

The Morality of Form; or, What's "Bad"
About "Bad Writing"?

SEVERAL YEARS AGO Edward Said delivered a series of lectures at my institution. He was introduced by the late Ian Watt. I remember Watt's introduction well but even more Said's response: Watt told the audience that of all the critics writing at the time he most appreciated Said because of the clarity and lucidity of his writings, which Watt attributed to an English education. I must not have been the only one in the audience who held their breath in anticipation of what Said, having grown up under British occupation, could possibly say: What he did say was both gracious and to the point. He thanked Watt for the introduction and then added, "But you know, Ian, some of us learned English in different ways—some of us were camed if we didn't speak English correctly."

I use this anecdote because it addresses not only the issue of writing and the value attached to clarity (however ascertained) but also the intensely social aspect of the current discussion of academic writing: It is to that notion of sociability that I will turn for my emphasis. As Ian Watt had been instrumental in establishing a regard for the humanities at Stanford, and was the founder of its humanities center, there was something very significant about his welcoming Said: What Watt chose to emphasize as a point of commonality, of sociability, was a discourse that allowed him to imagine Said as part of a particular fraternity: Watt's pronouncement indicated that he and Said were brothers, not only in the English language but also in a particular usage of it within specific intellectual protocols. For Watt this bond transcended the particularities of how they each came to write English. But for Said such an affinity could not so easily erase historical specificity, a specificity that challenged the notion of a seamless social bond produced by a common language and a shared sensitivity about its proper use.

Debates over language ("national language," bilingual education, ebonics,

and so forth) are never about language alone or even primarily. Rather, such arguments point to the social functions of linguistic communication and the assumptions of sociality that are to be at once vouchsafed and reproduced by communication. These issues have everything to do with the social positioning of the practitioners of language—the actual speakers and writers themselves and the extralinguistic situations that englobe acts of communication, that is, the arenas in which words circulate and are recognized, responded to, or rebuffed. The most significant issue behind the flurry of activity that has surrounded the controversy over “bad writing” is the issue of sociality and the attendant matter of social responsibility.

The issue of responsibility is located in two related areas: first is the concern that what is deemed “bad writing” is bad because its authors allegedly set themselves up as progressive political thinkers, whereas in actuality they write in such an obscure and difficult manner as to make access to such political thinking impossible for more than a handful of initiates.¹ Alongside the issue of how “bad writing” might be, despite its assumptions and claims, unpolemical, there is the issue of its application in a certain domain—that of the academy, specifically, the classroom. The issue of bad writing is deeply linked to a pedagogical program constructed around a particular vision of an academic community. In both cases “bad writers” are chastised for their moral dereliction.

To make this charge stick, however, requires the establishment of norms and propriety. An intellectual community is constructed that is populated by a specific group of individuals whose norms and capacities guide the production of discourse. If norms supposedly have been broken, contracts voided, responsibilities dodged, then we need to first assume the existence of a “common person” whose level of intelligence or discernment would be used to adjudicate the proper form of language, the degree to which language should conform to its social contract. From a conglomerate of such individuals one posits an ideal community in order to arrive at some sense of what the most acceptable degree of transparency would be or how much complexity, nuance, indirection could be tolerated in social discourse.²

Here one discovers an affinity between the notion of “bad” writing and what one might call “deviant” writing, that is, writing that departs from presumed norms and threatens by its example to lead others to reproduce not only that sort of writing but a bad sort of behavior as well. Such language and behavior challenge the norms, the grounds for sense making, truth setting, and rational discussion in the community. From early rhetorical debates between the Atticists and Asiaticists there has been a specific concern over the manners in which “unplain” language might persuade (indeed, seduce) listeners better than “plain” language and convince them to do bad things. Unplain language is assumed by its critics to be not only less than

transparent but also untrue by virtue of its opacity.³ The assumption on the part of those arguing against “bad writing” is that it irresponsibly and immorally beguiles its readers into taking on its own behavior and norms, into becoming complicit with its own reproduction. Furthermore, these norms are at a significant remove from anything that might be construed as not only true but honestly arrived at as well. Critics of “bad writing” remark on a double loss—the loss of a social world in which “truth,” to which they held the keys, no longer takes the same linguistic form, no longer is configured in the terms most familiar to them, and the loss of the power to enforce those norms and by consequence to discipline those who dare to write deviantly.

Thus, “bad writing” presents more than simply a spiritual loss, a loss of kindred community. The present attack on “bad writing” is a multifaceted attack that goes beyond its disappointingly ad hominem facet to an assertion regarding the types of scholarship central to today’s academy and the ways in which such scholarship and its conventions seem to have deprived its critics not only of voice but of a place to be. It has taken away an entire topos, a situation of speech and sociality in which their kind of behavior is not only sanctioned but required. If, in the fifth century B.C., Corax, the person to whom the “invention” of rhetoric is attributed, elaborated rhetorical skills in order to help people regain their property after the expulsion of the tyrants and to maintain social order, here we find a battle over language that differently enlists a particular set of rhetorical devices centered on a particular notion of “clarity” and its absolute value to secure intellectual property and rights.⁴ The similarity between these two otherwise quite different cases is that in each a particular kind of language/writing is seen as proper to the task of normalizing social relations and the power to claim property. In the academy it is a matter of making sure that the correct modes of expression and argumentation are in use, and in use to secure and convey a particularly configured notion of not only truth but ways of knowing the truth.

For “good writing” now to become urgently necessary requires three interrelated elements: first, the instantiation of a normative community whose reproduction is essential; second, a viable threat to that community and its values; and third, a particular realization of this threat. Here, the threat is manifested in a figure at once inside and outside of the community. This figure occupies this double status because although it has certain claims to membership within the community, it is not a full or equal member. This figure is, precisely, that of a student. “Good” academics are needed to deliver knowledge properly to the benefit figure of the average student in need of proper guidance. Without this particularly imagined, abject object of instruction, we would not need academic writers. To argue a disease and a patient is to legitimize the presence of the physician. To substantiate the exist-

tence of this abject figure, critics of bad writing go to some lengths to construct a scenario of powerlessness and fear, of subjection and contempt.

Most important, along with this contempt for readers/students comes a contempt for academic responsibility. D. G. Meyers, one of the editors of the journal that awards the prize in "Bad Writing," asserts that "bad writing" expresses a "contempt for readers" and "not so much a lack of concern for clarity" as a "lack of concern for *clarification*." This distinction is important, for it focuses our attention not on a value but on a pedagogical process. Bad writers should even "take pains" to make themselves clear.⁵ According to this critique bad writers are bad because they refuse to honor the contractual obligation all academic writers have with their readers and all teachers have with their students.⁶

The rhetoric of Meyers's sentence snowballs from an abrogation of "responsibility," a dereliction of "duty," and, indeed, the evasion of the "pain" necessary for writers and teachers to fulfill their contract: this community is invented not only by the pleasure of learning but also by a constitutive pain. The assumption is that writers and teachers are to absorb the pain of difficulty in order to spare the reader and student. The proposition is that the scene of reading and learning should have a precisely delimited ratio of difficulty (if it need be difficult at all). But such a notion of obligatory self-sacrifice is again premised on a particular notion of the character and identity of the members of the community—the very individuals whose pain and pleasure, capacity and willingness to understand and to clarify, is presumed to be uniform and discernible. It is also premised on the proposition that learning should not hurt. Meaningfulness must thus be delivered in a particular fashion that clearly delineates a product to be consumed in ways that do not similar to the consumption of all such products, that is, in ways that do not unwarrantedly challenge the consumer beyond a certain point.

Hence, Martha Nussbaum argues that academic writers "assume the responsibility of advancing a definite interpretation."⁷ Using Judith Butler as her example, Nussbaum states: "[Butler's writing] bullies the reader into granting that, since one cannot figure out what is going on, there must be something significant going on." This argument is weak in two regards: first, it again constructs a "straw-student," a gullible, weak, and unintelligent individual, to represent the victim of bad writing. Second, it assumes the absence of any redeeming pedagogical value. But one could easily argue against the assertion that "bad writing" is "bad" because it lacks determinacy. Rather than deliver a predigested commodity for absorption by an innocent student body, one could imagine that "bad writing" is a provocation to think outside received categories and that "indeterminateness" is exactly what prompts critical inquiry and further speculation. Yet I doubt that the critics of bad writing would argue with this point. Rather what would likely result again

would be an argument about the proper degree of difficulty. And, again, that is an abysmal argument, which calls for a stable and clear calibration of the ratio between requisite clarity and acceptable difficulty.

But although one might respond to such criticism by arguing that a new set of concerns and problems now calls for different discursive strategies, and that new forms of linguistic expression have to at least be entertained (if not accepted outright) in order to make possible the representation of new problems, this is not really the point of the controversy. Although there is the need to debate the issue of whether the production of new knowledge calls for a commensurate change in the way we write, as I read and reread the various position papers in this debate, what seems most irksome to critics of "bad writing" is not its existence but rather its supposed predominance. My own suspicion is that on this count those who worry about the dominance of "bad writing" have little to worry about, especially if the issue is the "common person," whose intelligence has to be protected from the tortuous meanderings of bad academic writers. The vast portion of news venues around the world that covered "the story" sided with the critics of bad writing, and hardly any of its defenders were cited at all. The basis for this attack on "bad writing" therefore seems faulty and its moral charge less than persuasive simply because it is not an absolute critique (bad writing is bad) but rather relative and qualified (there is *too much* of it). The issue thus becomes a purely political one: 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. By casting themselves as the parents and guardians of the next generation, the critics of bad writing attempt to achieve the moral high ground and at once assure that the right kind of reproduction, of the right social world, will be continued.

The critics of "bad writing" are concerned that it persuades a particularly constructed audience to become themselves bad writers. Says Deborah Knight, one of the judges for the "Bad Writing" award: "The real risk is that students will be exposed and start writing like this, thinking they ought to [emphasis added]."⁸ What is needed, then, is the reinstatement of the proper community created by "common" language and behavior—what would be more horrible than the production of another sort of community? The issue ultimately is not the degree of difficulty and pain imposed on the reader/student, or even the need for Truth, but another quantitative issue—the *number* of practitioners of bad writing and their likely proliferation and domination over those who envision another sort of community. That is, if all this fuss were about a couple of isolated writers, why would it matter? What indeed emerges from this diagnosis of a few instances is an entire so-

cology of domineering types and personalities that are necessary to substantiate and give weight and durability to this phenomenon.

For example, we have Nussbaum's imputation of an "air of in-group knowingsness" in Butler's prose, and Robert E. Clark's "Letter to the Editor" in the *New York Times* (March 27, 1999), which accuses bad writers of playing "a self-perpetuating and insular game . . . speaking only to and for their colleagues." Meyers elaborates on this to name an entire renegade "community" at odds with all the usual standards of academic communalism: "Academic writing wasn't supposed to be this way. Even at its most stylistically awkward it was supposed to seek truth. Instead, what we have in academic writing nowadays is the circulation of authority—the replacement of the ideals of scholarship and academic community with the principle of a political party."

And it is here that we can disentangle the accusation of "bad writing" as irresponsible socially and professionally from the much more relevant charge of its being "bad" because it is partisan. But even partisanship in itself is not necessarily bad. The issue is not power (academics has of course always been involved with power: its acquisition, loss, trade-offs, various sites, and interrelations) nor the mechanisms that perpetuate it (for example, who cites whom, who sits on which nominations or awards committees) but rather that the *wrong kind of people* have it—*bad* people. Meyers writes, "Although Butler wishes to disrupt 'the workings of capitalism,' the effect of her writing is exactly the opposite. Its effect is to safeguard the power and privilege of academic capitalists—among whom she is one of the great robber barons." As titillating as this sounds, this "discovery" of a conspiracy, this Manichean schematization, is hardly new; in fact, it is as old as the academy itself.

In *The Sociological Imagination* C. Wright Mills argues the need to understand better the phenomenon of academic "cliques":

If we are to understand what is going on in any area of cultural and intellectual work, we must understand its immediate social context. . . . The whole business of "cliques" and "personalities" and "schools" is . . . complicated. . . . their importance in shaping the development of social sciences deserves more awareness on our part. . . . The function of the academic clique is not only to regulate the competition, but to set the terms of competition and to assign rewards for work done in accordance with these terms at any given time.⁹

Most germane for my discussion here is Mills's comment on the reproduction of cliques:

[I]f there is competition among several cliques in a field of study, the relative positions of the several competitors tend to determine clique strategies. Cliques that are small and considered unimportant can in due course be expected by leading cliques

to go out of business. Their members will be ignored or won over or rejected, and in the end die off without having trained the next generation. It must always be kept in mind that one important function of cliques is the shaping of the next academic generation.¹⁰

Meyers herself finally drops the whole issue of writing and discloses the real agenda behind the granting of the "award":

The problem, finally, is not that academic writing is "ugly" and "stylistically awful." It's rather that bad academic writing conceals the political reality of the contemporary university. No longer defined by the common attachment to ordinary rational principles, our universities have become institutions of one-party rule. . . . Young scholars must toe the party line in their writing—and pay a protection fee to the party bosses in the form of quoting them.

The very vagueness of the notion of "ordinary rational principles" and the openness of such a notion to precisely partisan debate forces us to focus instead on the issue of dominance. The issue is not bad writing itself, or even the badness of the people who write badly; but rather the assumed monopoly of authority in place in academia and its effect on "young scholars," that is, the production of new generations along the wrong axis of power. But, again, if this is the real issue, it falls seriously short of being anything worth spending much ink on. This is true for two reasons. First, there is, again, no proof that this is actually the case. Apart from some anecdotal evidence, we have no other data with which to support the assertion that "our" (!) universities have become "institutions of one-party rule." But even if this were so, it would behoove Meyers to prove which party, exactly, is in power. The second reason why this argument falls short is that, as mentioned previously, universities have long been exposed for not being exempt from deeply personal battles over authority and the loyalty of students—such battles belie any claim of "ordinary rational principles" holding sway over individual or group egos. For instance, the judges of the Bad Writing Contest claim that it "exposes the workings of entrenched power" and in so doing seeks to liberate all those docile and intimidated students held under the gun by bad writers. Yet what would happen if "they" succeeded in doing so? They simply would have rooted out the enemy and established themselves as the new party. The debates over "bad writing" may thus be seen within a tradition of interecine academic institutional battles over influence—here the critics of bad writing have taken up the gauntlet supposedly laid down by bad writers. Whether the gauntlet was ever thrown is hardly the issue—it provided a pretext on which to launch a more general attack against a largely invented opposition.

When examined on its basic claims, the critique of "bad writing" discloses a vacuous argument and tremendous bad faith. But, beyond that, there