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Appreciating Difficulty: Resistance and the Ethics of Reading

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I applaud *JAC* for publishing a “special cluster” of essays on the question of difficult theoretical writing. Containing essays by Susan Wells, Teresa Ebert, Daniel Smith, and myself, the cluster raises issues that I hope will
generate additional debate. Collectively, our essays argue for the value of prose that disrupts the normal practice of reading and for the recognition that a certain amount of difficulty (as Wells puts it, writing that is "perhaps just difficult enough") is salutary. What we seek are ways to talk about the inherent intellectual and political importance of reading as a practice. We assume when reading is reduced to an ancillary and utilitarian activity that there is a significant loss. Further, we assume that an important role of, at least, some writing is to challenge readers and to offer them a certain type of work that is an integral part of intellectual and political life. In offering this challenge, difficult writing can claim a proud lineage and trace its operation to a character who was notoriously difficult—Socrates—and like its prominent ancestor, difficult writing can find its purpose in that most irritating of activities: troubling the commonplace.

The four of us focus on different sources of difficulty. Ebert argues for writing whose difficulty arises from its challenge to dominant paradigms. For her, the manifesto is a genre that eschews stylistic complexity for a certain directness of statement—it seeks to confront rather than conciliate. Wells charts a variety of causes for difficult prose and moves from the inevitable limitations of technical vocabulary and preferred forms of argument faced by any disciplinary practice to the difficulties inhering in the metaphoricity and metonymy of language. Smith defends a dialectical tradition of theorizing in which the opaqueness of the prose plays an essential role in the articulation of the philosophy and its attendant pedagogy. And finally, I explore Kenneth Burke’s effort to reclaim reading as meaningful labor within a culture dominated by capitalism and technologically. These different focuses suggest two broad categories for the discussion of difficulty, each producing a different type of resistance and each setting the reader a different task. The resistance provoked by a manifesto—a resistance rooted in a reluctance to have normal practices reconsidered—seems to be of a different order than the resistance arising from a prose style that frustrates a seamless comprehension. But, as I will argue, it is more profitable to explore the different kinds of difficult writing as a consequence of different discursive purposes rather than as dissonance of styles.

For Ebert, the manifesto is a rhetorical form whose intent is to promote change by effecting a radical rewriting of the culturally dominant understandings whose power resides in their being accepted as "common knowledge." The manifesto brings perspective to the forefront and, in particular, exposes the common understanding’s interested pers-
perspective that has been either strategically or inadvertently hidden. By revealing this interested perspective, the manifesto seeks to create the conditions necessary for change by proposing a radical break from a current and prevalent understanding. In effect, the news that it brings can be difficult to hear, for, at the very least, it involves a serious reevaluation of the given.

Its difficulty is that of a beginning. The opening of Thoreau’s *Walden* (to cite a text that Ebert does not discuss) enacts the key moment of a manifesto. Thoreau will become Chanticleer and his writing will emulate the rooster’s cawing and awaken his fellow countrypeople who are not even aware of their being asleep. The rooster image is apt in another way: manifestos are also proclamations—statements that someone is present. *The Communist Manifesto* proclaims the existence of the communists, announces that they now constitute a force to be reckoned with, and then explains why they are such a force. Equally, Thoreau announces his intention to explore the conditions of existence and asserts his authority to do so. The assertion of authority is important, for manifestos are not petitions; rather, they are rhetorical acts in which authority is claimed, and in which existing authority is challenged or denied.

It may be this act of proclaiming authority leads to another feature, which, although not necessarily present in all manifestos, seems to characterize many. Ebert sees the manifesto as a type of rhetoric that is not marked by subtlety, understatement, irony, or other stylistic qualities present in a more refined prose. Because manifestos challenge normal discourse, they offer emphatic distinctions, what Ebert, borrowing from Benjamin’s account of Brecht’s style, calls “coarse thinking.” The coarseness is linked to the task of provocation, for it focuses attention on what is to be done and does not direct attention to the skill or craft involved in creating the text. In this aspect, the manifesto is antithetical to the difficulty that occupies the other three essays. For Ebert, subtlety belongs to a “mode of conservative intellectual consolidation,” and so it is out of place in a manifesto, whose purpose is to make visible the assumptions of current authority and to challenge their legitimacy.

Foucault becomes an interesting figure for Ebert because, as she sees him, he began by issuing manifestos, but when he himself became the new authority, he challenged the value of polemic. Without taking a position on Ebert’s account of Foucault’s shift, I would argue that her disappointment with Foucault points to a tension within the manifesto. If the manifesto’s purpose is to create an opening for new knowledge and new modes of action, then it would seem that there would need to be an
inevitable movement in any viable social or intellectual program beyond the manifesto. If manifestos mark beginnings, then the subsequent effort at putting into place or acting upon the beginning would lead to discourses that would elaborate and critique the opening salvo, which would necessarily be too crude to sustain an organization. Manifestos should lead to elaborations, and the elaborations should, out of an interest to do justice to complexity, lead to subtlety. So elaboration and subtlety would seem to be necessary consequences of successful manifestos. This would be yet one more instance of Burke's "bureaucratization of the imaginative."

Smith's essay would, then, seem to follow naturally in the wake of Ebert's. Smith's analysis of stylistic opaqueness and its relationship to the dialectical tradition from Hegel onward and to the pedagogies that are most coincident with that tradition and its insight into the ongoing drama of identity and difference exemplifies the way in which an insight that destabilizes itself in its own demonstration develops. For Smith, Hegel, Adorno, and Jameson are difficult writers because they are enacting in their writing the dialectic whose truth can only be fully grasped through participation in its self-correction or development. And as Smith argues, this difficulty should lead to a more complex pattern of affect, as the writing and the reading of the writing educate readers into a more elaborated style of response. So like Ebert, Smith understands difficult writing as leading to practical social change, but he locates the social change in which he is interested in a different moment.

I don't think that it is stretching things too much to say that we could argue from Ebert's essay that we should read Smith's essay as a manifesto. Stylistically, Smith's essay does not display some of the key features that Ebert identifies for a manifesto (the most obvious difference is that it values and pursues subtlety over coarseness), but its intent seems coincident with that of the manifesto, as Ebert has set it forth. Smith wants his readers to see that the common complaint about difficult theoretical writing with its confidence in the self-evident value of stylistic qualities such as clarity has blinded readers to the other stylistic values and even necessities. Using Dennis Dutton as representative of those frustrated by the initial unavailability of difficult prose, Smith analyzes Dutton's strategy of ridicule, dismissal, and rewriting as based in an unquestioned acceptance of the naturalness or self-evidence of qualities such as clarity as those most desirable for prose.

Smith's arguments make manifest the reasons for a different set of stylistic values. Starting with Hegel, Smith defends difficult writing by
arguing that a philosophy that pursues its insights dialectically and that believes that its truth cannot be comprehended fully in propositional form is committed to the production of a prose that is continually enacting a process of inquiry that is simultaneously failing and succeeding. The difficulty of the prose arises from the difficult and complex insight that can be grasped only by someone who has participated in the frustrating, necessary, yet impossible pursuit of the attempt by mind or Spirit to know or be equal to truth. Spirit may seek truth, but since Spirit is realized in the acts of individual subjects, all of whom are defined by particular perspectives, it cannot finally grasp that which it seeks. But it can only understand both its failure and necessity of persisting if it continually tries to grasp that which must elude it. Its search for identity (of Spirit) and truth leads it inevitably to the fact of difference.

For Smith, Adorno becomes an exemplary reader of Hegel's difficulties. And if Hegel's intellectual drama is the continual enactment of the search for identity leading to the continual discovery of difference, Adorno's drama is the ever vigilant effort to keep difference from degenerating into a lesser form of identity. For Adorno, difference is tied to alterity, and alterity is the ground for ethical existence: ethical life is the continual effort to be adequate in our response to the other. But if difference is required for alterity, identity is also an inescapable aspect of thought. We can only think by locating both differences and similarities, and to locate a similarity is to discover an identity that things share. So the very activity of thinking becomes a danger to difference, and hence the central and difficult task for Adorno's writing is to prevent the elimination of difference. He needs to make things continually difficult.

Smith reads Fredric Jameson as someone writing in response to Adorno's insight but who nonetheless seeks to develop the possibilities of action in the world of late capitalism. Smith argues that the difficulty of Jameson's writing is intentional and justified, for the resistance that his writing provokes leads to important affective consequences. The frustration engendered by Jameson's complex syntax and abstract vocabulary has the effect of making his readers aware of the acts of reading and writing, and they are forced to deal with the resistance of Jameson's writing to their efforts at understanding. This, in turn, creates a reading experience in which response or affect becomes foregrounded. Ultimately, such readers develop a more conscious awareness of their response and a deeper understanding of the way that the reader's affect is a consequence of a complex set of expectations that are rooted, usually
unconsciously, in a set of cultural givens. Difficult writing thus becomes a key axis in an evolving cultural consciousness.

I must confess that Jameson does not work quite this way for me, and I will leave it open as to whether I need to develop a fuller appreciation for his difficulty or whether he needs to attend to his difficulty in a more reflective way. I make this point because difficulty may arise from a variety of sources, and one of the key questions is whether a particular instance of difficulty is justified. The answer to that question cuts two ways. It is simultaneously an investigation of the adequacy of the writer and of the reader. So, a concern with difficulty becomes a point from which to begin an inquiry into the ethics of writing and reading. And it is always fair to ask what the writer owes the reader and what the reader owes the writer, and then to ask how successful have reader and writer been at meeting their obligations.

Wells’ essay suggests why this will always be an abiding question. In the opening section of her essay she makes the important point that discussions of the experience of difficulty will themselves always be difficult because that “experience is hedged about with daunting barriers of shame and privilege.” To discuss difficulty seriously is to engage in risky and scary business, and we often couch our discussions in ways that will allow us to protect fragile professional and personal identities and to shield ourselves from those who would aggressively use difficulty to establish superiority. To talk frankly about difficulty is to reveal oneself, and it is to find oneself in a Socratic place. And all we have to do is to read the dialogues to see how often shame truncates and closes a potentially important conversation.

This conversation is the one that Wells wishes to open. Moving from writing whose difficulty is to be reasonably anticipated or justified, Wells addresses writing whose difficulty is more problematic. She makes a solid case that Habermas’ difficult prose cannot simply be dismissed as an unfortunate instance of abstraction and an unnecessarily elaborate overstatement. In her reading, Habermas’ prose, in “its deliberately unfashionable philosophical lexicon,” is intended to challenge assumptions that have become prominent as a result of two decades of deconstructive criticism and theory. She makes a more qualified case for the difficulty of Henry Giroux’s abstract prose. While acknowledging the force of the argument that novel insights can create difficulties, she balances this argument with the recognition that writers such as Engels and Ira Shor deal with the same material as Marx and Giroux yet manage to write a prose that is far less difficult.
So the question of whether certain prose, even prose dealing with new ideas or approaches, need be as difficult as it is turns out to be is an empirical question. But there is a final type of difficulty that is rooted in the nature of language itself. Working from Lacan's insight into the inherent figurativeness of language, Wells explores his argument that metaphor and metonomy are inescapable aspects of language. She is particularly interested in those instances in which the operative metaphor has become so embedded in the discourse that its direction of or contribution to an argument is not immediately apparent. Aside from the obvious difficulty that some readers may not detect the presence of the metaphor that is directing the prose, there arises a second difficulty. Since the metaphor connects two signifiers, it sets in motion lines of signification that can take on a life of their own, establishing and challenging the identity and difference that is a consequence of any particular line of signification. Metonomy, Lacan's basic figure, equally creates an inherent difficulty, for it is through metonomy's use of contiguity and association that language develops, and this developing language is the partial source for the ways in which we understand our experience and for the ways in which we constitute ourselves as subjects. The alignment of language and that which is other than language but gets formulated in language as experience, subject, and desire is not fixed but is in motion. At the very least, this makes the relation of writing to world a complex affair. Obviously, Wells is not arguing for the value of metaphor or metonomy but for the recognition of their inescapable role in language and for their being a non-intentional source of difficulty. This argument leads to the central intentions of her essay, which are to point out the inevitability and naturalness of difficulty and to get us to reevaluate difficulty and to appreciate its important role in writing.

I think that Kenneth Burke would agree with Wells that we need to appreciate the role of difficulty in writing. While Burke would agree fully with Lacan's view of language as inherently figurative, his concern in Attitudes Toward History is less with language as a synchronic system and more with the stance that readers need to assume toward history if they are to use creatively their intellectual inheritance. For Burke, the problem is a too easy assimilation of the ideas of others, and he argues that if readers are to appropriate their intellectual inheritance, they need to make it into a problem—they need to create a difficulty.

I read Burke's prose as writing whose style is informed by this insight. His non-utilitarian and disruptive style prevents, as well as a style can, its readers from simply taking over ideas and instead requires readers to
work to understand what Burke is saying. The lack of surface clarity and cohesion makes reading Burke into work that is difficult. But it is the difficulty of this work that allows the reader to recover the value and pleasure of intellectual labor. My argument for the value of Burke's style, thus, is similar to Smith's argument for the value of difficulty in the writing of Hegel, Adorno, and Jameson. This similarity should not be surprising since Burke is also a writer committed to dialectic. And like Adorno and Jameson, Burke is very much aware of the cultural, intellectual, and political challenges posed by capitalism, and his wry codicil in which he defines us as a species "rotten with perfection" could stand as a cautionary motto for any negative dialectics.

I am heartened by the appearance of four essays on difficulty. For all of their differences, the essays share a recognition that difficulty is important because it creates conditions necessary for new beginnings. Whatever the difficult does, it prevents the unchecked flow of the normal and expected. It demands that we take some stance on the writing that resists us. We may decide that it is bad, that the return promised is not worth the effort required, but we also must realize that we are also revealing an aspect of ourselves. Is it the writing or the reader who stands in need of justification? It would be silly to praise difficulty uncritically, and none of the essays do. Instead, all ask that difficulty be reconsidered so that we can open ourselves to those texts that demand that we put ourselves at some risk. To take difficult writing seriously is one way into an active engagement with the ethical issues that make writing and reading intellectually and politically important practices.

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Works Cited


