

[Advice]

THE DIFFICULT POEM

By Charles Bernstein. Bernstein read this essay on September 9 at the New School's graduate writing program in New York City. His most recent collection of poems is *With Strings*, published by the University of Chicago Press.

All of us from time to time encounter a difficult poem. Sometimes it is the poem of a friend or a family member, and sometimes it is a poem we have written ourselves. The difficult poem has created distress for both poets and readers for many years. Experts who study difficult poems often trace the modern prevalence of this problem to the early years of the last century, when a great deal of social dislocation precipitated the outbreak of 1912, one of the best-known epidemics of difficult poetry.

But while these experts have offered detailed historical discussions of difficult poems, and while there is a great deal of philosophical speculation and psychological theory about difficult poetry, there are few practical guides for handling difficult poetry. What I want to do in this essay is explore some ways to make your experience with the difficult poem more rewarding by exploring some strategies for coping with these poems.

You may be asking yourself, how did I get interested in this topic? Let me be frank about my situation. I am the author of, and a frequent reader of, difficult poems. Because of this, I have the strong desire to help other readers and authors with hard-to-read poems. By sharing my experience of more than thirty years of working with difficult poems, I think I can save you both time and heartache. I may even be able to convince you that some of the most difficult poems you encounter can provide very enriching aesthetic experiences—if you understand how to approach them.

But first we must address the question—Are you reading a difficult poem? How can you tell? Here is a handy checklist of five key questions that can help you to answer this question:

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, you are probably dealing with a difficult poem. But if you are still unsure, look for the presence of any of these symptoms: high syntactic, grammatical, or intellectual activity level; elevated linguistic intensity; textual irregularities; initial withdrawal (poem not immediately available); poor adaptability (poem unsuitable for use in love letters, memorial commemoration, etc.); sensory overload; or negative mood.

Many readers when they first encounter a difficult poem say to themselves, "Why me?" The first reaction they often have is to think that this is an unusual problem that other readers have not faced. So the first step in dealing with the difficult poem is to recognize that this is a common problem that many other readers confront on a daily basis. You are not alone!

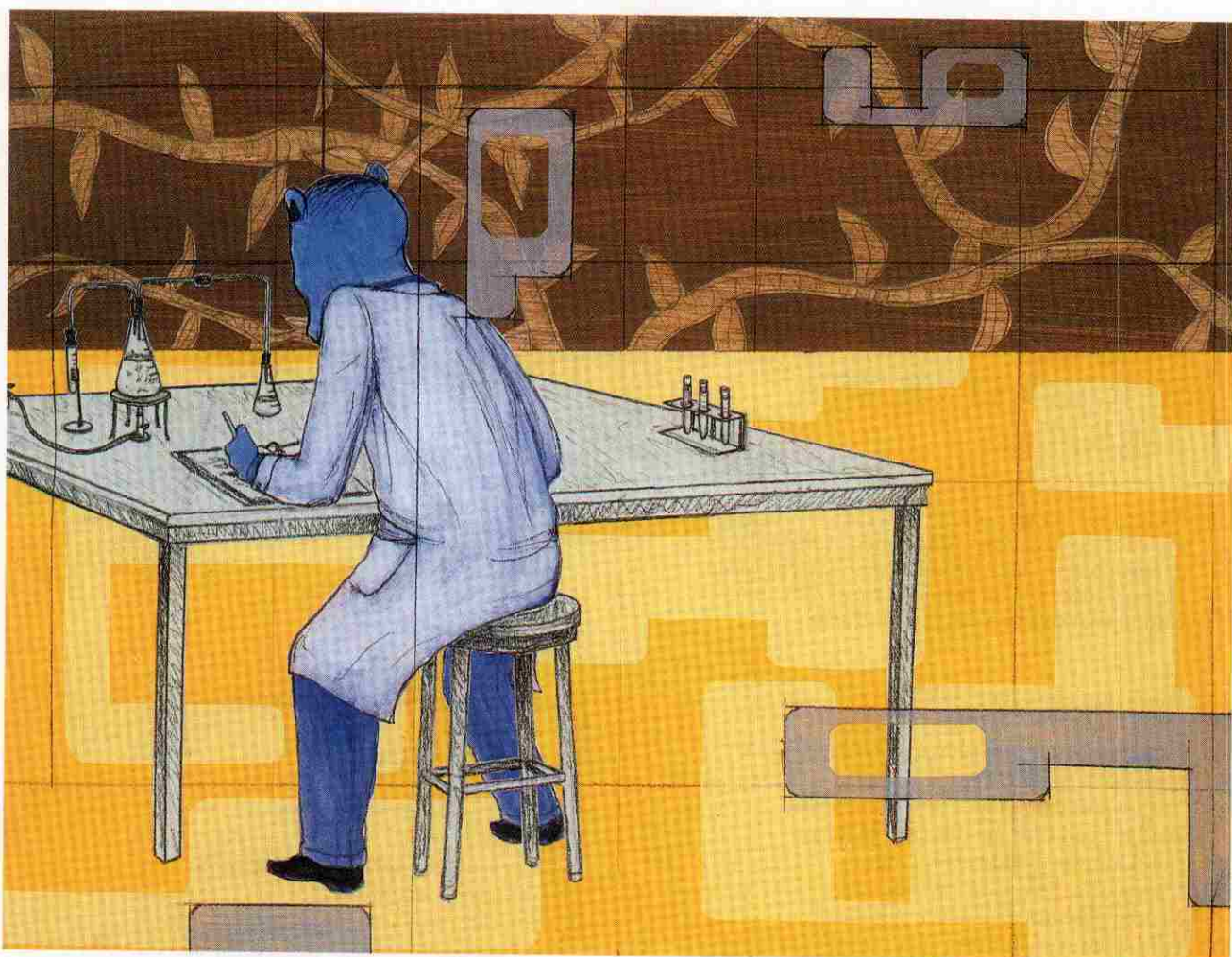
The second reaction of many difficult-poem readers is self-blame. They ask themselves, "What am I doing to cause this poem to be so difficult?" So the second step in dealing with the difficult poem is to recognize that you are not responsible for the difficulty and that there are effective methods for responding to it without getting frustrated or angry.

The writers of difficult poems face the same troubling questions as readers, but for them the questions can be even more agitating. Often a poet will ask himself, if he is a man, or herself, if a woman (transgendered individuals also find themselves asking these questions): "Why did my poem turn out like this? Why isn't it completely accessible like the poems of Billy Collins, which never pose any problems for understanding?" Like readers of difficult poems, these writers of difficult poems must first come to terms with the fact that theirs is a common problem, shared by many other authors. And they must come to terms with the fact that it is not their fault that their poems are harder to understand than Billy Collins's, but that some poems just turn out that way.

Difficult poems are normal. They are not incoherent, meaningless, or hostile. Well-meaning readers may have suggested that "something must be wrong" with the poem. So let's get a new perspective. "Difficult" is very different from abnormal. In today's climate, with an increasing number of poems being labeled "difficult," this is an important distinction to keep in mind.

Difficult poems are like this because of their innate makeup. And that makeup is their constructed style. They are not like this because of something you as readers have done to them. It's not your fault.

Difficult poems are hard to read. Of course you already know this, but if you keep it in mind, then you are able to regain your authority as a reader. Don't let the poem intimidate you! Often the difficult poem will provoke you, but



Untitled (Scientist at Table), by Kojo Griffin. His work is currently on display at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston.

this may be its way of getting your attention. Sometimes, if you give your full attention to the poem, the provocative behavior will stop.

Difficult poems are not popular. This is something that any reader or writer of difficult poems must face squarely. There are no three ways about it. But just because a poem is not popular doesn't mean it has no value! Unpopular poems can still have meaningful readings and, after all, may not always be unpopular. Even if the poem never becomes popular, it can still be special to you, the reader. Maybe the poem's unpopularity will even bring you and the difficult poem closer. After all, your own ability to have an intimate relation with the poem is not affected by the poem's popularity.

Once you have gotten beyond the blame game—blaming yourself as a reader for the difficulty or blaming the poem—you can start to focus on the relationship. The difficulty you are having with the poem may suggest that there is a

problem not with you the reader or with the poem but with the relation between you and the poem. Working through the issues that arise as part of this relation can be a valuable learning experience. *Smoothing over difficulties is not the solution!* Learning to cope with a difficult reading of a poem will often be more fulfilling than sweeping difficulties under the carpet, only to have the accumulated dust plume up in your face when you finally get around to cleaning the floor.

Readers of difficult poems also need to be aware of the tendency to idealize the accessible poem. Keep in mind that a poem may be easy because it is not saying anything. And while this may make for undisturbed reading at first, it may mask problems that will turn up later. No poem is ever really difficulty-free. Sometimes working out your difficulties with the poem is the best thing for a long-term aesthetic experience and opens up the possibilities for many future encounters with the poem.

I hope that this approach to the difficult poem will alleviate the frustration so many readers feel when challenged by this type of aesthetic experience. Reading poems, like other life experiences, is not always as simple as it may seem to be from the outside, as when we see other readers flipping happily through col-

lections of best-loved verse. Very often this picture of readerly bliss is not the whole story; even these now-smiling readers may have gone through difficult experiences with poems when they first encountered them. As my mother would often say, you can't make bacon and eggs without slaughtering a pig.

[PsyOps]

STRAIGHT OUTTA TIKRIT

From a rap set to the tune of Coolio's "Gangsta's Paradise" broadcast last April in Iraq by Radio Tikrit, a station believed to be backed by the CIA. A Saddam Hussein impersonator performs most of the song in English with occasional Arabic interludes.

If you don't like me, I kill you.

I am Saddam. I don't have a bomb.
I am not a soldier. I work at a farm.
Bush wanna kick me, I don't know why.
And if I call him, he does me goodbye.
Smoking weed and getting high.
I know the devil is by my side.
My days are finished and I will die.
All I need is chili fries.

Why is that one not dancing? Come on, dance.
I'll remove your eye and the eye of the one who
gave birth to you.

I am so dirty, I am so bad.
Stop killing Iraqis. That make me sad.
I am big daddy, this is my game.
I don't have feelings. I don't have shame.
Forty-eight hours left, Bush said.
All my troops left me and fled.
Now I am sitting by myself.
My ass is shaking. I am going to hell.

Where is the music? May God curse you.
I am for adoption. Anybody wanna adopt me?
Shake it. Shake. Please. I love you.

Everybody in the house say you hate me.
We hate you.
Everybody in the house. What's up? What's up?
What's going around here?
Everybody in the house say "We hate you."
We hate you.

[Poetry]

THE WASTE LAND

The following poems were composed by Hart Seely from statements by Donald Rumsfeld. The poems appear in Pieces of Intelligence, published this month by the Free Press.

THE UNKNOWN

As we know,
There are known knowns.
There are things we know we know.
We also know
There are known unknowns.
That is to say
We know there are some things
We do not know.
But there are also unknown unknowns,
The ones we don't know
We don't know.

—February 12, 2002, Department of Defense
news briefing

GLASS BOX

You know, it's the old glass box at the—
At the gas station,
Where you're using those little things
Trying to pick up the prize,
And you can't find it.
It's—

And it's all these arms are going down in there,
And so you keep dropping it
And picking it up again and moving it,
But—

Some of you are probably too young to remem-
ber those—
Those glass boxes,
But—

But they used to have them
At all the gas stations
When I was a kid.

—December 6, 2001, Department of Defense
news briefing

