Hegel’s aesthetics—there is his subsequent notion that art promotes not an engagement with the world, but a subject’s withdrawal from it. Similarly with Kierkegaard, the subjective moment is emphasized and aesthetics becomes a theory of sensuality rather than a philosophy of art. This culminates in Nietzsche’s aestheticization of philosophy and, as Hammermeister claims, it results in the “despotism of aesthetics that refuses to acknowledge any perspective other than its own” (p. 150). It is then the task of thinkers such as Heidegger, Cassirer, Lukács, and Adorno to integrate aesthetics back into philosophy as a whole. To do this, each relies on some aspect of the paradigms erected by Kant, Schiller, and Schelling, among others. This is done, Hammermeister argues, as a reaction to Nietzsche’s transformation or violent merger of philosophy and aesthetics. But outside of this, he does not delve into this crucial—and fascinating—intellectual transition.

What Hammermeister inevitably achieves in this compact, yet wonderfully rich book is much more than a scholarly overview of an important and difficult historical tradition in aesthetic philosophy. He also shows through his exposition of each of these thinkers the crucial connection that each of them saw between art, beauty, morality, and, many times, the political. In our own day, when art and culture can scarcely be said to be entwined with public life, the German aestheticians saw art as part of the central interpretive faculties of the human mind and of social life as well. They were concerned with the ways that humanism could be extended to combat the ever deepening, and (what they saw to be) sterile encroachment of modernity into the realm of artistic production and reception. Far from simply seeing art as the production of beauty, Hammermeister’s interpretation of the German aesthetic tradition also shows that art has a purpose: whether it be to solidify a moral political order as in Schiller or as a locus of self-regeneration in the face of bourgeois conformism as in Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Adorno, the ineluctable relationship between art and society in all of its nuances is one of the most salient contributions of this great, and sadly lost, intellectual tradition.

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In 2002, the first anniversary of the September 11th attacks was marked in New York City by the reading of the Gettysburg Address. It was, as many commentators noted, an odd choice of eulogy, comparing as it did the unwitting and innocent victims of a terrorist attack to the willing and active
participants in a bloody civil war. In *Doing Our Own Thing*, the Berkeley linguist John McWhorter asserts that this strange choice was the result of a decline in American public discourse. A “particular kind of artful English, formerly taken for granted as crucial to legitimate expression on the civic stage has” he argues, “virtually disappeared” (p. xiv). For McWhorter, this lack of contemporary public oratory is merely part of a broader linguistic decline that has affected all aspects of American life and culture.

There has, he suggests, been a dumbing-down of the language. Whereas Americans once took care to craft their language, public and private, McWhorter argues, there is now a casualness to their speech and writing which affects all aspects of their existence. The nature of this decline is best captured by McWhorter’s anecdote about his research into Gullah, an obscure Creole dialect. In response to his inquiries about local speech patterns, an elderly black woman in Greenwood, Mississippi responded: “Well, seems like most folks, they speak pretty good English, but some people, it seems like they just talk” (p. 2). Whereas Americans once spoke pretty good English, McWhorter believes, now, for the most part, they just talk. In *Doing Our Own Thing*, he seeks to identify not only evidence for his thesis, but also the causes and consequences of this decline.

Evidence of linguistic decline is, McWhorter believes, to be found in our public discourse (as evidenced by the contemporary use of the Gettysburg Address), and in the rise of rap music and popular lyrics at the expense of poetry—he notes that as late as the 1960s, the poet Marianne Moore was a guest on *The Tonight Show* twice. Less intuitively perhaps, he identifies the same decline in the decreased popularity of piano bars, and the rising popularity of cell-phones. What all these examples of have in common, McWhorter suggests, is a turn towards an oral as opposed to a written culture. Speech has, he says, become something of a “dress-down affair” (p. 49), and this has infected both our written word and public oratory. The “modern American speech writer” he notes, “tends strongly to operate under a guiding imperative not to sound too high a note” (p. 47). McWhorter contrasts this with examples from the nineteenth-century—with letters from ordinary soldiers to their sweethearts, and with Edward Everett’s two-hour plus address at Gettysburg—which show that “we live in an America with a distinctly different relationship to the English language than an America still within living memory” (p. 167).

For McWhorter, the causes of this decline are clear. The 1960s counterculture, in its efforts to “Speak Truth to Power, abandoned the formal conventions of previous generations’ speech, and adopted its own more casual approach to public discourse. Indeed, McWhorter feels confident enough to identify “a single year when America lost its love for its language”: 1965 (p. 183). The consequences of this decline are, for McWhorter, similarly obvious. Among them, the shift to an oral culture is held to be responsible for: the election of George W. Bush—Al Gore’s “studied articulateness is certainly one of the major
factors that blocked him from winning the presidency” (p. xxi); the decline of contemporary political debate—more formal written language is, says McWhorter, “a better vehicle for objective argument than speech” (p. 35); and the increasingly obtuse nature of academic language. Indeed, McWhorter asserts that Judith Butler’s success in the Philosophy and Literature Bad Writing Contest was a product of an academic culture whose formal writing has been allowed to “drift into a hyperelaborated mode” (p. 243). Academics, asserts McWhorter, do not “willfully write opaquely either to reaffirm their status or to camouflage muddled thinking” (p. 244), but simply because they can. In the absence of a public written culture, he argues, academics need only to communicate with other academics and as such, they have developed a language of their own. “To put a point on it,” he writes, “the scholar under the old regime would have been embarrassed to write the way modern postmodernist thinkers do. But the public norms of linguistic expression that drove the embarrassment are now a thing of the past. And after that, the deluge” (p. 244).

McWhorter is, it seems, somewhat nostalgic for the past. The decline in public discourse, he writes, “compromises our facility with the word and dilutes our collective intellect” (p. xiii). Whether or not this is true, there certainly seems to be a good deal of evidence to support his assertion that our language patterns and writing styles have become less formal than they were. The suggestion that contemporary political debate has been impoverished as a result of this decline seems to ring true: witness the shrill exchange of position statements that now passes for political dialogue. Nevertheless, his argument appears overstated and there is much that is problematic about the book as a whole.

McWhorter’s approach is somewhat reductivist: the claim that Al Gore’s formal speaking style was a “major factor” in his loss of the 2000 election does not, as any political scientist will tell you, stand up to closer scrutiny. Similarly, the precision with which McWhorter identifies the exact year of the beginnings of the decline in language—the year of his birth—suggests that, as with much of the book, the argument has more to do with McWhorter’s nostalgia than any clear analysis (as does the rather bizarre and detailed discussion of the decline of piano bars). Indeed, his suggestion that academic prose has become too divorced from reality belies the clearly argued and well-written work that one encounters every day in academia. The biggest problem with the book is, however, that McWhorter writes it in precisely the casual language that he identifies as insufficient for nuanced debate. Although this approach paradoxically ends up confirming the value of one of his central claims—that informal language is an inappropriate medium for careful argumentation—it undermines the book as a whole and makes what might otherwise be an enlightening discussion of an interesting issue, rather more of a vehicle for the author’s
often curmudgeonly and deeply subjective complaints about contemporary society.

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**Simon Stow**


*Caveat lector*. Let the reader beware: this is no leisurely, nostalgic stroll by another Parisian intellectual now ruminating and pontificating over issues and events outside his competence. True to his vocation as ferryman (*passeur*), Todorov guides the reader over the vast expanses of historical, ideological, and intensely personal terrain that he has explored as an émigré of Bulgaria, a brilliant Structuralist, French citizen, father, spouse, and son caring for his aged father. The resulting mosaic composes a narrative itinerary rich in intellectual history.

The exceptional range of Todorov’s experience and research affords him a unique perspective. Having first lived and studied under Stalinism, he distinguished himself as a Parisian literary scholar stressing the primacy of the linguistic. Now internationally renowned, his books cover a broad spectrum of human experience, including the Holocaust, WWII, totalitarianism, the ethics of memory, the role and function of the intellectual, race and culture, ethnocentrism and conquest, and, most recently, human identity and a new humanism. Having immersed himself in numerous contexts, Todorov has acquired extensive firsthand knowledge from within. He is nevertheless adept at standing back and assessing them from without, revealing idiosyncrasies and limitations. His uncompromising scrutiny bows to no ideological *a priori*, nor spares any sacred cow.

Some pronouncements will ruffle feathers in a number of intellectual aviaries. He values literature, for example, above philosophy, science, and the social sciences as a source of not only beauty, but meaning and truth. Contrary to the tendency to view literature as an arbitrary construction used to further an agenda of socio-economic domination and political repression, he contends that literary texts can best enrich our vision of the world and our personal sensibilities. Stressing art’s essential humanity while challenging the obsession with science and technology, Todorov views language as neither estranged from reality nor subjugated by politics. Hence the impossibility of isolating literature from ethics and existence: writers legitimately seek to come to terms with the human condition, communicating experiences and sensibilities we would otherwise ignore.