

Introduction

Alan C. Purves

When the reviewers greet a novel by Thomas Pynchon, they refer to him as a “difficult” or “obscure” writer. When reviewers comment on a new novel by Stephen King, they may use various adjectives, but not those two. As teachers of literature in English, we know that *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce is difficult; we know that *Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter is easy. We know that in the 1930s even sophisticated readers found T. S. Eliot difficult, but today’s readers have less trouble. Conversely, for many college students a novel of Trollope’s or one by Dickens is considered difficult, but in their day they were light general reading. But what makes these texts shift in their category?

The texts clearly have not changed; have the readers? What is it that changes over time and what is it that varies within an era? Is there some objective criterion for determining the difficulty of a work of literature? In the field of reading, formulas are often used to determine something called “readability,” formulas based on word and sentence length as well as on counts of word frequency. They seem to work with nonliterary texts, but do these formulas really hold up when one deals with poetry, drama, or fiction? Many of William Blake’s lyrics would be low on a readability formula, but many readers would find them difficult.

Perhaps we might better consider difficulty less from an objective perspective, but from a constructivist one. Such a view would suggest that difficulty is an aspect of the individual’s estimate of the nature of the object and that individual’s estimate of her or his capacity to deal with the object. When a fourteen-year-old boy says of a story “That’s a childish story, written for younger kids. . . . I mean I don’t understand it,” the student is commenting upon his perception of the story and his perception of himself. When a teacher says of a class, “They didn’t really understand *Peter Rabbit* as an existentialist treatment of rabbithood like *Water-ship Down*; they just saw it as a simple kid’s story,” that teacher is saying that the students did not construe the text as complex and so overestimated their capacities as readers.

Those of us concerned with the formation of the literature curriculum and with the assessment of literature learning have long been concerned with the issue of difficulty. We have had to face the issue of

difficulty in our determination of what is to be tested and how. In part that search has focused on the nature of textual difficulty, and how to determine the relative difficulty of one text as opposed to another. The search for an answer has extended to the question of how one determines that one student is "better" than another. Since examiners must deal with a psychometric world that seeks certainty and definitiveness of answers, reliability in the rating of performance and the ability to rank students on a "true" scale from the able reader to the insensitive clod, they face a complex set of problems. It is the purpose of this volume to seek to address this dilemma and the fundamental contradictions in the very term "examination of literary understanding."

These are the sorts of issues and the approach to the idea of difficulty that are taken up in the essays that constitute *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature*. Originally commissioned by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, a center supported by a grant from the United States Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts, the authors were asked to approach the concept of difficulty in literature from their own viewpoint. The authors were chosen for the diversity of their viewpoints and backgrounds, and the request was for each to shape and reconstruct the question as seemed best. What is amazing is that despite the diversity of background and approach, the authors converge upon the constructivist view. Difficulty is a social construct, often enforced by schools, rather than a simple objective property. Put in psychological terms, difficulty lives in the eye of the beholder; it may be seen as based upon beholders' estimate of the object as well as their estimate of their capacity to deal with that object in a fashion appropriate to a given situation.

We may see this in many of the statements of readers: "That's a hard book; it deals with something I don't know much about." "This book is written in a simple style; it's easy to read." "I have trouble reading books that are filled with metaphors; they make you work too hard." Such a self-estimate comes from the attempt to match one's prior knowledge to the text, and such knowledge may refer to the content and vocabulary, the structure, or the style of the text. When such estimates are held by groups, they tend to become reified and seen as conditions of the texts and not as resulting from the transaction between text and reader (Rosenblatt, 1978).

The volume includes essays from several scholarly worlds: those of literary theory, which explore difficulty of texts in the light of current thinking about literature and literary theory and knowledge; those of linguistics, which considers the various issues related to textual complexity; and those of pedagogy, which explores difficulty from the perspective of the novice and expert reader and the student in the classroom. The

essays, therefore, cover a broad range of scholarly interests and perspectives, and seek to unite them within a single framework, the question of difficulty. Surprisingly, they all tend to converge on the idea that difficulty of text is not simply a matter of textual qualities but more importantly of the relationship of those qualities to the demands placed upon the reader.

In the first section, which proceeds from a basis in literary theory, Wallace Chafe explores some of the linguistic constructs that appear to define difficulty for today's readers, but he cautions us against using these constructs as absolute values of quality, an error often perpetuated by the adherents of readability formulas and "plain talk." Hazard Adams then traces the history of the idea of difficulty in literature and suggests that it is often related to the social privilege of literature and its guardians. It is also related to the problem of the topicality and allusiveness of literature, which in building upon itself demands ever-increasing knowledge upon the part of readers. William Touponce then examines the notion of difficulty as it is set forth in three recent French figures, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes. These writers have all elaborated theories of the text and related these theories to the problems of reading the text. The final author in this section, Helen Elam, turns to difficulty as a psychological and humanistic construct, and elaborates how that construct "problematizes" reading, and teases out the difficulty of reading and what is read, thus challenging the institutional practices that seek to make things simple.

In the second section, the authors begin with the institutions that can both work to make things difficult and seek to make them simple. Gunnar Hansson shows how the constraints of formal discourse about literature often serve to make the texts more difficult than they might actually be. Referring to the corpus of his research since his replication of I. A. Richards's classic study (1929), Hansson shows that problems of reading are intertwined with problems of articulating the response to what is read. Susan Hynds and Martin Nystrand each demonstrate the ways in which classrooms and teachers in the United States serve to prove Hansson's thesis. Hynds explores the questions that teachers ask and shows how they reflect codes and conventions of learning more than the nature of the text. She suggests that it is possible to change those codes and conventions. In his paper, Nystrand demonstrates the ways in which the complex of assignments, discussions, and texts can make literature study more or less difficult. In the final chapter, Purves seeks to pull many of the ideas of the other authors together to suggest a theory of the social nature of difficulty in literature and literature education, and the implications of this theory for instruction and assessment.

The volume, then, moves from theory to practice to theory, from the

text to the reader and back again. All of the papers clearly support the concept of literature reading and literature learning as social events bound by the cultures of readers as well as by the cultures of the texts read. The implications for education are clear: simplistic notions of text difficulty and difficulty in learning to read, talk, and write about literature cannot withstand scrutiny, but must be replaced by notions that view the whole web of meaning and the making of meaning in our society.

REFERENCES

- Richards, I. A. (1929). *Practical criticism*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). *The reader, the text, and the poem*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.