

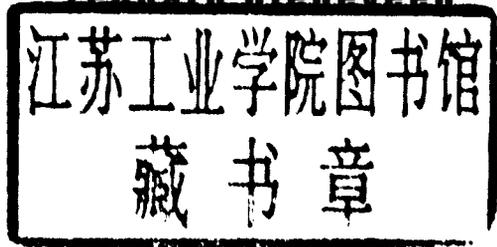
THE DIFFICULTIES OF **Modernism**

Leonard Diepeveen

DO NOT ERASE

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Preface

Speaking at Harvard in the early 1950s, the poet Randall Jarrell noted that he had been asked to talk about the “Obscurity of the Poet.” Jarrell commented that his assigned topic did not mean that he was to talk about a timeless quality of art, but was instead to speak on something that had come to prominence in the first half of the century. Its outlines could be sketched with precision:

That the poetry of the first half of this century *was* too difficult—just as the poetry of the eighteenth century *was* full of antitheses, that of the metaphysicals full of conceits, that of the Elizabethan dramatists full of rant and quibbles—is a truism that it would be absurd to deny. How our poetry got this way—how romanticism was purified and exaggerated and “corrected” into modernism; how poets carried all possible tendencies to their limits, with more than scientific zeal; how the dramatic monologue, which once had depended for its effect upon being a departure from the norm of poetry, now became in one form or another the norm; how poet and public stared at each other with righteous indignation, till the poet said: “Since you won’t read me, I’ll make sure you can’t”—is one of the most complicated and interesting of stories. (Jarrell 1953a, 12)

Jarrell’s take on modern difficulty is a complex of shorthand arguments. When he insisted that difficulty *was* modern poetry’s central characteristic, Jarrell also asserted that modernism was no longer in flux, that modernism had been accomplished, and that its difficulty was central to this completion. The details of this accomplishment were a matter of record; with his assertion that “romanticism was purified and exaggerated and ‘corrected’ into modernism,” Jarrell suggested that difficulty had a publicly recognized discourse. Jarrell’s sense of difficulty as public discourse was part of his characterization of “difficulty” as a story; moreover, it was a story that his listeners

needed to understand as a social phenomenon, one in which poets and readers had consciously played out their roles, playing them out to some degree as melodrama. This story, Jarrell believed, had important consequences, not the least of which was a loss of audience for poetry.

Now, Jarrell knew he was being polemical, arguing for a particular way of understanding modernism's difficulty. But many of his ideas about difficulty would have been beyond argument to almost anyone in his audience. In particular, he did not need to convince his audience that modernism was commonly seen as difficult, or that this difficulty needed to be understood as a social phenomenon, or that everyone involved in the difficulty debate claimed the ethical high ground—or that difficulty had triumphed. All that could be assumed.

However, fifty years later, this “most complicated and interesting of stories” remains untold. *The Difficulties of Modernism* narrates this story and considers its effects. It does so with the understanding that difficulty is an experience familiar to everyone with some knowledge of twentieth-century high culture. Readers even mildly interested in twentieth-century high art can connect difficulty to modernism, often by referring to one of modernism's famous stories—the scandal of the Armory Show, perhaps, or the riot at the Paris premiere of the *Sacre du printemps*. They might be familiar with the critical wisdom that while Joyce wrote a difficult but worthwhile book in *Ulysses*, in *Finnegans Wake* he went several steps too far. And while every reader of this book will have some personal experience of the exhilaration that can accompany a successful struggle with difficult art, more memorable perhaps are the *failed* struggles with it: perhaps the memory of fumbling through *The Waste Land* or *Mrs. Dalloway* in college (an acquaintance, on hearing me describe this book, remarked of *The Waste Land*: “I didn't even understand the notes”); or of glumly listening to a perplexing piece of twentieth-century music that filled the second half of a symphony concert; or of walking into a contemporary art gallery and staring blankly at the neat rectangle of firebricks Carl Andre had arranged in the center of the gallery floor.

The Difficulties of Modernism, from its definitions on up, stays close to this sense of difficulty as an experience. It defines difficulty in terms of how modern readers understood and used it: as a barrier to what one normally expected to receive from a text, such as its logical meaning, its emotional expression, or its pleasure. For modern readers, difficulty was the experience of having one's desires for comprehension blocked, an experience provoked by a wide variety of works of art (“comprehension” is here defined broadly). Without dealing with this barrier in some way—and such dealings were not restricted to *understanding* or decoding the syntax of the difficult moment—it was impossible to interact significantly with the text. Difficulty thus drove

its readers forward, for they realized that their bafflement was an inadequate response. Further, until they removed or contained their bafflement, readers overwhelmingly reacted with anxiety. Modernism's difficulty, then, is not merely a classifiable set of techniques. To discuss difficulty solely as the property of texts is to impoverish it and miss how difficulty became an integral part of high culture. Difficulty must be understood in terms of a reading process, and it manifests itself socially; modernism begins with a typical interaction between art and its audience. Difficulty, this book argues, is that recurring *relationship* that came into being between modernist works and their audiences.

Two central claims about difficulty shaped its social articulation. First, literary modernism's first readers often asserted that difficulty's prevalence was unique to modernism, frequently commenting that difficulty currently was, as one reader grumbled, "running rampant in literature" ("Flat Prose" [1914] 1986, 38). Difficulty, in fact, was the most noted characteristic of what became the canonical texts of high modernism; it dramatically shaped the reception of Faulkner, Joyce, Stein, Moore, Eliot, Pound, and Woolf, just to name those who early were considered to be central modernist writers. Now, it's not that people thought difficulty had never before surfaced in literature. However, there was a general sense that this was the first time in history that difficulty was so widespread, and that modernism was unique in that its difficulty was seen as being central to art's *direction*. Second, modern difficulty made big claims for itself. T. S. Eliot, for example, would claim that "it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results" (Eliot [1921] 1975b, 65).

Difficulty thus was central to people's sense that modernism was a sea change—not just in the properties of art works, but in the default and most useful ways of talking about and interacting with art. Modernism's difficulty set up the terms and protocols by which readers read and gained access to modernist texts, and it became a litmus test: one could predict both a given reader's response to modernism by his or her reaction to difficulty, and a writer's place in the canon by the difficulty of his or her work. Modern difficulty was a powerful aesthetic, then. It also continues to be one, for aesthetic difficulty retains its legitimizing force today. Modern difficulty has profoundly shaped the entire twentieth century; one's ability to move in high culture continues to depend, in large part, on how one reacts to difficulty.

Focusing primarily on literature, this book examines what followed from the moment when modernism's readers began to comment that difficulty was everywhere. Why did difficult writing produce such anxiety? In what ways

did difficult works contest traditional understandings of pleasure? How did the argument over difficulty shape what became the high modern canon? How much of literary professional activity is bound up with difficulty? How much do modern understandings of difficulty shape contemporary culture? Answering these questions is crucial to understanding not only difficult literature, but the relationship between all forms of high art and culture in the past century, for the major arguments about literary difficulty travel unchanged to other arts, using the same rhetorical tropes, describing the same kind of experiences.

Difficulty's movement in culture is not only widespread, it is routinized, doing its work quietly, using presuppositions that most often "go without saying." As a result, in answering the above questions, this book attempts to defamiliarize difficulty, to make it look strange. It does so by examining the routine ways in which difficulty functions, questioning whether these activities serve culture best by working unexamined in the background.

To make my generalizations about modern difficulty accurate, I have made my research broad. This book examines the initial response to the work of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, Stein, Faulkner, and Moore, as well as the reception histories of Robert Frost and Willa Cather. In addition, it turns to early thumbnail arguments about the modern canon, found in the introductions to over one hundred anthologies of modern poetry, as well as the first generation of books on modernism (ca. 1927 to 1935), particularly those on modern poetry. It works with the essays of Eliot, Pound, and Moore; with the editorials of J. C. Squire at the *London Mercury* and those of Harriet Monroe at *Poetry*; and, of course, little magazines such as *The Little Review* and *transition*. To broaden my evidence, I have collected representative arguments from the visual arts and music. To get a sense of the hold of modern difficulty on contemporary high culture, I have also researched contemporary responses to difficulty and difficulty's role in the culture wars. This has given me a base of more than 1,500 books, reviews, articles, and anthologies from which I make my generalizations.

Early on, my research revealed the basic characteristics of difficulty's movements; as I continued, the broadness of my research revealed those basic characteristics to be present everywhere. Probably the most important aspect of the difficulty argument—one that shaped the theoretical approach I found most useful—was that developed theoretical arguments did not drive the conversation about difficult modernism. There is no well-reasoned argument by someone like, say, Pound that established a theoretical basis for difficulty. What primarily drove the discussion were comments like Eliot's. The most frequently quoted comment on difficulty in twentieth-century Anglo-American literary culture, Eliot's remark is shaped more like an epigram than

an argument. That casualness typifies modern comments on difficulty. A lot of the difficulty argument was carried out as shorthand, almost as rhetorical tropes. (Perhaps some of this was because difficulty was central to *public* discourse about modernism and had the generalizing that characterizes such discourse.) Further, there is no evidence that modernist readers were silently using more sophisticated arguments on which to base their ad hoc comments. The argument about difficulty can more profitably be understood as a kind of game, a game with a limited number of rhetorical counters but a great variety of combinations. This book reveals what those counters were, the standard ways in which they were moved, and their consequences. *The Difficulties of Modernism* thus is, in a sense, a social rhetoric of difficulty: “rhetoric,” because it is concerned with recurrent linguistic strategies, and “social” because these strategies occurred within a social domain and were profoundly implicated in it.

The sketchiness yet preponderance of arguments about difficulty, the stylized reactions to it, along with the breadth of my research have led me to analyze the work performed by *typical* descriptions of difficulty. I do not give pride of place to those discussions that are the most theoretically sophisticated or that “get it right,” for such an approach would not adequately portray difficulty’s extraordinary activities. Making sense of modern difficulty necessitates looking at how it typically functioned in its culture.

Since what is typical in modernism drives my argument, modernism’s understandings of difficulty set the agenda for how I discuss accounts of difficulty from before the twentieth century (not that I believe that modernism’s understandings were always right). As a consequence, though there are many moments in the book where I point to earlier understandings of difficulty, *The Difficulties of Modernism* does not give a time line. It does not begin with Aristotle, move through Dante, Kant, and Hegel, and then onward toward early modernism. It is not that these earlier moments are irrelevant to modernism’s difficulty, but a writer like Aristotle shows up where he impinges most clearly on modernism’s peculiar difficulties; this book addresses how difficult modernism put Aristotle to use.

This book limits its attention to Anglo-American culture during the years 1910 to 1950, setting the parameters of analysis at the beginning of the twentieth century and at midcentury. The chronological range is pragmatic: beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century one starts to hear the complaint that difficulty is everywhere. Earlier, and in the previous century (except, possibly, in painting), comments about difficulty are directed at individuals, such as George Meredith or Joseph Conrad. Around 1915 difficulty starts to be discussed as a *movement*, and a large movement indeed, for readers begin to comment on how difficulty had overtaken *all* the arts. By

1950, a fairly impermeable canon of high modernism had been established in the university curriculum. And that general sense of modernism is the one that functions as my definition. It is the idea of modernism that typically was promoted in English departments from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s, modernism with a capital *M*: portentous, asserting a unity for itself, and claiming privileged status to speak about early twentieth-century culture.

To have stretched this history to the end of the twentieth century would have resulted either in a monstrously large book or one too full of demurrals and throat-clearings as it tried to separate the beginning from the end of the century. On the other hand, my research reveals that contemporary difficulty has an enormously weighty inheritance from high modernism. Postmodernism may present some new forms of difficulty, but the *reflexes* about difficulty haven't changed. Thus, although this is not primarily a book about contemporary difficulty, there are obvious homologies that I point out in notes, text boxes, and some of the anecdotes that start or conclude chapters. But I do not give an extended argument about them; this is not an exhaustive argument, but a suggestion of how modern difficulty continues to have its hold on us.

The same desire to create a tellable narrative has limited my focus by and large to Anglo-American culture. This is not to say I was oblivious to the allure of wandering outside this linguistic cultural situation, given the connection many high modern writers had with various continental aesthetic communities. Moreover, many of the arguments from other cultures about difficulty not only contain the same basic logic, they use the same tropes and demonstrate the same social and physiological responses (chapter 2 begins to point out why this similarity might be the case). Yet while I sometimes point to those highly suggestive similarities, my interest in telling a relatively complete story prompted me to use a culturally more uniform and stable body of evidence.

The Difficulties of Modernism begins by noting the perceived preponderance of high modern difficulty and examining how that preponderance shaped modern culture. As well, it considers how modern understandings of earlier difficulty helped form the high modern canon. Chapter 2 turns to examine the powerful affective responses to difficulty. In the formation of the modern canon, difficulty did its work in a highly charged atmosphere, for difficulty is always accompanied by evaluation and often gives rise to powerful affective responses. Difficulty is an odd aesthetic experience; using their whole bodies, people react viscerally to difficulty, often with anxiety, anger, and ridicule. The public debate about difficulty and its scandalousness, then, was much more than a story of elitism and middle-class anti-intellectualism. It was also

a story of anger, of pleasure, and of the body. Moreover, those affective responses are enmeshed in the standard ways of conceptualizing difficulty and profoundly influence how difficulty shaped modern culture.

Not surprisingly, given their highly charged responses, people thought difficulty was important. High modernism's skeptics thought it was destroying literature, even civilization; while modernism's apologists made big claims for difficulty, arguing that difficulty had important things to say about modern culture or human psychology. Chapter 3 examines those standard arguments for difficulty and looks at the kinds of work they did in forming the high modern canon. It considers the arguments that difficulty is the inevitable domain of the professional, that difficulty accurately portrays the human mind or modern culture, that difficulty is an agent for social change, that all new works are difficult and that difficulty will disappear as the difficult work becomes a classic, that the apparently difficult is actually simple, or that difficulty is essential to all great art. (These arguments, as this and chapters 4 and 5 indicate, did not march along in a triumph of efficient logic. Instead, they were driven by an inner conflict, a conflict that on the one hand grounded difficulty in a professionalist/classicist ethos, and on the other hand kept nervously reaching back to romanticist ideals of aesthetic expression, including the sublime.) Chapters 4 and 5 look at several instinctive attitudes in high modernism, attitudes that were key to difficulty's triumph: the relationship between modernism's moralistic sense of machismo and its distrust of both pleasure and simplicity. In doing so, these chapters posit that these attitudes are entangled with the visceral attitudes delineated in chapter 2.

The Difficulties of Modernism also continues the current examination into the social context of modernism. What modernism's defenders did not clearly acknowledge, but which is central to understanding how difficulty worked in modern culture, is that difficulty had an important social function as a cultural gatekeeper. Knowing how to respond properly to difficult art became a way of indicating one's membership in high culture. High culture eventually accepted this social function so completely that it was possible for it to do its work in the background. This acceptance has everything to do with how we got where we are today, and *where* that "where we are" actually is. Modernism was formed on an aesthetics of difficulty; since that time high culture has been living off of a modernist inheritance. Unless we reexamine that allegiance and the ways in which it continues to control contemporary culture, we are doomed to accept its benefits and its costs.

Finally, a note on the vexing question of terminology. Most of the time I have tried to indicate specific aspects of early twentieth-century literature by referring to "high modernists" or "difficult modernists" as a way of indicating

those who generally supported difficult modernism. Those who were skeptical of difficulty I typically refer to as “traditionalists,” or “difficulty’s skeptics.” At times when it is clear that I am referring to difficulty, I occasionally use the plain term “modernism.” I realize that the terminology may dichotomize early twentieth-century culture more than it at times deserves, that some interesting variegations exist (for instance, a conservative like Harriet Monroe represented herself as more modern than Ezra Pound). But difficulty *was* a highly charged debate, with almost no one occupying a middle ground, and my terminological shorthand does keep the book from grinding to a halt every time I use these terms. Context on each of these occasions should make it clear in which direction my terminology is pointing.

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Difficulty as Fashion

Poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*.

—T. S. Eliot

The trick of incomprehensibility is the best trick that has ever been invented for the benefit of writers who, if they can feel or think, do not know how to translate their thoughts and feelings into the language of art.

—J. C. Squire

If the literary history of the early twentieth century teaches anything, it teaches that modern writers liked nothing better than a good fight. Literary enemies were useful; they allowed one to heighten the rhetoric, to draw in one's arguments with decisive strokes, and to point out the clear direction literature, if it was to have any integrity at all, must follow. In retrospect the polemics may seem overdone; early twentieth-century writers drew the demerits of their opponents' claims (and the virtues of their own) more like cartoons than like subtle portraits. But these histrionics were useful; indeed, it is likely that the institution we now know as high modernism could not have been created without such melodrama.

High modernism, then, was built with clumsy but efficient arguments. Of these arguments, difficulty was central. Difficulty, one of the early twentieth century's great cultural debates, had big consequences—as everyone in the literary community then was aware. Everybody had something to say about modern literary difficulty, and they often did not rest there; those who argued about difficulty and modern literature extended their claims to *all* modern art forms and beyond—to *all* literature, and to *all* art. Anything but equivocal, early twentieth-century readers made grandiose assertions, claiming that *all* good literature was difficult, or that *all* good literature was simple. Further, all those embroiled in the difficulty argument referred to

themselves as the underdog, a strategy that created the necessary sense of crisis and imbued their writing with polemical urgency.¹

While that dichotomizing made for robust assertions, it did not allow for much maneuvering room. By magnifying their claims to *all* literature, and by demonizing their opponents, early twentieth-century writers made literature into a zero-sum game, a game that acknowledged neither ties nor stalemates, a game that would end only when the competitors had been separated into the victors and the vanquished. Modern readers thus did not discuss literature in terms of a variety of honorable strategies, of which difficulty was but one option among many. The difficulty argument did not open up literature to a variety of strategies; rather, it assembled a canon of like-minded literary works. Further, difficulty was made to carry more weight than it could support—difficulty became not just an argument about comprehension, it became an argument about professionalization, about pleasure, about the meaning of twentieth-century culture. Difficulty took in a huge chunk of the aesthetic landscape, and it seemed that the winners of the difficulty argument would walk away with a very large prize.

Difficulty, then, was the early twentieth century's central tool for arguing about what literature is and who should control it. However, whatever gains modern difficulty produced came with a price. By making the stakes so high (something that, as chapter 2 argues, was perhaps unavoidable), modern readers forfeited diversity and flexibility. This loss made two things inevitable: difficulty's apparently seamless end product (a product that by the 1950s was known unproblematically as modernism), and the dominant ways of reading that product.²

In modernism's cantankerous setting an exceptionally resonant voice was that of J. C. Squire, editor of the *London Mercury*. In the pages of his monthly, from which he coolly surveyed contemporary culture, Squire often grumbled about the difficulty of modern literature, painting, and music. Even so, the issue of June 1924 was something special. To be sure, it followed its usual agenda; as it did every month since its first issue in 1919, the magazine commented on a wide range of books and cultural events. For the edification of its ten thousand readers the *London Mercury* meditated on contemporary theater and the Wembley Exhibition; it indulged in some literary chat and ruminated on the virtues of the now-forgotten poet Herbert Trench; and its lengthy review section assessed contemporary poetry, fiction, music, belles lettres, literary history, and biography. But the June issue's short story, Squire's "The Man Who Wrote Free Verse" (1924, 127–37), contained Squire's most sustained attack on modern difficulty to date. Giving a forum for Squire's métier—parody and satire—the story not only puts into play the basic rhetorical strategies that writers used to oppose difficult modernism, it

**Apollo through the woods came down
Furred like a merchant fine,
And sate with a sailor at an Inn
Sharing a jug of wine.**

**Had sun-rays, spilled out of a storm,
Thither the God conveyed?
Or some green and floating cloudlet caught
On the fringes of a glade?**

—Opening lines of Herbert Trench's 1907 *New Poems*

also illustrates the social stresses that brought the modern canon into being, and it serves as a primer for the concerns of *The Difficulties of Modernism*.

The story begins on a hot summer day at the country home of Lady Muriel, who is hosting several guests for the weekend, including two young men, Adrian Roberts and Reggie Twyford. Resting after lunch, Reggie, languidly thumbing through Lady Muriel's collection of currently fashionable authors, drops his book to complain that Lady Muriel's books "seem even more ridiculous here than they do in town" (121). Adrian, taking on the role of cynic that he wears throughout the story, cannot see why Reggie wastes his time on such trash. However, with the air of someone who sees it as his painful duty to know avant-garde high culture, Reggie responds with a lament for the state into which contemporary literature has drifted: "I can't quite ignore it all as you do. It's the poetry I was thinking of most. I confess I can't make head or tail of three-quarters of it, but I can't help thinking I may be wrong. Why should they be writing what seems to us cacophonous gibberish? It isn't only Muriel, you know. Lots of people seem to admire it, and it's happening all over Europe and America" (128). As Reggie sees it, the incomprehensible writing found in Muriel's books (particularly the poetry) raises two issues that don't mesh very well: the problem of motivation (the question of why "they" would write "cacophonous gibberish"), and the problem of fashion (not only the fact that "lots of people seem to admire it," but also that so much is being written, that "it's happening all over Europe and America"). These two observations, coupled with his own incomprehension, shape Reggie's anxiety.

Adrian, on the other hand, doesn't share Reggie's apprehension. He sees difficult writing as not much more than a publicity stunt: "We hear a good deal about it and the papers we read seem to think it all ought to be taken seriously. In point of fact these creatures are scarcely read by each other." He