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Publishing Puzzles:
Some Implications of Literary Difficulty for the Editor

Brendan Brown

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Research question:

What does literary difficulty's potential to add value to books and reading
mean for editorial theory and strategy?

Introduction

Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, but because it wishes to be art. However much the artist might long to be, in his work, simple, honest, and straightforward, these virtues are no longer available to him. He discovers that in being simple, honest, and straightforward, nothing much happens: he speaks the speakable, whereas what we are looking for is the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken.

—Donald Barthelme¹

The specter of literary difficulty is at bottom the very same as, or a primary aspect of, that which has dogged and driven textual scholars and literary theorists, linguists and philosophers of language, educators, legislators, theologians, and aesthetes—in short, “professional readers” of all stripes—from time immemorial. As such, it carries with it a bevy of unknowns, questions thus far neither satisfactorily answered nor, in many cases, even fully and properly articulated. This likely has a great deal to do with the fact that the term *difficulty* is and has historically been applied in a variety of senses to a radically diverse plurality of elements, figures, and phenomena of the literary world. It appears as a qualifier of texts, of authors, of the basic processes of reading, and of the interpretive and discursive activities which accompany and embody the practice of reading itself. The result of this definitional breadth, or fuzziness, and of the phenomenological hydra-headedness indicated thereby, has been the persistent indissolubility of textual difficulty before a centuries-long assault from all sides.

Given so disquietingly bleak a history of investigative shortfall, a comprehensive account of literary difficulty is readily acknowledged to be leagues beyond the scope of the present study. Instead, what is here ventured is a derivation of useful insights into the actual and potential role of the modern literary editor within the readerly apparatus.² Approaching difficulty as a lens upon, or point of entry

1 Donald Barthelme, “Not-Knowing,” in *Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews*, ed. Kim Herzinger (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1997), 15.

2 “Apparatus” is here used in a loose sense largely equivalent to that espoused by Jean-Louis Baudry in limning his theoretical “basic cinematographic apparatus,” the relevant conceit of which is that extra-filmic elements, including the spectator, are as much a part of the cinematic phenomenon as are projector, screen, etc. See Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed.

into, editorial theory and praxis shall serve to illuminate certain inconspicuous and oft-unrecognized aspects of literary editing and the philosophies undergirding it. Some special attention will be paid to the implications of certain theoretical developments around authorial agency and intent for practical editorial concerns, and how difficulty may serve to shed light thereupon. More generally, though, it will be demonstrated that, contrary to an intuition common among the casual and uninitiated, the role of the editor is by no means the wholesale mechanical expunction of difficulty from texts; on the contrary, in certain cases an editor may, in theory, determine that a text is to be optimally enriched for the greatest number of relevant, interested parties by the deliberate insinuation and cultivation of some significant measure of difficulty. To understand the logic of this line of thought, it is first necessary to explore the senses and contexts in which literary difficulty may be meaningfully considered valuable.

Difficulty Demonized

The purpose of art is always, ultimately, to give pleasure.

—Susan Sontag³

The term *difficulty* as applied to literature is plagued by a negative valence owing, it is not fatally reductive to assert, essentially to those mediating social and cultural institutions which govern and pervade all aspects of the lives of books, from their writing to their reading, and to the ideological frameworks reified through and informative of said institutions. Like every human activity, reading never takes place in an insulated void, but rather within ideologically constructed and defined contexts. The prevailing presumptions and prejudices of academic, pedagogical, political, religious, and—today, doubtless, most radically of all—commercial institutions collectively direct and define not only particular reading experiences but readers’ fundamental ideas and subconscious prejudices about the

Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, seventh edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 171–188.

3 Susan Sontag, “One Culture and the New Sensibility,” in *Popular Culture and the Expanding Consciousness*, ed. Ray B. Browne (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), 35.

purpose, or value, of books and reading, full stop.

An extended explication of the manifold manifestations of these institutionally imposed notions and their mechanisms is, again, outside the scope of the present study; a pair of examples will suffice to indicate the nature of the phenomenon. Among the clearest of such cases is that of the pedagogical institution, i.e., the school, which takes as central to its mission students' instruction in reading. As cogently observed by Helen Regueiro Elam, "'reading' has been associated with 'literacy' in its narrow definition, the definition that precisely bypasses the question of difficulty. Literacy, in its philological relation to 'literature,' means, of course, how to read, but also 'how to read.'"⁴ On this view, a student's experience of difficulty in reading a text indicates a deficiency in readerly ability calling for practical improvement, with total systematic textual mastery being the ideal goal, and students often find themselves penalized for what can only be their own inadequacy (the text selected for the exercise is invariably presumed blameless). Thus the study of literature in schools gets muddled with training in institutionally endorsed reading practices, and the pedagogical concept of utilitarian literacy comes to define readers' foundational experiences with literature. The experience of readerly difficulty in any context comes to be interpreted by the reader as symptomatic of an inadequacy, either on her own part or on that of the text in question: if reading is difficult, something must be wrong.

This aversive distaste for literary difficulty is widely espoused and exacerbated by the basic ideology underpinning the culture market. Briefly, the prime culprit here is the industrialization of literary production—the emergence of the *trade* publisher. Such sociocultural theorists and commentators as Chris Lehmann invoke the ideological swing underlying this distinction by the term *masscult*: manufactured cultural material masquerading as genuinely popular culture by artificial environmental saturation (rather than by virtue of its inherent quality or merit). As Lehmann puts it,

mass culture is, above all, the culture of market prerogative, blotting out nearly all elements of

⁴ Helen Regueiro Elam, "The Difficulty of Reading," in *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature*, ed. Alan C. Purves (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 74.

individual taste with prefigured consensus. . . . [Its defining traits include] rampant formal imitation, within and across genres; the recourse to formulaic stereotypes at the expense of inwardly developed character or subjectivity; instant stimulation at the expense of reflection or considered argument; and the lockstep choreography of one-dimensional emotional responses by turns sentimental and cynical.⁵

With the advent of trade publishing, literature was assimilated into the culture industry and packaged as a fungible commodity in market competition with other such commodities. Under this consumerist paradigm, books' likelihood of being published and read is finally decided by their projected salability.

Further complicating the dynamic of the modern publishing industry is the success of the *middlebrow* literary commodity: a class of books presented as superior to merely recreational fare in "its function as a device for providing education [and] self-reflection [in addition to] the pleasures of imaginative absorption."⁶ The middlebrow is worth noting here because it represents the commoditization of self-improvement. Drawing upon the pedagogically endorsed valuation of literacy, the claim implicit in middlebrow marketing strategy is "that the means of improvement [can be] convenient and efficient, and [can] be purchased, as part of the consumer culture."⁷ This approach effectively hybridizes the scholastic antipathy toward difficulty with the market's assertion of consumerism's democracy; in a word, by selling readers a purported antidote against, or shortcut around, literary difficulty, the middlebrow duplicitously serves to further reinforce for readers an ingrained distaste for the difficult.

The above treatment is clearly but a cursory one, a shallow dip into waters which run far deeper and murkier, but it suggests how it is that literary difficulty acquired and retains that negative valence which superficially appears innate. What is here of primary relevance and import is the recognition that despite all evidence indicating that difficulty is, in the abstract, wholly a social and institutional

5 Chris Lehmann, *Revolt of the Masscult* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 2–3.

6 Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 76.

7 Robert Westerfelous, "Illustrators, Mass Media, and the Rise—and Demise—of America's Middle Class, Middle Brow Culture," (Lublin, Poland: Wordstruck, 15 May 2015), https://youtu.be/_gSzfKQ4gvQ.

construct, individual readers' subjective experiences of difficulty (and their evaluative impressions thereof) nonetheless seem to them authentic and unmediated. The aversion to difficult reading may be learned, a matter of early conditioning and subliminal reinforcement, but that does not manifest in its felt effect. For the literary editor, whose goals have fundamentally to do with the felt effects of books, a conscious awareness of this psychological nuance is crucial. For reasons not fully transparent even (and perhaps especially) to themselves, readers are to some degree predisposed to misprize and seek to avoid literary difficulty.

Difficulty Redeemed

“Literary” work, in its textual condition, is not meant for transparency, is not designed to carry messages. Messages may be taken from such work, but always and only by acts of simplification and diminishment.

—Jerome McGann⁸

Despite the omnipresence of ideological forces inclining readers against it, difficulty has also been recognized as a valuable—even necessary—feature of literature. Numerous schools of literary, critical, aesthetic, and scholarly theory have emphasized distinct species of its value, whether explicitly or implicitly, and have forwarded distinct (and sometimes incompatible) arguments therefor, but these share a central thrust: literary difficulty is, first, to some degree inevitable and, second, in many cases to be celebrated.

The literature of scholarly editorial theory is particularly rich in discussions of difficulty. For example, in compiling a critical edition of a historical work, the scholar strives to determine an “ideal” text, which, for most editors, has meant that which “represent[s] most clearly what the author wrote” or “what [the] author really meant.”⁹ The disparity between these views reveals a difference of opinion

⁸ Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 76.

⁹ W.W. Greg, “The Rationale of Copy-Text,” in *Studies in Bibliography* 3 (1950–1), 21, and Philip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography*, 1995 edition (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll, 1972), 360.

regarding the supremacy of authorial intent in defining a literary work. By the latter standard, the intent of the author is paramount, meaning elements of multiple texts may in some cases be eclectically synthesized into a novel variant arguably more legitimate even than the author's original manuscript. Conversely, the former view champions chronological primacy, holding the best editorial approach to be the faithful reproduction of the earliest textual variant approved by the author. The underlying assumption of authorial intent as the deciding factor in the identity of literary works aside, what is on display in this relatively early theoretical dispute is the question of the *accessibility* of authorial intent, that is to say, of the possibility for foolproof semantic ascertainment of literary works via one or several texts.

This attitude of exegetical uncertainty—a distrust in textual interpretation—is none other than the difficulty experienced by the casual reader, that malaise which “may be seen as based on beholders’ estimate of the object as well as their estimate of their capacity to deal with the object in a fashion appropriate to a given situation.”¹⁰ The linguistic turn in philosophy has done much to explicate the inherently difficult nature of language itself, and to assuage the unpleasantness of readerly confrontation with semantic doubt. A number of post-structuralists and hermeneutical theorists work to reposition the obscurity (and, ultimately, absence) of absolute textual semantic value as a key to readerly freedom, opening up a space for interpretive creativity and empowering the reader. “It is language which speaks, not the author,” writes Barthes, “which is . . . to restore status to the reader. . . . Thus literature . . . *liberates an activity*.”¹¹ That activity, of course, is reading: the generation of a cognitive experience through active interaction with a text.

Not all scholarly editors are so inclined to embrace this literary subjectivity, and the readerly responsibility entailed thereby, as is Barthes. T.H. Howard-Hill, for example, claims “modern readers require mediated texts, just as they require mediated ideas,” and argues that “not to edit, or . . . to shift

10 Alan C. Purves, introduction to *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature*, ed Alan C. Purves (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 2.

11 Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Aspen 5+6* (New York: Roaring Fork Press, 1967), 3 (emphasis mine).

editorial burdens on to unprepared readers are not supportable alternatives to a long tradition of editing.”¹² The “editorial burdens” of which he speaks are, in effect, a species of literary difficulty. He considers the role of the editor to be the resolution and obviation of elements likely to incite uncertainty, presumably for fear that readers will resent textual openness and the extra effort of confronting it (and, likely, that they will not infrequently “get it wrong”). There is, to be sure, merit to this logic: if textual interpretation is left to the reader, of what use is the editor? Must the latter’s position as arbitrator and gatekeeper of texts not be justified by an uncommon professional expertise? “It does no good,” observes Philip Cohen, “to protest that establishing the text of that metaphysical abstraction called a literary work and interpreting its meanings are two very different propositions, for literary judgment and interpretation are inseparable from the editor’s task.”¹³ To edit, that is, is to read.

The contraposition of the postures represented by Barthes and Howard-Hill is admittedly not entirely fair, as the latter is far from arguing for the radical “flattening” of texts (what critic Clement Greenberg might call “predigestion”).¹⁴ Rather, he is simply citing the fundamental task of all editors, scholarly or not, to determine the texts ideal for particular editions of literary works. His warning against “the death of the editor” is nonetheless useful to the present survey for what it conspicuously omits: acknowledgement of the value which difficulty can have for readers. Hazard Adams explains the case for radically difficult books admirably in discussing the readerly “fascination of difficulty itself”:

[Difficult literature] appears as a puzzle, but without a solution in the usual sense. . . . What about puzzles do [readers] love? It has to be the difficulty and the process of overcoming it. . . . Of course, one has to be able to recognize the difficulty as a puzzle—a puzzle, in the case of literature, without an allegorical key or the expected kind of solution. . . . To learn this and be able to live with it and be

12 T.H. Howard-Hill, “The Dangers of Editing, or, the Death of the Editor,” in *The Editorial Gaze: Mediating Texts in Literature and the Arts*, eds. Paul Eggert and Margaret Sankey (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 61–2.

13 Philip Cohen, introduction to *Devils and Angels: Textual Editing and Literary Theory*, ed. Philip Cohen (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1991), xii.

14 Lehmann, *Revolt of the Masscult*, 57.

satisfied with it is itself a solution. . . . It is a mystery that can turn into a fascination.¹⁵

An editor who preemptively solves all the puzzles for her readers—who takes herself to be facilitator and expeditor, greaser of the grooves, exterminator of semantic noise, and guarantor of readerly ease—is, in this light, almost certainly failing to generate and secure for her text its maximum possible value for readers.

Deliberately Difficult

Many of the most influential and perduring works of literature published throughout the past several hundred years are generally understood to have been designed, to varying degrees and by various mechanisms, to generate and exploit readerly difficulty to positive effect. One famous early example is Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1759–67), in which Sterne frustrates readers' established expectations of narrative; the comic effect of the work's perpetual deferrals and its refusal to "behave" might plausibly be characterized as the occasion of readerly pleasure via difficulty. The rise of literary modernism early in the twentieth century saw the publication of books such as Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1920) and *Ida: A Novel* (1941) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939), works legendary for their unprecedentedly radical syntactic and compositional experimentation. As Donald Barthelme explains it, such a work is by design encountered as an unfathomable, worldly object:

It is characteristic of the object that it does not declare itself all at once, in a rush of pleasant naïveté.

Joyce enforced the way in which *Finnegans Wake* is to be read. He conceived the reading to be a lifetime project, the book remaining always there . . . problematic, unexhausted. . . . The strangeness of his project is an essential part of it, almost its point.¹⁶

Almost its point, but not quite—or, certainly, not exclusively. He goes on: "Similarly, almost any brief

15 Hazard Adams, "The Difficulty of Difficulty," in *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature*, 44, 46–7.

16 Barthelme, *Not-Knowing*, 4–5.

quotation from Gertrude Stein discloses a willingness to follow language wherever it leads (and if it leads nowhere, to make capital of that).”¹⁷ Joyce’s cultivation of strangeness and the insouciant freedom of Stein’s exercise produce precisely those puzzle-box books which Adams extols for their capacity to generate for the invested reader an infinity of delighted perplexity, of perplexed delight.

Legion such books and authors might be cited here, and the unique strategies and species of value generated by the particular difficulty of each detailed—the anti-linguistic, anti-literary work of a W.S. Burroughs, the awkwardly hyper-realistic fiction of an Alain Robbe-Grillet, the formal explosion of a Mark Z. Danielewski, etc., etc.—but the present study is most concerned with the implications of such literature’s potential value for editorial praxis. Several especially intriguing questions an editor ought to bear in mind and weigh carefully for any literary project thus demand consideration.

The first: when, to what extent, and to what ends is it acceptable and/or advisable to leave difficulty unresolved? It is clearly by no means always the case that difficulty operates as an indicator or generator of literary value. Nor are the needs and desires of a single book’s anticipated readership often anything like homogeneous; “many of the legitimate requirements of different readers are inconsistent with those of others and cannot be accommodated in a single edition.”¹⁸ The disposition of readers, moreover, could not be the single deciding factor in charting an editorial course even were it in fact monadic and ascertainable, for the fealty of the editor is properly concurrently to her author(s) and to the publisher. Trade publishers in particular are notorious for their ambivalence with regard to difficult literature. “Within the publishing industry the adjective ‘literary’ is usually a synonym for abstruse, artsy, Brahmin, gnomic, high-falutin, or academic,” laments Jonathan Galassi, though he adds on a brighter note that “although the publishing industry is often suspicious of ‘literary’ works, enormous prestige is still attached to their publication, . . . a commodity second only to money itself in the world

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁸ Howard-Hill, “The Dangers of Editing, or, the Death of the Editor,” 52.

of publishing.”¹⁹ A keen understanding of the nature and dynamics of this prestige (often invoked in the Bourdieusian register as “cultural” or “symbolic capital”) and the complexities of what James English, in limning the phenomenon of the cultural prize, terms “the economy of prestige,” is thus equally crucial for the literary editor.²⁰ Answering the wants of readers is important, but some degree of compromise may in some situations be unavoidable if a book is to be published at all.

A second, more difficult editorial dilemma: is it ever be acceptable, or indeed advisable, for an editor to deliberately introduce difficulty into a text? Given that the editor’s function is, at the most abstract level, to add and secure value to books for the benefit of interested parties, and given that literary difficulty undeniably sometimes holds the potential to boost the value of reading experiences, might it not actually be the editor’s duty, in certain cases, to willfully problematize a text rather than elucidate it? This notion is counterintuitive for two main reasons: (1) because it runs contrary to the customary understanding of the editor’s role, i.e., as self-effacing transceiver between author and reader, and (2) because it entails a gross violation of the aforementioned historical primacy and sacredness of authorial intent. Yet, upon reflection, it will be admitted that that special breed of publishing professional known as the developmental editor in fact regularly engages in just such active textual complication. Many scholarly editors are likewise guilty of deliberate problematization of works; to produce a synoptic edition, or to implement some tortuous critical apparatus, is in nearly every case to confound as much as it is to clarify. Translators often make similar moves; consider “[Walter] Benjamin’s idea . . . that a translation should be non-fluent in order to convey the difference of the other language and its capacities.”²¹ These precedents aside, the idea of an editor extending the same principle so far as to justify, say, the radical emendation of perfectly orthodox syntax or punctuation, even in an earnest effort to enrich the text in question, nevertheless carries a disquieting aura of

19 Jonathan Galassi, “The Double-Agent: The Role of the Literary Editor in the Commercial Publishing House,” in *The Art of Literary Publishing: Editors on Their Craft*, ed. Bill Henderson (New York: Pushcart, 1980), 80–1.

20 See James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

21 Fredric Jameson, “Mallarmé Materialist,” in *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007), 330.

blasphemous transgression and demands further contemplation.

A final question worth raising here: given the modern deemphasis upon authorial intent as an absolute index of textual quintessence, alongside the acknowledgment of both authorship and reading as socially, institutionally, and ideologically framed practices, in what sense might the editor be assigned responsibility for the public, readerly personage of the author? A queer inquiry, to be sure; how could the editor be held to blame for the identity of the author? Recall, though, Barthes's argument for the ontological independence of the text, through the very writing of which "the author enters his own death."²² On this view, each reader of a text, each discrete readerly event, consists of a distinct, subjectively experienced iteration of that literary work. Furthermore, every such iteration must necessarily include some notion of the text as artifact (if for no other reason than the authorial attributions on the book's cover and title page!), meaning that the reading experience entails not only the readerly generation of semantic value imputed to the text, but also the inference to an artificer. In short, the author is a function of the text. In McGann's words, "authors themselves do not have, *as authors*, singular identities; an author is a plural identity."²³ This logic suggests that, by the process of editorial revision of a text, the editor is also involved in a kind of theurgy of Barthes's "Author-God," which rather drastically magnifies her potential to determine that text's value for reader, author, and publisher alike. "When speaking of Gertrude Stein," writes Fredric Jameson in an observation that might have been made of virtually any author prone to being perceived as difficult, "one has to begin with the question of trust. . . . Do we trust her or is she a charlatan?"²⁴ It is in a very practical sense the editor's duty to secure such readerly trust, by ensuring that the text as published implies—makes manifest—an author who is trustworthy.

22 Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 2.

23 McGann, *The Textual Condition*, 75.

24 Jameson, "Gertrude Stein and Parts of Speech," in *The Modernist Papers*, 342.

Conclusion

It has been the goal of this study to shed some light upon the implications of literary difficulty's potential to add value to books and reading for editorial theory and practice. Among the greatest obstacles to pinpointing lucid, readily generalizable lessons to that effect are, on the one hand, the inherently subjective and incommunicable nature of difficult reading experiences and, on the other, the singularity of literary works and texts. The most likely avenue to an even moderately satisfying investigation of difficulty would be by way of exhaustive case study; yet, the more focused and explicit the lessons drawn from such a research project, the less reliably could they be brought to bear on other, distinct cases. As such, this survey has followed a different strategy, sacrificing particularity in favor of universality and favoring general theoretical inquiries designed to promote fruitful editorial contemplation.

Literary difficulty is, appropriately enough, itself an enigma as rich in the capacity to bewitch and befuddle as any difficult work of literature. The conspectus above falls terribly short of doing its complexity justice. The question of difficulty is of profound relevance to virtually all aspects of not only the literary field but the cultural, academic, and political spheres as well. It is a social and a psychological phenomenon, and so the literary editor must in a real sense act in part as sociologist and psychoanalyst. By virtue of the finally ineffable value it demonstrably secures for various figures throughout the literary community, difficulty stands as a crucial, albeit intractably abstract, conceptual tool in any editor's professional arsenal.