

## IS BAD WRITING NECESSARY?

*George Orwell, Theodor Adorno, and the Politics of Language*

JAMES MILLER

THESE ARE TRYING TIMES for the left in America, which may be one reason why a bitter debate has erupted among avowedly left-wing academics and intellectuals over a venerable topic—"Politics and the English Language," to borrow the title of George Orwell's famous 1946 essay. Must one write clearly, as Orwell argued, or are thinkers who are truly radical and subversive compelled to write radically and subversively—or even opaquely, as if through a glass darkly? That is the question.

On one side stand academic luminaries like the University of California at Berkeley rhetorician Judith Butler and the University of Pittsburgh English professor Jonathan Arac, who take their inspiration from critical theorists like Michel Foucault and Theodor Adorno. Arguing that their work has been misunderstood by journalists on the left, these radical professors distrust the demand for "linguistic transparency," charging that it cripples one's ability "to think the world more radically."

On the other side are ranged a variety of public intellectuals and journalists like the UCLA historian Russell Jacoby, the feminist writer Katha Pollitt, and the NYU physicist Alan Sokal. Intolerant of bewildering jargon, they cannot see how deliberately difficult prose can possibly help change the world. As their patron saint, they often nom-

inate George Orwell, the very image of a man who spoke truth to power and spoke it plainly.

One thing the plain talkers on the left share is relatively greater access to a wider public. In part, this is because they know how to write with "linguistic transparency." But as Pollitt has ruefully pointed out, the proponents of plain talk have also doubtless benefited from the long-standing anti-intellectualism of the American mass media. Keen to simplify and wary of sustained argument, those who oversee the media are generally impatient with abstraction and complexity as well as the qualifications and nuances that might slow down the majority of readers. They want facts reported and explanations and arguments conveyed as painlessly as possible. As a result, writers on the left who can handle complex topics with terseness, clarity, and brio exercise an apparent influence on the wider culture out of all proportion to their standing, if any, in the academy.

This situation not only excites the envy of some left academics; it also fuels their suspicion that plain talk is politically perfidious—reinforcing rather than radically challenging the cultural status quo. Indeed, last year the academic organizers of a conference at the University of California at Santa Cruz made exactly this case, trying to pin the pejorative label "left conservatism" onto some of their most widely read critics.

If Orwell perfectly exemplifies the party of clarity, it might be said that the German philosopher Theodor Adorno has come to represent the party of opacity. Consider the most recent episode in this internecine Kulturkampf, which occurred this spring after the editors of *Philosophy and Literature* bestowed their annual Bad Writing Award on Judith Butler. Stung into action, Butler defended herself—in an Op-Ed piece of defiant lucidity—in the columns of *The New York Times*. And she cited Adorno to do so. But this was not the end of it. A few months later, when the literary critic Terry Eagleton complained in the *London Review of Books* about the labored style of Gayatri Spivak, the prominent postcolonial theorist, Butler weighed in to defend Spivak and denounce Eagleton. And once again Adorno served as her witness.

"Surely," Butler proclaimed in a letter to the editors, "neither the *LRB* nor Eagleton believes that theorists should confine themselves to writing introductory primers such as those that he has chosen to provide." Precisely because pathbreaking thinkers like Butler and Spivak are in pursuit of something bigger and better than a primer—Butler calls it "critical theory"—they refuse the "truisms which, now fully commodified as 'radical theory,' pass as critical thinking." If their prose is sometimes hard to read, that is because they, unlike Eagleton, are performing true critical thinking. "Adorno surely had it right," asserts Butler, "when he wrote—in *Minima Moralia*—about those who recirculate received opinion: 'only what they do not need first to understand, they consider understandable; only the word coined by commerce, and really alienated, touches them as familiar.'"

WHAT IS GOING ON HERE? And how have Orwell and Adorno, two long-dead figures, come to represent the poles of this debate? It was a half century ago that Orwell warned of the totalitarian use value of the evasive euphemism, the deliberately misleading oxymoron, and the proliferation of obfuscating abstraction in political prose, not least among academics on the left (a prime target of "Politics and the English Language" was Harold Laski, a leading light of the Labour Party). For a quarter century, Orwell's aesthetic convictions carried the day, at least on the anti-Stalinist left. In *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), the radical sociologist C. Wright Mills approvingly cited Orwell's example in contrasting the "confidence of the individual craftsman in his own ability to know reality" with the "bureaucratization of reason." Ten years later, Noam Chomsky used Orwell to throw darts at a different target, those segments of the academic left avowedly uninterested in practical politics: "George Orwell once remarked that political thought, especially on the left, is a sort of masturbation fantasy in which the world of fact hardly matters. That's true, unfortunately, and it's part of the reason that our society lacks a genuine, responsible, serious left-wing movement."

However plausible the position of Orwell and Mills and Chomsky,

one cannot help but notice that Adorno's formidable *Minima Moralia*—the work cited in self-defense by Butler—was written at roughly the same time as Orwell's pioneering essay and commands a similar following among left-wing intellectuals.

Orwell and Adorno, both born in 1903, were early and outspoken foes of fascism and Stalinism. Both, deservedly, are icons of the independent left. And their worldviews overlapped in other ways as well. Each of them regarded the postwar world in the most dire terms: Adorno saw both western Europe and the Soviet Union as entirely "administered" societies where the prospects for genuine freedom were few; Orwell defined political speech as the "defense of the indefensible," adding that contemporary politics could be summed up by its "evasions, folly, hatred, schizophrenia." Both men also saw a close relation between the corruption of language and the corruption of politics. Orwell protested that "orthodoxy, of whatever color, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style." Adorno wrote, "Where there is something that needs to be said, indifference to literary form always indicates dogmatization of content." Both were appalled by the replacement of evocative words with prefabricated, ready-made phrases. When Adorno asserted that "defiance of society includes defiance of its language," Orwell would have agreed.

And yet when it came to assessing the need for clear language in social criticism, they parted ways dramatically. In "Politics and the English Language," Orwell asserts that to write and think "clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration." In his 1956 essay "Punctuation Marks," Adorno asserts, just as boldly, that "lucidity, objectivity, and concise precision" are merely "ideologies" that have been "invented" by "editors and then writers" for "their own accommodation."

So whose views on language—Orwell's or Adorno's—seem most cogent in retrospect? And why did these two estimable authors come to such drastically different conclusions about the morality of style?

FIRST PUBLISHED in German in 1951, Adorno's *Minima Moralia* is one of the most intransigent pieces of cultural criticism in this cen-

tury. The book was written in the 1940s, while Adorno was an unhappy exile in America. Divided into three parts—"1944," "1945," and "1946-1947"—the text consists of 153 numbered entries with deadpan titles ("They, the people," "Tough baby," and so on). Fragmentary and nonsequential, solemn and simultaneously offhand, each fragment circles briefly around a theme. Some of the book's most celebrated formulations are defiantly paradoxical: "In psychoanalysis, nothing is true except the exaggerations." Others issue in wild generalizations: "Normality is death." Still other passages combine a knowing allusiveness (for example, to Hegel's famous dictum that Napoleon was the world spirit on horseback) with a simple image ("Hitler's robot bombs," the pilotless V-1 and V-2 missiles that killed thousands of people in London) to insinuate, in a few elliptical words, a considered view about abstract philosophical matters: "I have seen the world spirit,' not on horseback, but on wings and without a head, and that refutes, at the same stroke, Hegel's philosophy of history." A topic that is provocatively formulated in one passage often reappears in another with a completely different, and sometimes inverted, emphasis. Adorno compared this way of writing to "spiders' webs." He hoped to snare readers in a tightly woven net of metaphors and ideas.

The distinctive features of Adorno's style owe a great deal to his rarefied upbringing. Born in Frankfurt am Main, Adorno inherited, and helped to renew, many of the most demanding currents in German high culture. Trained to become a classical pianist, he also studied sociology and philosophy before moving to Vienna in 1925 to study with the atonal composer Alban Berg. Discouraged from pursuing a career in music, he returned to Frankfurt and completed a dissertation on Kierkegaard.

Fluent in the specialized vocabularies refined by German philosophers from Kant and Hegel to Husserl and Heidegger, Adorno in these years also absorbed the key idea of reification from Marx and the Hungarian communist philosopher Georg Lukács. Capitalism, according to Marx, had produced a "topsy-turvy world" in which inanimate objects of every sort—from stocks and bonds to paintings and poems—were treated like fetishes with magical powers, while human

beings were manipulated like inanimate objects, as if a laborer earning a salary were a mere tool with no independent mind or power. Adorno at the same time acquired a taste, which will seem rebarbative to most Anglophones, for dramatizing the wages of reification by attributing agency to impersonal nouns. (One example: "Topsy-turviness perpetuates itself: domination is propagated by the dominated.")

In 1938, old Frankfurt friends, led by Max Horkheimer, helped Adorno escape from Europe to join in research projects being organized in America by Horkheimer's transplanted Institute of Social Research (a.k.a. the Frankfurt School), based in New York City. At first Adorno earned a living working for the Princeton Radio Research Project, commuting daily from Manhattan to Newark, New Jersey, the site of the project's headquarters. "When I traveled there through the tunnel under the Hudson," he wrote years later, summing up his sense of displacement, "I felt a little as if I were in Kafka's *Nature Theater of Oklahoma*." Compared with a great many less fortunate émigré academics, Adorno had a good war. In 1941, after having moved to Southern California for health reasons, Horkheimer offered Adorno another job, this time conducting research into "the authoritarian personality." So, once again Adorno joined his German mentor, this time in the land of palm trees, balmy breezes, and movie stars.

He hated it.

Although Southern California in the 1940s was teeming with illustrious European exiles, including Arnold Schoenberg, Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, and Igor Stravinsky, Adorno disappeared into his writing and research, repelled by the vainglory and vulgarity of the people he was expected to get along with amiably, in the American style. Outside the émigré community, Adorno's painstakingly acquired storehouse of knowledge—about modern opera, German philosophy, and the evils of the cash nexus and the commodity form—impressed no one.

"In America, I was liberated from a certain naive belief in culture,"



he confessed shortly before his death in 1969. In Europe, he had simply taken for granted "the fundamental importance of the mind—'Geist.' . . . The fact that this was not a foregone conclusion, I learned in America, where no reverential silence in the presence of everything intellectual prevailed."

Or, as he more tartly summed up the same sad experience in *Minima Moralia*, "Anyone who, in conversation, talks over the head of even one person, is tactless. For the sake of humanity talk is restricted to the most obvious, dumbest, and tritest matters."

American anti-intellectualism has rarely had a more vicious critic. After completing a long collaborative essay with Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno set to work with a vengeance, organizing his thoughts about the wretchedness of his émigré experience. Composed in bits and pieces throughout his time in Southern California, *Minima Moralia* is, in part, the effort of a sensitive introvert, feeling lost and bereft of proper recognition, to conjure a cocoon of "reverential silence" around the words he has obsessively strung together, as if a perfectly taut sentence could be a talisman and helpmate, like the rosary beads of a pious Catholic.

He had no expectation whatsoever that the man in the street would have the faintest clue what he was up to. He didn't care. On the contrary: "For the intellectual, inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity"—and this isolation is to be ensured through the rarefied quality of one's prose.

Since Adorno obviously did not suppose that plumbers and soda jerks would be disturbing their dogmatic slumbers by laboring through his prose, what kind of reader was *Minima Moralia* meant to reach? Certainly someone who could pick up, and perhaps even find pleasure in, his many allusions (starting with the title, a play on *Magna moralia*, a digest of maxims and ethical arguments attributed in antiquity to Aristotle) and probably, too, a reader who shared something of his overwhelming disgust for modern-day popular culture.

But there are also hints that Adorno was appealing to a still-higher

court of judgment. In a fragment on intellectual history, after surveying the damage done to Nietzsche's reputation by his posthumous popularity among neo-fascist bands of "Noble Human Beings and other riffraff," Adorno concludes that "even at that time the hope of leaving behind messages in bottles on the flood of barbarism bursting on Europe was an amiable illusion." The great solitary thinker, who had "wondered whether anyone was listening when he sang to himself in 'a secret barcarole,'" had suffered a fate worse than death: his work had become the plaything of ignoble fools. "Who, in the end, is to take it amiss if even the freest of free spirits no longer write for an imaginary posterity . . . but only for the dead God?"

Adorno's hidden premise seems to be this: any serious piece of writing, like any serious work of art, will be produced from the standpoint (in a mystical image borrowed from Walter Benjamin) of "the messianic light." Like Benjamin, Adorno wants "to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption"—an emancipated point of view, beyond the despair of living under the rules of capitalism. Insofar as such a work succeeds in single-mindedly addressing its proper audience, it may well be understood properly by no one—save the Messiah (who, of course, may never appear).

IT IS IN THIS FRANKLY ESCHATOLOGICAL CONTEXT, weirdly conjoined with what Jürgen Habermas once characterized as "self-affirmation gone wild," that Adorno most eloquently sums up his views on rhetoric in the fragment that Butler cites. It is titled "Morality and style."

"It avails nothing ascetically to avoid all technical expressions, all allusions to spheres of culture that no longer exist," Adorno declares. "The logic of the day, which makes so much of its clarity, has naively adopted this perverted notion of everyday speech." (One can see here the roots of his postwar antipathy to the ordinary-language philosophy of Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin.) "Rigorous formulation" re-



quires of a reader "conceptual effort," which Americans, with their dim-witted commitment to a superficial pragmatism (another one of Adorno's *bêtes noires*), will "violently resist." He adds: "Only what they do not need first to understand, they consider understandable; only the word coined by commerce, and really alienated, touches them as familiar. Few things contribute so much to the demoralization of intellectuals. Those who would escape it must recognize the advocates of communicability as traitors to what they communicate."

Since Adorno made no bones about his lack of interest in defining his terms or presenting a sequential argument ("In the emphatic essay thought divests itself of the traditional idea of truth"), it is worth pausing over three claims that can be distinguished in this remarkable fragment.

1) "It avails nothing ascetically to avoid all technical expressions." Serious writing sometimes requires jargon: the sorts of terms that circulate in any highly evolved science. It would be absurd to demand of a physicist like Einstein or Bohr that he write in prose intelligible to the layman. In Adorno's eyes, German philosophy has some claim to the title of science, and it certainly has evolved its own glossary of technical terms. Just because a bunch of American yahoos have never read Kant and Hegel is no reason to abandon an exacting vocabulary.

2) "It avails nothing ascetically to avoid . . . all allusions to spheres of culture that no longer exist." Seriously artful writing sometimes requires a license to range freely, drawing without inhibition on a rich store of cultural references, no matter how esoteric. It would be absurd to demand of a poet like Rilke or T. S. Eliot that he write lines that any old reader can appreciate. Adorno is a highly cultivated individual, a cosmopolitan, a musician of the mind. Just because a bunch of American yahoos have never read Goethe or listened to Alban Berg is no reason to give up referring to works by such artists, both classical and modern. Indeed, anyone aware of what modernism has wrought in the fine arts will feel further emboldened to reject, in a typically

modernist declaration of independence, "conventional surface coherence, the appearance of harmony, the order corroborated merely by replication."

3) "Only what they do not need first to understand, they consider understandable; only the word coined by commerce, and really alienated, touches them as familiar." Under capitalist relations of production, human beings exist in a state of alienation. Much of what they think they know must pass through a process of exchange, in which writers working for large corporations premasticate ideas, arguments, and the events of the day, and then deliver this information in measured portions to a starved and stunted public desperate for distraction and indifferent as to whether it is devouring thin gruel or a real meal. *Pari passu*, under current social conditions, as these are regulated by capitalism and the commodity form, truly unpopular writing willy-nilly becomes a locus of resistance to the powers that be: "He who offers for sale something unique that no-one wants to buy represents, even against his will, freedom from exchange."

Under these circumstances, the ideal of "universal communicability" is a sinister "liberal fiction," one that surreptitiously assumes the desirability of a "complete conformism." When even educated souls have internalized the "detritus" of a "barbarous culture—half-learning, slackness, heavy familiarity, coarseness"—the "desire to be understood by others" can only reinforce the "downward urge of the intellect." "Retention of strangeness is the only antidote to estrangement."

Q.E.D.: the most radical critic of alienation will be the most exquisitely aloof thinker, incomprehensible and unpopular by design, as if enraptured by his unswerving address to an ideal audience of one, a God who may not exist.

IT IS NOT TOO HARD to guess what Orwell would have made of *Minima Moralia* had he been able to read it. The scathing social criticism and the longing for a truly independent movement for social change

Orwell would, of course, have recognized and welcomed. But the style of Adorno's work would have offended all of Orwell's deepest literary instincts.

"Good prose is like a window pane," he once declared. True to this motto, he never stopped looking for the right frame for the right kinds of concrete images and turns of phrase, artfully enough rendered to conjure an illusion of perfect transparency.

That he was staggeringly successful in reaching the largest possible public, in a way that very few twentieth-century writers have been, is indicated by a few simple facts. Paul Berman has summed them up in one long sentence: "The writer who coined 'Hate Week,' 'Thought crime,' 'Thought Police,' 'vaporize,' 'Newspeak,' 'doublespeak,' 'Some are more equal than others,' and 'Big Brother is Watching You' has sold, between *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, more than 40 million books in sixty languages which is, according to John Rodden, 'more than any pair of books by a serious or popular postwar author.'"

Orwell's views on politics and language were deeply shaped by his experience as the son of a British official in the Indian civil service. Christened Eric Arthur Blair, the boy was groomed to follow in his father's imperial footsteps. By the mid-1920s, while Adorno was in Vienna studying music with Berg, Blair was in Burma working for the police. In 1927, the year Adorno began his graduate studies in philosophy, Blair, renouncing his father's colonialism and resigning his police post, began to tramp around France and England, washing dishes in a Paris hotel, harvesting hops in Kent, and observing coal mining in the north of England. While keeping a diary of the injustices he witnessed, Blair discovered his vocation.

He would be a man of letters. He would "make political writing into an art." And he would make the world listen.

Diffident in private, Blair so feared failure in the literary marketplace that he invented a pseudonym for the book he wrote based on his diaries, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Criticism would be directed at George Orwell, not Eric Blair. But since the book, when published in 1933, was a literary success, Eric Blair became George Orwell.

If the key experience behind Adorno's critique of mass society was his miserable exile in Southern California, Orwell's political epiphany could not have been more different. It happened in 1937 in Spain, where Orwell went to fight on the Republican side in the civil war against the fascists and to file reports for *The New Leader*. Enlisted in a Catalan militia organized by POUM (the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification), he was seriously wounded at the front and sent back to Barcelona to recover. There, Orwell was witness to a murderous power struggle between the Spanish Communists and the independent left, which in Catalonia consisted largely of anarchists and Trotskyists (who dominated POUM).

In the course of this struggle, the Communists falsely accused the Trotskyists of plotting with Franco. Determined to expose the lie, Orwell gathered documents and took notes for his great book on the civil war, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). The experience left him with an admiration for the independent left and a hatred of the Communists. A decade later he claimed: "Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it."

Orwell's literary and political convictions only deepened with the passage of time. A political pariah by the time World War II broke out, Orwell tried to join the British army but was declared medically unfit (he seems to have suffered from tuberculosis, the likely cause of his premature death in 1950). Still anxious to lend his talents to the war effort, he took a position at the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1941, producing radio talks for the Indian section of the BBC Eastern Service, submitting himself to government censorship in order to make a contribution to the battle against fascism, writing news scripts, and broadcasting his sophisticated blend of political commentary and Allied propaganda. During the war, he also served as a literary editor and columnist for the *Tribune*, a weekly newspaper with an editorial board headed by Aneurin Bevan, the Labour Party leftist who would become a chief architect of Britain's National Health Service after the war.

As the war went on and Orwell developed a firsthand understanding of the difficulty in conveying facts and political ideals to the



largest possible audience, his views hardened on the question of what Adorno had called "morality and style." For his wartime work, Orwell knew full well that critics would accuse him "of being an intellectual snob who wants to 'talk down to' the masses" or suspect him of "plotting to establish an English Gestapo." But he felt certain that he was on the right path, helping to establish the linguistic preconditions for a deeper democracy. "Some day we may have a genuine democratic government," he wrote in 1944, "a government which will want to tell people what is happening, and what must be done next, and what sacrifices are necessary, and why. It will need the mechanisms for doing so, of which the first are the right words, the right tone of voice."

In 1946, Orwell summed up his views in a short essay titled "Why I Write." In a passage of characteristically disarming bluntness, he listed four major reasons: "sheer egoism," the wish to be noticed; "aesthetic enthusiasm," the pure pleasure in arranging words in finely formed sentences; "historical impulse," the desire to bear witness to events and "to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity"; and "political purpose," the drive to "push the world in a certain direction."

To satisfy these ambitions, Orwell needed readers—the more, the better. "My initial concern is to get a hearing," he wrote. Neither his egoism nor his sense of political purpose could be gratified in any other way. What provoked his greatest works, from *Homage to Catalonia* in 1938 to *Animal Farm* in 1945 and *1984* in 1949, was his sense of moral outrage: at the mendaciousness of the Communists; at the barbarism of the Nazis; at the politically motivated obfuscation produced by the liars in every party. The bigger the audience he could reach, the more lies he could expose, the deeper his political impact would be.

AT THE CORE of Orwell's writing was his obsessive concern for factual truth, which, he could see, was an infinitely fragile thing, forever susceptible to the kinds of lies favored by those in power. Orwell's fixation may seem self-explanatory to anyone raised within the con-

ventions of Anglo-American philosophy. But to a great many Continental philosophers, the empiricist assumption that there exists a pre-theoretical world of facts just waiting to be described seems hopelessly naive. For the past two centuries, almost all of Germany's most eminent philosophers have subscribed to some version of the Kantian view that—in Hannah Arendt's formulation—"truth is neither given to nor disclosed to but produced by the human mind."

The philosophical issues at stake here are too complex to summarize briefly. Suffice it to say that Arendt herself was virtually unique, among German thinkers of her generation, in her refusal to give up the meaning of truth "in the sense in which men commonly understand it"—that is, as factual truth. Indeed, Arendt was, if anything, even more alarmed than Orwell about the fate of this form of truth: "The chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed; it is always in danger of being maneuvered out of the world not only for a time but, potentially, forever."

Orwell, for his part, felt that his obligation to factual truth trumped even his unrelenting preoccupation with the style of his prose—or, for that matter, his loyalty to any particular political cause. In one of the longest chapters in *Homage to Catalonia*, he marshaled his evidence of Communist treachery with the painstaking thoroughness of a prosecutor at the bar of justice, knowing, as he later conceded, that he ran a risk of turning an otherwise lyrical piece of writing into a tedious exercise in topical journalism. "I could not have done otherwise," he explained: "I happened to know, what very few people in England had been allowed to know, that innocent men were being falsely accused. If I had not been angry about that I should never have written the book."

His erstwhile allies on the British left did not share Orwell's anger, arguing that the only hope for a Republican victory was a unified alliance under Communist control. And potential allies elsewhere did not always share Orwell's fierce commitment to the direct statement of factual truths. Indeed, members of the Frankfurt School were horrified by the "fetishization" of facts that they saw in the logical positivism of the Vienna circle, the value-free social science of the



American university, and the "tell it like it is" school of newspaper journalism. The problem was not only that a narrow emphasis on external facts sometimes obscured the mind's role in framing concepts (as Adorno protested, "something merely factual cannot be conceived without a concept, because to think it is always already to conceive it"); it was also that it obstructed the task of social criticism. In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno charged that the effort, so characteristic of Anglo-American investigative reporting, to give readers "the facts full in the face" succumbed to "the form and timbre of the command issued under Fascism by the dumb to the silent." For those who wished to achieve a measure of "comprehensibility to the most stupid" (as Adorno sarcastically put it), the critical theorist—in this respect indistinguishable from a Prussian autocrat—expressed nothing but contempt.

The contrast with Orwell could not be more stark. Whereas Adorno deployed a sophisticated philosophical framework, Orwell stressed brute facts. Whereas Adorno strove for modernist complexity, Orwell aimed at demotic simplicity. And even as Adorno was abjuring any effort to address a large audience of ordinary people, Orwell had bet his political and literary life on doing just that.

MANY INTELLECTUALS on the left today regard both Orwell and Adorno as hopelessly compromised figures, whatever their views on the politics of language and the morality of style.

Orwell's political sins were manifold: he disapproved of birth control, he was a Blimpish sort of British patriot, and (as one Web site put it in a warning against taking "Politics and the English Language" too seriously) he collaborated "with the B.B.C. against fascists in India in World War II, and wrote . . . in part to justify the work his journalism had done—for the Empire." Last year, controversy flared again over the fact that Orwell, shortly before his death, jotted down a list of people he regarded as politically compromised by their sympathy for Stalin and had it conveyed to the Information Research Department of the Foreign Office.

Adorno's case is almost equally vexed. There are some pretty strange lines in *Minima Moralia*—for example, “Totalitarianism and homosexuality belong together.” In recent years, proponents of cultural studies have ridiculed Adorno's uninformed ranting about the evils of jazz and popular music. And then there is the matter of the great man's truly awe-inspiring capacity for contemplative passivity. This is someone (unlike his fellow critical theorist Herbert Marcuse) who steadfastly refused to be drawn into taking concrete positions on matters of pressing political importance. One of his oldest friends from Frankfurt, Leo Lowenthal (who ended up as a professor of sociology at the University of California at Berkeley), has said that Adorno had a simple motto: “Don't participate.”

Orwell's political errors may well comfort academic critics of “left conservatism.” But what about Adorno? For all his sins, can Adorno nonetheless be enlisted in the defense of the contemporary university?

Let us examine the arguments presented in Butler's letter to the *London Review of Books* by taking in turn the three claims that are implicit in Adorno's fragment “Morality and style.”

1) On the matter of “technical expressions,” a sympathetic reader must give Butler the benefit of the doubt. Like Adorno, today's critical theorists have steeped themselves in the vocabulary of German philosophy, from Kant and Hegel to Husserl and Heidegger, augmented by an infusion of terms from more recent French philosophers, especially Foucault. Jargon that is intolerable to a general reader is not only a source of power; it is also a convenient shorthand for conveying the results of inquiry in most academic disciplines, from physics to sociology, and not excepting feminist theory, literary criticism, and cultural studies.

At the same time, an unsympathetic reader is liable to feel put upon, if not bamboozled, by the constant barrage of technical terms found in the work of Butler and other contemporary theorists, such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. Quite often, one cannot help but suspect that this is a deliberate ploy, allowing the writer to accuse any critic of uncomprehending idiocy. Adorno himself once observed that

"the thicket is no sacred grove. There is a duty to clarify all difficulties that result merely from esoteric complacency." Referring to Heidegger's prose, he complained that "he lays around himself the taboo that any understanding would simultaneously be falsification."

2) Adorno's staunch defense of the writer's right to deploy a dense network of cultural references that is liable to be appreciated by a relatively small number of people seems, on the whole, both reasonable and just. Anyone who has labored in the mass media knows that there is relentless pressure to dumb down every word of every sentence. Adorno's defiant display of erudition, by contrast, is a bracing rebuke to the ignorance and sharply diminished attention span of a great many ordinary readers and pundits, not to mention the blinkered narrowness of a great many university professors.

However, few writers, be they poets, scholars, or journalists, possess a mind as well furnished as that of Adorno. Certainly, few contemporary exponents of radical theory, Butler included, share his devotion to European high culture. His allusiveness is so pure, and so rooted in a specifically European sensibility, that it has been successfully emulated by only a handful of Americans—Susan Sontag, in her best essays of the 1960s and early 1970s, comes to mind, as does T. J. Clark, in his recent book, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes From a History of Modernism*.

3) Adorno's last claim—that a style of writing comprehensible to only a few readers stands the best chance of evading the alienation of being turned into a mass-market commodity under conditions of capitalist production—is both the most radical and the hardest to know how to apply in practice. Apart from demonstrable inaccessibility, coupled with a lack of popularity, it is not clear how one is supposed to judge success, or failure, in this paradoxical venture. It is also not entirely clear from her references to Adorno whether Butler fully agrees with his position, at least in its most radical articulation in *Minima Moralia*. On the one hand, she agrees that resistance to capitalism requires the refusal of received opinions cheerfully expressed in

smugly measured periods. On the other hand, she holds out greater hope than Adorno does for the possibility of constructive social activism.

In her letter to the *London Review*, Butler, before quoting *Minima Moralia*, praises Spivak in terms Adorno would recognize—as a brave voice in the cultural wilderness. But in the same letter, she marvels at the sheer size of Spivak's readership and even claims that the "wide-ranging audience for Spivak's work proves that spoon-feeding is less appreciated than forms of activist thinking and writing."

While Butler may hope by endorsing Adorno's position to justify her style of writing, and that of countless other left academics, she cannot have it both ways. Either a key criterion of a truly radical theory is its austere indifference to being widely "appreciated," or it is not. If the criterion of a truly radical theory is its inaccessibility and consequent evasion of the cash nexus (Adorno's basic position in *Minima Moralia*), then a theory advertised as radical that nevertheless reaches a "wide-ranging audience" under conditions of commodity production must, ipso facto, not be truly radical.

Or consider another paradox of Adorno's position: if (in a typically exaggerated formulation) a literary "retention of strangeness is the only antidote to estrangement," then when the language becomes familiar, the antidote must lose its potency. (An overdose, even of critical theory, may prove fatal for the free spirit.)

Does this mean that Adorno's and Butler's most challenging ideas, precisely because of their relative popularity among a not-insignificant number of left-leaning intellectuals, have lost their antithetical use value and, by the infernal logic of exchange, been alienated and perhaps even dialectically transformed—turned into something hackneyed and predictable? If one accepts Adorno's position in *Minima Moralia*, there is no escaping the conclusion.

THREE YEARS AGO, Katha Pollitt summed up the problem with esoteric writing as a radical gesture in a world without real radical alternatives. When intellectuals on the left write in a way that excludes "all



but the initiated few," she remarked, what almost inevitably results is "a pseudo-politics, in which everything is claimed in the name of revolution and democracy and equality and anti-authoritarianism, and nothing is risked, nothing, except maybe a bit of harmless cross-dressing, is even expected to happen outside the classroom."

Adorno himself was characteristically unapologetic about the apolitical consequences of his ultraradical critical theory: "Concrete and positive suggestions for change merely strengthen [the power of the status quo], either as ways of administering the unadministratable, or by calling down repression from the monstrous totality itself."

Orwell, by contrast, had little anxiety about making political suggestions, the more concretely put, the better. "If you simplify your [language]," he wrote in 1946, "you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy"—even the orthodoxies of a purer-than-pure critical theory. "You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself."

Of course, it is dispiriting, particularly for anyone on the left, to be reminded that some things, including this debate, never change. But the next time one of our latter-day critical theorists attacks the desire for plain talk as a Trojan horse for "left conservatism," I suggest a thought experiment. Imagine poor old Adorno rolling over in his grave, still waiting for a messiah who may never come. And then picture Orwell, the "Maggot of the Month," as the Communists used to call him, doubled over in laughter and delighted to discover a brand-new oxymoron being deployed as a rhetorical weapon of perfectly Orwellian proportions.

—December 1999