

Wittgenstein's Curse

by Jay Tolson

It's easy to go on about how bad most academic writing is these days, and how it became so during the past 30 or 40 years. Curmudgeonly journalists have been pouncing on prof-prose at least since the days of H. L. Mencken. But now high sport is made of the subject even within the academy. One academic journal awards annual prizes in a Bad Writing Contest, causing pain and sometimes anger among the unwitting winners. Scholars agonize about the problem, too. Russell Jacoby, for one, links it to the disappearance of the great public intellectuals who once enriched the larger culture. And it seems clear that the decline of scholarly writing has widened the eternal divide between the world of scholars and the public realm, to the impoverishment of both. Just as bad, the pursuit of truth and knowledge—an activity that should be charged with passion and engagement—now appears to the larger public to be an exercise in nonsensical irrelevance.

Perhaps nothing brought the whole sorry matter to a more dramatic head than the parodic gibberish-and-jargon-filled article that New York University physicist Alan Sokal tricked the scholarly journal *Social Text* into publishing in 1996. Titled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” the essay argued that scientific knowledge was socially constructed, an argument very much in line with the journal's postmodernist agenda. What the editors failed to see, though, is that the piece was packed with illogic, non sequiturs, and nonsense, including an unargued rejection of the “dogma” that asserts the existence of “an external world, whose properties are independent of any human being and indeed of humanity as a whole.”

On the day the article was published, Sokal let the world know that it had been a hoax, and an uproar ensued. Many of the more interesting contributions to that controversy were published last year in a book, *The Sokal Hoax*—and not all of them were critical of the journal's editors. In fact, literary scholar Stanley Fish made a plausible defense of the argument that Sokal had parodied: “What sociologists of science say,” Fish wrote, “is that of course the world is real and independent of our observations but that accounts of the world are produced by observers and are therefore relative to their capacities, education, training, etc. It is not the world or its properties but the vocabularies in whose terms we know them that are socially constructed—fashioned by human beings—which is why our understanding of those properties is continually changing.”

That is true and sensible and clearly put. Unfortunately, it's not a distinction the editors of the journal seemed to grasp, because what Sokal



Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, in a 1943 photograph set amid one of his manuscripts.

said in his trickster voice was precisely that there was no external world independent of human constructions of it. And the trickster didn't even make an argument for his outlandish claim. He simply tossed around the jargon, let it fall where it might, and concluded—voilà—that there is nothing out there unless we construct it into being.

Maybe Fish failed to get the point for the same reason the editors didn't see it: because the writing was as impenetrably bad as most prose published in *Social Text*, and indeed as bad as so much current academic writing. The not-so-secret little secret, it turns out, is that no one really reads this stuff anyway, not even folks who produce reams of it for countless scholarly publications. And in truth, the stuff is not meant to be read. It's a form of professional feather display, the ritual gesturing by which scholars establish standing with others in their particular niche, or subniche, of the scholarly trade. Display the jargon—feminist, neo-Marxist, post-colonialist, deconstructionist, whatever—and you're in, you're one of us, we want you on our tenure track.

If this seems to be a partisan slam against only the more progressive, left-leaning, and postmodern members of the academic community, let me second a point made by Patricia Nelson Limerick in the *New York Times Book Review* (Oct. 31, 1993): The more conservative traditionalists within the academy can often be just as bad as the Sado-Marxists and the Martian-Leninists (or maybe almost as bad). Limerick quotes a passage from that best-selling tract *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), by the late Allan Bloom, a University of Chicago scholar who trained, and was subsequently revered by, a cadre of neoconservative

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thinkers now gone forth into the world to pursue an assortment of academic and nonacademic occupations:

If openness means to “go with the flow,” it is necessarily an accommodation to the present. That present is so closed to doubt about so many things impeding the progress of its principles that unqualified openness to it would mean forgetting the despised alternatives to it, knowledge of which would only make us aware of what is doubtful in it.

Got that? And does it not read like something only barely translated from German, or a directive from the Department of Housing and Urban Development? Postmodernish, far-leftish types may commit more, and more grievous, sins against the ideal of clear prose, but they are not alone in their sins.

Why have so many been undone by willful obscurantism and given themselves over to cant and nonsense? So many reasons, so little time to state them all. In fact, many have already been stated, and many times over. But let me mention a couple that might not have received quite as much attention as they deserve, before coming to what I think is a fundamental cause.

First of all, academic writing has never been all that much fun to read. Mencken, as I mentioned earlier, went to town on the foibles of academese, focusing with particular viciousness on sociologist Thorstein Veblen’s tortured, jargon-flecked prose. But does that mean that Veblen’s theories about the leisure class and conspicuous consumption were unimportant? Not at all. Writing about difficult matters can be difficult—and often requires neologisms and complicated, subtle analysis. We have a hard time following the explanations of auto mechanics. Why should the explanations of a philosopher or sociologist be easier to follow? Clarity of expression should be a handmaiden of intellectual brilliance, but Veblen and many others demonstrate that often it is not.

That said, the rife obscurantism in scholarly publications today comports itself in a self-congratulatory, almost arrogant manner. Its promulgators argue that the difficulty is essential to the gravity of their ideas or to an intellectual or political stance, and that clarity, in any case, is just some elitist, dead-white-male convention. In “Troubling Clarity: The Politics of Accessible Language,” published by the *Harvard Educational Review* (Fall 1996), Patti Lather justifies the liberating complexity of her own feminist writings:

Sometimes we need a density that fits the thoughts being expressed. In such places, clear and precise plain prose would be a sort of cheat tied to the anti-intellectualism rife in U.S. society that deskills readers. . . . Positioning language as productive of new spaces, practices, and values, what might come of encour-

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aging a plurality of discourses and forms and levels of writing in a way that refuses the binary between so-called “plain speaking” and complex writing? . . . What is the violence of clarity, its non-innocence?

Claiming that her book about women with HIV/AIDS, *Troubling Angels*, was aimed at a popular audience, and even intended to be what she calls a “Kmart book,” Lather boasts at the same time that she refused to produce a “tidy book” or a “comfort text,” with the kind of writing “that maps easily into our ways of making sense and ‘giving sense.’” I have yet to encounter *Troubling Angels* on any of my visits to Kmart. I wonder whether any other Kmart shoppers have come across it.

Lather, like so many who proudly assert their obscurity, does not have the justification of a Veblen or a Hegel. There is no brilliance or insight or originality in her work. There is only a thicket of nonsense, faddishness, and claptrap. But Lather wears her opacity proudly, like a badge, and no doubt enjoys tenure at Ohio State University because of it. And she is no rarity, no exception. Her kind are everywhere—troubling texts, troubling clarity, troubling the hegemonic hold on beauty and truth—and the sheer quantity of the drivel they produce is another big part of the problem.

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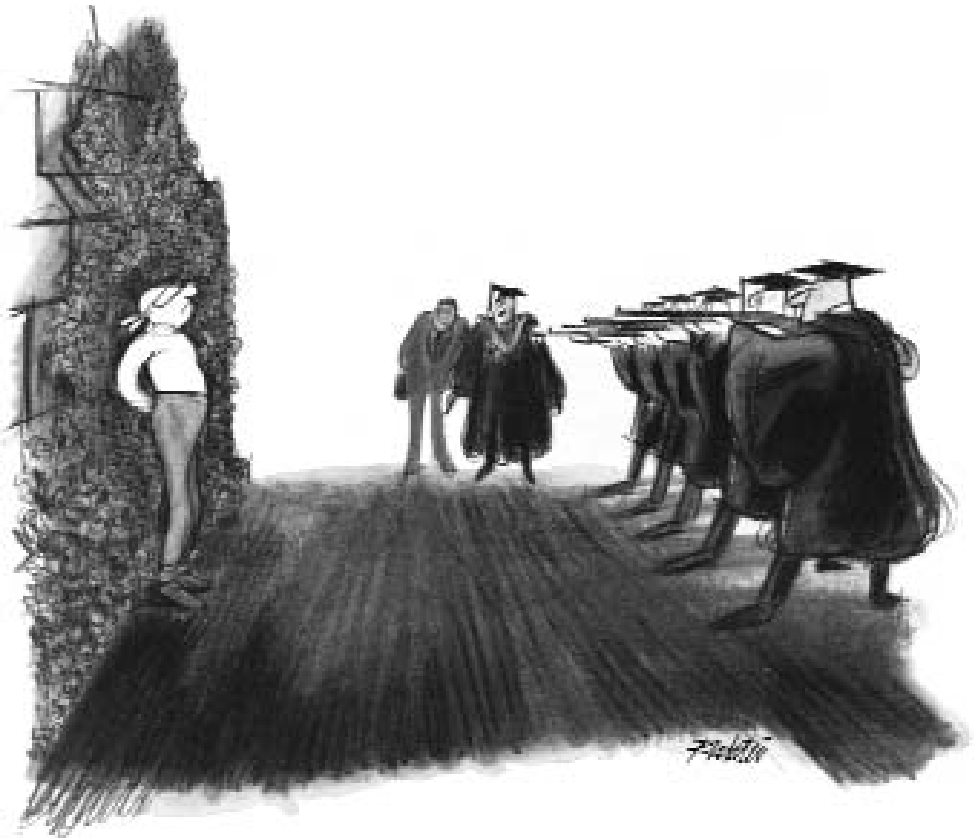
The endless production is a matter of necessity and survival, of course. The academic professions require it—and not just the noble drudgery of teaching, research, editing, and monograph writing that engaged more modest scholars in the past (particularly those who recognized their intellectual and writerly limitations). No, the professions today demand substantial “original” works by all members of the professoriate who hope to rise to tenure. And that demand is simply unrealistic. For how much new is there under the sun? Not much—in scholarship or in any other human pursuit. Yet never have so many words been used so badly, and to say so little, as in these works of professedly original scholarship. Yes, there are still scholarly writers who produce truly groundbreaking work that reaches, informs, and enlightens not just other scholars but popular audiences as well. But beneath that apex, how enormous is the mountain of entirely superfluous scholarly prose!

One remedy seems obvious: more modesty on the part of the academic professions and a return to other scholarly tasks, including teaching, greater mastery of the core subject matter of a field, and recognition that in the realm of “original” work, less is more. But the obvious solution is no easy solution. It may even require coming to terms with a difficult matter indeed—the very character of the modern scholarly enterprise. The formation of that character has a complicated history, which has already been the subject of many works of scholarship. Let me attempt to make sense of the problem by blaming it, only half facetiously, on one of the more brilliant minds of the past century.

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Great minds can do great mischief, and few minds have been greater than that of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), the Vienna-born philosopher who spent some of his productive years disturbing the donnish waters of Cambridge University. Wittgenstein first decided to establish very precisely, in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), what philosophy should and should not discuss. He then all but reversed the conclusions of that book to develop his notion that human language has a fundamentally gamelike quality—a notion that implied a far less restrictive view of philosophy’s mission. Though he accomplished those feats in a prose so gnomically stringent that it almost defies comprehension, he left a deep imprint not just on philosophy but on 20th-century intellectual life in general. But that influence, alas, was not wholly benign.

The baleful part of Wittgenstein’s legacy is not so much a matter of strict logical-philosophical inadequacy as it is a problem of intellectual style—a certain prejudice, expressed both in his personal dealings with people and in his work, about what the life of the mind should be. One way to get a sense of this style is through an anecdote recounted by one of his Cambridge friends, the literary critic F. R. Leavis. In a short memoir about their friendship, Leavis told how Wittgenstein came to him one day “and, without any prelude, said, ‘Give up literary criticism!’” Cambridge being a relatively civil place, Leavis



"It's publish or perish, and he hasn't published."

didn't assault the brash Austrian. He didn't even make the obvious retort—"Give up philosophy!"—in part because he thought that Wittgenstein had fallen under the sway of John Maynard Keynes and other Bloomsbury wits who liked to toss off facile putdowns of people or ideas they disagreed with. More to the point, Leavis noted that Wittgenstein had only a "rudimentary" sense of literature, and so was incapable of thinking that it (much less literary criticism) "might matter intellectually." Such a view could not have been more inimical to Leavis's conviction "that the fullest use of language is to be found in creative literature, and that a great creative work is a work of original exploratory thought." And to validate his conviction, Leavis adverted to his view about the inadequacy of philosophers: They were, he said, "weak on language."

What confidence! Had it endured within the precincts of higher learning, it's fair to ask whether we would have avoided the current parlous state of academic letters. I think so, even as I acknowledge the overstatement implicit in my assertion, and even as I allow that Leavis's confidence was itself a little shaky.

Many factors share responsibility for the deplorable condition of academic writing, but none is more fundamental than the fatally mistaken view that intellectual work must be "serious." By claiming that literary criticism was serious in a way that Wittgenstein should have been able to appreciate, Leavis all but embraced, however unwittingly, Wittgenstein's definition of seriousness: a rigorous way of thinking and proceeding intellectually, rooted in the assumedly clear procedural ways of the inductive sciences and leading to objective truth about the world, people, and what Wittgenstein called "everything that is the case." That is scientism, of course, driven by a Protestant intentness on having one's subjective perceptions validated by claims to the kind of objective truth that can be revealed by the scientific method. No, I am not attacking science, the scientific method, or the many real and obvious blessings that have resulted from them. Nor am I attacking the notion of objectivity or the laudable goal of objective truth. I am merely pointing to the misapplication of the scientific idea, and to the consequences of the same.

Wittgenstein's early philosophy led him to the conclusion that we cannot talk rigorously or precisely about most things that humans deem of ultimate importance: truth, beauty, goodness, the meaning and ends of life. We can speak precisely and meaningfully only about those things that objective science can demonstrate. In his view, philosophy was to be a helpful tag-along of science: It can paint clear verbal pictures of what science divulges. But even Wittgenstein recognized that this understanding of the limitations of language was too limiting, and he became more and more interested in the provisional and social character of language, and in how the mystery of meaning emerges out of the shared play of making worlds out of words. He was struggling beyond scientism, and his final book, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), posthumously assembled, seems to point suggestively away from the narrowness and inconsequentiality of his earlier position.

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But if Wittgenstein struggled against the conclusions of his early work, I fear that the Western academic world increasingly succumbed to a desire for the kind of dubious seriousness that enticed the young philosopher. Scholars of literature and the arts, historians, philosophers, and other academic humanists joined sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists in trying to make their fields as “serious” as the hard sciences. They grew obsessed with theory and methodology, and particularly with the most abstract issues of epistemology—how we know what we know. This is largely the story of professionalization, of course, of how professional standards and approved behaviors got established in the academic realm. It was Wittgenstein’s curse upon the professionals of the humanistic and social science disciplines that they took his kind of seriousness as an essential goal.

Why a curse? For one thing, because it burdened those professions with a narrow-spirited utilitarianism. In his early work, Wittgenstein believed that his job was to make philosophy useful. He wanted to clear out, like so much underbrush, all the metaphysics and other matters that couldn’t be resolved the way a problem in, say, engineering (in which he had had training) can be resolved. In his early view, remember, philosophy was supposed to become a helpful user’s manual for the hard sciences. For it to be anything else was frivolous, an indulgence, *unserious*. Wittgenstein, as many of his contemporaries noted, had a genius for making colleagues and students feel guilty about not doing useful, productive work. He urged a number of his students to abandon scholarship altogether and become car mechanics or hospital orderlies. Some took his advice—to the shock and sorrow of their parents.

The compulsion to prove the utility of ideas spread through the humanities and social sciences like a contagion, assuming a variety of political, ideological, and theoretical colorings. It was no longer sufficient to master and convey the great historical record, or to locate and celebrate the pleasures of great works of literature or painting or music. Even the pursuit of wisdom was not enough, once wisdom got problematized. Theorizing took over. Elaborate theorymongering, often French- or German-inspired, displaced the mastering of subject matter, so that fledgling literary scholars, for example, ended up knowing more (or thinking they knew more) about Bakhtin than about Chekhov, more about queer theory than about any literary tradition. The pretense of helping the working class, or liberating gays by deconstructing texts, or doing meta-meta-interpretations of historical questions appeared to be the really serious work. No matter that such seriousness arguably achieved no serious real-world consequences. No matter that it became increasingly irrelevant to the real world—and completely impenetrable to most people in that world.

There’s an additional problem. The drift of much postmodern thought has been toward the conclusion that there is no absolute or objective truth; there are only constructions of the truth, influenced by power and power relations within society (might makes right—and truth) or by unacknowledged biases rooted in, say, gender or race. This radical skepticism, elaborated by

such thinkers as the pragmatist Richard Rorty, holds that the pursuit of truth is essentially bootless. Whether such skepticism is itself simplistic (and, in Rorty's case, whether it's a misreading of the far more complicated view of truth held by earlier American pragmatists such as Charles Sanders Peirce) is beyond discussion here. But skepticism's almost dogmalike standing within much of the academic community introduces a rich irony: Whereas skepticism would seem to invite scholars within the humanities, and even the social sciences, to abandon their reliance on pseudoscientific theories and methodologies and become truly independent thinkers and writers, it has in fact enslaved them all the more to pseudoscientific doctrines.

And make no mistake: The doctrines are pseudo. The same Sokal who fooled the editors of *Social Text* subsequently teamed up with philosopher Jean Bricmont to write a book, *Fashionable Nonsense* (1998), that showed the absurd and often hilarious efforts by leading postmodern thinkers to dress up their theories with scientific terminology and even mathematical formulas. (The highly influential Jacques Lacan, for example, boasted that his theories drew from "the most recent developments in topology.") On close inspection, the terminology and the formulas make no sense at all. "They imagine, perhaps, that they can exploit the prestige of the natural sciences in order to give their own discourse a veneer of rigor," write Sokal and Bricmont. "And they seem confident that no one will notice their misuse of concepts."

Such dishonesty is bad enough in itself. But the effect of the pseudoscientific doctrines on writing throughout the humanities and social sciences—and the writing remains unchanged, despite Sokal and Bricmont's valuable unmasking—only increases the seriousness of the crime. Forcing their ideas into the Procrustean beds of Foucaultian or Lacanian theoretical constructs—or others equally dubious—scholars produce a prose that seems to have emerged from a machine, a subjectless void. Where in that prose is the self, the individual? Nowhere. There is no mind grappling freshly with a problem. There is no feeling, no humor, no spark of what is human; there is only the unspooling of phony formulas, speciously applied to the matter at hand.

The great harm in all of this has been a loss of confidence in the fundamental worth of the seemingly irrelevant pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and even pleasure for their own sake. Though an edge of defensiveness crept into his voice, Leavis was right to say that respectful but not uncritical reflection upon great literary works was worthwhile. Such activity deepens and complicates the individual, even as it expands the individual's appreciation of the larger world of other people, society, politics, the natural and physical order. The pleasurable pursuit of knowledge and wisdom is, in great part, an extended meditation on the relations between self and world, subjectivity and objectivity, and on the question of where truth resides. It is, of all pursuits, the most relevant for human lives, and to the extent that the academy chooses to stand apart from it, academic writing withers and dies. □