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Making No Apologies for Difficulty: Putting Modernist Form at the Center of Classroom Discussions

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Abstract: In this paper, I recount my experiences teaching an undergraduate seminar on non-linear modernist narratives and discuss the ways in which such a framework makes it possible both to introduce students to trademark characteristics of modernism and to subject those elements to critique. Putting form at the center of a modernism course also provides an opening into larger issues of literary interpretation; students have an opportunity to consider critically the novelistic conventions that are defamiliarized, criticized, and skirted by modernists. Emphasis on form leads to important conversations regarding modernists' relations with other media as well, particularly visual art and popular magazines. I draw on recent studies in psychology and pedagogy to consider the ways in which modernist difficulty offers initial roadblocks for new readers, but then improves readers' engagement and memory over the long term.

Keywords: difficulty / non-linear / pedagogy / failure / memory

Although defining characteristics of modernism emerge only to be challenged from all sides, the leading proposals - including fragmentation, tonal complexity, and emphasis on interiority - might be summed up, from a student perspective, as difficulty. As Gail McDonald observed recently, T.S. Eliot "made difficulty a badge of modernist honor" (17), and the decades of critical work since Eliot have done little to change either our measure of the difficulty or our perception of it as a hallmark of literary modernism.1 When introducing students to modernist literature, then, why not put those features up front, making complexity the theme of the course? What, afraid that "Making Reading Difficult" will send your enrollment plummeting? For students who have grown up with hypertext, webs, and clouds, reading that promises the interactive puzzles of those other media may actually add to the appeal of modernism, though I would suggest a bit of rhetorical flair when titling the course.

I recently taught a seminar for first-year students titled "Playing with Time in Non-Linear Narratives,"2 with texts that ranged from One Thousand and One Nights and Sterne's Tristram Shandy to hypertext and contemporary experimental fiction. The core of the course, however, was commanded by modernist writers, including Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and Jorge Luis Borges, with Vladimir Nabokov rounding out the period. Although formal complexity could be considered a limiting pedagogical lens, since it detaches modernist literature from its cultural and historical environment, my students quickly recognized that the way in which modernist difficulty is delineated has changed over time. In studying difficulty, then, we charted the changing cultural and intellectual landscape of the past century. In their recent discussion of "The New Modernist Studies," Douglas Mao and
Rebecca Walkowitz take note of modernism's early marketing strategy:

For the mid-twentieth-century commentators who helped solidify modernism as an object of analysis - Clement Greenberg, Theodor W. Adorno, the New Critics, and others - it was evident that a common denominator in the vast welter of modernist formal innovations was the property of being hard to sell to large numbers of people, at least in the short term. (744)

For students and scholars of another era, however, modernist difficulty is itself a kind of "sell" that should be open to questioning and refashioning. In some ways, the "surface difficulty" of modernism (McDonald 18) serves as a historical trace for students, rather than a genuine obstacle. Their encounters with difficulty lie elsewhere, as they learn to articulate both the reading conventions that lie at the heart of literature from a variety of eras and the ways in which modernists defamiliarize, criticize, and skirt those very conventions.

My students found plenty of elements in the reading difficult, but they were, inevitably, not the same techniques that might have tripped up students twenty years ago. Eliot's learned allusions may still be "difficult," but they are no longer impenetrable: search engines will quickly turn up many of the references that baffle students.3 What remains, however, is the need to assess the significance of such allusions, an interpretive burden that is very different from the book-report narratives to which many students are accustomed. Non-linear chronological sequences, another traditional site of readers' confusion, may not seem novel to students who spend time with the swift change-ups of cinema. For many students, their entry into novel-reading is through movies; in my opening questionnaires for students each semester, the majority of students write that their latest reading was the novel behind whatever movie adaption recently hit theaters.

In an article titled "When Do We 'Get It'?" New York Times film critics A.O. Scott and Manohla Dargis claim that "We live in interesting narrative time, cinematically. . . . [In recent movies] filmmakers are pushing hard against, and sometimes dispensing with, storytelling conventions, and audiences seem willing to follow them." Such "interesting times," of course, have happened again and again in both cinematic and literary history, but our students have as narrow of a historical framework as do Scott and Dargis. Still, it is the "playfulness" that Dargis celebrates in these new mainstream movies that ties them to the play of modernist texts, and that can go a long way toward making modernist narrative appear inviting, rather than impenetrable. Bringing the technical play to the foreground in classroom discussions enables us to better equip our students to assess these forms in the future, in whatever medium they might appear. The Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman designed his recent book, Thinking, Fast and Slow, with an eye toward not only bringing the work of psychologists into public readership, but also developing a public lexicon for the goings-on of the mind: "A deeper understanding of judgments and choices . . . requires a richer vocabulary than is available in everyday language" (3); having such an understanding makes slips in cognition "easier to anticipate, recognize, and understand" (4). I would argue that the same is true for narrative complexity, so my first duty in helping my students navigate modernist texts is to equip them with a vocabulary that will allow them to chart differences and similarities in narratives across a variety of media and genres.

I found the emphasis on non-linear structures extending well past our reading list and into my organization of the semester's reading and writing. How, in a course on non-linearity, could I in good conscience follow the common classroom format, beginning with early examples of non-linearity and then plodding along until we reached contemporary ones? At the end of the semester I did offer my students examples of non-linear texts from a variety of periods, ancient to contemporary, lest they develop too rigid of a conception of non-linearity as a modernist technique. For the rest of the term, however, I organized our readings by strategies of non-linearity: Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury and Woolf's Jacob's Room complicate narrative authority by offering multiple perspectives of the same story; Ford Madox Ford's The Good Soldier, on the other hand, uses shifts in time within a single consciousness to raise issues of the reliability of memory. There are texts that mix media and genre to break out of expectations of narrative continuity, such as Nabokov's Pale Fire. Another cluster might investigate the use of short-story collections to evade expectations of a grand overarching narrative.

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Perhaps more controversially, one could explore the use of insanity, disability, and the child's perspective as lenses for non-linear narration. One unexpected benefit of this classroom organization was a shift in emphasis from literary greats to great strategies and rhetorical play. I included a number of canonical authors in my course, but for my students, their presence on the syllabus was as much a challenge as a given: are these authors inventive in their use of language, character, and structure? The course design encouraged connections between texts and conversations about shared techniques, rather than a roll call of modernism's greatest hits. Granted, formal experimentation is certainly not the only, nor perhaps the best, means of evaluating literary texts, but it is more graspable for students than "greatness," and the value, nature, and role of formal experimentation was a subject of scrutiny as much as it was an evaluative rubric in our course.

Because so many modernist works draw on ad copy, music hall lyrics, and other forms of popular media, students gained some of the critical awareness one might expect in a cultural studies course. I found myself developing clusters of poetry, magazine clippings, audio recordings, and other media around each work of modernist fiction we studied. More than any other form, however, visual art emerged as inspiration and dialogic partner for a course on nonlinear literature. Before my students ever read a non-linear story, I introduced them to two examples from Seymour Chatman's Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film. Chatman uses Benozzo Gozzoli's "The Dance of Salome and the Beheading of John the Baptist" as an example of storytelling in visual art (35). There, laid out across the spatial field, are the major events of the Biblical story - her dance, his beheading - narrative conveyed in paint. On the following page, Chatman incorporates a Short Ribs comic strip that includes very little text (36). The move from visual art to graphic novels, and only then to novels, helped my students approach the last on the list already prepared to see literature differently. Particularly when provided with Joseph Frank's essay, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," students were able to reimagine storytelling in ways that broke with the reading conventions they had unwittingly brought to the table.

While studying Woolf's Jacob's Room, my class visited an exhibition of the Bloomsbury Group's art, aptly titled "A Room of Their Own: The Bloomsbury Artists in American Collections," at Cornell's Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art. There my students found not only paintings by Bloomsbury artists, but also textiles and furniture bearing the patterns of Roger Fry's Omega Workshops. Seeing the patterns recur on such a wide variety of objects, and gallery pieces alongside household goods, helped my students get a sense for the flexibility of the work the Bloomsbury artists, both the writers and the painters. When I showed them pictures of the interiors of Woolf's homes, strewn with Omega objects and covered in murals by her sister, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant, my students saw how closely the visual art and narrative art ran alongside one another in Woolf's life. The blending continued when they saw Vanessa Bell's woodcuts gracing the covers of Woolf's novels in their first edition. One thinks of the movement of the car and the airplane in Mrs. Dalloway, and her use of these features as ways to detach attention from Clarissa Dalloway and move it among other figures in the crowd on the street before settling on Septimus Smith. Maps, events, paintings, and the crush of urban spaces become contact points for attention and character in modernist narrative, and they form a new narrative logic for students readers of these works.

UNDERMINING THE TENDENCY TO JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS

Pound's rallying cry for modernism may not have the same resonance for students accustomed to musical "sampling" and webpages that update every few seconds, but one very important function of a course on the "Make It New" period is to help students better understand the "It" that was made new: the cultural, textual, and political threads that underwent reinvention in the modernist period. Discussions of modernist formal difficulty open quite naturally into conversations about reading conventions that one takes for granted in works of other genres and periods. One could, in a sense, frame a course on modernism as a "history of the novel" through the lens of what is played on, studiously avoided, and made baroque in modernist narratives.
Allusion, formal play, and imitation in modernist texts offer a window into the reading conventions by which students may be surprised to find themselves guided. Chief among these is a tendency to read for the ending. When I ask students about their reading habits, many, even literature lovers, speak as if they see books as items on a list to be checked off, one by one. Why read Sense and Sensibility more than once when you can move on to conquer Pride and Prejudice? In part from the simple desire "to know what happens," and in part from looming deadlines, students race through texts to get to the end. When they get there they look for resolutions to conflicts they barely registered in passing. Some texts resist such readings. In a course I teach on women writers of the American South, Eudora Welty's mystical endings leave students bewildered. Kate Chopin's The Awakening keeps them fascinated - until they watch their heroine commit suicide at the novel's conclusion. It is an ambiguous ending, but my students tend to appeal to the ending as evidence for their theses without arguing for a particular interpretation of it. Although in conferences with me they concede that the ending could be read in multiple ways, they still feel quite strongly that the ending could only be the resolution and confirmation of all the ideas they accumulate over the course of the novel. The ending becomes, in effect, the unqualified stamp of approval for my students' readings, whatever they happen to be.

The reading habits I have observed in my students match their writing practices. They draw conclusions without offering sufficient argument. They spend little time considering what interested them in the book and which of those interests might make the best paper topic. In their conferences, students are often willing to experiment with their interpretations. When writing the paper, however, they clamp down and stop thinking. My main goal in the course on non-linear narratives has been to make experimentation irresistible, despite the pressure of deadlines and heavy course loads, enabling students to write more considered analyses of what they read.

As my students read non-linear texts, they found themselves drawn in even when the authors ostentatiously disposed of concluding revelations. As one student wrote, only slightly begrudging Borges for his technical virtuosity, "What would be the surprising ending in any other story is one of the beginning facts in Borges's story... The focus of the story is now on the details of the situation, as opposed to the death at the end."

Recent public events suggest that many of us are not actually reading the book to discover who done it. As the London Olympics of 2012 left Americans juggling up-to-the-minute online results with tape-delay NBC coverage geared toward prime-time broadcasting, many fans realized that they wanted to watch the race in the evening even though they had read the results while drinking their morning coffee. In a New York Times column, Neil Genzlinger compared the post-results race watch to the long-running television hit, "Columbo," and he encouraged Olympics watchers to shift their expectations from a "Who's going-to-win" narrative to those of a detective story.

It is not, then, the race to the end that defines the reading experience. As my students moved from one modernist narrative to another, they accumulated a vocabulary for the ways in which authors connect narrative without clear lines of chronology and causality. My students concluded that modernist literature, in distancing itself from linear storytelling, has embraced character. As two of my students wrote, "In messing with time and genre, the author must keep other things the same, focusing on the same characters and themes throughout the novel to ground the reader"; "With nothing to surprise them, readers still stay with the story to find out more about the characters and the relationships between them." They unwittingly joined forces with "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf's famous defense of her generation's depictions of character. Character infuses nonlinear texts, from the hobby-horses of Sterne's novel, to the Kinbotean narcissism of Nabokov's Pale Fire, to Jason Compson's "Once a bitch always a bitch," which opens the third section of Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury (113). One of my students noted, "Looking through a character's eyes means that readers follow every mistake and bad judgment the character makes. Although it complicates the plot, this also strengthens the attachment readers feel to the character."

My students' conception of character, however, became more complex as we waded through our reading. Although they dutifully followed every bad judgment and mistake, they expected the character to develop in a
clear narrative arc while maintaining a set of traits by which to remain identifiable. But that is not how many modernist writers depict character, and it is not, in fact, how human character works outside fiction. In a psychology experiment that Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons reported in their book, The Invisible Gorilla: And Other Ways Our Intuition Deceives Us, 4 subjects were asked about important end-of-life decisions, and then were asked the same questions a year later. Nearly a quarter gave different answers the second time. More surprisingly, three-quarters of those who changed their mind did not realize they had done so: "their memory for what they had said earlier was rewritten to match their current beliefs" (65-66). The study's subjects shared my students' expectation of consistency in character across time. Novel conventions only make this tendency more pronounced by aligning particular virtues and vices with individual characters, and even, in extreme cases, equating them: Scrooge and Pecksniff are not only Dickens characters but also character attributes - or, depending on the situation, insults. But modernist narratives challenge this simplification of character, allowing characters to contradict themselves and to claim virtues that are not evinced by their actions.

The sequence as well as the variety of character attributes matters. Readers' affection for a particular character is influenced by what psychologists call "the halo effect": the tendency to like all of a person's attributes if you like some of them. As Daniel Kahneman observes in Thinking, Fast and Slow, "The sequence in which we observe characteristics of a person is often determined by chance. Sequence matters, however, because the halo effect increases the weight of first impressions, sometimes to the point that subsequent information is mostly wasted" (88).

Neil Genzlinger characterized post-results Olympics watching as "comfort food," in which "all those delightful little tics" of character take precedence over the whos, hows, and whys. His interpretation supports that of my students: character comes to the foreground when the results of the game no longer claim our interest. But psychologists Chabris and Simons may be equally close to grasping the lure of such events: "we may delight in narrative precisely because we compulsively assume causation when all we have is chronological order, and it's the causation, not the sequence of events, that our brains are really designed to crave and use" (167). As my students learned to distinguish chronological sequence from causality when the two came apart in modernist novels and short stories, they discovered the "pitfall inherent in turning chronology into causality" that Chabris and Simons caution against: "Because we perceive sequences of events as part of a timeline, with one leading to the next, it is hard to see that there are almost always many interrelated reasons or causes for a single outcome" (172). Particularly as my students encountered stream-of-consciousness narratives, in which authors indicate the excess of sensory data in everyday life, they felt much more keenly the process of selection involved in writing literature. Although my students were unaware of Chekhov's gun, one mentioned that if she had read the modernist literature as she would a detective story, she would have expected every joke, every described object, and every reference to the time of day to play an important role in the plot - and as a result she would have been extremely disappointed, not to mentioned overwhelmed, by the conclusion.

As causal and narrator relations became more complicated in our reading, classroom discussions came to reflect a much greater array of student voices. Discursive logic and the linking of images, languages, and narrators over the course of the text came into the foreground of students' discussions. With the plot no longer the presumed target of discussion, they felt freer to suggest alternative models of narrative cohesion and readerly involvement. For a few of the course units, I wrapped things up by reading aloud from Wikipedia or SparkNotes summaries of the texts, just to see starts of surprise from students who quite likely used such aids when beginning the work but, at this point, recognized how little the summaries capture.

If students recognize the value of reading beyond plot, they may be less concerned with trimming the pages of their reading list by swapping novels for reading guides or by putting pressure on their instructors to reduce the reading load. In one of many articles to be found on the subject, Carlin Romano wrote recently in The Chronicle of Higher Education about "the growing feeling among humanities professors... that for too many of today's
undergraduates, reading a whole book, from A to Z, feels like a marathon unfairly imposed on a jogger.” Non-linear modernist narratives, despite or perhaps because of their difficulty, undermine the assumed goals of student readers and claim, instead, new reading terms that make any and all shortcuts inadequate substitutes. It was readers’ involvement that drew the most interest from my students in classroom discussions, as they weighed the texts' demands on their attention with the skills to be gained by tackling such literature. To my dismay, students initially conceived of reading as a largely passive enterprise, echoing a view present in much pedagogical literature. In "The War Between Reading and Writing," Peter Elbow seeks to rectify what he sees as an imbalance between reading and writing in academic instruction. By suggesting that, in focusing on reading, higher education regards the student as merely a vessel to fill, Elbow seems to conflate writing with the act of producing an interpretation: "When we stop privileging reading over writing, we stop privileging passivity over activity” (Elbow 16). I would not be the first to claim that texts, particularly those that are formally experimental - even, to use Barthes's term, "writerly" - will not be read without a high level of engagement. But because Elbow is particularly concerned with creating an interpretation-generating class, rather than simply a captive audience, his ideas can be used to elicit a high level of reading engagement from students of modernist literature.

Experimental modernist novels overtly involve the reader in interpretive decisions early in the game, well before it is time to write up a formal interpretation. The transition to writing can, then, be easier with these difficult texts than with other forms of literature, but only if instructors help students recognize interpretive decisions for what they are, rather than let student think that they made a "mistake" or "didn't get it" when they encounter a pivotal interpretive moment. How can instructors make those twists and turns of interpretation evident to students, to shift them from the expectation that they will recognize the story as they read to one in which they participate in creating it? Here we might take a suggestion offered by Elbow:

Writing involves physical actions that are much more outward and visible than reading does. As a result, it’s easier to see how meaning is slowly constructed, negotiated, and changed in writing than it is in reading. The erasing, crossing out, and changing of words as we write is much more visible than the erasing, crossing out, and changing of words that do in fact go on as we read - but more quickly and subliminally. . . . Most writing teachers now try to set up their classes so that students can experience how written meaning is constructed through a process of thinking, generating trial text, revision, and social negotiation with peers and teachers. It seems to me then that writing is the most helpful paradigm we have for teaching what may be the central process in our profession and what we most want to convey to students: the way meaning in both reading and writing is constructed and negotiated. (14)

As my students worked through Woolf's Jacob's Room, they kept a reading journal in which they recorded not only characters and events, but also their early guesses about plot twists, recurring images, and areas of confusion. Initially, my students were eager to paper over those early observations, just as they were to erase "embarrassing" early drafts of their papers. Part of instructors’ role, then, is to help students see how those early readings contribute to a nuanced, considered interpretation. After students finish a novel, they maintain a good sense of the contours of the plot, but they are not accustomed to remembering the early scenes of a work that later undermines or reimagines those scenes. Instead, students often simply replace their early knowledge with what comes afterward, assuming that what follows has greater authority than the early information.

In helping students retain those early pieces for comparison, another of Elbow's writing-focused strategies proves helpful. After observing that "Writing is a leveler" (14), since both students and teachers struggle with it, he suggests that those who are good at reading are often unable to understand the struggles of those who are not. I am not sure that I agree with Elbow's assessment, but it seems quite likely that instructors give the impression of such a difference to their students. If instructors walk into the classroom with a polished interpretation, students will be unlikely to make the initial attempt, as they imagine a vast gulf between their reading ability and that of their instructors. One of the most important things we can show students, instead, is
the development of an interpretation over several stages of reading. If students learn that early stages of the reading can be unfocused and confused even for accomplished readers, they may be bolder in tackling new literature on their own, knowing that they haven't "missed it" from the first page onward, but that their understanding will grow with time and consideration. That is all easier, of course, if we spend more class time in the middle of the book, rather than after reaching the end.

One of the writing exercises in my course on non-linear narratives required students to write an analysis of Nabokov's Pale Fire when they had read only half the novel. As I note in my instructions to my students:

If you have learned nothing else thus far, you have realized that you will not get very far by attempting to unlock the mysteries of an entire novel in just a few pages. By assigning you an exercise that you will need to write before you finish the novel I am removing from you any remaining burden you may feel to "sum it all up," to illuminate the entirety of the text for your reader. In other words, I'm forcing you to come to terms with the limitations of your knowledge, whether those limitations come about because you have not finished the novel or because you missed a few things along the way. Revel in these limitations. Feel relieved of that burden. And pick a new goal for your writing.

In a related exercise, I laid out a basic six-step process for writing a paper, stressing that this was simply one way to approach the writing process. I then asked students to complete just the first three steps, in which they spent time identifying and grouping small elements of the text that caught their eye. My students did not complete the remaining stages of the paper-writing process until a second assignment. Instead, they brought their lists to class, where we discussed the themes and rhetorical styles they had identified. Several students said the activity was helpful for giving them the time and direction they needed to spend time thinking about the text and their reading of it. They also identified far more interesting patterns in the text than I had seen in their previous papers. Instead of skimming the reading so that they could get "started" on the writing process, they were encouraged to keep their ideas at play, considering a variety of relationships and argumentative strategies, and to see that play as part of the "writing" or interpretive process.

I cannot simply abolish procrastination, but I can provide students with an environment that reveals the pleasures of the early writing stages: the poring over a book, experimenting with pieces of text, the positing and questioning of theses. Implicit in Elbow's idea of reading "drafts" is the idea that reading should improve as one rereads and reconsiders the text at hand. The New York Times film critics who emphasized the new narrative turn in film offered an intriguing guess about the source of such a development in their field: the shift from theater-only films to those available on home video for repeated watching, as well as DVDs loaded with behind-the-scenes extras. As Manohla Dargis notes, "This new film-audience relationship may help account for the emergence of these new, complex narratives." What lies behind this technological advancement is the obvious opportunity for repeated viewing, followed by repetition with a difference - as when one watches the movie with the director's commentary laid over the soundtrack, or with a different group of friends or family with whom one discusses the film. Similarly, students should recognize that modernist narratives require rereading in order to fully engage with the narrative complexity of the text.

In my course, we talked a great deal about reading the text each time with a different reading persona: focused on hammering out the plot, or with an eye to recurring images or shifts in character and narrator tone. In a set of exercises I designed to help students try on different writing voices and reading and writing conventions, I asked them to invent a short story that they could tell in a few sentences. We had just read Alan Lightman's Einstein's Dreams, which conjures up a series of worlds where time works differently than it does in ours. I asked my students to re-imagine their chosen story in five different genres or in different chronological order. The goal was to help them not only experience the mechanics of playing with narrative time, but also see how different genres rely on particular non-linear forms. Romance, horror, and so on appeared in the stories my students read aloud. As a result, they better understood the task undertaken by our authors, and they exhibited more interest in analyzing the work of those whose writing both incorporated and reimagined those very conventions.
In a second part of the exercise, I asked students to return to their theme and variations with a critical, rather than an authorial, eye. Some had difficulty acknowledging that the elements they had intended to come through had simply not appeared. But those who achieved a bit of critical distance were delighted to see how the different temporal organization subtly shifted the emphases in each story, developing different tensions among the various pieces. A third part of the assignment, this one an in-class exercise, asked students to imagine their stories through the lens of a particular character; I used as an example Nabokov's Charles Kinbote, since his narcissism had obvious effects on the emphases in his narrative. Students responded gamely to the play among fiction and criticism, chronology and character, and this set of exercises served as a touchstone throughout the semester: whenever students felt stuck in a particular reading or writing pattern that was not working for them, their peers and I asked them to use the flexibility they gained from this early exercise to try on new arrangements of their argument so as to better play to the strengths of the evidence.

OVERCONFIDENCE AND FAILURE

With the playfulness of Nabokov's Pale Fire lending my course its dominant register, I was able to pair dizzying texts such as Borges's Ficciones and Seymour Chatman's narratology with the fun of creative-writing exercises, graphic novels, and museum trips for my students. All of this, however, contributed to my ultimate goal: to help my students deal with failure. Initially, they balked at the reading, not bothering to hide their desperation to consult something - Wikipedia, SparkNotes, anything - that might clue them in to the plot and help them map the changes among narrators. I banned the use of any and all secondary aides. Part of university teaching involves helping students learn to ferret out resources, but another part involves encouraging them to use their own. Over and over again my students admitted to not trusting their own faculties, wanting instead to confer with each other, consult me, or ask Google.

My task, then, was two-fold: to get them to trust their own ability to read "difficult" texts, and to arm them with reasons to tackle such difficulty in the first place. Thankfully, recent research has upheld our intuition: making material more difficult for students to learn can result in a deeper level of comprehension and better retention (Diemand-Yauman 111). In one study, simply giving experiment subjects reading material in unusual fonts resulted in a fourteen percent increase in information retention when compared to the control group (113).

Daniel Kahneman wrote of another study on difficult fonts: "90% of the students who saw the [test] in normal font made at least one mistake in the test, but the proportion dropped to 35% when the font was barely legible. You read this correctly: performance was better with the bad font" (65).

Kahneman's model of cognitive systems is useful for understanding why this is the case. Kahneman distinguishes between the cognitive work of System 1, which is rapid, intuitive, and continually taking in new sensory information, and System 2, which is a more deliberate, effort-filled, analytic mode of thinking. As Kahneman writes, "the experience of cognitive strain, whatever its source, tends to mobilize System 2, shifting people's approach to problems from a casual intuitive mode to a more engaged and analytic mode" (65).

Difficult visual or formal qualities can trigger heightened analysis in a reader. Although students may have to work much harder for a Faulkner novel than they will for the latest airport thriller, they will, at the other end of the Faulkner endeavor, have a much deeper level of engagement that might also last beyond test time.

Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons wrote of another test of what psychologists call cognitive disfluency, in which subjects were asked to read two sets of sentences: 1) "Joey's big brother punched him again and again. The next day his body was covered by bruises." 2) "Joey's crazy mother became furiously angry with him. The next day his body was covered with bruises." Chabris and Simons explain that:

In the second case, the cause of the bruises is implied but not stated. For this reason, understanding the second pair of sentences turns out to be slightly harder (and takes slightly longer) than understanding the first. But what you're doing as you read the sentences is crucial. To understand the second pair of sentences, you must make an extra logical inference that you don't need in order to make sense of the first. And in making this inference, you form a richer and more elaborate memory for what you've read. (166-167)
The link between difficulty and memory in this experiment and in the first of the font studies seems particularly significant for teachers of modernist texts. As the psychologists from the font-altering study point out, "students tend to gauge the relative success of a learning session based on the ease of encoding information rather than subsequent performance and instructors may not have access to information on student's long-term retention and thus may also evaluate learning based on encoding" (Diemand-Yauman et al 111). They also observe that "many education researchers and practitioners believe that reducing extraneous cognitive load is always beneficial for the learner" (111).

The "cognitive load" theory has led many an instructor to opt for a dumbeddown syllabus, but even in my first few years of teaching I could see my students gravitating, almost against their will, to the difficult texts. As one student in my non-linear narratives class said, "I did not come in liking or wanting to like anything on the syllabus. But now I am deep in and can't help myself. Even the Borges has a spot in my heart." The authors of the font study, however, caution that "it is not the difficulty, per se, that leads to improvements in learning but rather the fact that the intervention engages processes that support learning" (111). It is the kinds of difficulty found in modernist texts, for example the gaps in timeline and causation, that make these narratives resonate.

One of my students commented, "One is forced to use critical thinking and hash together many broken fragments of information and create the story for oneself. Fusing genres and breaking traditional modes of storytelling is a risky art that puts much confidence in the reader."

I could see assigning reading from psychological studies to my students, to arm them with information that will help them choose the education that best suits their long-term goals, even as they fight short-term obstacles. Of the many ways to help students grapple with modernist difficulty, the most effective are those that help students to look behind the curtain: that show their instructors working through drafts of interpretation before reaching one with which they are satisfied, and that give students a sense of the long-term gains to be had from making such a monumental cognitive effort. Even more than Don Gifford's annotations to Ulysses, students need the means with which to generate their own motivation for reading these texts. Short readings from pedagogical and psychological literature allow them to take part in the meta-discussion that can help them shape their own education.

James Lang, who discussed two of the psychological experiments above in a 2012 article in The Chronicle of Higher Education, offers a caution to those who would leap too quickly to raise the difficulty of our class material:

But, of course, if we push them too hard toward disfluency, we may end up discouraging them and shutting off their learning altogether . . . the challenge that we face, then, is to create what psychologists call 'desirable difficulties': enough cognitive disfluency to promote deeper learning, and not so much that we reduce the motivation of our students.

One has to find a balance, of course, but the sweet spot is not fixed. Students expect to have moments of cognitive meltdown in a mathematics course, but they do not expect - and thus do not work through - such a problem if they are in a literature seminar. In a series of articles, Michele Osherow and Manil Suri reported on their experience co-teaching a course on "Mathematics and What It Means to be Human." Their students struggled both with the mathematics and with the literature, which included Tom Stoppard's Arcadia and works from the Oulipo group. Osherow noted that at several points she was able to help floundering students by reminding them to look for patterns in the literature, like those one would expect in mathematics. When Lang and several colleagues compiled a list of classroom strategies that would help students reap the benefits of cognitive disfluency, they frequently called on strategies of defamiliarization (e.g., employing a variety of argumentative positions or rhetorical forms) to undermine students' expectations of a given medium or field. Such strategies, I would argue, are useful on the level of textual interpretation, but also in challenging the assumptions about effort and reward with which students enter our classrooms.

One of the commenters on the Lang article inquired, "Here's the million dollar question for those on the tenure
track. What does it do to teaching evaluations?” and I am sure he or she is not alone in considering such concerns. But the solution, as usual, lies in part in education. If students are made aware of the rationale for the extra effort that is being asked of them, they will be much less likely to hold it against the instructor, and much more likely to step back and assess the kind of education they are willing to undertake upon entering college. In their work on human limitations of attention, memory, confidence, knowledge, cause, and potential, Chabris and Simons emphasize not the limitations themselves, but rather the common assumption that we have more of each of those things than we do (x, 7). It is the illusion of ability, not its limitation, that they underscore in experiment after experiment. That distinction is one worth extending to the goals of an instructor teaching modernist complexity. We want our students to become better at reading and interpreting, of course, but perhaps more than that, we want them to develop a sense for how much more there is to know and how much effort and creativity it will take for them to learn it.

Like a musician whose ear far outstrips his or her playing ability, students who have some sense for the extent of the territory they are exploring will be less inclined to write off given text in the way one student announced to me: “Oh, I’ve done Shakespeare. He was part of my AP Lit course.” In a study of serious chess players, Chabris and Simons found that “stronger players . . . were somewhat overconfident, but weaker players were extremely overconfident” (89). For those of us who desire to deflate our students’ egos when we see them get in the way of deep learning and ambition, Chabris and Simons offer a simple remedy: “Making people more competent is the way - or at least one way - to make them better judges of their competence” (90). Modernist formal complexity offers a way to help students reassess their own skills so that they find both space and need for additions to their interpretive armory.

Even as we develop students’ critical “ear” and their receptivity to new interpretive strategies, there is much we can do to encourage perseverance and creativity in reading and quell their fear of failure. Difficulty and failure, concepts that seem to hark back to an earlier, more punitive era of education, are newly of interest in educational circles, and have spilled out into mainstream media. Paul Tough recently titled a New York Times article, “What if the Secret to Success Is Failure?” He quotes the psychologist Angela Duckworth, who speaks both as an academic and a former schoolteacher:

The problem, I think, is not only the schools but also the students themselves. . . . Here’s why: learning is hard. True, learning is fun, exhilarating and gratifying - but it is also often daunting, exhausting and sometimes discouraging. . . . To help chronically low-performing but intelligent students, educators and parents must first recognize that character is at least as important as intellect.

Duckworth’s recent work has focused on the significance of a trait she calls "grit" in long-term student success, which she sees as far superseding IQ or even self-control. The literature on education reform is now filled with terms such as "zest, grit, self-control, social intelligence, gratitude, optimism and curiosity" (Tough). Tough follows educators of both privileged and underprivileged students, and he finds that, for both, grit is both essential and difficult to instill. As an educator of elite students noted, "The idea of building grit and building self-control is that you get that through failure. . . . And in most highly academic environments in the United States, no one fails anything" (Tough). Although these discussions frequently have as their focus K-12 education, they are beginning to find their way into higher education. The University of Southern California’s Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice just held a conference titled “Attributes That Matter: Beyond the Usual in College Admission and Success,” in which experts in what is frequently referred to as "noncognitive" characteristics made a case for designing and implementing assessments that seek out qualities such as "grit" (Hoover). Whatever the challenges and virtues of such assessment tools, I hope that we soon find more reason to consider fostering such qualities - and not just for college admission.

My goal is to create a classroom in which students approach the work of reading with a high level of engagement, an engagement that is reflected in the greater sophistication of their subsequent writing, rather than wrung from them by the threat of later writing assignments. For this to take place, I need to provide a
creative, supportive environment in which students can confront failure when they first attempt a difficult modernist text. But in learning to quell the panic, keep reading, try new reading methods, and seek alternative means of putting the text together, students not only develop a repertoire of reading strategies, but they also acquire the confidence needed to tackle challenging texts on their own. Few readers, having read Joyce in a college seminar, will shy away from a new novel that has a reputation for difficulty.

A FINAL NOTE: DIFFICULT TEXTS AND NEW MODERNIST SCHOLARSHIP

The recent expansion of modernist scholarship, as it topples canonical hierarchies, seeks geographically and culturally diverse writers, and scrutinizes the material conditions under which the texts were produced, has an important role to play in a class on modernism's formal complexity. After students become accustomed to modernist "sampling" of genres and styles, and the idea of texts as fragments rather than unified wholes, one could easily expand the scope of the study to include identifying the place of these texts within a larger network of cultural media. I particularly enjoy sharing with my students Faulkner's frustrated letters to his editors, as he desperately pitched stories to various magazines - clearly hoping to sell to the highest bidder. My intent is not to unravel the author before my students' eyes in giving them such information, but to encourage them not to read artifacts from the past as part of one grand narrative of cultural production, like the history textbooks my students drop onto the table with a heavy thud as they enter my classroom. Marsha Bryant wrote recently of a course in which she asked students to read Plath's poems in their original magazine contexts; as she noted, "Using popular magazines for these writing assignments also invites students to question the widespread assumption that poetry always resists the mainstream and the marketplace" (483). On the other hand, if students come at what Suzanne Churchill calls "periodical pedagogy" through a focus on non-linear narrativity (490), they will have some tools with which to read Plath's poems as significantly different from the advertisements that run alongside them. The formal emphasis, in other words, is one way of trying to keep the historical background that I would like my students to appreciate from explaining away interest in the poems and the ways they may fit or not fit their cultural contexts. Fragmentation plays an important role in holding such reductions at bay.

In the final assignment of my course, I guided my students through a reading of the first section of The Sound and the Fury, on which they wrote their final papers. We then read the second section, the Quentin narrative, as they revised their drafts, so that Quentin's narrative could help them revisit some of the issues of the Benjy section from a different perspective. And then students departed for the winter holidays with a half-read book. Some, particularly the more dutiful students, wrote me later to say they had finished the book on their own, and I was glad they were rewarded for their earlier hard work with two "easier" sections. Even though some students did not complete the novel I did not fear that they had missed something vital to their understanding. After all, this is a story that is always incomplete, whether you read one or four tellings of the story in Faulkner's novel. They had learned to consider more carefully the impulse that one student wrote about, halfway through the semester: "One must wonder when reality ends and fiction begins. The reader is left searching for just a bit more information, some key element that will clarify everything."

References

Notes

1. In her introduction to a special section on modernism and pedagogy in Modernism/modernity, Helen Sword puts difficulty in quotation marks: "Most scholars of modernism are also teachers of modernism, and a significant proportion of our day-to-day intellectual labor involves prompting our students to engage with notoriously 'difficult' cultural artifacts" (Introduction 471). Both pedagogically and in scholarship, modernist difficulty looms large, and I think it important to indicate to students that it is not merely the common reader who finds these texts difficult for one reason or another.

2. My thanks to the benefactors of Cornell University's Shin Yong-Jin Graduate Fellowship, whose generosity enabled me to develop and teach such a course to first-year students. I am also grateful to the seventeen
students in the class, which met in the fall of 2009, for being game for such a challenge, and to Katherine Klein, a colleague and friend who read the texts along with my class and offered invaluable feedback. The students with whom I engaged in this experiment had merely submitted to a required writing-in-the-disciplines seminar for first-year students, and nearly all were planning to major in something other than English. The writing-intensive design of the course (requiring six papers, most of them with several draft stages) provided me with regular, revealing feedback as to student comprehension and the unfolding of their reading process, and it also gave them an opportunity to "talk back" to the literature that so often frustrated them. As we shifted the lens so that literature was less an obstacle than a game, the writing provided them with the way to play - to match Nabokov's prose with their own. Some of the strategies described in this paper had their origins in earlier first-year seminars on other themes, but this was my first opportunity to make the entire course a hotbed of readerly experimentation. It did result in a somewhat quieter class than usual during the early weeks of the course, since each student labored under the impression that he or she was alone in not understanding, but the seminar-discussion format allowed us to work through such misunderstandings in short order.

3. Other instructors have developed inventive exercises to help students overcome this difficulty. Jena Osman asked her students to write a poem, taking each line "from a different textual source they find in their homes. . . . This assignment makes Eliot's seemingly impenetrable text more accessible, in that it shifts the focus of inquiry from 'what does it mean' to 'how was it made' " (239). Gail McDonald called on technology to bring the sources of Pound's allusions more quickly to her students' fingers, using a hypertext of his Canto 81 to link source material in a variety of media to Pound's text (19-20).

4. Chabris's and Simons's "gorilla experiment" has brought them interest beyond academic psychology. In their experiment, they asked subjects to watch a short video of basketball players bouncing balls on a court. The subjects were asked to count the number of times the ball hit the court - but while the subjects focused on the ball, a person in a gorilla suit ran onto the court, beat her chest, and ran offagain. What Chabris and Simons discovered was that roughly half of their test subjects did not see the gorilla, though when the subjects were told of their error and had the video replayed for them, they said they could not believe they missed it. As the psychologists concluded, "It takes an experience like missing a chest-thumping gorilla . . . to show us how much of the world around us we must be missing" (38).

5. Recent studies on the relations between the Internet and reading practices, particularly the work of Catherine McLoughlin and Mark Lee, have helped to complicate this picture, but it should not have taken technological advances to mount an argument for the activity required for reading.

6. Or, in the words of the psychologists running the study, "More cognitive engagement leads to deeper processing, which facilitates encoding and subsequently better retrieval" (Diemand-Yauman et al 111).

7. Sarah Copland recently reflected on the particular pressures among junior members of the profession: "nowhere is the imperative for pedagogical innovation more keenly felt than among the ranks of junior teachers, especially those on the job market or approaching tenure review. Their professional advancement depends in part on their teaching evaluations, which in turn depend on their ability to 'make it new,' to titillate the jaded palates of the modern student-consumer in new ways" (485). But chasing the glowing student evaluation is a losing game, particularly for scholars of difficult literature. In a recent analysis of the research on student ratings, Linda B. Nilson points out that the research that showed correlations between student ratings and student learning were done in the 1980's; more recent assessments reflect a change in the student makeup that results in a negative correlation between student learning and their evaluation ratings. Nilson's analysis is sobering. I should say, however, that the evaluations from my non-linear narratives course were the best in my teaching experience. If nothing else, the difficult texts made my students feel more keenly the need for a guide as they worked through the narrative jungle.

8. The font-changing psychologists corroborate this:

Importantly, disfluency can function as a cue that one may not have mastery over material. . . . For example,
studies have shown that fluency is highly related to people's confidence in their ability to later remember new information. . . . To the extent that a person is less confident in how well they have learned the material, they are likely to engage in more effortful and elaborative processing styles. . . . For example, Alter and his colleagues presented participants with logical syllogisms in either an easy- or difficult-to-read font. Participants were significantly less confident in their ability to solve the problems when the font was hard-to-read, however they were in reality significantly more successful. Alter et al. (2007) subsequently showed that when material was disfluent participants were less likely to use heuristics, and tended to rely on more systematic and elaborative reasoning strategies. In this way, disfluency might indirectly improve retention and transfer by leading people to engage in deeper processing of the information. (Diemand-Yauman et al 112)

9. Mao and Walkowitz cite expansions of time period, geography, considerations of "high" and "low" art, canon, marginalized writers, and attention to production, dissemination, and reception (737-738). For more on their sense of the new directions of modernist studies, see their introduction to Bad Modernisms.

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Subject: Motion pictures; Books; Novels; Narratives; Conventions;
Publication title: Journal of Modern Literature
Volume: 37
Issue: 2
Pages: 1-19,200-201
Number of pages: 21
Publication year: 2014
Publication date: Winter 2014
Year: 2014
Publisher: Indiana University Press
Place of publication: Bloomington
Country of publication: United States
Publication subject: Literature