

THE LIMITS OF INDETERMINACY:
A DEFENSE OF LESS DIFFICULT POEMS
Charles Harper Webb, Ph.D.
1700 Thorncrest Drive; Glendale, CA 91207
cwebb@csulb.edu

“You ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born.”
—Flannery O’Connor, “Good Country People”

For decades now, American poetry has been under the influence of literary theories arising from, and contributing to the collapse of fundamental Western “truths.” Revolving around concepts of uncertainty and indeterminacy, and borrowing intellectual heft from Science—Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle; Einstein’s Relativity—these essentially nihilistic ideas include the following:

1. There is no God, so there are no absolute standards of good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, worthy and unworthy—no standards but those which self-interested humans invent, and impose upon others. Man was not made in God’s image, and *human nature* does not exist. The mind is essentially a Blank Slate.

2. Logic and causality are constructs imposed on experience. Any coherent story is an ex-post-facto organization of chaos. Instead of moving by logical progression, life is a series of non-sequiturs governed by Chance. Straightforward narrative¹—from a single point of view, or even several—distorts reality (if such a thing exists), and is exclusionary and potentially oppressive.

3. Language creates the world as humans know it, and perhaps as it “is.” “Reality” is what Language allows us to know.

4. Yet Language is inadequate to map the world, and accurately convey what it finds. Words (signifiers) are slippery, bound loosely, if at all, to what they describe (the signified). A man may say, “Please pass the salt,” confident that he will receive what he requests; but to a sophisticated thinker, this is the bliss of ignorance.

Furthermore, when corrupted—as it has been—by exploitive political systems, Language forfeits what slight ability to communicate it might have had.

5. The concept of “I” is far less stable than the rock of Gibraltar, which is far less stable than it might be. “I” is a fiction, made up of many simultaneously-operating, constantly changing partial- and pseudo- “I”s. The “self” is at least as slippery as any other noun. The unified self is a myth.

6. Since any statement can be shown to imply its opposite, *meaning* is meaningless.

7. Since all literary standards are arbitrary and biased, it is unjustifiable to “privilege” one text over another. *Hamlet* is no “better” than *Shack Tramp* or a Huggies ad.

8. Given that everything that can be said is already contained in Language (“always already written,” as Barthes says), the author has little to do with the creation of texts, and may even be said to be “dead.”

9. Any attempt by an author to impose a particular point of view, narrative structure, or emotional response upon the reader not only falsifies human experience, but constitutes intellectual fascism. Authors, to the extent that they exist, have no special authority. Their sole function is to pull from the ether “already written” texts to be interpreted as readers see fit.

Poems influenced by these ideas have been labeled “difficult,” “experimental,” “avant-garde,” “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E,” “post-modern,” “post-post-modern,” “challenging,” “dissociative,” “elusive,” “elliptical,” as well as less flattering names. Attempting to embody these ideas—and not to embody “under-theorized,” “unproblematized” ones—poets have replaced traditional development-of-subjects with non-sequiturs, and orchestration-of-effects with randomness. They have embraced textual self-consciousness, exposing their technique. They have rejected “sincerity” as unsophisticated and false. They have fostered emotional distance and disengagement. They have embraced psychological dislocation, trying to disguise or remove personality

from their work. They have intentionally bored the reader, hoping to jolt him/her into a new understanding, a new consciousness. They have piled irony on irony, and stopped even trying to reach the elusive and vanishing “general reader.” They have thwarted such readers’ desire to lose themselves in what John Gardner called reading’s “waking dream,” offering texts so indeterminate that readers must abandon all expectations for meaning and sense, in hopes of experiencing an orgasmic *jouissance*. They have rejected mimesis and theme, while elevating invention and surprise.²

Yet, many of the scientific / philosophical ideas that set the Difficult ball rolling are partly or wholly untrue. Even when they *are* true, the consequences for poetry are much less extreme than has been supposed. The sky, as it turns out, is not falling; it has just tilted a bit.

Literary theories are very different from scientific ones. A scientific theory must be testable. To be accepted as “true,” that truth must be shown objectively, and replicably, in the physical world. Psychoanalytic theory, for instance, succeeds as science only to the extent that it accurately and verifiably explains the working of the mind.

Literary theories are not testable. (If they are, they become scientific theories.) To gain academic acceptance, a literary theory need only appeal to other literary theorists. In the world of literary studies, psychoanalytic theory succeeds if it helps scholars to say fresh things about texts. Whether it, and conclusions reached through it, are “true” is beside the point—especially if objective truth is unattainable, and likely a myth.

Still, if the theories underpinning works of art misrepresent how human brains process that art, those brains may well reject the art. If the world-view underlying a work of art proves to be false, that art may become as irrelevant as phlogiston.

With that in mind, let’s look more closely at the principles listed above.

Uncertainty / Indeterminacy. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle states that we cannot know both the momentum and position of a quantum particle at the same time. This principle operates at full strength only in the ultra-tiny world of quantum mechanics; yet it has been taken to mean that humans can't know much of anything.

Yes, there is uncertainty in the human-scale world. There is no denying the strong influence of Chance. Yet, from the fact that we will die, to the strong likelihood that our house will be, tonight, where we left it this morning, our world is not so unpredictable. Even when we can't know absolutely, we can often know to a high degree of certainty.

Relativity. Einstein's Theories of Relativity state that, since an absolute space-time coordinate system does not exist, there can be no absolute position in space and time—i.e., position is relative. Furthermore, relative to an observer moving near the speed of light, both time and space are altered. Einstein's theories do not mean that everything is relative, and nothing is certain. In Einstein's universe, the speed of light is *absolutely* certain.

No God. The God proposition is unprovable either way. Yet, even though not absolute or supernaturally-decreed, ethical and esthetic standards exist. Proof continues to accumulate that basic moral and esthetic principles are products of evolution. Babies seem to come pre-equipped with a sense of justice³ and beauty, among other things. Though "human nature" is plastic within limits, it too exists. Every culture creates laws and customs to enforce its beliefs. The fact that these beliefs aren't universal and unassailable does not make them less relevant to human lives or art.

No logic or causality. Logic is fallible, as logic itself can prove. But the most fallible logic is the formal kind. What Freud called the *Unconscious* uses a logic that incorporates more (and more complex) information, and processes it more quickly than the formal kind. Some people call this *intuition*.

The human brain evolved logic to help it survive in the world.⁴ From our perspective, events move from beginning to end, via cause and effect. Our brains process information

that way. The fact that the quantum world is ruled by probability does not mean that our lives, as we experience them, are too. Chance may disrupt our best-laid plans. Still, in our macro-world, causes and effects are real. If you doubt this, stomp your bare foot on an upturned tack.

Language creates the world. I remember my undergraduate excitement on encountering Whorf's notion that the language we speak dictates how we see the world, and maybe even what exists. The idea that Eskimos see many types of snow, while we see just a few, has instant appeal. For those of us who love and specialize in language, it's especially pleasing to think the world exists because of what we're expert in.

That doesn't make it true. Neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran tells of an Amazonian tribe with no word but "many" for numbers greater than three. Yet tests showed that members of the lexically-challenged tribe dealt with large numbers as well as members of tribes who did have words for larger numbers.⁵

Animals' brains serve them well without language. If our earliest hominid ancestors had needed language, we wouldn't be here today. Evidence supports the existence of a world independent of language or observation—a "reality" (from our perspective) that operates according to knowable Laws. This is the world that Language describes, and in which it is a valuable survival-tool.

Failure of Language: Though Language has been credited with creating the world, some thinkers lament its inadequacy to describe that world. But the problem has been overstated—mightily! Just because there are many words for what we call *watermelon* does not mean that language has a problem. Nor does the fact that watermelons vary in color, shape, and taste render the word meaningless. If I say *watermelon*, each English speaker who hears will call up a slightly different mental image; but all who know the word will know what I mean. Similarly, if I say, "Look behind you," or "I left five hundred dollars for you under that rock," any competent English speaker will know what to do. Words may squirm, but we can easily hold on.

The poet's job has always been to make words express more than seems possible. Imagery helps. Metaphor helps. "Music" help. Describing what "words can't describe" is what good poets do!

As for the corruption of Language by "the system"—rather than throw up their hands, or tear sense and syntax limb-from-limb, the best writers prove the problems surmountable in plain English. (Or Mandarin. Or Swahili.) If poets aren't able to out-express politicians and ad-men, they should choose another line of work.

Unstable "I". It's true that normal people change personae according to their audience. It's also true that people who lack self-knowledge often surprise themselves. But psychological research has shown that personality is remarkably stable after about age six⁶. Philosophers' romance with the "unstable self" arises, I suspect, from a tendency to romanticize psychopathology, and from fear of biological determinism.

Existentialists contend that we choose, instant to instant, who we are. *I'm a drug addict. Now I choose not to be. Uh-oh, I just did drugs, so I'm an addict again. Now, I choose not to do drugs any more, so I'm not an addict.* Etc. It's an appealing notion, but ignores Biology, the imperatives of which create a genuine *I*, and can make a mere verbal decision as futile as rowing into a hurricane.

Poets can, of course, write from different perspectives within a poem. They can try to write from no personality at all. But rather than reach a deeper understanding of the shaky ontological nature of the self and/or the world, most readers will likely reject the speaker of such poems as fraudulent, and not worth listening to.

Meaning as meaningless. Because our lives lack cosmic Meaning does not mean they lack meaning *to us*. Ask the parents of a longed-for baby if the new life lacks meaning.

Thank Deconstruction for the notion that we can't say "what we mean" without also saying (and meaning) its opposite—a notion that has metastasized into the belief that no one can have anything meaningful to say, and couldn't say it if he/she had.

Deconstruction, while clever, is essentially playful sophistry: a verbal game that reveals more about the ingenuity of the deconstructionist and the limits of lock-step logic than about our friend “reality.” If I tell a disruptive student, “Please be quiet,” I’m not simultaneously asking him to continue speaking, as he will learn if he tests me.

As intellectual play, and a way to expose contradictions—some genuine, some not—Deconstruction can be fun. But quirks in language and lock-step logic—Zeno’s paradoxes are early examples—do not reveal a true breakdown of meaning.

All texts are created equal. I could offer arguments such as “quality of mind” and “clarity of vision,” trying to disprove this statement. But preferring Keats to a Huggies ad is, finally, a matter of taste; and as another text tells us, there’s no arguing that. Still, writers are free to choose their own standards, and to write as if those standards arrived from On High.

Author as Corpse. People who envy authors may delight in reports of their demise. But, in the words of one author, pseudonymed Twain, this demise has been “greatly exaggerated.”

Because the number of sayable things isn’t infinite, it does not follow that everything that can be said is “always already written.” From a human’s finite perspective, a very, very large number of possible utterances is as good as infinite. Given that even to repeat the same word is not to say the same thing every time, it’s clear that every possible meaning could not have been expressed, much less written, even on a blackboard as large as the universe. Barthes’ phrase exemplifies his playfulness with texts. But even if everything were “always already written,” no brain could hold it all; so authors can still create, for themselves and their audience, something that wasn’t there before.

Author as Hitler. In the post-Holocaust world, few words carry the opprobrium of *fascist*. Yet not all strong leaders are bad. If I’m lost in a jungle, and find someone—even an autocrat—who knows the way out, I’m not oppressed if I choose to follow her or

him. By putting myself into an author's hands, I don't accept psychic slavery; I agree to follow, temporarily and for my own pleasure, another consciousness.

A DEFENSE OF LESS DIFFICULT POETRY

Right or wrong, the theories discussed above have sparked excellent poems. I hope it's clear, though, that Difficult poems are not the inevitable outcome of "advances" in our theoretical understanding of the world. To write Difficult is not a philosophical necessity, but an esthetic choice.

As Tony Hoagland points out, there are "two well-known descriptions of what a poem is, and does, one by Wordsworth, one by Stevens:

TYPE A: Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.

TYPE B: The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully."⁷

Type B poems are, by definition, Difficult. Type A poems may not be easy, but they are less Difficult. Not surprisingly, these types of poems attract different types of readers.⁸

Type A readers—once the norm—"want to experience a kind of clarification; to feel and see deeply into the world that they inhabit."⁹ They want poetry "that characterizes and clarifies human nature,"¹⁰ and helps them to live. Though they may know literary theory inside and out, they don't want to be self-conscious when they read. They love "the movie in the mind," the "waking dream" that they experience when lost in a text. They see reading as a chance to live by proxy, gaining experiences almost as vivid as real life. They want to meet fascinating people, and inhabit fascinating minds. "Do with me what you will," they tell the poet. "Just don't bore me."

Most avid readers start as Type A. Many remain there happily. But others, over time, mutate toward Type B.

Type B readers want poems that “disrupt or rearrange consciousness, “ creating “a condition of not-entirely understanding.”¹¹ They typically want to be self-conscious when they read. They mistrust the waking dream, the movie-in-the-mind, and may scorn such pleasures as naïve. Rather than “Take me, I’m yours,” their attitude toward the poet is, “I know your tricks. You can’t seduce me.” Refusing to be passive recipients of any poet’s thoughts, they demand to co-create meaning. They’re likely to be very aware of literary theory, and to accept its premises. Type B readers want poetry to challenge the limits of their intellect.

For purposes of this discussion, I will call poets who write for Type B readers “Difficult.” Since most poetry strikes most contemporary readers as at least somewhat difficult, I will call poets who write for Type A readers, “Less Difficult”.¹²

Like Beauty, Difficulty is in the eye of the beholder. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” seemed Difficult when it appeared. Now, to anyone familiar with contemporary poetry, it’s not difficult at all.

“The Waste Land,” for all its familiarity, is still fairly Difficult. It’s use of foreign languages and obscure allusions, its changing speakers and lack of transitions make most readers glad for copious footnotes. Yet extended passages of lyric brilliance, and a consistent general tone (gloom and exhaustion, as it happens), mitigate the difficulty.

Ezra Pound’s Cantos are Difficult for the same reasons as *The Waste Land*, and leavened similarly by lyric brilliance. Pound’s allusions and foreign quotations, though, are more obscure than Eliot’s. Also, Pound was certifiably insane.

Mention Difficult poetry today, and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E jumps to mind. The most influential and imitated Difficult poet writing today, though, is probably John Ashbery. His fertility of imagination, as well as his linguistic chops, are formidable. Still, reading his work can be like watching a man write brilliantly on a blackboard with his right hand, while his left, a line or two behind, erases all that’s gone before.¹³

A number of poets, termed “Elliptical” by Stephen Burt,¹⁴ write Difficult poems that seem to arise from the mating of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry with associative riffing like Dean Young’s, and wacky wildness like James Tate’s.

A pioneer in this style, and one of my favorites, is Mark Levine. His poem “Unemployment (1)” goes like this.

I had a calling.
 I took the call.
 It was all I could do to follow the voice streaming into me
 Like traffic on the runway where I lay
 Down to gather.
 I had a calling. I heard the geese bleat
 In the firmament as they migrated
 Into the jet’s jets.
 And could I have foreseen that falling
 I could have fallen too
 Rather than being sutured to the bottomless
 Freeze-out lake.
 For it is fine to lie within one’s borrowed blankets
 Looking up at the
 Dropped ceiling coming down.
 For at the moment I am employed counting the holes
 In the sound absorbing tiles
 Keeping a running record of the interlocutor’s
 Chides.
 I feel at one with extinction
 By my own hand
 (Inner hand)
 Though once there were many of my kind
 Flocking inland, or perhaps
 It felt that way.¹⁵

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I enjoy the word-play in this poem, the vivid imagery, the way one line of thought branches into another in unpredictable ways. I admire fresh and evocative phrases such as “the bottomless / Freeze-out lake” and “the interlocutor’s / Chides.” I like the ending’s strong statement of loss (“once there were many of my kind / Flocking inland,” undercut by, “or perhaps / It felt that way,” acknowledging the subjectivity of human perception.

As to what the poem “means,” I doubt that paraphrasable “meaning” is what Levine is going for. I suspect that the poem “means” itself—no less, no more. I do know, though, that I could write a longish paper investigating what it *might* mean.

I admire the work of Susan Wheeler—also labelled “Elliptical”—for its intelligence, wide-ranging knowledge, and strong self-awareness. Here is the brief “She’s a Pill.”

Oh, dangling long sleeves in the Mercurochrome.
Parking her punch on her knees.

I’m not a joiner.

In the night, a visitation, small as a thumb
enters the sealed house and ascends.

Mother wouldn’t have stood for *that* long. Drippy-drooping around
on heels. Leaving the blue cheese out.¹⁶

(Originally published in *Meme*, by Susan Wheeler. Copyright © 2012 by
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This short poem crackles with interesting words: “Mercurochrome” (dreaded wound-dressing from my childhood); “drippy-drooping” (perfect to describe some people I’ve known.)

“Parking her punch on her knees,” seems to imply that someone formidable is sitting with hands in (or close to) her lap. Following that phrase, the differently-indented non-sequitur, “I’m not a joiner” jolts me away from the “she” who is “a pill,” into the speaker’s consciousness, and one fact (is it a lie?) about herself.

What the “visitation” is, I can’t say—though I could speculate at length.

If I had to guess, I’d say this poem is about two sisters, one the speaker, one the pill. I don’t have a clear picture of either one; but to provide that is not Wheeler’s intent. Instead I get a few fragments of portraiture. If I want more, I must supply it.

My students, when first faced with Difficult poems, often react with outrage. “How can anybody understand this stuff?” they say.

Their outrage increases when I state that Difficult poets write as they do, not because they can’t write more clearly, but because *they don’t want to*.

Self-described Difficult poet Charles Bernstein asks, “1. Do you find the poem hard to appreciate? 2. Do you find the poem’s vocabulary and syntax hard to understand? 3. Are you often struggling with the poem? 4. Does the poem make you feel inadequate or stupid as a reader? 5. Is your imagination being affected by the poem?”

“If you answered any of these questions in the affirmative,” he says, “you are probably dealing with a difficult poem.”¹⁷

Difficult poetry is, by definition, difficult to read. It doesn’t yield to strategies that general readers use. More successful strategies include the following:

Read to enjoy the sound of the language. Savor individual words.

Read for an overall impression. Read several more times for a more definite impression.

Give up all expectations, and “have your way with the text,” as Barthes might say. Relish your freedom, entering and leaving the text when and where you like; making it mean what you want it to.

In “Close Calls with Nonsense: How to Read and Perhaps Enjoy Very New Poetry”¹⁸ Stephen Burt offers a list of ways to proceed. These include, “look for a persona and a world, not for an argument or a plot. Enjoy double meanings; don’t feel you must choose between them.” But Burt’s many excellent suggestions require repeated close readings—i.e., *studying* the poem.

To study, though, is not always to enjoy. I like to enjoy the poem first, then study to enjoy it more. Over three hundred years ago, John Dryden complained of poets who give us “a hard nut to break our teeth, without a kernel for our pains.” Difficult poetry often

requires that we crack the hard nut first, and hope a kernel will be there—that, or insert our own.

Less Difficult poets still abound. But if there is a fight for dominance, the Difficult have grabbed the upper hand. Difficult poets may not be more numerous, but they seem younger than the Less Difficult, their influence growing faster as they flood out of influential graduate schools. They see themselves as more philosophically “with it” than the Less Difficult—more adventurous and hip, their work flashing with panache. Adorned with literary theory, they radiate the glamour of intellectual rebels: stylish, cool, in tune with the latest trends. Many Difficult poets profess boredom with, not to say contempt for, Less Difficult work: too obvious, too easy, too predictable.

I’ve written mildly Elliptical poems, and can testify that they are fun to write. The most laborious and frustrating part of writing, at least for me, is the struggle to present thoughts in a clear, logical, tonally appropriate, and grammatical way. Theorists are right to call such writing artificial; the words that you are reading now did not arrive as they are printed here. But the human brain processes information most efficiently, and enters the waking dream most easily, when information comes in a clear, coherent, logical way. With no need to wrestle words into their most-digestible form, Difficult poems become, in that regard, easier to write than Less Difficult ones.

It’s also easier, when writing Difficult poetry, to follow Pound’s commandment: “Make it new.” When you can juxtapose anything with anything—and enlist randomness if you need help—newness is readily achieved.

Difficult poems are easier psychologically, too, in that they shield the poet’s psyche. T.S. Eliot can’t have failed to feel exposed by “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” “The Waste Land” gave him room to hide.

Irony—a favorite Elliptical tactic—protects the poet’s psyche, too. Piled high, irony becomes a wall to hide behind and take potshots. If anyone objects, the Ironist can say, “I didn’t mean that. That was irony.”

A well-crafted Difficult poem may easily disguise banality. Criticism of Difficult poems necessitates co-creation: impressionistic and highly subjective.

As general readers of poetry fall away, an increasing percentage of the readers who remain are scholars and/or literary experts. These can easily become jaded, in the “Been there, done that” sense, and start leaning toward the esoteric. Yet *they* decide what poetry is taught to novices in classrooms, as well as which poets win awards and are favorably reviewed. Not surprisingly, such readers often prefer Difficult poems, which provide the best chance for experts to “do their thing”—interpret, theorize, lecture, and publish. Difficult poems are a boon to academic careers for those who write them, and for those who write about them, too.

Yet, despite the career advantages of the Difficult, I prefer Less Difficult poems. I reject much of the theory that underpins Difficult writing; and those ideas that seem valid can be addressed without succumbing to Yvor Winters’ “fallacy of imitative form”—trying to express disorientation, dislocation, confusion, for instance, with poems that are disorienting, dislocated, and confused. Tony Hoagland, Thomas Lux, Mark Halliday, and others have written entertaining and readable Type A poems that address Type B concerns.

Humor, the ultimate intellectual subversion, allows poets to deal with literary theory—much of which emphasizes subversion of norms—without resorting to Difficult techniques.¹⁹ James Tate, Dean Young, and Lynn Emanuel use humor to express and interrogate the slipperiness of language, shifting and unreliable narrators, fragmentation of experience, lack of closure, moral relativism, indeterminacy, the problem of *meaning*, etc., while keeping at least one foot in Type A territory.

The Fantastic—intense imagination, surrealism, and even absurdism, as in the work of Russell Edson, David Shumate, and Richard Garcia—can also deal cogently and entertainingly with Type B concerns, while giving our brains new and tantalizing stews to chew.

Figurative language has the power to expand the reach of Language in a way that more Difficult techniques approximate, at best. Lyn Hejinian intends, in her prose poems, to make the paragraph “a unit representing a single moment of time, a single moment in the mind, its content all the thought, thought particles, impressions, impulses—all the diverse, particular, and contradictory elements—that are included in an active and emotional mind at any given instant.”²⁰

She does achieve some interesting effects. But anyone who tries to capture “a single moment” will find that the hand can’t write fast enough, even if everything could be simultaneously apprehended, which it can’t. Instead, the mind focuses on one item, then another item, and another item, each erasing the “totality” that went before. As Charles Simic states, “Only figurative language can hope to grasp the simultaneity of experience.”²¹

The most important reason, though, why I prefer Less Difficult poems is that, even when most brilliant, Difficult poems don’t, as a rule, do what I most want poems *to* do: 1) Facilitate the waking dream. 2) Lodge in my memory. 3) Allow me to inhabit—not just ricochet off—fascinating minds. 4) Evoke a wide range of emotions, including positive ones.

Good readers can become almost as involved in a literary situation as in a real one. They laugh and cry, feel fear, anger, desire, elation—experience, in fact, the range of human emotions. Human brains enjoy this state of waking dream, and—led by the Unconscious—move naturally into it. Poetry can encourage this movement by effective use of imagery, rhythm, diction, orchestration, unity, logical development—all the old-fashioned Creative Writing virtues.

Many characteristics of Difficult poetry—discontinuity, non sequitur, fractured syntax, etc.—disrupt the waking dream, or stop it from happening. The brain reacts, instead, with confusion and anxiety. Rather than relax and let the Unconscious take over, the conscious mind fights to make sense of the disruptive stimuli.

It may be true, as Barthes claims, that by accepting initial befuddlement, ceasing to “resist the ecstatic collapse of cultural assumptions,”²² a blissful state of *jouissance* can be achieved. But much more commonly, Difficult poetry heightens self-conscious intellectuality.

It also presents a patently false voice. Instead of offering a consciousness that, however unusual, the reader can identify, identify with, and finally, inhabit, Difficult poems may purposely hold readers at bay with a voice that seems autistically distant, schizophrenically fractured, or false in some other way.

In real life—yes, it exists—I dislike people who obfuscate. Nor do I like obfuscating voices in poems. I want to feel that the poem I’m reading arose in someone real who wants intensely to communicate with me. I don’t want a speaker who dangles meaning out of reach. Letting me in on the post-modern joke doesn’t lessen my annoyance if the speaker wants to show off, more than to connect. The Difficult speaker is often—openly, and by design—a fraud: a Piltdown Man composed of arbitrarily joined parts. Sensing that no such creature ever walked, or could have walked, the earth, I don’t enjoy the poem.²³

In addition to these drawbacks, most (not all!) Difficult poems aren’t memorable. Shakespeare’s brief candle, Donne’s compass, Keats’ Grecian Urn, Arnold’s retreating sea of faith, stay in my mind and change the way I view the world. Among contemporary poems, Kinnell’s bear, Komunyakaa’s Vietnam Wall, and other images too plentiful to name, have also reshaped my world. Yet, no matter how carefully I read Ashbery, and how impressive his “chops,” five minutes later, I’ve forgotten what I read.

The emotional range of Difficult poetry also seems limited. Poetry has already been shoved onto a small reservation. Difficult poetry further constricts that range, confining the poem mainly to Kafkaesque feelings—confusion, mistrust, anxiety, helplessness, wry humor, despair—or those contemporary favorites: scorn, and knowing self-satisfaction. The strategies of Difficult poetry almost guarantee that these emotions will predominate.

Yes, they suit our paranoid and disillusioned time. But do contemporary readers need *poems* to make them anxious and depressed? Or smug? Shouldn't art help us, at least sometimes, to surmount negative emotions, rather than intimate that they are all that a moral, intelligent, aware person can legitimately feel?

CONCLUSION

Everything I've said may be dead wrong. I may be stuck in the past: a dodderer preferring tie-dye to Armani, The Beatles and Hendrix to Nicki Minaj and Lil' Wayne. But I think the theories behind Difficult poetry are akin to what adolescents go through when they face their parents' fallibility, and can't stop barking their outrage. I think the Difficults' methods limit poetry. I think that they have bet on the wrong horse.

I think this because, though I like some Difficult poems and admire many, I rarely love reading them. I rarely thrust one at my friends, saying, "You've got to check this out!"

Maybe I mistake my own habits for Natural Law. Still, I ask more from poetry than mere intelligence and literary sophistication. I want to spend my energy resonating with poems, not deciphering them. A poem is not, for me, holy writ to be pondered endlessly because God's secrets hide inside. I don't mind a little work, but I don't enjoy finishing (co-creating) incompletely-realized poems.

I've heard poets characterize their work as "only as difficult as it has to be." Do these poets really lug such a weight of brilliance and sensitivity that only Difficult writing can

contain it, and only the most discerning readers, pick it up? I want to sass back, “Aren’t you good enough to make it clear?”

A quote attributed to Confucius via Ezra Pound states that the whole of human thought can be entered on the back of a postage stamp. If “human thought” means abstract thought, I agree. Anyway, I don’t read poems to increase my stock of abstract thoughts, as Difficult poems encourage me to do. I read to gain vicarious experiences. I read to discover verbal riches. I read for striking images, startling associations, revelatory metaphors, miracles of wit and imagination. I read to be excited, delighted, moved—to freshen, deepen, and revitalize my life.

Back in the 1980’s, scientists discovered neurons in the human brain that, when we witness something, fire as if the thing witnessed *is happening to us*. These “mirror neurons” may explain our powers of empathy, the appeal of narrative, the strength of verbal imagery, the vividness of dreams.

Whether or not mirror neurons are responsible, I want to read poems that feel vivid as life.

As a teacher of poetry workshops, I wonder if I fail my students by not teaching them to write Difficult poems. I worry that Difficult poems may be the natural outcome of a setting in which students and teachers chew and re-chew every poem submitted, searching for a kernel that may not be there.

Good students are, by definition, open and impressionable. Deluged with new ideas, eager for approval, desperate not to seem dense or retrograde, who can blame them for writing to increase coolness and decrease vulnerability? Some workshops instill a loathing of sentimentality and cliché that can spawn a Godzilla-like Poetry Superego, cruel in its defense against “un-problematized” emotions: love, tenderness, joy, grief, rage, enthusiasm. Yet these emotions embody the life-force. They power all of the best art, and—absent religion—are all we have to counter the despair to which rationality, forced to stand alone, must lead.

I don't expect to persuade the already-committed; there's no arguing taste. In any case, just as good psychotherapy depends more on the therapist than the theoretical orientation, every first-rate poet rises above any category to which he or she may be assigned. I don't believe that Poetry will out-popular the Superbowl if more poets write Less Difficult poems.²⁴ All the same, I urge the undecided to choose the Less Difficult road, with all its attendant difficulties.

This very week, a famous scholar proclaimed a certain Difficult poet to be, more or less, the new Star in the East. Well, I've seen the star, and won't be following. To write the kind of poems I love to read, poets must be brilliant and skilled enough to communicate without obscurity or obfuscation. They must write, as the best poets always have, with insight, awareness, wit, imagination, passion, intense involvement with life, and all the energy they can muster; and they must do it in the knowledge that general readers—Type A readers like me—are still out there, waiting for poems that speak to them, not just intellect to intellect, but human to human.

¹ Tony Hoagland has written, with his usual insight and good sense, about the avant-garde's distrust of narrative in, "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment," from *real sofisticashun*, (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2006), 173-187.

² More recently, in pursuit of what Stephen Burt has labeled "The New Thing" (*Boston Review*, May/June 2009), some have abandoned invention and high energy in favor of a stripped-down, hermetic, near-anorexic concreteness based on W.C. Williams' "No ideas but in things."

³ Old Testament-style: eye for an eye.

⁴ Even extremely Difficult poets defend their practices in logical essays, as if their theories apply only when making art.

⁵ New Age guru Leonard Orr, who popularized the therapeutic technique known as Rebirthing, has called death "a self-fulfilling prophecy." If we had no word for death, I've heard him state, we would not think of it, and it wouldn't exist. At 75, Orr is still alive and kicking. We'll have to wait and see.

⁶ On a trip to my childhood home, I found a stash of my grade school papers, and was amazed to find that, in the 7th grade, I already sounded just like me.

⁷ Tony Hoagland, "Recognition, Vertigo, and Passionate Worldliness," from *Poetry*, September 2010. Taken from the web: www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/239968.

⁸ Of course, there is much overlap.

⁹ Tony Hoagland, "Recognition, Vertigo, and Passionate Worldliness," from *Poetry*, September 2010. Taken from the web: www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/239968.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Common terms to describe this type of poet include "Accessible," "Reader-friendly," "Hospitable," "Welcoming", and the opposite of Difficult, "Easy." All of these terms have also been used pejoratively.

¹³ I'm not at all sure that he—poetic trickster that he is—would dislike this characterization.

¹⁴ Stephen Burt, "The Elliptical Poets," from *Close Calls With Nonsense* (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2009), 345-355

¹⁵ Mark Levine, "Unemployment (1), *Poetry*, July/August 2012. Taken from the Internet: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/244212>

¹⁶ Susan Wheeler, "She's a Pill," *Meme*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012).

¹⁷ Charles Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 3-4

¹⁸ Stephen Burt, *Close Calls With Nonsense* (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2009), 11

¹⁹ By humor, I don't mean the willed wackiness of some Difficult poems, which squeeze a superficial strangeness from the conscious mind, trying to impersonate a wild, insouciant intelligence.

²⁰ "The Rejection of Closure," by Lyn Hejinian, in *Twentieth Century American Poetics*, ed Gioia, Mason, and Schoerke, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 369.

²¹ "Negative Capability and Its Children," by Charles Simic, in *Twentieth Century American Poetics*, ed Gioia, Mason, and Schoerke, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 369.p 346.

²² Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker," *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 4th Edition, (Essex, England: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 158.

²³ "If we do not believe the voice in a poem, nothing else matters. . . . unless it seems a real voice in a real body in a real world, it is not likely to affect us deeply." David Mason and John Frederick Nims, *Western Wind: An Introduction to Poetry*, Fifth Edition (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2006) 7

²⁴ Seeing the fervor with which my son and his friends manipulate their iPods, I fear that reading itself may go the way of cave-painting and tossing tree trunks for sport.