ABSTRACT: Many late modernist long poems are notoriously challenging to read. In this essay I ask whether difficulty is an integral feature of the long poem and discuss accounts and instances of poetic opacity in essays and poems by Édouard Glissant, Ann Lauterbach, Lyn Hejinian, Charles Bernstein, Caroline Bergvall, Keston Sutherland, and others. I claim that poetic illegibility in these long poems is an instance of a widespread late modernist aesthetic of difficulty. This aesthetic works through embodied concepts of the fraught relations between known and unknown.

MY THEME IN THIS TALK is difficulty in the long poem. I start with two examples, one from Louis Zukofsky’s “A-23” (1975), which I will ask the readers to locate for themselves, and one from J. H. Prynne’s Kazoo Dreamboats (2011), which will be cited below. Although the poets are different in many ways, in age, nationality, religion, education, politics, linguistic background, and more, they share a deep and serious belief in the importance of poetry, whatever its regrettable lapses and vicissitudes. The texts are both late works that for some of their readers constitute masterpieces in late style, reckless in their willingness to try verbal devices, conceptually hasty as if there is no time to waste on the niceties of logical connection,
and vast in their scope, reaching into deep time, the entirety of human history, and a polyglot and polymathic range of intertexts. In both texts readers feel rushed along at such cognitive speed that they risk falling behind or at best losing apparel and baggage to the four winds during the poetic flight. In both examples this seriousness is signaled by their use of allusions to venerated texts, their use of sophisticated demanding lexis, and through a hard-to-describe yet very evident turbulent intensity of assertion. Zukofsky wrote detailed notes and plans, which is how Michele Leggott was able to reconstruct his compositional processes, and Jeff Twitchell-Waas is able to provide such detailed glosses on Z-Site. Consider the passage from “A-23” beginning “marry: a whole” and ending “show white,” in which Zukofsky uses homophonic translation, switches back and forth from Hebrew to English sources, paraphrases, abbreviates, twists, distills, and generally patchworks to the point of shredding earlier texts into a new poem. The sources of this new text are unlikely to be recognizable to anyone without some cues such as those on Z-Site. And unless you already know this poem well, you are likely to find this extract difficult.

My other example is taken from J. H. Prynne’s prose poem Kazoo Dreamboats (2011). It too is likely to appear difficult to read.

None of this it must be said is the power of harmony even in charge fluctuation or lifetimes except the desire integrate the variation of separate notice, that’s what spirit mostly does who where she went bare in her forehead morning, only men write their socks off like this; better to be clear than dizzy or cynic, not to refuse joy in favour of rapture or contentment, the gradients are lateralised in additive counterflow. But rapture is also pretty nice. It was the deep power of contradiction in dipole scattering brilliance, tumid with negation, deep only by customary expletive, that made a blaze before the eyes, because you see only by knowing and doing what you know. Spirit sat ever upon her hands but then that’s also not true, the truth of strong being and being strongly true is not weakened by extractive countermeasure, only by complacent denial. Empty truth is a medicine without a sickness, no time like the present tense of absolute ionic discharge.

The text was produced by compositional means very different from the intricate marquetry practiced by Zukofsky, as Prynne reveals in a recent Paris Review interview. Prynne went to a hotel in Bangkok, shut himself away with only a couple of books, leaving behind his vast book collection, not to mention Cambridge libraries, and wrote spontaneously, relying mainly on memory.

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3 See, for instance, the comments on 545.1–2, which show how Zukofsky not only constructs homophonic translation from the Hebrew but also cites from the King James Bible: ‘Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice: for the Lord hath done great things.’ LZ’s notebooks (HRC 37.4) indicate the rain imagery is suggested by Joel 2:23: ‘Be glad then, ye children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God: for he hath given you the former rain moderately, and he will cause to come down to you the rain, the former rain, and the latter rain in the first month.’ http://www.z-site.net/notes-to-a/a-23/.


for allusions and resonances. His text is prose poetry, yet like Zukofsky’s, it too writes through a large range of momentarily remembered texts from the Western and Asian traditions.

I leave interpretation to the reader. Instead of exegesis I want to ask some very basic questions. Why do these poets, and many other writers of long poems published over the past seventy years, transform their materials into something so difficult to read? Could they not produce poems whose beliefs, allusions, vocabulary, syntax, and other expressive practices are more readily accessible to the educated reader? Might they be generating difficulty for purely aesthetic reasons, perhaps to better produce unusual sounds and images or novel exciting effects? Or is the coincidence of these two very different poets both writing difficult long poems an indication that we might consider the possibility that writing a long poem requires difficulty, and if so, why? Has poetry at this point in our history become such a problem for itself that the long poem, containing as it does, so much poetry, is almost compelled to become difficult? Indeed, might difficulty itself be the medium which is the message? I shall argue that the long poem creates enough space to generate a difficulty distinctive enough to form a medium capable of endogenous communicative possibilities and providing sufficient training for the reader to undergo them.

In his essay “Transparency and Opacity,” Édouard Glissant argues that for many language professionals in the West the formerly trustworthy epistemological capacity of language to represent the world accurately appears woefully lost. Now they face the discomforts of opacity: “Transparency no longer seems like the bottom of the mirror in which Western humanity reflected the world in its own image. There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today, denied or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing.” Glissant sees opportunity in this partially opaque mirror as long as we recognize that the half-unknown is our condition. Paul Celan also thought that linguistic opacity was inevitable. In an unsent letter to René Char he writes: “one can never pretend to comprehend completely—: that would be disrespect in the face of the Unknown that inhabits—or comes to inhabit—the poet; that would be to forget that poetry is something one breathes; that poetry breathes you in.”

Although the occasion of this remark was the attempt at a somewhat disingenuous apology for

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6 The final lines of the poem demonstrate particularly clearly how allusion is embedded in the text: “The corridor is and to be the avenue, from particulate vapour to consign into bedrock, transit of durance it is a formative exit in naturalised permission, solemn grade-one rigmarole, better Wiglaf’s rebuke and insurance payout. To be this with sweet song and dance in the exit dream, sweet joy befall thee is by rotation been and gone into some world of light exchange, toiling and spinning and probably grateful, in this song” (27). There are allusions to Beowulf, the Bible, William Blake’s “Infant Joy,” Henry Vaughan’s “They are all gone into a world of light,” and an article by Richard Bradley. Richard Bradley, “The Land, the Sky and the Scottish Stone Circle,” in Monuments and Landscape in Atlantic Europe: Perceptions and Society during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, ed. Chris Scarre (London: Routledge, 2002). These allusions are unusually obvious; many are more latent in the text. A final page in the book lists texts from which the poet has drawn words and images as “reference cues”—presumably prompts for both author and reader—a reminder that these allusions may not be intended as extensions of the reading space of the poem.


finding his friend’s poems hard to construe, Celan was also making a similar claim to that made by Glissant: on the inside of the poem there’s a troubling opacity, a shadow of the unknown.

Celan’s sense of opacity was shadowed by the Holocaust; Glissant’s opacity is a legacy of the Middle Passage’s violent transition from a form of life immanent in a taken-for-granted African language to forms of survival in a fractured Western enslavement of silences, violent noise, failures of mutuality and what it makes possible. As the consequences of this legacy become ever more recognized, they result not in clarity but in an “increasing opacity of the world.”

Glissant knows that this opacity can be ignored. Literature therefore has an ethical responsibility to produce or generate opacity, though the reader may well try to escape “from the produced opacity to the transparency” the reader longs for. The resulting difficulty will be the result of a tension between two opacities, that of the text and “the always evolving opacity of the author or a reader.”

Glissant’s metaphors point to his understanding of opacity as a result of the remediation of texts, of writing that without this work might falsely appear transparent, apparently unmediated by any historical blockages. Opacity is a collective term describing characteristics of media in which miscommunication, failure, amnesia, as well as strivings for articulation and unofficial communication, take place.

Glissant understands this opacity to be unavoidable. It is not Robert Smithson’s deliberate derangement of the senses of discourse. Smithson’s opacity is voluntarily induced: “in the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge. . . . [B]ut this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures.” To plunge into the oceans of opacity may result in “bottomless fictions” and “meaningless reverberations.” Glissant, by contrast, believes that there is a bottom to this mirror to be found, there is potential, fertility in these depths, not just endless designified repetition, vacancy, or noise. Glissant’s analysis suggests that opacity in the media of linguistic communication may be increasingly our condition.

Du fond du miroir we won’t find shiny accurate reflections of what we think we know. More likely, in Elie Wiesel’s words from La nuit: “Du fond du miroir, un cadavre me contemplait.”

Everyone interested in poetry is talking about poetic difficulty. Or it might be more accurate to say that everyone interested in poetry is “not talking” about poetic difficulty, a “not talking” that acknowledges that this is a difficult, divisive topic, our differences of language, history, metaphysics, and identity. Glissant and Celan give us a sense of why this might be, that poetic difficulty is not just due to verbal intricacy, hypertrophied allusiveness, or the poetic equivalents of quantum physics; poetic difficulty opens onto dark, historical depths. Poetic difficulty is almost the

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9 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 111.
10 Ibid., 115.
11 Ibid.
The concept at the center of this dispute is troublingly vague. Like certain other concepts that circulate around the aesthetic, the difficult can appear too elusive, too evanescent, too separate from poetic genre or any specific practice, to be of interest as a useful term of poetics. Poetic difficulty is not even as intrinsic a quality as prosody or image; it appears as irredeemably subjective as the beautiful, perhaps a penitential late modern surrogate for the sublime.

If we listen to exactly how poets and critics circumscribe poetic difficulty, we can glimpse some of the issues behind my earlier questions about difficulty. I am going to suggest that the authors of many late modernist long poems practice an aesthetic of difficulty by offering poetic transgressions of the limits of knowledge. This is not to say that there is an inherent or necessary connection between the long poem and late modernist difficulty. There are difficult short poems, and seemingly accessible long poems. What I shall claim is that in our time poetry is as much an aesthetic problem for itself as the visual arts, and that this problem is related both to questions of the authorial legitimacy of any public communication and to a central historical condition that makes poetic difficulty feel so necessary to poets, the changing situation of public knowledge in our time. Knowledge has new relations to various unknowns: political, moral, metaphysical, phenomenological, and even linguistic. Poetic difficulty is an aesthetic investigation of these changing conditions of knowledge. And therefore the difficulty is a significant component of these poems. I don’t have time to elaborate on the historical conditions that have debunked old accommodations to ignorance, produced new dizzying vistas of unknowns in the infinitesimal and cosmological, nor the shifting politics of ignorance and secrecy.

I recognize that this argument may not sound very new. Adorno’s insistence on art’s capacity to outpace identity thinking or Craig Dworkin’s valuing of illegibility are just two instances of

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14 The “interesting” is not necessarily “difficult,” but it “places us in an affective relation to the fact of our not knowing something [and] encodes an analogous clash between knowledge and feeling.” Sianne Ngoai, Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 165. The difficult is an intense experience of not only not knowing but being unsure whether something is unknowable. I am reluctant to use the theoretical discourse of affect, however, despite Ngoai’s care to acknowledge the role of concepts, because of affect theory’s unstable model of the relations between noncognitive intensities, emotions, conceptual reasoning, and epistemology. On this theme, see Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” Critical Inquiry 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 434–72.

15 “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.” Charles Bernstein, “The Difficult Poem,” in Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essays and Inventions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 3. Bernstein’s richly comic essay concentrates on supposed anxieties and revulsions elicited by difficult poetry and doesn’t try to elaborate on the fabric of these “enriching aesthetic experiences.”

philosophy and poetics that already recognize the value of difficulty. Indeed, I shall trace such thinking back to Hegel. What I hope to add, however, is a further possibility, latent in Glissant’s insistence that the mirror does matter, that the depths are not limitless. I interpret the depths of the mirror as an analogy to the limits of knowledge and depths of the unknown and speculate that difficult poetry asks us to account for the ethics and material consequences of our society’s ventures on these horizons.

Before I continue I want to add a few brief personal comments. How did I become interested in this topic? I’m writing a hybrid memoir, history, and speculative criticism about how our culture thinks of the unknown. This research led me to reflect on my own investment, sometimes bordering on obsession or irritation, with reading contemporary avant-garde poems whose intelligibility is often an act of readerly faith. Z-Site offers explanatory glosses for Zukofsky’s “A.” What about many other long poems by established poets such as John Ashbery, Clark Coolidge, Bernadette Mayer, Tom Raworth, Allen Fisher, Maggie O’Sullivan, and Susan Howe, or the work of a new generation of emerging writers such as Kenneth Goldsmith, Lisa Robertson, Sean Bonney, Peter Manson, and Caroline Bergvall, all of whom write long poems which can appear unclarifiable by exegesis or paraphrase? Why, I ask myself, do I value such poems, especially the longer ones, if there is no obvious discursive resolution to be had. With some Coolidge poems it is far from evident whether any interpretative act would be relevant.

In a 1989 essay on Susan Howe, Charles Bernstein wrote: “Form, in Howe’s work, is allegorical.” In this context he finds that the visual boldness of Susan Howe’s poems can “engender a hyperactive awareness of the page’s opacity and impenetrability.” His comment makes me ask myself whether my own liking for texts that I don’t fully understand is also a hyperactive response, an addiction to experiences of the textual sublime that risks cognitive bad faith, as if I am finding in these poems the relaxations of perceptual disorientation and neuromuscular manipulation of our culturally approved intoxicants? Or as my internal dialogue might continue, is my liking of difficulty closer to that more defensible thrill described by J. H. Prynne in an essay on translating poems that the title alludes to in revealing scare quotes as “difficult”? We gasp, says Prynne, at the shock of the difficult: “good difficult poems sometimes surprise us so much that we can hardly breathe.” But how do we know they are good? Just because they do take our breath away and we spring back reoxygenated? As you can hear from the cumulative interrogatives, I don’t have a full answer to these questions yet—these are provisional reflections from work in progress.

Next I shall present a series of comments by contemporary poets who have addressed the historical, compositional, cognitive, and affective determinants of poetic difficulty. The overwhelming impression is that poets are aware that their poems are considered difficult, and although they


offer a variety of reasons for this opacity, they regard it as a necessary consequence of their praxis and facture.

Ann Lauterbach makes an epistemological case for poetic difficulty. When asked by an interviewer what she understands by the distinction between “sense-making” and meaning, she replies that she is not interested in the kind of clarity offered by a newspaper: “I’m much more interested in a more difficult kind of sense-making, and I mean difficult in the sense of complexity, and obscurity, but not willful obscurity, just the fact that there are certain things we cannot penetrate and do not know, we can’t know, we may never know. There are things that are furtive and peripheral and ephemeral—I like the idea of being responsive to some of that kind of content.” Thomas Nagel has been saying for many years that we should take seriously the implications of the possibility that “the truth is beyond our reach, in virtue of our intrinsic cognitive limitations.”

Lyn Hejinian thinks of poetic difficulty as both epistemological and ethical, a consequence of necessary attempts to register the outer reaches of selfhood. The subject develops itself under pressure from its encounters with both the material world and intersubjective otherness: “In the process [of registering the self’s interdependence on others] and, perhaps more startlingly, emotions are freed from the limits of the singular ‘I,’ allowing for a poetry of complexity and densely layered affect as well as intelligence. This contributes to the notorious ‘difficulty,’ ‘obscurity,’ ‘opacity,’ or ‘impenetrability’ that is sometimes ascribed to Language and post-Language writing.” Hejinian cites an especially interesting passage from George Oppen’s interview with L. S. Dembo. Asked what he meant by referring to the “matter” of the world, Oppen said: “Ultimately, it’s impenetrable. At any given time the explanation of something will be the name of something unknown.”

Other poets insist that the difficulty lies in our sociopolitical relation to a world where poetry is just another transaction. The poet Keston Sutherland explains that social inequality, exploitation, and state violence are preconditions of poetic difficulty. Talking about his Odes he says: “For me, the difficulty of acceptance is much more radical, in this work at least. How do we accept that we will all die under a system of vampiric ruthless exploitation? What does it mean to live with that?” It is this sense that our society relies on sucking the blood from one another, rather than formal complexity or arcane knowledge, that makes his poetry difficult: “What I would say about my newer work, and also about some of my older poems, is that they are perhaps not so difficult to understand—if what we mean by that is the basic construal of their grammar, the ability to summarise some of their propositions, the ability to follow discursive constructions and lines of argument—as they are difficult to accept.” I take it that Sutherland’s argument could be applied to parts of Charles Reznikoff’s poems Testimony and Holocaust. A few years ago I

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25 Ibid.
tried teaching the section “Children” from Holocaust and found it too difficult, too unbearable, to treat it as an aesthetic object in the classroom. At times I couldn’t speak for the upwelling of grief and rage at the abuse of the children’s trust in their Nazi warders. And this reaction itself was difficult, out of place in this classroom, though not an inappropriate response to reading the poem.

In each of these cases so far, difficulty is located outside the poet. A few poets have written about what it feels like to be composing at the center of the storm of difficulty. For Caroline Bergvall the storm of difficulty is intense. In her recent book Drift, a set of traditional poetic metaphors drawn from sea voyages, metaphors she is researching, become understatements of the buffeting she is experiencing in her own life. Drift is an unusual book of poetry. It provides its own reflexive critical archive of the entire production, including a “Log,” or creative journal, in which she explains that a project to remediate the Anglo-Saxon poem The Seafarer and create a lexicon of what Maria Lauret calls wanderwords,26 words that fare between Old English, Norwegian, and modern English, was heaved off course by the anguish of a near breakdown after the end of a relationship. In this context her characterization of opacity as “tough” carries the substantial weight of lived experience: “Opacity as some sort of compositional as much as existential reality yields tough lessons about knowledge and applying one’s skills. Tough lessons about investigation. Tough lessons about not looking too soon for the surf and the break. Being lost had shut down the field of thinking, of sensing, and choosing one’s tracks.… It arises not from the past but from what’s to come, not from the familiar but from the unimagined, the potential arrival. Desire’s opacity is the longing that gives the courage to depart, to set out.”27 Poetic difficulty is oriented towards the unknown, the future, a voyage of inquiry that may sink its author.

In all the otherwise different justifications of the difficult we can hear epistemological uncertainty—about how things hang together, about the inner lives of others, about who one is and what one knows. I therefore want to propose that a major component of poetic difficulty is due to the pressure of various unknowns on our culture.

The prevalence of poetic difficulty in the long poem is an instance of a wider aesthetic of difficulty that is characteristic of late modernity, an aesthetic of the unknown. Our relation to knowledge has become a new kind of problem for us. The “unknown” has relocated itself, become much harder to make tangible, and in many cases exists behind a firewall of state or corporate secrecy. Its once tangible geographies as frontiers or unexplored lands, and its intangible manifestations in sacred spaces, have been replaced by wellmapped territories, scientific epistemology, and rationalized theologies. New institutions of knowledge management—sciences, news media, certain corporations, and state agencies, to name just a few such institutions—create unfamiliar forms of ignorance and unknowable information. Large areas of contemporary communication are grayed out with encipherment; vast amounts of scientific research are classified secret. We have new priests and rulers of the unknown.

The long poem is a poem that makes large demands of poetry and, in doing so, is far more likely to engage with difficulty than the lyric. The long poem also has the capacity and room to initiate readers into a specific mode of difficulty, an altered verbal medium in which it can then

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train up readers, like new Morse code operators, to master its idiosyncratic communicative reasonings and feelings.

Here is an alternative conclusion. The difficulty of difficulty is that it invites positional solutions. Charles Bernstein’s awareness of this problem has led him to repeatedly document the resistance to difficulty displayed by poetry apparatchiks who would much prefer verbal armchairs to “Mental Fight.” In a recent essay “The Pataquerial Imagination,” the pataquerial will not stay still, will not allow readers to assign the author to a fixed position on difficulty.28 The pataquerial refuses the monolingual position-taking that is more or less standard in current academic writing. As he did in a much earlier essay with the seemingly fixed binary terms of artifice and absorption, he lets the pataquerial flicker back and forth amongst a variety of judgments, from the supposedly wonderful affects of the pataquerulous to the cognitive switch of the reverse-pataquerial. Both terms are names for poetic difficulty. But the pataquerial imagination of the poet refuses to settle for fixed explanations of difficulty. Pataquercials want to add to the opacity in the mirror. But just as pataphysics is not an anti-physics so much as a gleeful extrapolation of physics, so the pataquerial is not an anti-inquiry so much as a gleeful excess of inquiry, a recognition that there are more unknowns than our theory yet allows. Or in the more physics-oriented words of Allen Fisher, coherence can too often be “a summarising exclusory [sic] activity.” As a poet: “Therefore you’re stuck with this difficulty . . . of being offered alternatives, which is being incoherent.”29