Cultural Memory in the Present

Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries, Editors

Just Being Difficult?

Academic Writing in the Public Arena

Edited by JONATHAN CULLER
and KEVIN LAMB

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Contents

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Introduction: Dressing Up, Dressing Down

THIS COLLECTION emerges from recent debates about bad or obscure writing in the humanities, although many of the essays show that the issue is scarcely new. What is at stake when the work of prominent thinkers is attacked as "just bad writing" or as needlessly obscure? And why should what might seem a local academic matter have graced the pages of the *New York Times*, the *New Republic*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *London Review of Books*, as well as university publications such as *Lingua Franca* and *South Atlantic Quarterly*? The current controversy was stimulated in particular by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*, which for several years garnered publicity by announcing recipients of a bad writing award, recipients who—doubtless no surprise—turned out to be highly influential scholars and, more specifically, ones engaged in what has come to be known as "theory," with its odd cachet of both political radicalism and intellectual abstraction. In something like an academic version of *Entertainment Weekly*'s "worst dresses" of the Oscars, the editors of *Philosophy and Literature* sought out instances of the "ugliest, most stylistically awful"[1] prose, and, as with such awards at the Oscars, the targets' acknowledged star status certainly appears to be a prerequisite for disparagement. But if this concern with writing were all *merely* a matter of style, what could be the cause for such commotion? And if it were not only a matter of style, what else could the charge of bad writing possibly signify?

This volume sets out to inquire into the underlying stakes of these debates. The essays gathered here 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. For the most striking feature of the accusation of bad writing is that it seems not to require explanation or demonstration,

as if all one has to do is quote a sentence and people will instantly recognize how awful it is. Although obscurity is a charge one can contest by trying to show that, taken in context, for an appropriately informed reader the sentence is actually quite intelligible, badness seems to brook no argument. The editor of *Philosophy and Literature*, indeed, felt no need to explain what made a particular winning specimen the worst writing he had found, and when he did speak about criteria of badness, he cited ugliness and opacity. The allegation of *bad writing* works, then, through an appeal to transparency that assigns badness to opacity. But if the most credible gloss for *bad* in *bad writing* is simply "unclear," doesn't the word itself—as an unclear substitution for the word *unclear*—enact the same failure of clarity it decries? And insofar as, in this model of transparency, clarity is what provokes immediate recognition, bad writing might be above all merely unfamiliar.

As one might expect, the allegations of bad writing under scrutiny center on the twin demons of difficulty and obscurity, but like the bad writing itself, these constitute a special class of difficulty and obscurity. Literary and philosophical texts have often been characterized by elevated language, abstruseness, unconventional syntax, idiosyncratic style, even (horrors!) ungrammatical usage. But when the object under consideration inhabits the literary canon, difficulty is treated as richness and intricacy, the very qualities that make literature an object of exegetical energy and classroom study. Even in philosophy, grappling with Kant or Hegel is considered fruitful because they are important objects of knowledge whose stylistic complexity correlates with the task of precision demanded in the elucidation of complicated ideas. The obscure way of writing endemic to much philosophy is presumably one of the reasons the academy undertakes to teach philosophy at all and often in the format of explicatory lectures. But why, then, should certain other types of difficulty be scorned? Since scientists and even social scientists are not vilified in the public press for bad writing, the answer must lie in the status of the humanities, which is conceived not as a realm where specialized or recondite reflection is needed but as a set of disciplines devoted to transmitting a cultural heritage. To be more precise, specialized research may be needed to work out problems in the history of culture, but insofar as it is significant, this research should be "written up," as we say, in terms that are broadly accessible.

We will return to the questions this assumption raises about the tasks of the humanities. But what of difficulty? Critics of bad writing claim that the problem is not difficulty per se; rather, the writing of current literary and cultural theory is *needlessly* obscure. Doubtless the reason for charging writing with badness rather than opacity comes from the conviction that obscurity is unnecessary. Its badness, even wickedness—for moral indignation quickly bubbles to the surface here—comes from its refusal to communicate,

from its adoption of jargon, abstraction, and complicated syntax that make it inaccessible.

The claim not to understand might seem an innocent posture that people would seldom adopt willingly, but in fact it is one of considerable power, in which authorities often entrench themselves. Eve Sedgwick has described the "epistemological privilege of unknowing," whereby "obtuseness arms the powerful against their enemies," as when a bilingual diplomat must negotiate in the language of his monolingual counterpart from another country.[2] Something of that structure underlies charges of excess difficulty. The claim not to understand carries a presumption that the writer ought to communicate in terms familiar to the reader, who thus comes to have an interest in not understanding, since that is what strengthens his or her position. The person who does not understand or declines to understand, the interlocutor who has or pretends to have the less broadly knowledgeable understanding, gets to determine the terms of the encounter. This is particularly salient in laws on rape, where, Sedgwick writes—with some overstatement, one hopes—"it matters not at all what the raped woman perceives or wants, so long as the man raping her can claim not to have noticed" or understood—a matter in which our culture provides masculine sexuality with a certain amount of training.[3]

Does something comparable happen in other cultural spheres? When difficulty is seen as elitist, inimical to the ideal of democracy, a disinclination to try to understand anything complicated can readily cloak itself in self-righteousness. When American students are treated as customers who should be satisfied, their resistance to difficulty can become a source of power. Above all, our educational system, treating difficulty as something to be postponed until it doesn't seem difficult, declines to value the struggle with complexity except when that struggle succeeds in dissipating it.[4] In this context it is striking but scarcely surprising how securely the power of the enemies of theory is anchored not in their command of knowledge, their superior understanding of the texts they would impugn, but precisely in their ignorance, their claim not to understand.

But the critics of theoretical writing swiftly proffer a different, and to some extent contradictory, charge: it is not that theorists incompetently conceal a simple meaning in obscure formulations. On the contrary, they know exactly what they are doing and deliberately write obscurely in order to sound profound when in fact they have nothing to say. According to such reasoning obscurantism is purely suggestive display. It produces the expectation that deciphering is in order, only to elude the reader's effort with hollow mystification.

This charge has the merit of recognizing the performative dimension of

writing, that it does not simply transmit a thought or a content but performs an action, takes up a stance. Of course, this fact about writing is itself part of the problem: instead of self-effacingly conveying information, difficult writing puts itself forward, seeks to act on the reader, providing an experience as it structures experience. And one of the performative effects of writing is indeed the establishment of authority, although it is scarcely clear that writing obscurely succeeds in conferring authority, as critics of academic writing seem to believe. There is a great deal of obscure writing out there, and few of those who write obscurely become invested with authority. Far more often readers are put off, and the writing languishes. Obscure writing may connote profundity of thought, but it rarely achieves the end of promoting its author as a profound thinker.

However, critics are not concerned with the mass of obscure writers, who produce difficult prose to no end, but with the famous ones, those thought, precisely, to have something important to say. The problem with these prominent writers, critics charge, is that their prose not only obfuscates any meaning but, more insidiously, produces an aura of authority. Theoretical jargon, pervasive allusions, syntactic complexity, in short, difficult style, commands the respect of the unwitting reader, they claim, because the rhetorical flourish that bars the transmission of meaning also stands in for meaning's presence. Obscurity in style, therefore, becomes a pretext for ferreting out the impersonators and exposing bad writers' complexity as the masquerade it is.

Accused of donning the vestments of authority without purveying the substance worthy of difficulty, these writers find themselves in a telling dilemma. If they assert, "Yes, I have content, and here it is in plain language," they grant that the difficulty was needless and can hope, at best, that their critics will acknowledge that there is credible content. But explaining to the critics of bad writing what a difficult sentence means invariably seems somewhat beside the point. They are not curious about the concealed or possibly missing meaning but angry at the obscurantism, which seems both to thwart comprehension and to signal the authors' more serious intellectual, moral, and political failings.

As many of the essays in this compilation make clear, the accusation of obscurantism (and even of intellectual vacuity) goes hand in hand with charges of professional irresponsibility, neglect of political realities, even collaboration with evil. Given the still vague definition of what qualifies as bad writing in this context, it may be unremarkable that these attacks can and do come from vastly different quarters of the political map, from the left and the right. The lack of immediate communicability—and therefore the lack of immediate content or politics of the sort to which lucid prose would supposedly guarantee access—is taken to reflect writers' willful resistance to

commitments in the world, their refusal of, in Robyn Wiegman's terms, "the political real" or, in David Palumbo-Liu's terms, "sociability." But since critics can scarcely claim that transparency and simplicity correlate with political responsibility or that one should read only what is immediately clear and familiar, that one should never read anything the least bit difficult, they have, instead, recourse to a distinction between good and bad difficulty by differentiating interior from exterior, what is inherently difficult from what is only superficially so—a position that allows that truly substantive complexity may make unusual linguistic demands of the reader but still inveighs against purely stylistic obscurity.

Critics' attempts, however, to separate real difficulty from merely apparent difficulty—the latter being equated with bad writing—is perhaps unwittingly and transferentially a displacement of the problem of which the bad writers in question are often so acutely aware: the problem of a criticism that aspires to find language about language yet is always already working through and with the tools about which it seeks to perform its explanatory magic. For Paul de Man this problem was the site both of theory and of its resistance. He writes, "Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory *is* itself this resistance."[5] Nowhere are these paradoxes more in evidence than in the debate that has emerged around the badness of particular academic writing.

Inasmuch as theory takes language as an object of critical inquiry, it is forever working both within and against linguistic constraints, seeking the distance implied by interrogation yet snared in the intimacy of language as the ultimate dwelling place of descriptive possibility. This effort has placed determining importance not only on language but on its subset of metalanguage, on language about language. *Bad writing* is precisely a metalinguistic designation, a form of writing about writing. Yet, as we've suggested already, the manifest sense of what one means by *bad writing* is only assured by familiarity with its absence; the meaning that the label "bad writing" makes present consists in isolating writing's failure to produce meaning. Of course, the enabling ground on which all metalanguage functions is its reference to something *else* called language. The referent is, thus, always eluding its description, perpetually absent at the moment it is, in fact, speaking on its behalf. According to de Man it is even in appealing to our most intuitive notions of language that we are perhaps most adrift in the problem of theory, for "we seem to assume all too readily that, when we refer to something called 'language,' we know what it is we are talking about, although there is probably no word to be found in language that is as overdetermined, self-evasive, disfigured and disfiguring as 'language.'"[6]

That theory aims to account for language necessarily implies that theory must examine the metalinguistic tools at its disposal. And if theory has

seemed to be self-critical, even self-parodying, it must be, in part, because theory resists *itself*. To the extent that theory is enmeshed in language's refusal of literal self-description, charges against academic writing may highlight the central task of theory: to engage, expose, describe, and even resist this defining resistance of and to language. The very difficulty toward which the designation "bad writing" gestures—that writing is *bad* when it is opaque or extrusive, when it is seen as primarily or merely writing, without the precious nucleus we designate content—appears mistakenly as theory's outside; but it is, on the contrary, internal to the objects it describes, characteristic rather than independent of the theory it purports merely to characterize. For if language were to be transparent in relation to itself, it would be inescapably opaque, presenting itself as the object by simultaneously claiming only to refer to language and only to be language. The label "bad writing" is, hence, a fine specimen not only of de Man's resistance to theory but also of the quandary of theory as resistance, caught up in its impossibility as its condition of possibility. Indeed, at bottom, the failure of critical metalanguage is what drives all theory.

The recent example of Judith Butler's selection as *Philosophy and Literature*'s bad writer of the year is especially revealing with respect to the task of theory and its relation to the prevailing distinction in these debates between real or essential complexity and purely accessory or stylistic difficulty. Strangely enough, parody has seemed at issue in the recent controversy. One of the contest's rules states, "Entries must be non-ironic, from serious, published academic journals or books. Deliberate parody cannot be allowed in a field where unintended self-parody is so widespread."[7] In explaining the journal's goal to readers of the *Wall Street Journal*, editor Denis Dutton goes on to define "theory" (his quotes) as "mostly inept philosophy applied to literature and culture." To show how "jargon has become the emperor's clothing of choice" for literary theory, Dutton cites a passage from a recent article by Paul Fry, which he characterizes as follows: "The writing is intended to look *as though* Mr. Fry is a physicist struggling to make clear the Copenhagen interpretation of Quantum Mechanics. Of course, he's *just* an English professor showing off."[8] Turning his attention to the year's prizewinner, Dutton contrasts Judith Butler and previous prizewinners—so-called kitsch theorists—with Kant, Aristotle, and Wittgenstein, where the former, it is claimed, only "mimic the effects of rigor and profundity without actually doing serious intellectual work."[9] In a separate and very different attack on Butler, Martha Nussbaum accuses "The Professor of Parody" (her title for Butler) of encouraging dangerous flirtation with gender travesty as a substitute for the real politics of advocating legal equality for women and gays and lesbians. Like Dutton, who describes theory as "intellectual kitsch" and as "analogous to bad art," Nussbaum seems interested in ripping off the frock of gender subversion and exposing it as a bad charade of real political engagement.

This charge of impersonation is particularly interesting for the way in which it takes on the questions of earnest performance, mimesis, and parody thematized by Butler's work, questions at the heart of her claims about the constitution of identity and of the social realm. Butler's point—that reality itself has been delimited by the concretizing effects of language and that drag performance is perhaps one way of seeing anew the materiality of everyday self-presentation as already imitative, linguistic, repetitive—ironically becomes the very ground of attack, as though Butler were merely a carbon copy, flitting around decked out in all the trappings of intellectual abstraction and political radicalism but with neither the substance of theoretical complexity nor the bite of genuine activism. One of Butler's enduring insights, however, is that the example of drag performance, of acting "as though a woman," uncovers in all gender identity a form of impersonation or performance predicated on the certitude of belief guaranteed over again by language and by its invisibility. If Butler herself was merely *impersonating* the real labor of intellectuals, acting *as though* an intellectual, she was, by the logic of her own account, simultaneously exposing the natural performance of such labor as already imitative, as relying on the transparency of meaning that could only be guaranteed by powerfully obscure linguistic conventions, conventions requiring language's invisibility and designating as parodic—and bad—thought that appears garishly overdressed in language.

Pretending "as though" or "as if"—a function treated at greater length and in more detail in Barbara Johnson's contribution to this volume—traditionally sustains our encounters with fiction, not criticism. But as Dutton's analogy to kitsch suggests, bad critical writing has seemed to be *like* bad art, in part, because it has ceased to be properly *critical*, because the difference from the object of criticism has diminished to the point where theoretical writing, maintaining vaunted pretensions to be "real philosophy," appears at times to mimic the allusive, metaphorical, convoluted structure of its literary objects, becoming itself literary. Many of the essays in this collection also point to this perceptible overlap between the literary and the critical, emphasizing the continuity between modernist writers' attempts in the early twentieth century to enable the representation of new realities and contemporary theorists' efforts in the latter half of that century to make newly strange familiar ones. Even what alerts critics of bad writing to its presence is ostensibly a structure of fictional self-presentation, a structure in which authority is claimed under false pretences; for resemblance to abstraction is taken as the real thing in its absence, as though fooling readers into buying the novelistic surrogate by way of a persuasive likeness to reality. But what if

the task of criticism is the unmasking of various fictional self-presentations as the stuff of reality? What would it mean to present the substance of reality as certain types of linguistic masquerade yet to avoid masquerade? The seeming literariness of theory may then be its own self-difference as an undertaking of theory at all, which is to say that its moment of writing—and hence of coming into being—is also its moment of fictionality. As Barbara Johnson has argued elsewhere, "The difference between literature and criticism consists perhaps only in the fact that criticism is more likely to be blind to the way in which its own critical difference from itself makes it, in the final analysis, literary."[10]

When deconstruction discovered in the writing of philosophy the disavowal of writing—writing as the supplement to conversation in its absence, of an address to the other in the other's absence—it made explicit that for philosophy badness and writing have perhaps always belonged together and that the potential failure of acknowledgment seemed peculiarly the condition of writing at all. It should seem unsurprising, thus, that deconstruction and the work of many continental philosophers who influenced a linguistic turn in modern thought found their most hospitable home in the United States not in departments of philosophy but of literature, where writing constitutes the object of study and where the reliability of language and its relation to reality may be brought into question. In the philosophical tradition beginning with Plato, in which writing is an encumbrance to be rarefied to a vitreous surface, Derrida and others encountered an unmistakable figurality that turned against the description of language even at the moment of its supposed clarity. In specifying its office, language was supposed to guarantee the idea's presence yet was instead relying on rhetorical tropes—the metaphor, for example, of glass—even in its act of discrediting rhetoric. The ineluctability of the rhetorical, the figural, in other words, the literary, became central to much of the task of investigating language and meaning making that characterized semiotics, deconstruction, and, later, simply theory. That critical writing should seem not only the explication but also the uncanny double of its literary object reflects perhaps theory's central dilemma in finding literality shot through with its own figural otherness as always other than the literal, as itself a figure of the literal. If theory's task were to challenge commonsense notions about language and make apparent the role of language in relaying, producing, and structuring everyday phenomena understood as reality, how would it stretch, even deform, language to render discernible the contours of language itself?

This question brings us back to the role of writing in the humanities. Insofar as charges of bad writing take clarity and transparency as the norm, they appear to treat the humanistic disciplines as means of transmission of a cultural heritage. If they are, rather, the testing of the elements of that heritage in a critical writing of it, or even the unwriting of what culture has taught us to take for granted, then critical prose must call attention to itself as an act that cannot be seen through. Roland Barthes suggests that the writer's task is not "to express the inexpressible" but "to unexpress the expressible," to unwrite what is already inscribed in the discourses that subtend our world.[11]

Perhaps, then, the more serious criticism levied against certain theoretical writing is that it reflects merely a consolidation of local vernaculars, that in the process of challenging common sense it has failed to question its own intellectual "common sense" and that of fellow left-leaning scholars in the humanities. The weak version of this claim rehearses the common assumption in this debate about disciplinary distinctions, the assumption that comes through loud and clear, for instance, when Denis Dutton accuses Paul Fry of acting "*as though*" he were a physicist when he is "*just* an English professor showing off." However, a more interesting argument—and certainly the strong version of this claim—would be that, far from being too difficult or merely difficult for difficulty's sake, so-called bad writers aren't difficult enough; their idiom is too settled, not sufficiently creative, perhaps not even adequately neologistic. Rather than discouraging difficulty, this latter claim seems a call to difficulty not unlike the call to theory, desperately seeking a metalanguage able to allow the most deftly self-critical operations necessary to explain language within language itself. If we are to move beyond the current debate around bad writing in the humanities, it seems fitting to start at exactly this point of conjunction, where badness in writing means only, in the end, not treating writing with the difficulty it deserves.

The essays in Part 1, "In Search of a Common Language," start from precisely this question of common ground by taking issue with assumptions about transparency, persuasion, and intuition in the writing of philosophical ideas. Collectively, they represent insightful attempts to unearth and to think beyond the historical primacy of clarity as the arbiter for intersubjective contact. The first two essays of the section trace the status of language from the early Greek philosophers' repudiation of the Sophists through the advent of the modern academic disciplines in eighteenth-century England. Margaret Ferguson's essay on "illustrious vernaculars" in Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia* examines, in particular, the troubling position that foreigners and inscrutability occupy in the coemergence of ideologies of national unity and common language, ideologies that, often deployed in the service of imperialist expansion, tend to connect moral virtue with one form of argumentation, a form of argumentation that has at its heart the hierarchical exclusion of various others. With similar historical rigor and detail Robin Valenza and John Bender look closely at two texts from Hume taken as the translation

between "learned" and "conversable" worlds, arguing that the term *translation* is itself inadequate to describe the movement between specialized, disciplinary knowledge and its more broadly accessible representation. By placing language debates in the context of the nascent disciplinary division between "natural philosophy" and "moral philosophy," they demonstrate that the movement in Hume's worlds betrays not only a difference in the representation of knowledge but a transformation in the very ways of knowing.

Jonathan Culler's and John McCumber's essays move the question of common language and communication into the modern philosophical context, where the authors propose the potential of difficulty to enable new ways of engaging subjectivity and meaning. Closely reading the hard prose of Stanley Cavell, Culler shows the promise of a style that convincingly describes the knots, dilemmas, desires, and identities of the writer. By breaking up the process of reading and interfering with the accustomed modes of understanding a text, "stylish" philosophical writing, Culler argues, may go past mere assessment and give persuasion a chance to happen. Locating the origin of philosophy's insistence on clarity in Aristotle and in the law of preservation of form, McCumber highlights the historical domination of matter by form. He concludes that when "matter"—that is, the body repressed and denied—speaks, its speech may ultimately need to reject both the Aristotelian mode of clarity (occupying the extant vocabularies of experience) and the Hegelian mode (treating obscurity as a necessary prelude to clarity) and rather to undertake a more experimental relation to obscurity, one that neither relegates obscurity to failed communication nor ties it to the ultimate goal of its own transcending.

Part 2, "Institutions, Publics, Intellectual Labor," centers on the politics embedded in theoretical discourses in the academy and elsewhere. Robyn Wiegman opens the discussion by showing how disciplinary divisions have, in themselves, abetted and reproduced the conventional estrangement between a "political real" and a "theoretical imaginary," cementing the opposition of activism versus abstraction. Her essay argues that feminism needs to reclaim a "theoretical humanities" as a vital site for considering afresh some of the many articulations between poststructuralism and left politics. Echoing many of the concerns raised by Wiegman, Rey Chow moves the discussion from the domestic politics of debates over bad writing to the flow of intellectual capital abroad, investigating, with surprising results, how globalization has affected the value attached to difficulty and the potential of obscurity to circulate in new, unanticipated ways. In the final essay of the section Michael Warner provides a nuanced account of the pressures, paradoxes, dilemmas, and unpredictability of writing that aspires to transform the world. Scrutinizing the different functions complexity in writing style plays in intellectual affiliation and change, Warner teases out the implications of

publishing circuits, political participation, and the anteriority of "world making" theory to its audience proper.

That the contemporary theory in question is itself a continuation of certain types of literary experimentation forms the organizing center of the essays in the next part. As the title "Modernist Poetics and Critical Badness" suggests, the authors of these essays find in modernism the roots of a simultaneously literary and critical enterprise in which stylistic complexity and the renegotiation of the subjective go together and in which the transgressing of linguistic conventions—in the lyric, the novel, the essay, even the boundary between the poetic and the prosaic, on the one hand, or art and interpretation, on the other—diverts from general circulation works deeply interested in the masses and in everyday experience and common sense. Whereas Peter Brooks, by taking a historical view onto the emergence of criticism and its alignment with the literary avant-garde, affirms hope for a renewal of exegesis and its role in an aesthetic education, Robert Kaufman provides a detailed example of such an inquiry into the complexity of modernism in the example of contemporary poetry and Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory. Barbara Johnson's piece closes the section with the impossibility of closure, acting appropriately instead "as if" concluded. Her far-reaching use of notions of "badness" from Baudelaire and Mallarmé shows the existing currents of contemporary debates to be still deeply embedded in prevailing notions of language that have the denial of self-obscurity as their precondition and, therefore, project difficulties in comprehension to moral failings of authors.

The final part of the collection, "Address to the Other," deals at greater length with precisely this question of ethics raised by obscure academic prose. The authors in this section engage with readers' refusal of acknowledgment to the seemingly opaque and inscrutable, or the less than immediately intuitive and transparent. David Palumbo-Liu's essay shows this refusal to be rooted in conditions of sociability whereby notions of bad writing, bad people, and nonnormativity work together to constrain what qualifies as legitimate intercourse, even as they function within the circuit of politics as usual, in which different groups vie for predominance. The interview with Gayatri Spivak places the question of difficulty in the terrain of left academic politics and knowledge production and dissemination. By looking at the "law of curvature," the different temporality now attached to books, and the role of teaching, Spivak argues for wedging apart the question of the validity of knowledge from the relative level of difficulty attached to its expression. In the final essay Judith Butler revisits the frequently cited example of Adorno by way of a significant detour through Henry James's *Washington Square*. Through Adorno's correspondence with friend and colleague Walter Benjamin, Butler argues that Adorno signifies not only difficulty but also

difficulty's limits, the terrifying points at which difficulty is reconstituted into orthodoxy and withdraws recognition to those who transgress its entrenched parameters. Proposing that the world may be understood anew in unfamiliar and unconventional writing, Butler also advocates reexamining the ethics of reading difficulty and of judgment in the face of incomprehension. By attaching ethical value to encounters with the "inadequacy of explanation," Butler challenges us to honor that which cannot be fully understood or mastered in the other.

Notes

1. The contest was conducted through the list serve, PHIL-LIT, for the journal *Philosophy and Literature*. The rules were posted on the Internet and have since been quoted in a number of places, in virtually identical form. The quotation here appears on the following Web page: Denis Dutton, "Bad Writing Contest: Results for Round Three," posted at www.miami.edu/phi/misc/badwrit3.htm.
2. Eve Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 4–7.
3. Ibid., 5.
4. For discussion see Helen Regueiro Elam, "The Difficulty of Reading," in *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature*, ed. Alan Purves (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 73–79.
5. Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory," in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 19 (de Man's emphasis).
6. Ibid., 13.
7. Denis Dutton, "Bookmarks: The Somewhat Exaggerated Death of Primitive Art," *Philosophy and Literature* 23 (1999): 252.
8. Denis Dutton, "Language Crimes," *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 5, 1999, W11 (our emphasis).
9. Ibid.
10. Barbara Johnson, "The Critical Difference: BartheS/BalZac," in *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 12.
11. Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1972), x.