

critics should avoid such prose at all costs. The denser the prose, the harder readers must work at understanding it and thus the less likely they are to be unconsciously converted to any particular ideology. Stubbing readers' toes on the ideologies imbedded in dense prose struck me as a specious defense of bad writing when Jameson first proposed it, and Morton doesn't make it sound any better.

As any editor knows, the burden of clarity is on the writer, not the reader. But Morton derides Hunter as a poor reader, an unsophisticated reader, and—worst of all—an “anxious” reader. Anxiety in this context summons to mind not Harold Bloom so much as D. A. Miller—in particular, Miller's discussion in *The Novel and the Police* of those (unconsciously) erotic texts of nineteenth-century England that made their (male) readers so anxious. Those readers felt both guilty and titillated, aroused and repressed, homophobic and homosexual. They thought they were reading one thing, but they were really responding to something else: a subtext. Is Morton's subtext an indictment of Hunter as a homophobe and therefore as a potential homosexual (as homophobes so often are beneath the strai(gh)t laces, according to queer theorists of Morton's ilk)?

I think the answer to this question must be yes, given the intriguing twist in Morton's response to Hunter's letter. Morton suddenly shifts from the initial site of contestation—his murky prose—to an entirely different locus: sexual harassment. He suddenly introduces into the discussion the case of a Syracuse professor accused of sexual harassment last spring. Some observers defended the professor on the grounds that his accuser had “poor writing skills” (and therefore “deserved” the harassment). Clearly, this is a ridiculous defense in that situation. However, Morton's mention of poor writing skills recalls Hunter's initial complaint about Morton, but with an added reference. By linking an accusation of poor writing skills to sexual harassment, Morton casts Hunter's objection in a different light. Morton seems to be saying that it isn't really his prose that is under attack but his cyberqueer theories. Thus, concludes Morton, he is not simply being chastised as a poor writer; he is being sexually harassed.

This reasoning reminds me why intellectuals have grown fearful of criticizing the work of those who identify themselves as members of politically marginalized groups. As Morton proves, even a criticism leveled at a seemingly unrelated topic—grammar, syntax, style—can be twisted into a criticism of sexual preference.

But still, no matter how he (b)utters it, I can't swallow Donald Morton's defense of obscure prose. I can only hope that *PMLA* will pay more attention to the “concise and readable” snippet of its editorial statement in the fu-

ture and solicit works that manage to display both original, intelligent thought and clear, sparkling prose.

SUSAN BALEE  
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To the Editor:

Reading the Donald Morton–William Hunter exchange, I felt as if I were on the merry-go-round of “repressive tolerance.” I'm referring to Marcuse's notion that the institutions that maintain the status quo are tolerant, even glad, of “radical activities” that don't impede the smooth functioning of the state's bureaucracy. For those who missed the exchange, Morton and Hunter traded quips on what was putatively an issue of professional cant and of praxis-oriented criticism. Morton had minted a heady essay on queer politics and electronic media, and Hunter refused to grapple with the essay because he felt that the first sentence, dense, prolix, and multiply nuanced as it was, excluded him. Morton's stinging reply (“It's politics, stupid”) to Hunter's equally acerbic dismissal (“It's nonsense, stupid”) gives the impression that something important has transpired, namely, a contentious issue. The academy, as everyone knows, has identified contention, problematics, and failure (e.g., subjects' failure to resist or the dominant discourses' failure to impress) as the only signs of intellectual rigor and political vitality (see Marshall Brown, *Forum*, 111 [1996]: 134), but too often I think academics surmise that anytime they dispute an interpretation, deconstruct a metaphor, or unmask an ideology, they have done something radical and not simply enabling. Too often, I believe, their motives are masked by a zeal that could be put to better use. I sense both bad faith and bad habits at work behind many academic projects and careers.

For instance, if Hunter is really perturbed only by Morton's style and not by Morton's subject (position), why doesn't Hunter suggest a keener way of presenting the one sentence he did read?

Morton, like any good avant-gardist, claims that his arguments cannot be otherwise than how they are. He suggests (illogically) that if he were to address his topic in the “oppressor's language,” I suppose with the oppressor's fealty to stylistic clarity and public effectiveness, he would leave the dominant ideologies intact, regardless of how scathing his critique. But isn't this just a lot of posturing? Would Morton so blithely recommend that Hunter go read up to understand the oracle if Hunter were an undergraduate student? What if the undergraduate student were from a blue-collar home and had a profound

(and warranted) distrust of professional cant? Who would be the oppressor then?

Bad faith is one issue, I suppose, and institutional practice another. In (dis)respect to the second, I ask a practical (rather than “commonsensical”) question: How is intervention possible when most people (and I mean ninety-eight percent) can’t fathom, or are seldom treated to, academics’ brilliant insights? Isn’t the state quite content to have critics berate each other and compound nuance on nuance until there is naught left to nuance? But let’s leave undergraduates out of the question (since tenure committees do). Why do intellectuals spend so much energy, time, and money writing books for their coterie, fine-tuning interpretations that won’t intervene in any conversation except one already sensitive to and (paradoxically) respectful of radicalism?

Since I’m on a roll, I might as well ask another question: Why doesn’t the MLA fund truly activist groups, Web sites, fanzines, literacy programs, film production companies and truly interventionist groups like Amnesty International? Why don’t MLA members pressure academic presses to donate a portion of textbook profits to fund radical independent films, literacy videos, lobby groups? I suppose the issue I bring up is pretty banal. I can hear the sagacious response from career MLA members: “Yes, neophyte: eloquent, impassioned, sophisticated reworkings [read, “interpretations”] of cultural texts do not help change the world, but a critic’s job is only to criticize and illumine. Remember: I criticize; therefore I am. That is all ye need to know.”

CHIDSEY DICKSON  
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### Reply:

Like all conservative pedagogues and their allies in the culture industry (the *New Criterion*, *Heterodoxy*, *Salmagundi*, *Firing Line*, and so on), Susan Balée and Chidsey Dickson are devoted to the theory of the writer as entrepreneur. For Balée, the writer—like any entrepreneur—must place sellable goods on the market: according to her, the writer’s particular commodity is “clarity.” A text without “clarity” is simply not a good commodity, because it is not readily “consumable.” This theory has an ideological investment in the status quo: it posits the reader as a passive consumer of texts. The reader consumes “clarity” without having any productive role in constituting the meaning of a text. I leave aside Balée’s naïveté in regarding “clarity” as a “natural” given and not a historicopolitical construct, a systematic effect

of class politics. By appealing to the authority of such archconservative academic power brokers as Arac and Howard, who have taught Balée something she thinks is “theory,” Balée posits herself as a passive consumer of their pedagogy and thus misses the point of my text. My point is the systematic role of language as a structure of historically conditioned and changing meaning in cultural politics. But like all conservatives, Balée regards any claim for the active structuring role of language (not the “skills” and “style” of the individual author) as a form of political correctness.

One would have thought that a person with even a surface acquaintance with theory would already be thoroughly familiar with the power-knowledge-discourse nexus and therefore that my proposal that there is indeed a connection between representational conservatism (the authoritarian assumption that there are transhistorical standards of “good writing”) and political conservatism (automatic resistance to charges of sexual harassment, homophobia, etc.) would be plain to such a person. Instead of responding with counterarguments to my main point (the relation of ideology to language), Balée simply dismisses it as “specious” and then excuses herself from rigorous argument by opportunistically substituting for historical and political issues an experiential and dehistoricized notion of homophobia. This rhetorical substitution trivializes homophobia (by not giving an argument for how it comes about) and allows her to use homophobia (as most conservative pedagogues with no philosophical arguments do) to prevent any sustained understanding of the material and political conditions that enable an effective intervention into the forces that cause homophobia. In other words, her interest in bringing up homophobia is not to find ways of putting an end to it but to deploy it rhetorically to cover up her empty tactics: instead of argument, she offers merely “experience” (what “any editor knows”). What seems to bother Balée is my argument that there are systematic ideological connections between forms of oppression (class, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) and such issues as sexual harassment and defenses of “good writing,” an argument that would indeed implicate her. Ultimately, in fixating on my sexual orientation as the decisive issue for merely rhetorical reasons and in lumping me indiscriminately with those queer theorists whom I have vigorously critiqued, Balée only demonstrates the point she fears I am making: that for commonsensical *PMLA* readers like herself, all queers are finally alike.

To Balée’s “Newtish” discourses, Dickson’s appear at first to provide a contrast. In Dickson’s letter, which opens under the sign of the “leftish” authority of the Frankfurt school, the reader is given a seemingly more