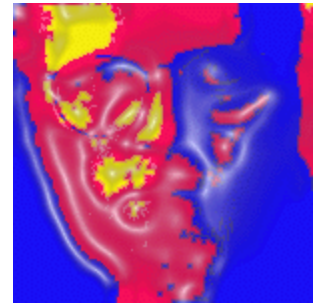


## Sentences In Space

Review of [Ron Silliman](#). *The New Sentence*. New York: Roof, 1987.

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### I.

Not this.

What then?

"I am going to make an argument, that there is such a thing as a new sentence and that it occurs thus far more or less exclusively in the prose of the Bay Area" (63).

Which implies, of course, that there is such a thing as an old sentence and that it occurs in the prose from elsewhere. What, then, characterizes the old sentence? Its "hypotactic logic," the "syllogistic leap, or integration above the level of the sentence" necessary for telling referential stories (79). As in the following passage from "The New Sentence" essay:

The French found the prose poem to be an ideal device for the dematerialization of writing. Gone were the external devices of form that naggingly held the reader in the present, aware of the physical presence of the text itself. Sentences could be lengthened, stretched even further than the already extensive elocutions which characterized Mallarmé's verse, without befuddling the reader or disengaging her from the poem. And longer sentences also suspended for greater periods of time the pulse of closure which enters into prose as the mark of rhythm. It was perfect for hallucinated, fantastic and dreamlike contents, for pieces with multiple locales and times squeezed into a few words. (81)

These hypotactic sentences lead the reader away from the sentence itself to a concept beyond, in this case to a concept of a language which does not so naggingly hold the reader in the present of the text. The dematerialization of writing.

"But note that there is no attempt whatsoever to prevent the integration of linguistic units into higher levels. These sentences take us not toward the recognition of language, but away from it" (82).

But why would someone choose to focus on this point?

"The sentence, hypotactic and complete, was and still is an index of class in society" (79).

There's an analogy here somewhere. But first a genealogical note:

Prose fiction to a significant extent derives from the narrative epics of poetry, but moves

toward a very different sense of form and organization. Exterior formal devices, such as rhyme and linebreak, diminish, and the structural units become the sentence and paragraph. In the place of external devices, which function to keep the reader's or listener's experience at least partly in the present, consuming the text, most fiction foregrounds the syllogistic leap, or integration above the level of the sentence, to create a fully referential tale (79).

So it wasn't always so.

If we argue—and I am arguing—that the sentence, as distinct from the utterance of speech, is a unit of prose, and if prose as literature and the rise of printing are inextricably interwoven, then the impact of printing on literature, not just with the presentation of literature, but on how the writing itself is written, needs to be addressed. This would be the historical component of any theory of the sentence (73).

The imprint of Gutenberg. It wasn't always so.

Within tribal societies the individual has not yet been reduced to wage labor, nor does material life require the consumption of a vast number of commodities, objects created through the work of others. Language likewise has not yet been transformed into a system of commodities, nor subjected to a division of labor in its functions through which the signified overwhelms the signifier. In contrast, where the bourgeois is the rising class, the expressive gestural, labor-product nature of consciousness tends to be repressed. Objects of consciousness, including individual words and even abstractions, are perceived as commodities and take on this 'mystical' character of fetish (11).

There's an analogy here. But first a note from Marx:

. . . the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. . . . [Value] does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language.

**Fetishism of commodities:** a commodity's value is seen as a natural constituent of the product itself, not as an effect of the social process of exchange ("the equalization of the most different kinds of labour" —Marx).

**Fetishism of language:** a signifier's meaning is seen as a natural constituent of the word itself, not as an effect of the social process of language.

Bourgeois realism foregrounds the syllogistic leap at the expense of the perception of language as a labor process.

What happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its expository, descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of "realism," the illusion of reality in capitalist thought. These developments are directly tied to the function of reference in language, which under

capitalism is transformed, narrowed into referentiality.

Reference possesses the character of a relationship of a movement to an object, such as the picking up of a stone to be used as a tool (10)

Language as a tool: "the completed tool is a sentence" (78).

A hammer, for example, consists of a face, a handle, and a peen. Without the presence of all three, the hammer will not function. Sentences relate to their subunits in just this way. Only the manufacturer of hammers would have any use for disconnected handles; thus without the whole there can be no exchange value. Likewise, it is at the level of the sentence that the use value and the exchange value of any statement unfold into view. The child's one-word sentence is communicative precisely because (and to the degree that) it represents a whole. Any further subdivision would leave one with an unusable and incomprehensible fragment (78).

Unusable fragments: the whole as a utilitarian value. Marx's notion of commodity fetishism depends on his distinction between use-value and exchange-value. "The utility of a thing makes it a use-value. But this utility is not a thing of the air. Being limited to the physical properties of the commodity, it has no existence apart from that commodity." Exchange-value, on the other hand, exists as an abstraction apart from the commodity, its physical properties no longer in sight. What determines the exchange-value of the commodity is not any quality of the product itself but the quantity of labor time that went into its making; that is, exchange-value is a social relation, a result of the labor process. Marx: "So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond."

Hammer: parts (face, handle, peen)

Sentence: subunits (words, phrases, clauses)

What Silliman claims to discover is that the sentence is the hinge between fragments and wholes, the privileged point of focus for his study of reification in language. Use-value depends on the material of the object itself, while exchange-value ignores that material in order to pass on to something beyond the object (the apotheosis of such being money). By analogy, the use-value of a linguistic object involves a concentration on the materiality of that object (rhyme, rhythm, line breaks), whereas exchange-value in language involves passing through the language to something else—meaning. The sentence is the smallest written unit, according to Silliman, which leads to a complete statement (exchange-value), yet the sentence in isolation tends to be the largest unit which can be viewed as a material object (use-value).

Pre-bourgeois language use emphasized, drew attention to, both levels of language. The same was true, Marx claims, for the pre-bourgeois view towards the commodity: "Compulsory labour is just as properly measured by time, as the commodity-producing labour; but every serf knows that what he expends in the service of his lord, is a definite quantity of his own personal labour-power. The tithe to be rendered to the priest is more matter of fact than his blessing. . . . [The] social relations between individuals in the performance of their labour, appear at all events as their own mutual personal relations, and are both disguised under the shape of social relations between the products of labour."

## II

"The question is contextual, not textual" (21).

The attraction of *Tender Buttons* for poet Ron Silliman lies in Stein's use of the sentence rather than the line as the unit of composition. Objects juxtaposed for friction: Cubist perspective. In standard prose sentences are arranged within the paragraph in syllogistic order, one premise contributing logically to the preceding and succeeding ones. Stein's arrangement challenges syllogistic expectations. "The syllogistic move above the sentence level to an exterior reference is possible," Silliman writes, "but the nature of the book reverses the direction of this movement. Rather than making the shift in an automatic and gestalt sort of way, the reader is forced to deduce it from the partial views and associations posited in each sentence" (84).

*Tender Buttons* thus presages "The New Sentence," which Silliman characterizes as follows:

- 1) The paragraph [rather than the stanza] organizes the sentences;
- 2) The paragraph is a unit of quantity, not logic or argument;
- 3) Sentence length [rather than the line] is a unit of measure;
- 4) Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity;
- 5) Syllogistic movement is (a) limited (b) controlled;
- 6) Primary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work;
- 7) Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work;
- 8) The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, the sentence level or below. (91)

Here is an example from his *Tjanting*:

Forcing oneself to it. It wldv'e been new with a blue pen. Giving oneself to it. Of about to within which what without. Hands writing. Out of the rockpile grew poppies. Sip mineral water, smoke cigar. Again I began. One sees seams. These clouds break up in the late afternoon, blue patches. I began again but it was not beginning. Somber hue of gray day sky filled the yellow room. Ridges & bridges. Each sentence accounts for all the rest. I was I discovered on the road. Not this. Counting my fingers to get different answers. Four chairs in the yard, rain-warpd, wind-blown. Cat on the bear rug naps. Grease sizzles & spits on the stove top. In paradise plane wrecks are distributed evenly throughout the desert. All the same, no difference, no blame. Moon's rise at noon. In the air hung odor of ammonia. I felt disease. Not not not-this. Reddest red contains trace of blue. That to the this then. What words tear out. All elements fit into nine crystal structures. Waiting for the cheese to go blue. Thirty-two. Measure meters pause. Applause. (12)

Despite its inverted syntax, "Out of the rockpile grew poppies" is a fairly ordinary sentence. Coming

right after "Hands writing," however, this sentence seems to demand to be encapsulated between quotation marks, presented as an example of what hands write rather than as a direct statement to be taken at face value. "Rockpile" is then metonymically recalled in the following sentence in "mineral water," while the self-conscious attention to usually-rote actions, sipping and smoking, refers back to "Hands writing." Not much later the rockpile becomes recontextualized even further by "[One sees seams](#)," referring in part to the reader's perception of Silliman's writing process itself—the deliberate focussing of attention on the contextualizing process of writing—the rockpile now becoming a trope for the pile of sentences which is *Tjanting*, out of which, despite superficial appearances, meaning coheres and accretes. The gaps between sentences (the locus of tension or torque), the visible seams, here take the place of the line break and draw our attention to the materiality of the words as words, not simply as transparent signifiers.

In discussing Carla Harryman's poem, "For She," Silliman tells us that "[What endows Harryman's piece with precisely the intensity or power that makes it worthy of our consideration are the many ways in which individual sentences are not 'in free-standing isolation.'](#)" The charged use of pronouns, the recurrence of the name Maxine, the utilization of parallel structures ('I wavered, held her up. I tremble, jack him up.')

or of terms extending from the same bank of images, notably water, are all methods for enabling secondary syllogistic movement to create or convey an overall impression of unity, without which the systematic blocking of the integration of sentences one to another through primary syllogistic movement (not how those parallel sentences operate in different tenses, or how the second one turns on that remarkably ambiguous, possibly sexual, verb 'jack')

would be trivial, without tension, a 'heap of fragments.' Nonetheless, any attempt to explicate the work as a whole according to some 'higher order' of meaning, such as narrative or character, is doomed to sophistry, if not overt incoherence. The new sentence is a decidedly contextual object. Its effects occur as much between, as within, sentences. Thus it reveals that the blank space, between words or sentences, is much more than the 27th letter of the alphabet. It is beginning to explore and articulate just what those hidden capacities might be" (92).

In this paragraph we see, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else, what Silliman looks for in a poem, and why the new sentence fulfills his demands:

1) intensity; 2) power; 3) a charged use of linguistic units; 4) recurrence; 5) parallel structures; 6) a common image bank; 7) secondary syllogistic movement; 8) the systematic blocking of primary syllogistic movement; 9) varied tenses; 10) ambiguity; 11) importance; 12) tension; 13) an exploration and articulation of the hidden capacities of the blank space (parataxis).

### III. Final Frontier

I am going to make an argument, that there is no such thing as a new sentence.

"The proposition of a new sentence suggests a general understanding of sentences per se, against which an evolution or shift can be contrasted.

"This poses a first problem. There is, in the domain of linguistics, philosophy and literary criticism, no adequate consensus [as] to the definition of a sentence. Odd as that seems, there are reasons for it" (63).

The sentence is a "primary unit of language" (65). But linguistics, philosophy, and literary criticism all have "rendered the question of the sentence invisible" (69). Why does the sentence insist on slipping

from view?

Here "is an important insight, which is that modes of integration which carry words into phrases and phrases into sentences are not fundamentally different from those by which an individual sentence integrates itself into the larger work" (75). The sentence stands somewhere between words/phrases and the larger work, between the fragment and the syllogism. But what becomes of this distinction if fragments become wholes?

"The child's one-word sentence is communicative precisely because (and to the degree that) it represents a whole. Any further subdivision would leave one with an unusable and incomprehensible fragment.

"Yet longer sentences are themselves composed of words, many, if not all, of which, in other contexts, might form adequate one-word sentences. Thus the sentence is the hinge unit of any literary product" (78).

The sentence, then, is a function of context, and context is a function of the desire for the whole. So what can legitimately be seen as a fragment?

Someone called Douglas.

Someone called Douglas over.

He was killed by someone called Douglas over in Oakland. (74)

"Someone called Douglas" is only a fragment when it is seen as part of a larger whole.

Soil of the rock. The turtle is not the cure of the learning which it snows. My breath are small here. Only, we defines, is struggle day. One voice, coming from several parts of the room, or brain. Hedged the idea, conditions the thing. The lower the corner, the higher the porch. Rags from the garbage bags. These are really personal and have no other universe. More in which porridge eat. Great mime of stone chose in the east crowd. Saw of cruel, loss of circus. A cat I suddenly expected to spray. (The Age of Huts 114)

Are these fragments or simply sentences which have absorbed the paratactic order that in *Tjanting* usually occurs "above" the level of the sentence? "Syntax, that lineating element, also has a habit of reinserting itself in even the smallest of phrases. As Robert Grenier has shown, the organization of letters into a single word already presumes the presence of a line" (62). "Stein . . . [equates] clauses, which divide as indicated into dependent and independent, with sentences. Anything as high up the chain of language as a clause is already partially a kind of sentence. It can move syllogistically as a sentence in itself to a higher order of meaning" (86).

"The sentence is the horizon, the border between these two fundamentally distinct types of integration" (87).

sentence = horizon

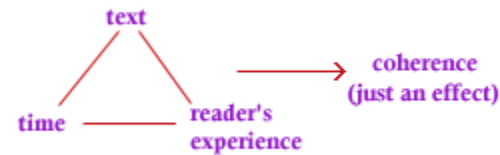
sentence = hinge

I am going to make an argument, that there is no such thing as a sentence, new or otherwise. The sentence is not; it functions as the spacing between desire and fulfillment. Derrida: "What counts here is

the formal or syntactical praxis that composes and decomposes it" (*Dissemination* 220). The sentence articulates the gesture towards totality.

### Roast potatoes for.

The answer to these questions is to be found in how we conceive the part:whole relations of the poem. Each device is determined by its relationship to the whole. This might be called the first axiom of the poetic device, to which we must add a second, based on the implications of the privilege given to expectation, to the process of experiencing, in the generation of semantic shifts at all levels: there is no such thing as a whole. This is because time divides the poem: it can never, even on completion, be experienced 'at once.' The reader is always at some point with regard to the reading. This placement organizes the interpretation of details, including any ambiguities, but only temporarily. The perceptibility of a device, in fact, depends upon the reader's recognition of the process of reorganization itself (122).



"... context is the antidote to the metaphysics of identity" (33).