

April 27, 2007

The case of the Bad Writing Contest: Literary theory as commodity and literary theorists as brands

Eli Thorkelson

Paper presented at Michicagoan, May 2007. Please do not cite, circulate, or reproduce without author's permission. Contact eli@uchicago.edu.

The Bad Writing Contest

One of the more interesting recent public academic controversies centered around the Bad Writing Contest, which was held in the late 1990s by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*, in order to ridicule the worst samples of academic prose. The first-prize "winners" were all famous within the theoretical humanities: Fredric Jameson in 1995 and 1997, Roy Bhaskar in 1996, and Judith Butler in 1998. According to the contest's editor, Denis Dutton, the contest "celebrates the most stylistically lamentable passages found in scholarly books and articles published in the last few years... 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" (Dutton 1998). Subsequently, a remarkable public debate ensued, at first on a small scale in the *Times Literary Supplement* and *Salon*, and then, in 1999 after the prize was given to Butler, across magazines, journals, the internet, and eventually the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and other newspapers domestic and foreign.

I'm going to argue that this affair is a good case for examining the workings of a particularly academic system of textual exchange. I'll draw attention, also, to one of the constitutive ideologies of this system, the ideology of "authorship" or what I will call textual branding. But first, just to give a better sense of what was going on, let me recite Judith Butler's prize-winning sentence:

"The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the

thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power" (Butler 1997:13, quoted in Dutton 1998).

Dutton claimed that "To ask what this means is to miss the point. This sentence beats readers into submission and instructs them that they are in the presence of a great and deep mind. Actual communication has nothing to do with it" (1999). But Dutton's views met with much opposition; for instance, the well-known literary theorist Jonathan Culler said that "it seemed to me a matter of bad faith to take a single sentence out of context and charge it with obfuscation" (2003:43).

We see here (a) on Butler's part, the highly specialized communicative practice of post-structuralists; (b) on Dutton's part, the claim that Butler's sentence is senseless; (c) on Culler's part, the intriguing ideology that recontextualization is immoral. What we get a hint of here, I'd say, is a real social struggle staged in the arena of prose style. In part, this was a clash between different communities of academic discourse. But it also turns out that there was a dramatic status differential between the winning authors and their nominators. I compared the academic positions of the contest's participants, and in 15 or 16 of 18 awards given, the winning author was obviously superior in institutional rank and affiliation to the nominator. At the extremes, the first-prize winners were in all cases "academostars," while two of the nominators were graduate students. Thus, in part, the contest was a ritual of inversion (wherein the powerless represent themselves as powerful) making visible the ongoing conflicts over academic life.

Theorists as brands

What I want to examine more closely is not Butler's prose per se but the entanglement of Butler with her texts. I'm going to argue that this has everything to do with her status as a preeminent theoretical brand. But the first question is: what is a brand? Provisionally, I'll define a brand as a

commercial marker defined by a definite structure of semiotic and social relations. These semiotic and social relations are enabled by a pervasive and implicit cultural logic of recognition, upon which any given brand depends: a brand is a recognizable sign that unites particular commodities as members of a set, by making the commodities, in turn, recognizable as branded. In itself, a brand is merely a unique name or image; its functions derive from two semiotic relations, a relation of connotation and a relation of classification. On one hand, a brand is defined through its relation to an imagined, immaterial "brand personality," to affiliated signs and images, to a cluster of somewhat ephemeral connotations and semantic associations. On the other hand, a brand is also defined through its designated products, which it classifies as a set. For instance: the Apple Computer brand designates a set of products like the iMac, iPod, and iBook, but it also connotes a hip, aestheticized, high-tech consumerism.

I would further point out that brands mediate our social and object relations by imposing two essential relations of *ownership*. In short, ownership of a commodity-token is separate from ownership of the commodity-type, and broadly speaking, consumers' ownership of branded commodity tokens entails recognition of the brand as owner of the commodity-type in general. What I have in mind is the general idea that a consumer can own, say, a *particular* can of Coke without owning Coke *as such*. To own a can of Coke is to own something that remains, in a sense, Coca-Cola's. William Mazzarella terms this "keeping-while-giving the brand": something of the brand remains in the commodity purchased by the consumer, reinforcing and circulating the corporate identity at the same time (2003:192-195).

Now, given this very schematic account of brands, I'd like to examine one of the texts that came out of the Bad Writing controversy: the book *Just Being Difficult*, a collection of essays edited by Culler and his graduate student Kevin Lamb, which appeared in 2003. We can see here

the workings of what I would call academic brands in two respects. First, I think we can correctly say it is a branded book, given the definition above. Jonathan Culler's name, which is stamped on the front cover and the spine, serves to classify and identify the book. Culler's name is a commercial marker insofar as it catalyzes, not mass-market commerce, but the specifically academic commerce in texts. And finally, in terms of mediating social relations, I would agree with Dominic Boyer (2003; cf. Williams 2001) that our relations to our colleagues and to our own work are indeed largely defined by names — that is, by academic brands. "She's a Derridean," "he's critiquing Marx," "I'm working in the tradition of Bourdieu." This kind of branding discourse is endemic.

When do academics' names become brands? I would argue that there is a process of semiotic detachment: professional texts take on lives of their own, names circulate out of sight of their authors, and in short, one's name is detached from oneself and made into a unique, autonomous brand of scholarly identity. As scholars, we frequently read texts whose authors we have never met; with such authors, we do not have full social relationships, but only imagined relationships with their disembodied names, with the personalities we speculatively attribute to them on the basis of hearsay or guesswork. When we mediate our knowledge of texts through our experience of these free-floating, decontextualized scholarly names, then, I would argue, we are living in a branded scholarly world.

In this regard, *Just Being Difficult* should be seen, not just as a text legitimated by pre-established brands, but as a work of scholarly brands in the making. The book can be seen as an effort to defend the names of the "bad writers," and of their collective theoretical enterprise. In a social world where critique is a stain on one's ideas and transitively on one's professional name, where the only official remedy for such a stain is a learned rebuttal of the critique, a book like

Just Being Difficult is a strategic maneuver. Judith Butler was perhaps the most prominent winner of the Bad Writing Contest; in *Just Being Difficult*, we see a risk to a famous brand being mitigated, a reputation formally restored, a critique or two refuted; among other things, the book is a collective labor of brand management.

Scholars' strategies of brand management are quite different from the contemporary corporate variety (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2004), although the history of commercial and philosophical markings might be more closely connected than we would like to think (cf. Johns 1998). One point of commonality is that branding seems to appear in *impersonal* exchange systems, ones where producers aren't personally known to consumers. But cultures of branding are themselves products of underlying regimes of exchange, and I now want to turn to the structure of the textual exchange system that underlies the Bad Writing Contest.

Systems of Textual Exchange

I want to confess, first of all, that I won't be giving a comprehensive empirical analysis of the processes of circulation in question. What I want to try here, instead, is a quasi-structuralist attempt to analyze the logical system underlying the case at hand. Inspired by Marx's analysis of commodity exchange in *Capital* (1977:ch. 3), I want to try to analyze the *structures of textual metamorphosis* underlying the Bad Writing Contest.

According to Marx, commodity exchange involves "The conversion of things into persons and the conversion of persons into things" (1977:209). A more apt formula for scholarly social life could scarcely be found. Texts are always talked about as if they were their authors, as if the voice of the text were the voice of the author; and on the other hand, persons are always transforming themselves into texts and reifying their thoughts. [In fact, scholarly exchange puts in practice antitheses not just between objectification and personification, but also between

private and social labor, individualization and collectivization, making and consuming, writing and reading. For instance: *Just Being Difficult* embodies the transformation of the concrete, living Jonathan Culler into a text, but once he is textualized, his text will be systematically mistaken for his person, and the voice of the text will be mistaken for his own voice. And the text also transforms his private labor of writing into a representation on behalf of his academic collectivity, but one which is nonetheless expressed by Culler the concrete individual.]

Formally speaking, three apparently distinct forms of exchange characterize the scholarly realm: traffic in persons, traffic in texts between persons, and traffic directly with texts. However, if we consider that texts and persons are, according to certain procedures, exchangeable with each other, we can reduce these three kinds of exchange to one general form, which we could express in a little Marx-ish diagram:

$$\text{Text}_1\text{-Person-Text}_2$$

$$T_1\text{-P-T}_2$$

Let me explore some of this diagram's structural implications. (1.) One forms an academic person out of texts; one does not count as an academic without absorbing, without *reading*, texts. This point is codified in *Just Being Difficult*, when Culler writes of Denis Dutton that his interpretation of Butler's article is "complete rubbish" and asks, "I wonder *who* has failed to do serious intellectual work—such as read Butler's three-page article" (2003:45). In effect, Culler says that, by failing to read, Dutton fails to be a bona fide academic. (2.) Furthermore, one cannot produce a text, that is, *write*, or crystallize one's knowledge in textual form, without first having read other texts, becoming an authentic academic person, and citing the texts one has read. This structural necessity, too, finds expression in *Just Being Difficult*, when Butler writes that "to pass through what is difficult and unfamiliar is an essential part of critical thinking

within the academy today" (2003:199). (3.) As shown in the diagram, *the texts are prior to the person*: the world of academic texts exists prior to any individual's entrance into academia, for one cannot reinvent the world from scratch.¹ (4.) Furthermore, one cannot successfully participate in scholarly exchange by reading alone. To complete the exchange, one must write as well. The common slogan is "publish or perish" – but what would "perish" is one's social body, one's professional, scholarly body. (5.) Finally, insofar as texts are internalized and consumed through reading, and persons produced and externalized through writing, we could construe reading and writing, not only as cognitive activities, but also as interdependent forms of *collective labor*.

The diagram (T₁-P-T₂) that I have been examining can be manipulated in revealing ways. Inverted, we obtain Person₁-Text-Person₂ or P₁-T-P₂, which suggests that social relations *between* academics are mediated by texts. Or one can write diagrams analogous to the general formula for capital: Person-Text-Person' or P-T-P' indicates that one gains something by reading, one improves one's academic person and academic capital by learning, by appropriating texts. This suggests, too, the unsettling insight that academics' relations *with themselves* are mediated by the texts they read. Finally, the inverse formula, Text-Person-Text' or T-P-T', shows that texts are altered as they are exchanged. (Note, incidentally, that by "text" I have in mind the literary theorist's indigenous notion of text, not necessarily the linguist's technical definition.)

But, you might ask, what forms of value underlie these textual exchanges? I would argue, very briefly, that there *is* no universal value-form in these academic systems. Nonetheless, at a highly abstract level, we might be able to think of textual exchange as the exchange of time for knowledge. As we know, time is close to being the coin of the human sciences; Bourdieu has

¹ Admittedly, the strategic conceit of a radical reinvention of the scholarly world, of a radical break with the past, is common and powerful.

argued, for instance, that academic power is "perhaps above all the art of manipulating other people's time" (1988:88). And we might construe knowledge as an abstraction standing in for all the various epistemic forms whose vehicle is the scholarly text. Thus we might say that one gets another scholar's knowledge in exchange for contributing some of one's own time and attention to their scholarly project; whereas in writing, one shares one's own knowledge in exchange for the collective time and attention of others. But I cannot develop this here.

Conclusion

What, at any rate, can this structural account tell us about the Bad Writing Contest? We might take another look at it, with the premise that the texts are crystallized forms of this system of relations and exchanges. I interviewed one of the contributors to *Just Being Difficult* and discovered that a number of other titles had previously been considered, including "Worth the Agony?", "The Importance of Being Judith," and "Judy the Obscure." We might conclude, then, that textual crystallization distorts social relations as much as it reveals them, and that there can be considerable argument over the ways in which scholars are entextualized and scholarly texts are personalized. But I have to leave the ethnographic project of relating textual practice to the underlying exchange system for another time.

Works Cited

- Bourdieu, Pierre
 1988 *Homo Academicus*. P. Collier, transl. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Boyer, Dominic
 2003 The Medium of Foucault in Anthropology. *Minnesota Review* 58:265-272.
- Butler, Judith
 1997 Further Reflections on Conversations of Our Time. *Diacritics* 27(1):13-15.
 2003 Values of Difficulty. *In* *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*. J. Culler and K. Lamb, eds. Pp. 199-215. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Chevalier, Michel, and Gérald Mazzalovo
 2004 *Pro Logo: Brands as a factor of progress*. J. LaCour, transl. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Culler, Jonathan
 2003 Bad Writing and Good Philosophy. *In* *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*. J. Culler and K. Lamb, eds. Pp. 43-57. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Culler, Jonathan, and Kevin Lamb
 2003 *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*. *In* *Cultural Memory in the Present*. M. Bal and H. d. Vries, eds. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Dutton, Denis
 1998 The Bad Writing Contest Press Release, 1998. Vol. 2007.
 1999 Language Crimes: A Lesson in How Not to Write, Courtesy of the Professoriate. *Wall Street Journal*, February 5.
- Foucault, Michel
 1977 [1970] What is an Author? *In* *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Johns, Adrian
 1998 *The nature of the book: print and knowledge in the making*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
- Marx, Karl
 1973 *Grundrisse*. M. Nicolaus, transl. New York: Penguin Books.
 1977 *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. B. Fowkes, transl. New York: Vintage Books.
- Mazzarella, William
 2003 *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Williams, Jeffrey J.
 2001 Name Recognition. *Minnesota Review* 52:185-208.