocultural form (should I now say formation?) of the avant-garde now lacks plausibility. The dynamic of the postmodern is such that the expressive media of literature and art no longer have the ability to shock and perplex, at least not in forms that drive those who would understand them—as once was the case—to patient exegesis and explication.

The modernist avant-garde produced criticism as a necessary completion of its artistic practices (Eliot's footnotes to *The Wasteland* might offer the parodic instance of this, and Nabokov's *Pale Fire* its metainstance). Put in historical perspective, the emergence of literary criticism as an autonomous field of practice and then an academic discipline more or less tracks the evolution of avant-gardes from romanticism onward. It responds to the rise of what Charles Taylor calls "the Romantic ideal of self-completion through art."[6] This is foreshortened history, of course, in that there has been criticism from Aristotle on, especially in the form of poetics, which has perhaps been especially congenial at moments of neoclassical revival, where conventions, rules of genre, the grammar from which individual utterances are forged become most evident. The need for exegetical criticism, originally associated with sacred texts demanding interpretation within the moving horizons of

history, becomes most clearly marked with the rise of the difficult art of the modern, say from Baudelaire through Woolf. Creative writers themselves become critics, and they spawn exegetes. The relation of exegesis to text is essentially collaborative—by no means always harmonious but nonetheless a recognized commonality of enterprise in the reception and sharing of understandings.

The coming to America of continental "theory" in the 1970s created a new avant-garde of sorts—a genuine one, I think—and a new exegetical enterprise. Yet its fate was different because there was never a public consensus that the work in question constituted art objects whose public exegesis was important. (Witness the almost total neglect by the *New York Review of Books*, founded in the early 1960s, of the work of Lacan, Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, etc.) The need for exegetical criticism, it seems, was linked to poetry and novels. Expository prose of a challenging order could be left to take care of itself. If not immediately comprehensible, to hell with it. Meanwhile, there apparently ceased to be anything identifiable as avant-gardism in poetry and fictional prose (the French "New Novel" of the 1960s is the last example that comes to mind), although the avant-garde impulse continued to manifest itself in the visual arts, especially arts of performance. *Art Forum* for a while achieved a kind of mediatory critical function that literary journals had lost.

It is at least conceivable, then, that the present crisis of criticism derives from a lack of need for criticism in the public perception. Literary journalism of the daily and weekly sort can take care of instructing us what to read and to see and to listen to. There is no longer an imperative to look in the mirror of high art and discuss the reflections one finds there. In this sense the present crisis of critical languages, of how to write criticism, is authentically a crisis of criticism itself. One sits down to write criticism without any sure sense of the audience it might be addressed to, and thus language, tone, and even subject matter become desperately difficult to define. Over my many years as a writer of criticism I have found it increasingly difficult to know what I am writing it for. Who will publish it? Where will it be published? Who, if anyone, will read it? I can no longer harbor a conviction that anyone cares.

The situation of criticism was impressed on me recently when I wrote one of those (agonizing) letters of comparative evaluation of candidates for a professorship at a major university. All the candidates had published original, important, and readable books. Not one of these books has been reviewed in any media one would recognize as "public"—and I don't simply mean the *New York Times Book Review* but such other serious media as *New York Review of Books*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *London Review of Books*, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, and the nearly moribund quarterlies such as *Partisan Review*. I suppose the commonsense explanation is that there are too

many books being published because academic careers demand it. But it's by no means clear there has been a recent increase in publication rates in literary criticism—it has become more difficult than ever to get oneself published. What I think we really see is a failure of discrimination. It's as if the public journals had accepted the view of the cultural right and decided that all academic literary criticism is unreadable and trivial and therefore needn't be bothered with. This was, after all, the position championed by Lynne Cheney when she headed the official organization for our kinds of study, the National Endowment for the Humanities.

But if we have resigned ourselves to the situation of seeing good work go unreviewed (I don't want to be construed as saying that we should so resign ourselves—we need new journals that do serious public book reviewing), it may very well be from a certain weariness with literary criticism itself, which I think derives from a crisis in belief about its usefulness. Most of us who continue to write and publish literary criticism don't particularly enjoy reading it any more—not most of it, anyway. We continue to do so (if we do) out of a sense of duty, because we continue to think it important to learn what's new in the discourse. But most of the fun is gone, since the stakes appear to be diminished, and there isn't much sense of real dialogue about our understandings of texts and issues that matter—that matter in a way on which there is some consensus. Literary criticism gained its broadest audience at a time when literature was taking the place of religion, as a kind of secular scripture—see Wallace Stevens for an extreme statement of the case: "After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is the essence that takes its place as life's redemption."[7] It may prove to have been a historically delimited field.

The partisans of cultural studies may claim that they understood this some time ago and therefore have even in some academic settings replaced departments of comparative literature (for instance) with departments of cultural studies. Yes, but: if literary criticism is a dying art, in too much of cultural studies there is no art at all—no hypotheses at least as good as those of the New Critics, or Frye, or the structuralists to account for the conditions of the production of meaning in the field under study. Although recognizing that we all now do cultural studies in one form or another, and applauding the breadth this has given to our inquiries, I also recognize the truth of Geoffrey Hartman's recent strictures:

> Literature is becoming less the object of literary study than of an informal sociology or politology. I say "informal" because so few who approach literature this way have actually worked in sociology or political science. They use socioeconomic categories—particularly class, gender, race and property relations—to inspect works of art as "products" of a certain form of social life, which Marx (who is being read) considered temporary or transitional. The motivation of most of these analyses is social justice, and the field established by them is what we call cultural studies. Yet where do we find, together with that social awareness, the inventiveness, playfulness, and art-centeredness of a Kenneth Burke?[8]

It is perhaps unfair, or at least premature, at this point to demand of cultural studies a full-fledged theory of practice. But in the meantime the problem is that so much of it combines a smug assumption that it is on the side of the moral and political angels with a disparate set of critical tools and concepts that never seek justification. Too often it employs a writing style that, for all its gestures toward global inclusion, proves its moral earnestness by in-group allusions. In short, it assumes virtue rather than establishing it.

The solution to all these woes recommended by Rosenbaum—and many before him—is a return to what he calls "aesthetic considerations," by which he really means a "return to questions of value: How good is this passage or play, how do we judge it better or worse than something else in Shakespeare or in the work of other dramatists?"[9] I think it strange that "value" should be evoked in this manner, as if a kind of literary stockbroking could save us—Frye warned us in that same "Polemical Introduction" about the shiftiness of such valuations in the absence of any overall sense of the structure and functions of literature and criticism. This is "aesthetics" only in a narrow and relatively trivial understanding, although one that, alas, is common.

Hartman also wants to revive aesthetics, but he has in mind something more serious, since he evokes Friedrich Schiller's concept of "aesthetic education," which he glosses as meaning "that art is taken to be a serious empirical object of study and a field encouraged to reflect on itself, on its role in human relations. . . . There is no other way to strengthen aesthetic education than to expose students to art itself and those who have written passionately and critically about it."[10] Schiller in fact saw the need for aesthetic education in nearly anthropological terms, as a development of the *Spieltrieb*, that play function that is the essence of human freedom. The aesthetic education of humankind is on this model both an end in itself and a precondition of culture as an active, transformative medium in which people mutually civilize one another and proclaim their sphere of freedom from the state. "There is no other way of making sensuous man rational except by first making him aesthetic," writes Schiller, arguing for the power of fictions to restore people to their humanity.[11]

I think the notion of "aesthetic education" is useful also because it takes us back to pedagogy. Much of the exegetical work of the New Critics, for instance, came in shortish essays that were very much like classroom exercises, and I. A. Richards's "practical criticism," indeed, began as a classroom experiment. That is, to the extent that such criticism was written, and published, it very much limned a certain pedagogical practice. It didn't seek to

be an earthshaking new interpretation bound in hard covers. We have placed a premium on "original published scholarship" that leads to a certain critical hyperventilation, the promotion into books of what should not be books, and the claim to significance where one would prefer a modest elucidation.

We all know why this is so. Indeed, I find myself telling younger colleagues that only books "count" any more; articles just don't make the weight. The example of my late colleague Paul de Man, who was appointed to a professorship at Yale on the basis of one slim volume of collected essays (*Blindness and Insight*), seems to me irreproducible today. The decline in prestige of the exegetical article points to another problem: the etiolation of those journals that used to bridge the gap between the academy and a "general public," mainly the famous quarterlies. I doubt if anyone under the age of seventy turns to *Partisan Review* for its literary and cultural commentary, and if the library catalogue didn't assure me of the continued existence of *Kenyon Review* and *Hudson Review*, I would not be aware of it. *Commentary* and the *New Criterion* disqualified themselves as interpreters of culture by becoming public executioners during the culture wars. And nothing has come to take the place of these journals of mediation. (Witness the rise to prominence of *Lingua Franca*, a kind of academic *People* magazine; and even it is now defunct.) But there is perhaps no point in lamenting the decadence of the serious cultural journals since journals of any sort mainly go unread at present.

The decline of the quarterlies of course can be explained as part of a general decline of the literate print media in an age of the "frenzy of the visible," to use Jean-Louis Comolli's phrase.[12] Nonetheless, it participates as well in a loss of faith in the value of exchanged understandings about the meanings and conditions of meaning of literature. I don't think it is simply nostalgia to claim there was once a culture in which serious writers and serious readers were able to meet on the grounds of what to think about Kafka or Wallace Stevens. Now, each new book of literary and cultural criticism must be an individual performance, strenuous, original, self-inventing—and inventive, too, of an audience it hopes to shape and indeed create through its rhetoric. Some of these performances succeed remarkably—as in the work of Judith Butler. Many others simply produce a kind of hypertrophy of rhetoric and alleged significance.

Have I then argued myself into a corner where literary criticism must finally expire and be seen in historical perspective as the acolyte of modernism, rising and falling with the long passage from romanticism through to postmodernism? I think this is a distinct possibility, although not one to which I am currently willing to resign myself. I consider that the writing of literary and cultural critique is still worth the agony. This may be simply the result of years of professional deformation. But there still are grounds to believe that criticism matters. To paraphrase the French poet Paul Claudel, the world is before us like a text to be deciphered. One need not share Claudel's religious commitment to believe that the semiotics of literature and culture are crucial to understanding not only discrete messages and how they affect us but also our very composition as fiction-making animals.

Criticism may need to think more of its pedagogical nature and recreate a closer relation to classroom praxis. I know this sounds like a recipe for superior boredom. But I think most of us—meaning academics—spend a good deal of time making ourselves clear in response to student questions both intelligent and dumb, and intelligibility in response to questions, both real and imagined, is a good test of critical writing. Mikhail Bakhtin comments of Dostoevsky's characters that their "every thought . . . senses itself to be from the very beginning a *rejoinder* in an unfinalized dialogue."[13] If the agony of writing criticism makes it most often seem a deeply monologic enterprise, one can nonetheless keep the dialogic ideal in mind. A dialogic model might conduce to a certain modesty of critical tone. We have come to embrace the notion of the critic as creator, but there is plenty of evidence that the public prefers to see us in the more humble role of reader's surrogate, stand-in, go-between—which is after all the traditional and honorable role of Hermes. We might well recall Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, which argued that the actor performs most effectively when he eschews identification with his role in favor of conceiving the performance from the point of view of the audience.

But if literary criticism is in fact a terminal case, what is to be gained from recommendations about its tone and manner? Roland Barthes wrote that "those who neglect to reread condemn themselves to reading always the same story."[14] This of course evokes a kind of mandarin practice, of the leisurely rereading and patient exegesis of texts. Yet I don't see that we have much more to offer. Nor do I think that patient rereading is a negligible enterprise, especially when the notion of text has been expanded to include all cultural discourses, manifestations, artifacts, performances. Here, in my view, the move into cultural studies has been wholly positive. Where it has lost its way is in its all too frequent abandonment of the patient practice of reading in its urge to make heady megaconceptual claims and to construe itself as the teaching of virtue. All of culture offers itself to us for critical decipherment. But the decipherment must be real, not simply a simulacrum in the service of in-group spiritual uplift.

And of course as academics we have a responsibility to work toward the reform of those university practices that have encouraged critical hypertrophy: the demand for ever more publication for hiring and tenuring, the weighing of publications by the kilo, the devaluation of the critical essay, the hyping of the modest contribution to knowledge. If the tenets of high mod-

ernism and the avant-garde no longer command allegiance, it may be time to reexamine the kind of value they assigned to individualism and originality. Reconceiving research and critical writing as a collaborative enterprise could move us toward greater dialogism. And, just for starters, I propose that the contributors to this volume persuade some combination of benefactors—perhaps a consortium of university presses along with foundations—to found a new periodical dedicated to serious critical reviews of serious critical writing. I don't see how we can move forward without that.

Notes

1. Ron Rosenbaum, "The Play's the Thing, Again," *New York Times Book Review*, Aug. 6, 2000, 12–13.
2. Linda Charnes, "We Were Never Early Modern," cited in ibid., 12.
3. Guillaume Apollinaire, "La Jolie Rousse," in *Calligrammes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1925).
4. T. S. Eliot, "Four Quartets," in *Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950).
5. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), 10–11.
6. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 409.
7. Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 185.
8. Geoffrey Hartman, *Aestheticide; or, Has Literary Study Grown Old?* Emory Humanities Lectures (Emory University, 1999), 11.
9. Rosenbaum, "Play's the Thing, Again," 13.
10. Hartman, *Aestheticide*, 4–5.
11. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. and ed. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 161.
12. Jean-Louis Comolli, "Machines of the Visible," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Theresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin's, 1980), 122–23.
13. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 32.
14. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970), 22–23.