

# TEMBLOR

C O N T E M P O R A R Y P O E T S

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E D I T E D B Y L E L A N D H I C K M A N

## The Sophist: A Play of Texts

## CAST:

Charles Bernstein: a poet/philosopher from New York, speaking from *The Sophist* (S2) and *Content's Dream* (CD).  
 Theaetetus: a student who makes no difficulties and allows himself to be guided, speaking from Plato's *The Sophist* (S1).  
 Eleatic: a visitor from Elea, a member of the society of Parmenides and Zeno—a genuine philosopher! He also speaks from Plato's *The Sophist*.  
 Jacques Derrida: a philosopher/poet from Algiers/Paris, speaking from *Dissemination* (D).  
 George Hartley: a manipulator of texts.

## SETTING:

The space between signifier and signified.

**Bernstein:** This questions persists: What is the interpretive stance to be toward a work which unmasks its own discontinuities, flaunts its core ideas as candy coating, and insists throughout not on its deferred meaning but its enacted meaning? (CD 380)

**Theaetetus:** I am afraid being is intertwined in some such fashion with non-entity, and a very singular complication it is.

**Eleatic:** It is indeed. But at least you perceive how our Hydra of a sophist has availed himself of this ambiguity to drive us again, much against our will, into the admission that non-entity [in] some way *is*.

**Bernstein:**

The world deals with negation and contradiction and does not assert any single scheme. New signs on the federal building, they say  
 FEDERAL BUILDING. (S2 11)

**Derrida:** The sophist thus sells the signs and insignia of science: not memory itself (*mnēmē*), only monuments (*hypomnēmata*), inventories, archives, citations, copies, accounts, tales, lists, notes, duplicates, chronicles, genealogies, references. Not memory but memorials. (D 107)

**Bernstein:**

Innovation is Satan's toy, a train  
 That rails to semblance, place of memory's  
 Loss. Or tossed in tune, emboss with gloss in-  
 Signias of air. (S2 14)

**Derrida:** Insofar as writing *lends a hand* to hypomnesia and not to live memory, it, too, is foreign to true science, to anamnesia in its properly psychic motion, to truth in the process of (its) presentation, to dialectics. Writing can only *mime* them.

**Hartley:** But what has all this to do with politics?

**Bernstein:**

Resistance marries faith, not faith persist-

Ence. Which is to say, little to import  
 Or little brewed from told and anxious  
 Ground: an alternating round of this or  
 That, some outline that strikes the looking back,  
 That gives the Punch and Judy to our show. (S2 14)

**Hartley:** So there's this distinction between *resistance* and *persistence*. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* tells us that *-sist(a/e)nce* comes from *sistere* [L, to take a stand, stand firm; akin to L *stare* to stand]. So there's this question of how to take a stand.

Resistance: taking a step back (regression), taking a stand again (repetition), taking a stand against [against: ME, alter, of *againes*, fr. *again*], two separate unities facing off again. Either/Or.

Persistence: taking a step through (progression), taking a stand throughout (unflagging), taking a stand thoroughly, to destruction. But recognizing mutual influence: when you cross through water you stir things up, and you get wet.

**Bernstein:** We

Carve and so are carved in twofold swiftness  
 Of manifold: the simple act of speak-  
 Ing, having heard, of crossing, having creased. (S2 14)

**Hartley:** The told and anxious ground (reference) gives credence to distinction. I & Other.

**Derrida:** The front line that is so violently inscribed between Platonism and its closest other, in the form of sophistic, is far from being unified, continuous, as if stretched between two homogeneous areas. Its design is such that, through a systematic indecision, the parties and the party lines frequently exchange their respective places, imitating the forms and borrowing the paths of the opponent. (D 108)

**Bernstein:**

*Ectophobia*: fear of the without, the external, the outside.  
 (S2 42)

**Derrida:** The boundary (between inside and outside, living and nonliving) separates not only speech from writing but also memory as an unveiling (re-)producing a presence from re-memoration as the mere repetition of a monument; truth as distinct from its sign, being as distinct from types. . . . The space of writing, space *as* writing, is opened up in the violent movement of this surrogation, in the difference between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis*. The outside is already *within* the work of memory. (D 108-9)

**Bernstein:**

Cf: *heterophobia*: fear of others, otherness ((Ectomancy.))  
 (S2 42)

**Eleatic:** I have already told you; to dismiss these subtleties [as interminable, as within any man's compass, with all

one's might] and show your capacity to follow an argument critically at every step; to meet him who affirms the *other* in some sense to be the same, or the *same* in some sense other, in the particular sense, or point of view, from which he makes his assertion. Merely to declare the same *in some sort of way* other, or the other same, the great *in some way* small, or the like unlike, and plume oneself on this external parade of contradictions is no true criticism,—too manifestly 'tis but the crude first fruits of incipient commerce with the real.

**Theaetetus:** Assuredly.

**Eleatic:** In short, my good lad, the attempt to dissociate everything from everything else is something worse than false taste; 'tis possible only to one who is an utter stranger to the Muses and to philosophy.

**Theaetetus:** Why so?

**Eleatic:** This divorcement of everything from everything else amounts to a total annihilation of discourse of reason, for 'tis the intermarriage of form with form that gives us discourse.

**Theaetetus:** True. (S1 259 C-E)

**Bernstein:** "Dysraphism" is a word used by specialists in congenital disease to mean a dysfunctional fusion of embryonic parts—a birth defect. . . . *Raph* literally means "seams", so dysraphism is mis-seaming—a prosodic device! But it has the punch [and judy] of being the same root as rhapsody (*rhap*)—or in Skeat's—"one who strings (lit. stitches) songs together, a reciter of epic poetry", cf. "ode", etc. In any case, to be simple, Dorland's does define "dysrhapia" (if not dysraphism) as "incomplete closure of the primary neural tube; status dysraphicus"; this is just below "dysprosody" [sic]: "disturbance of stress, pitch, and rhythm of speech." (S2 44)

**Eleatic:** I presume you mean that words which when consecutively uttered have a signification "fit together", those which form a succession with no significance do not.

**Theaetetus:** But what do you understand by this?

**Eleatic:** . . . You are, of course, aware that we have two sorts of vocal expression significant of being.

**Hartley, aside:** So being is expressed in chains of signifiers which fit together?

**Theaetetus:** Which are—

**Eleatic:** *Nouns*, as they are called, and *verbs*.

**Bernstein, aside:** The winter of  
prepositions falls  
on the Jew's  
benighted brow (S2 40)

**Theaetetus:** Would you explain the difference?

**Eleatic:** A sign expressive of an action is what we call a *verb*. . . . And a vocal sign appropriate to the agent of such an action is a *noun*.

**Theaetetus:** Exactly.

**Eleatic:** Now a continuous string of nouns by themselves will never constitute discourse, nor yet a series of verbs without accompanying nouns.

**Theaetetus:** I do not see that.

**Eleatic:** . . . The very point I was anxious to make was that such a succession of utterances is not a discourse. . . . [Only when verbs have been mingled with nouns] have we a *concord* and a discourse with the immediate emergence of the primitive *combination*, which we may call the most primitive and briefest of discourses. (S1 261E—262C)

**Hartley:** Concord = discourse = signification of being = truth. Ergo, discord is not truth, not signification, not discourse.

**Bernstein:**

These vague reproaches—a handkerchief waved at the tumultuous facade, returning the look with an altogether different effect of discounting. Over and over plagued by the dialectic of such Messianism—  
—tied

as it is to a conviction in a primeval totality of word and object, each echoing the truth of the other and the very contours of the cosmic. (S2 8)

**Hartley:** But what alternative do you propose, a facade being a facade, to this primeval totality that Plato refers to (in a sense) as the primitive *combination* necessary for being/truth?

**Bernstein:** One vision of a constructive writing practice I have, and it can be approached in both poetry and philosophy, is of a multidiscourse text, a work that would involve many different types and styles and modes of language in the same "hyperspace". Such a textual practice would have a dialogic or polylogic rather than a monologic method. The loss of dialogue in philosophy has been a central problem since Plato. (CD 227)

**Hartley:** How about a practice like Pound's?

**Bernstein:**

It is the taint of positive value itself in the mythological structure; to question, that is, all current correspondences

even the most luminous, lustrous. **False.** . . . Vague feel of it but no recollection. *Dulcit figitur omnibus plectrum semeris delecto, obit relentere moribus dixum.* For I have wintered in the fields of the Hesperus  
and tasted

of the starling; this, too, unbears my trial. Though the question is, how can you lose something you never had?

**Hartley:** Sanity, you mean?

**Bernstein:** One screw missing, but you can air condition us all; some kind of far away village, behind it. (S2 12)

**Hartley:** Then Olson?

**Bernstein:** I think it's time  
we were all put to sleep. The

body, the  
body. I, minim of Amsterdam  
shimmy on the waves, and torch  
plunge and vanish. *Was*  
*Maurice Bishop killed because*  
*he spoke English?* WHOSE  
Christmas? (S2 168)

**Hartley:** Then what of Ginsberg?

**Bernstein:**

One wants almost to shudder (yawn, laugh . . . )  
in disbelief  
at the hierarchization of consciousness in such a dictum  
as "first thought, best thought", as if recovery  
were to be prohibited from the kingdom;  
for anyway "first thought" is no thinking  
at all. There is no 'actual space of'. So  
quiet you can hear the clouds gather. . . .  
I'm screaming at somebody or being screamed at, not  
interesting enough to wake up for. Slurps  
as it burps. FIRST BURP, BEST BURP. (S2 13)

**Hartley:** Prohibited from the kingdom: Plato boots the  
poets.

**Eleatic:** A mimic sometimes acts *with knowledge* of the ob-  
ject he is mimicking, but sometimes *without* it. Now can  
we find a more important basis for division than this of  
ignorance and knowledge?

**Theaetetus:** Surely not.

**Eleatic:** . . . For the sake of making the distinction,  
though the expression may be somewhat *risqué*, we may  
call mimicry based on mere fancy *doxomimetic*; that which  
is founded on knowledge shall be called *scientific mimicry*.

**Theaetetus:** Well and good.

**Eleatic:** And 'tis the former which must have our atten-  
tion; the sophist, as we have seen, is not to be found in  
the ranks of those who know, though he is very certainly  
among *mimics*.

**Theaetetus:** Indeed he is. (S1 267A-3)

**Hartley:** But where do we mark the boundary between  
the two?

**Derrida:** The word "between" has no full meaning of its  
own. *Inter* acting forms a syntactical plug; not a catego-  
rem, but a syncategorem: what philosophers from the  
Middle Ages to Husserl's *Logical Investigations* have called  
an incomplete signification. What holds for ["between"]  
also holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for all other signs which, like  
*pharmakon*, *supplément*, *différence*, and others, have a double,  
contradictory, undecidable value that always derives  
from their syntax, whether the latter is in a sense "inter-  
nal," articulating and combining under the same yoke,  
*hup'h'en*, two incompatible meanings, or "external," de-  
pendent on the code in which the word is made to func-  
tion. But the syntactical composition and decomposition  
of a sign renders this alternative between internal and  
external inoperative. One is simply dealing with greater  
or lesser syntactical units at work, and with economic

differences of condensation. Without reducing all of  
these to the same, quite the contrary, it is possible to rec-  
ognize a certain serial law in these points of indefinite  
pivoting: they mark the spots of what can never be medi-  
ated, mastered, sublated, or dialecticized through any  
*Erinnerung* or *Aufhebung*. . . . Because of this indecision  
and instability, Plato would have conferred upon the  
double science arising from these two theaters the name  
*doxa* rather than *epistēmē*. (D 221)

**Bernstein:** But the crucial mechanism to keep in mind is  
not the rules of current preferred forms versus possible  
alternatives but *the mechanism of distinction and discrimination*  
*itself* that allows for certain language practices to be legiti-  
mized (as correct, clear, coherent) and other language  
practices to be discredited (as wrong, vague, nonsensical,  
antisocial, ambiguous, irrational, illogical, crude,  
dumb, . . .). This "mechanism of exclusion" is described  
by Michel Foucault in relation to the designation both of  
"criminal" and the "insane", with the comment that it  
is the mechanism itself and its techniques and procedures  
which were found useful in creating and preserving the  
predominating hierarchical power relations of the nine-  
teenth-century bourgeoisie (as well, it should be added,  
the twentieth-century Soviet state). (CD 223)

**Hartley:** So how does this apply to writing?

**Bernstein:** There is no natural sound or look to a poem.  
Every element is intended, chosen. That is what makes a  
thing a poem. Modes cannot be escaped, but they can be  
taken for granted. They can also be meant. (CD 49)

**Hartley:** How do you "mean" a mode?

**Bernstein:** To  
bare it, make it palpable—but not so it can be  
transcended, rather recirculated, exposed to air, plowed,  
worked  
until fertile for inhabitation. All huff & puff. (S2 8)

**Hartley:** So a poetics of persistence: writing not to escape  
meaning but to draw attention to the meaning-process,  
the working of ground for the planting of seeds. The  
ground does not precede meaning; it is altered/reconsti-  
tuted in the production of meaning-effects.

**Bernstein:** But grieve only  
for the survivors, who hoe  
in tiers and do not  
forsake—hope's stooges.  
"And cry, 'Content', to that which grieves  
the heart." For there is more to anesthesia  
than simply rendering unconscious  
and free of pain. To suppress a twitch  
or tone, the anesthetist  
may wish to abolish it  
at its origin. A less toxic approach  
is to block the signals  
or otherwise interfere with their transmission  
from source to destination. (S2 171)

**Hartley:** Block the signals, interfere with the transmis-  
sion: a poetics of dissemination . . .

**Derrida:** Now, this reference is discreetly but absolutely displaced in the workings of a certain syntax, whenever any writing both marks and goes back over its mark with an undecidable stroke. This double mark escapes the pertinence or authority of truth: it does not overturn it but rather inscribes it within its play as one of its functions or parts.

**Bernstein:** a few beats in the  
context of a deproliferating structure that  
nonetheless is bouncing by. (S2 173)

**Derrida:** Dissemination skims and froths the flight and theft of the seminal: a vain, blank loss in a wet dream in which the masthead, pour qui le lit [*for the one who reads/ for whom the bed exists*], blots itself into abysses of lost veils, sails, and children. *A<<bo/lit*. The "so white."

**Bernstein:** There are many  
things to say, much that can truly be said, but  
little that needs saying. Acts  
of meaning preempted as an absence  
for want of repetition—the needing  
is saying, the saying is meaning. Any you,  
my friend, back away, & hear only dim  
peals to dead throngs. I hear  
them too, & you. Speak  
to me so I may hear, speak  
that I may speak. There are only  
plain words, panes of our separation  
and sameness in saying. Tell  
me of another country and of  
your blankest journeys, tell  
of the colors you cannot contain.  
Afraid of meaning, afraid  
of the words, which are  
its body. (S2 167)

**Derrida:** Appearances to the contrary, the endless work of condensation and displacement does not end up leading us to dissemination as its ultimate meaning or primary truth. The emission here is not that of a message: [Bernstein's] *dispersal*. Following a pattern we have already experienced in the "entre," the quasi-"meaning" of dissemination is the impossible return to the rejoined, readjusted unity of meaning, the impeded march of any such *reflection*. But is dissemination then the *loss* of that kind of truth, the *negative* prohibition of all access to such a signified? Far from presupposing that a virgin substance thus precedes or oversees it, dispersing or withholding itself in a negative second movement, dissemination *affirms* the always already divided generation of meaning. Dissemination—spills it in advance. (D 268)

**Eleatic:** How then, if a man has no personal knowledge of a subject, can there be anything sound in his controversial objections against one who has this knowledge?

**Theaetetus:** How indeed?

**Eleatic:** Then what can the strange secret of the sophist's influence be?

**Theaetetus:** Secret? What secret? (S1 233A)

**Derrida:** One must . . . be fully cognizant that this reading of Plato is at no time spurred on by some slogan or password of a "back-to-the-sophists" nature. (D108)

**Bernstein:** At midnight's scrawl, the fog has  
lost its bone and puffs of  
pall are loamed at  
tidal edge. No more to count  
than density arrows its  
petulance at crevice laced  
with dock, not hour's  
solstice nor brimmed detour—  
over the haunch of lock and  
tress the vein pours sweetly  
and Devils' door knows no  
more than pester and undone—  
the seering moors where I  
refrain of lot and camphor. (S2 177)

**Derrida:** Doubtless this order will appear to be contested, even inverted, in the course of history, and on several occasions. (D 192)

**Bernstein:** Only this, a ripple  
against a blind of shore that sands  
us smooth and mistless; let  
he who has not stunned make  
sound, cacophany of  
nearing, having fell, of  
pouring, having stalled. (S2 177)

**Hartley:** SYMPTOM: *syn & piptein*, to fall together, the together being out of sight, out of mind: TRACE *syn* see SIGN. Cacophany of nearing, having fell (symptomagram).

**Eleatic:** I suppose you are aware that our disobedience to Parmenides has gone far beyond the limits of his prohibition.

**Theaetetus:** In what way?

**Eleatic:** Our enquiry has pushed even beyond the problem he forbade us to examine, and has presented him with a result. (S1 258C)

**Bernstein:** Though  
free to bore and load, let  
rail retail conclusion, finicky jejubes  
at waste of moor, or lord these  
tower, tour the template, thoroughfare  
of noon's atoll. (S2 177)

**Theaetetus:** Yes, the question must be faced. (S1 229D)

#### TEXTS

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# Sentences In Space

Ron Silliman: *The New Sentence*.  
(New York: Roof Books, 1987)

**N**ot 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 litera-

ture, 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, 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 unuseable and incomprehensible fragment" (78).

Unuseable 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).

## 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 between the preceding and following sentences;
- 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 wooden chairs in the yard, rain-warped, 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, refer 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* unity, without which the systematic blocking of the integration of sentences one to



another through *primary* syllogistic movement (note 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 unuseable 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, the 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).

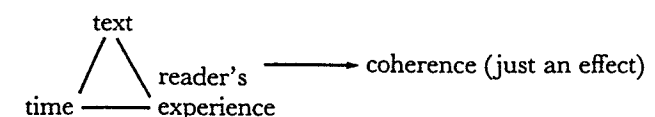
sentence = horizon

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).