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## A Straightforward Realist: Documenting the Real in Silliman's *Xing* and *You*

*the Alphabet*, by Ron Silliman. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008.

Ron Silliman, I think we can agree, has been remarkably consistent in his use of "the new sentence" since its conception in the early seventies. Within this consistency, however, his work has exhibited a fairly fluid formal range. As Silliman claims in *Under Albany*, "there has been a shift in the work from structures that carried forward a formal concept as a mechanism for breaking up the habits of perception and those that tend to define a form and in the process to seek mechanisms of sub- and di-version" (UA 22). Intriguingly, both the "shift" and the original "mechanisms" he describes are evident in two books, *Xing* and *You*, that appear consecutively late in *the Alphabet*, the former written in short three-line stanzas and the latter in prose paragraphs. The books pair Silliman's perpetually fruitful new sentence with meticulous formal and procedural constraints—one primarily involving space and the other time, but with ample overlap between the two—in a multivalent act of documentation.

This conception of a sentence, as Bob Perelman explains, encompasses transgression in its basic composition:

Writing in sentences was one way to bring practice, politics, and daily life closer together . . . But sentences per se were not the answer . . . The new sentence, on the other hand, with its relative ordinariness and multiple shifts, encourages attention to the act of writing and to the writer's particular position within larger social frames. (316)

The new sentence, in other words, draws attention to the performance and labor of the poet and, in its very nature, offers implicit connections between the part (the poem and poet) and the whole (the

"larger social frames"). While Silliman himself initially discussed the new sentence in terms of the paragraph and prose poem (see *The New Sentence*), eleven of the twenty-six books of *the Alphabet* utilize what could be more accurately described as the stanza; this is certainly part of the "shift" in his work (*UA* 22). While the new sentence might remain fundamentally unchanged, still containing what Silliman refers to as "interior poetic structure" ("From *The New Sentence*" 547), a work like *Xing* shows the poet additionally playing with line and stanza:

You, the reader (whichever)  
wave a slow, distracted  
gesture high over your  
  
head as if unsure I can  
see you from this rocking  
barrel, curious as to my  
  
destiny as it approaches  
the precipice at the margin  
waves' roar drowning my (874)

Riding a "rocking barrel," the poet approaches the waterfall of the poem's line and stanza breaks and, not coincidentally, draws further "attention to the act of writing" (Perelman 316). The doubled reference to waves additionally alludes to a reoccurring motif (here reversed) in *the Alphabet*, that of poet waving to reader from inside the text. Perelman's criteria for the new sentence has been fulfilled and, through the use of space, further enhanced.

Space, after all, has been essential to Silliman's agenda throughout his career; the crucial function of parataxis is to force the reader to examine the connection—the space between—two seemingly unconnected sentences. Here, however, we see much larger spaces, the swaths of blankness on each page of *Xing*, being utilized as this poem's specific constraint. While the new sentence's insistence on parataxis is itself a form of constraint, fighting against a writer's natural impulse to create and follow explicit or implicit connections, Silliman often encompasses additional levels of constraint within his works, perhaps most famously the series of repetitions in *Ketjack* and the Fibonacci sequence in *Tjanting*. Here, his constraints might be considered more subtle but no less important. *Xing's* additional constraint, as should be clear from the above example, is formal: the short lines, mainly between four and six words, and three-line stanzas. This may

not appear unusual in poems generally, but compared to the rest of Silliman's oeuvre, or even simply to the rest of *the Alphabet*, this diminutive form clearly goes against his typical modes of composition. While other works use the line break, nowhere else is the form so rigorously applied and sustained.

In contrast, the constraint in *You* is more explicitly procedural, as explained in the notes of *the Alphabet*: "1995. One paragraph a day, one section a week, for a year" (1062). *You*'s primary constraint, then, is time. As with *Xing's*, this constraint may not be unique in *the Alphabet*, but *You* may represent its most complete application. The notes reveal, for instance, that *Jones* was composed by the poet looking "at the ground" on a particular street "every day for a year" in 1987 (1058). *Paradise* was "literally begun on New Year's Day, completed on New Year's Eve" in 1984. "Every paragraph was one sitting." Similarly, for *Skies* "every day for one year [the poet] looked at the sky & noted what [he] saw" (1060). In each of these works, the constraint is exactly one year, and at least for *You* and *Paradise*, each paragraph is the equivalent of one sitting. The only additional constraint for *You* is that we know each paragraph also precisely represents one day of its year; the physical space of the poem and the time of its composition are effectively collapsed.

This may, in fact, be what defines *You* as a singular creation. As William Watkin states about *BART*, an earlier poem the critic describes as "perhaps the closest to the work that makes up" *the Alphabet*, "What meaning there is in the poem centers around the procedures governing its creation, namely to write a poem in real time" (513). *BART* might represent a more localized event, composed over one day riding the train, but *You* follows a similar rationale with its longer unit of time. Though Watkins curiously describes *the Alphabet* as "nonprocedural" (513), his observations about Silliman's utilization of procedural constraints effectively connect the poems to another crucial component in the poet's work: realism.

Asked in a recent interview to describe his "writing style," Silliman responded, "I'm a straightforward realist" (Hoenigman). This may seem an odd description when considering lines such as, "Readers of the lost art. Monster with an eye in its mouth (body of a rocket ship)" (908), but paratactic technique and procedural constraint are, indeed, inherent to this concept of realism. In his study of *Tjanting*, David W. Huntsperger suggests, "Silliman's use of procedural form is in part an attempt to find a means of writing adequate to the real as it emerges within contemporary society . . . If traditional realism is no longer adequate to the complexities of a post-industrial capi-

talist world, then it is necessary to make new formal interventions" (111-12). Our daily lives, after all, are certainly more paratactic than hypotactic, and in cataloguing a year, as the poet does in *You*, what can be more real than encompassing in that year the act of writing the poem itself—even if the subject is also what he is "not writing": "Gears and lever of a single hand, hidden below flesh, mesh to move and pick up this pen. What I am not writing about is seeing you sick" (906)?

Realism, in this sense, is documentation but without any clear imposition of order. Silliman's documentation of a year in *You* encompasses the cultural, the personal, and the poetic, and most importantly, there is a distinct lack of barriers between these categories. Essential to the paratactic practice, and certainly to language poetry's Marxist bent, is that no category of human experience is privileged over any other. As Timothy Yu puts it, "Silliman denies . . . division by shoving the public and private up against each other, like passengers on a bus, forcing the reader to see public and private as part of a larger system mediated by language" (67). What's being described here, as with the poet's manipulation of time and space, is a collapsing of these boundaries, a suggestion that categorization itself has little use in the "larger system" of experience being encapsulated and "mediated" in the poem.

For this reason, the details Silliman catalogues can range from the quotidian to the unmistakably historical, creating in *You* a remarkably balanced portrait of 1995. In at least two sections, he references the First Chechen War: "In Grozny, in Bihac, the idea of history shudders with each new explosion" (903), "In Grozny, a young girl, a child, lies dead in the street for a day" (910). Opening the section, IX, in which that second reference appears, a different type of historical event makes a cameo: "The O. J. Simpson trial to rerun forever as a Saturday morning cartoon" (909). No less privileged are what we now view as essentially nineties pop culture artifacts: "Baywatch Ken doll" (922), "Dark-toned palette of *The X-Files*" (920), "a new high score for Tetris" (924).

At the same time, of course, the poet catalogues the personal details of his family and his physical body. His sons, in particular, reoccur throughout—"I carry a sleeping boy up the stairs and to his bed" (932), "I stand and watch my boys asleep" (937), "'Change my diaper,' a small voice says" (946)—and it's no coincidence that they are so often sleeping. Silliman has stated that he views "the sitting as a unit of writing" (Tursi), and apparently this particular unit occurs most often in the morning before his children are awake. And what else occurs in

the morning? "Morning bowel: long loop, very nearly a massive rope, lies coiled at the bottom of the bowl" (934).

Set against these cultural and personal details, as we've seen, is the cataloguing of the act of composition itself, and this involves interposition between poet, poem, and reader. As with the stanza we examined from *Xing*, Silliman dramatizes this interplay by calling attention to the page itself:

Textism. Relax your eyes until the focus gives way and words appear like swarms of ants at a distance, at first orderly, then wandering, transgressing the margins, then the page, the room alive with a crawling swarm of letters. Crocodile puts on her coat and goes to work. (909)

This is a more than fair description of the reading process, in which the poem can appear "orderly, then wandering," and in demonstration, Silliman enacts this fluid state by including a paratactic space between "letters" and "Crocodile," a "transgressing" disjunction that can't be truly breached.

Breaching, after all, isn't in the agenda of the new sentence, but perhaps *crossing* is: as indicated by the title *Xing*, the points where the cultural, personal, and poetic intersect are of unquestionable interest to Silliman. This word is referenced in the poem as it would appear on a street sign, "Cattle xing" (873), and perhaps the most intriguing crossing in the work regards the repeated referencing to the poet's eye surgery. The longest sustained description in the work is of a woman, "a medical professional," who dies in a hospital after a series of medical errors, "leaving a husband and an infant boy / who will never have / even a memory of his mother" (875-876). Unusually taking up a full page and a half of the text, this length is a surprising inclusion, at least until the lines that immediately follow: "'Great,' says the doctor / shining the blue light / right into my eye" (876). While the story of the woman's death has a power in and of itself, the intersection between it and Silliman's own experiences with medical professionals, who examine and perform surgery on his eyes, provides the greatest punch. Throughout *Xing*, the poet's choice of juxtapositions with details regarding his eyes can feel particularly significant, as when, for instance, his sight is paired with the physical experience of the poem:

The new trifocal bring the right

eye back into play, post op,

for the first time in 18 months  
and I realize I'd forgotten

just what depth perception is,  
tunnel effect of this corridor,  
dizzying drop to the ground. (880)

He allows the reader to experience his "dizzying" reencounter with "depth perception" through the "tunnel effect" of the stanzas: the intersection between poet and reader is near literal.

The experience of seeing is particularly apropos when considering the poet's greater project of documentation: creating through all his intersections a document of collective experience. In the introduction to *In the American Tree*, Silliman states that "much, perhaps too much, has been made of [language poetry's] critique of reference and normative syntax . . . without acknowledging the degree to which this critique is itself situated within the larger question of what, in the last part of the twentieth century, it means to be human" ("Introduction" xx). This "larger question" is precisely what Silliman has been attempting to answer throughout his career. It could, however, be considered a problematic undertaking in light of a necessarily limited worldview.

Timothy Yu examines this potential paradox—white liberal male depicting collective human experience—at length in *Race and the Avant-Garde*: "Language writing is held to be both particular and universal, emanating from a circumscribed position—that of straight white men—yet still (by virtue of its immersion in the aesthetic) capable of incorporating all other discourses" (53). After all, when the poet is observing two homeless men, doesn't he remain imprisoned in his own narrow vision, no matter (or precisely because of) his sympathies: "In the first / Jackson Square Alley, / a young African- / American homeless / man, arms // of a weightlifter, / sorts through bags / of trash in // a dumpster" (892)? As Yu notes, "Silliman never allows his consciousness to cohere into a single voice or narrative and constantly breaks up and rearranges his perspectives. But they are unquestionably, even flamboyantly, all *his* perspectives" (68). What, then, can this tell us about what "it means to be [collectively] human" ("Introduction" xx)?

This question can't, in a sense, be properly answered, but undoubtedly, the use of the parataxis fights against any unified sense of the poet. While Silliman's "perspectives" are impossible to ignore, this concept of incoherence is key. Yu recognizes that "the techniques

of parataxis, of following one sentence with another that is apparently unrelated, refuses to allow that perspective to cohere—serving, in essence, as the author's bulwark against himself" (71). While the poet's perspective or persona might be anything but universal, the new sentence still has the potential to express the human experience as a whole, which has, of course, been its project from the beginning. Bob Perelman puts it succinctly: "Parataxis is the dominant mode of postindustrial experience" (313). And these words come from 1993, a time significantly less paratactic than now. With the increasing percentage of our days spent on the computer, navigating endless series of dis- (or barely) connected links, we experience parataxis for hours on end. Is it a coincidence just how much a Twitter feed resembles a language poem? Silliman's views are particular, but the form, if anything, is increasingly universal. Every poem represents a document that has by now transcended "the last part of the twentieth century" ("Introduction" xx) and begun to reflect the twenty-first; language poetry is primarily a product of the past, but it unquestionably mirrors our present condition.

This fact, however, offers complications when judging the transgressive nature of Silliman's work. At the very least, language poetry has lost its radical sheen. Perhaps in the seventies the hypotaxis of the novel might have been considered a dominant form, so offering a text that conformed more closely to daily human experience appeared transgressive, but the current dominant form is undoubtedly now dictated by technology. Americans rarely read a book, but increasingly they spend countless hours on Facebook and will continue to do so with what ever tech medium replaces it. And crucially, social media as text is *all* paratactic, and almost anyone with access to a computer is perpetually in the process of both consuming and creating it. So instead of transgressing dominant modes, it can be considered that Silliman is now participating in them.

The only issue with this formulation is that the experience of *the Alphabet* unquestionably remains challenging, and Perelman, again, might help illuminate why. Of the new sentence, he states, "this writing seems to me self-critical, ambitiously contextualized, and narrative in a number of ways" (316). This last component, "narrative," is a complicated one, because parataxis also *denarrativizes*. That's, in fact, how we commonly think of parataxis—disjunctions snap any sense of growing narrative, but Silliman's work offers hints of narrative in at least two ways. Part of what Perelman is talking about here is simply a natural inclination while reading to "renarrativize" (318), to search the space between Silliman's sentences for hidden bonds, so that a jux-

taposition such as, "An icon for poetry (winged hearse). Woodpecker walks up the trunk of tree" (933), encourages attempts to connect the image of the bird with the idea of poetry or even death. Crucially, however, this type of renarrativization is not only encouraged in *You* but also thwarted; the action is inherent, but full connection remains impossible.

Similarly, there are autobiographical elements in Silliman's work that point to a type of cumulative narrative. As in the personal examples we've seen from *Xing* and *You*, there are certainly strands of story floating throughout: of fatherhood, of the poet's eye degeneration and medical procedures, of the larger social and cultural changes that suggest narratives for our country as a whole. In documentation over time—remember time can represent a formal element in Silliman's work—a sense of narrative is inevitable. This is evident in the individual smaller works and impossible to miss in *the Alphabet* as a whole.

This renarrativization, however, is precisely what doesn't occur in our daily experience of parataxis, in which we remain passive consumers and participants, and this is key to the continuing transgressive nature of Silliman's work: it *forces* interaction, to return to Perelman's discussion of the new sentence, by implying "continuity and discontinuity simultaneously" (316). This occurs not only *between* but sometimes *within* sentences, such as this one from *You*, "Gradually a pattern starts to emerge—today it's a series of concentric circles—but it's always only the middle game, the transition between known beginnings and understood end, and soon the squares dwindle down and the lawn is cut (933)." Potential narratives come and go throughout the movement of reading this sentence. The first mention of "pattern" points the reader, in this context, to the poem itself—the poet makes some version of that move repeatedly throughout *You*—so it appears like typical self-reflexiveness, the story of writing / reading the poem. But then the "concentric circles" throw that potential narrative into question, as does this concept of the "middle game," and by the end of the sentence, Silliman reveals that this has been a description of mowing a yard: that's the slip of narrative. Except that it isn't quite that simple, because—and if she's gotten this far, the reader is really working hard—nearly all of the sentences (everything but "lawn is cut") are, in fact, *also* about the process of the poem itself. If this is a narrative, in other words, it is a multivalent one.

It shouldn't be surprising, then, that Silliman plays with this multivalent quality even in the title *Xing*. As discussed earlier, the word certainly references crossing ("Cattle xing" [873]), but Silliman offers



additional definitions as well: "Xingtài: / form, shape pattern. Xíngtí: / shape of a person's body" (894). Taken together, these three definitions reference the physical presence of both poet and poem, along with the crucial action, crossing, that describes the inherent quality of parataxis in our experience of the internal, the poem, and the external, the world. As with the poet's consistent application of the new sentence, no one of these meanings is privileged over the others; as when offering slips of narrative, Silliman encourages connections while also making them all but impossible to complete, and this is certainly key to his agenda. By privileging a multivalent sense of both narrative and meaning, while simultaneously diverting it, Silliman's poems have the potential to both reflect and subvert our current paratactic condition.

Perhaps the clearest expression of this appears in *You's* most prevalent motif, birds. Birds appear throughout *the Alphabet*, and quite a bit in *Xing* specifically, but nowhere with the frequency of *You*. No less than seventy-five occurrences of mockingbirds, cardinals, blue jays, chickens, hummingbirds, woodpeckers, swans, geese, robins, ducks, and many more flutter across the fifty-three pages of this poem. Part of the reason for this undoubtedly concerns the procedural constraints discussed earlier—in a quiet morning's documentation, the poet likely hears and encounters birds frequently—but the sheer mass of them in these pages points us to something more. In *Under Albany*, Silliman describes a bird as "one way to view nature that incorporates both chance and change. Define the trail by what is transient" (79).

There is an oddly totemic quality to this description, as if a bird might indeed be an "icon for [his] poetry" (933), and certainly Silliman "incorporates both chance and change" (79) into his work, but as *You's* birds demonstrate, there's another factor at play as well: constancy. After all, the birds' numbers may fluctuate—mockingbirds are particularly prevalent for a while, then cardinals, then all references thin out during what must be winter months—but they remain a constant, almost overwhelming, presence on the page: "One bird, one bird, many" (912), "Woodpecker's rapid beat" (929), "Drab female cardinal with brilliant yellow beak" (938). Pop culture references tend to only occur once, the Chechen War no more than three times, but birds appear all the way into the final section: "Big red-bellied woodpecker chases the downy and the white-breasted nuthatch away from the suet" (956). In this way, then, they do serve a totemic function as representatives of both transience and permanence, the ultimate reflection of Sillimanic realism. In *You*, *Xing*, and *the Alphabet* as a whole, birds fly through the gaps of the poems, illustrating and subverting

parataxis, collapsing and inflating the poet's conception of space and time. Look to the birds, Silliman appears to instruct, in order to see what it truly "means to be human" ("Introduction" xx).

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