

PHILLYTALKS

3 January 21, 1998, 7 pm

Kelly Writers House, 3805 Locust Walk, Phila.

Ron Silliman

from You

for Pat Silliman

V.

New maple bare in winter, almost invisible in front of the redwood fence. Lone bushtit, singing for its flock.

Eyes shut, sound of rain envelopes the house. Tree hung with dozens of plastic soda bottles, painted frying pans, plates, forms a rough altar. Tiny porcelain animal in each box of tea. By ear, he sd. Said.

An old pen that once seemed elegant now feels cheap in my hand. Small boy learns to fast forward. Toot 'n' Toddle Taxi. Where in history shall we find it?

Sun shimmers in the fog, cars passing on this two-lane country road reduced to the dull glimmer of headlights.

Details swarm, the hum and buzz of a million features, each infinitely specific, apparent to the eye. The art of time in tone tunes. Gears and levers of a single hand, hidden below flesh, mesh to move and pick up this pen. What I am not writing about is the shock of seeing you sick.

At night, the dial of a lone clock radio illumines the kitchen. Small birds chitter in the dark, an index of the oncoming dawn. At night, this house is a husk, a shell.

The garden in the fog feels exact, contained. Bare plum full of birds. My own breath visible. Unseen

voices pass. Further off, foghorn mimics baritone sax.

VI.

Don't rush the horizon. Man stands atop a shingle roof, measuring tape in one hand. Television in the background is a constant. Jetliner smaller than a fly appears to enter the sun.

Walking backwards, I climbed this mountain, he says, across the ocean of suffering. The freeway itself on fire from the heat of the butane truck explosion.

Paragraph as four-sided figure. I stand in the garden, alone at the center of the Center, constellations dim in the night sky. Young woman alone, asleep in the doorway of an abandoned porn theater, not even a sleeping bag. What puts the temp in temple?

Banana perceived as a flower, as a nut. Doll designed as anthropomorphized cartoon animal (unable to decide if it's a dog or bear or lamb). Appliqué seahorse on bedroom wall.

What the floss found: 27th letter of the alphabet.

Giant photo demonstrates radish. Plastic sunbear honey jar become bathtub toy. Why the automobile's proper metaphor is a horse or cat. The implicit question has always already been answered. Emotion as a furnace: *stokin'*!

A collapsible tray on gold rollers, designed just for use with caskets. Judgment narrativizes eternity. Sacred icon derived from an instrument of torture: the nail *through* the palm. In the drizzling rain I watch you driven from our eyes forever.

VII.

I meant *lives*. *Driz line* is how I will always hear that word pronounced. The poem not as an instrument of pleasure, but of passion. The child down the street, age four, is lovely, although her parents are scowling, reclusive, self-pronounced Satanists, house behind the high fence a deep purple, license plate on the ancient van reading *MLA FEY*.

Snails weigh down the leaf even as they devour it. Compost thick with worms. A still rain vs. a heavy fog. That sense of the indoors as complete.

Is false. Suture or sutra, which one? Long walk to the mailroom, my mode of relaxation. Heart beat pulse from the drip of the new leak in the roof. Small glimmer of blue sky teases. That much green in the hills is not natural.

The bones of the foot, unused to the weight of the body after a long night's sleep, snap and pop when I first rise and walk. The sheep of state mill and bleat in the holding pen. Ink spills, blood red. Full moon in a dawn sky.

Old lightbulb crackles and whispers with electricity. Seduced into Spring, plum tree's blossoms are crushed by frost. You are given one half hour to pack your personal belongings out of your cube and depart the premises. The premise is, at the end of the day, lives should make sense. Don't count your chickens.

When the bulb blows, the shadows will rock. First car on the block warming its engine long before dawn. Small boy sprawled asleep on a large bed. Morning paper bounces against the steps. In the distance, first one siren, then two, then several.

Behind which, even further, a train's long deep whistle articulates speed. In the corner with the sound off, television functions as a lava lamp. Crow in the plum tree coughs.

XIX.

Moment in which I realize I'm not wearing my glasses. Old stone house. Blue plastic wrap of the *New York Times*. Impact of red wine on white fur of the dog. Sunrise.

Poem as gradual as weather. Hotel art (pseudo-Hoffman softened, retro-Rothko as filigree in pastel). What Trenton makes, the world takes. What Nixon knew when Nixon knew it.

First compulsive songbird, pre-dawn, abruptly halts. The air conditioner is constant (unnoticed but never silent). You can hear the electricity in lightbulbs, faint crackling. Motivation: man in hotel conference room throws football to the sales reps.

Too bleary to imagine. How the river carves the city (lost at night, trying to find my way across). Dog leaps for the stick, her own ballet, then loses interest, wanders off to sniff the grass. History as a function of curiosity.

Of the forbidden, my three-year-old says "That makes me sad." Impossible to discern the ice from the shards of broken glass. A table of contents from which I've been omitted.

Room in which toupées outnumber beards. The firestorm sweeps left across the screen: we only imagine the men, women and children inside. I'm walking in a world you cannot imagine, having died so long ago.

Dream of real estate. Amato's tomatoes. The sun emerges gradually through the woods. (The son emerges gradually through the woods.) The present has not become a perfect copy, but rather an uneditable one. The boat sinks rapidly in the text. Try to capture the shape and impact of your cheekbones in words.

From an airplane, the spokes of suburban mall (this one in Princeton is T-shaped) are indistinguishable from those of a minimum security prison but for the immense parking lot. But for. When the hard drive on the PC that controls the security system crashes, every fire door in the hotel – each held open by electrically controlled magnets – slams shut. Cardinals will take some getting used to. Dark-toned palette of *The X-Files*.

XXII.

Small boy in a seaman's cap reminds me suddenly of my own such hat at that age, cap my father left

behind. A light fog promises to burn off. A week between homes.

Voices, verbs, verses (word, bird, third *absurd*). Boy's shout from the street stories below brings me out of my sleep instantly until I determine that all my children are here inside asleep. The absolute second you have the first opportunity in over a week to relax, to take a deep breath, give a sigh, you realize from its shallow painful wheeze that you've had bronchitis for days. Pesto potato pizza.

Seek out the path of most resistance.

A splinter I thought would work itself out has instead infected the whole finger. Dream in which, although I haven't seen you in ages and we were never more than cordial in a professional context, I wake to discover you next to me in bed naked the actual body is always such a surprise leaning toward me for a long, slow, deliberate kiss, guiding my hand gradually from your small almost conical breast south until I enter, first the front, then behind, and you twist, groaning, a broad grin across your face. Day that never happens.

Day that I discover total allergy to this powder detergent, big welt-like rashes everywhere from my neck to the soles of my feet. Cardinal in the yard smaller than I expected. You live on the east coast now.

When, on the car radio, they hit the baby-in-the-microwave story, I hit the button. Among the morning's rich cacophony of birdsong, pick out first one, then another, that sound completely unfamiliar, using each in turn as the foreground through which to hear the whole (nearby crow entirely out of scale). Upstairs, footsteps pace back and forth, for which I construct my own imaginary narrative: a young girl, a Latina whose parents, themselves the children of farm laborers, are schoolteachers, goes on scholarship to an excellent school, then rises quickly to corporate middle management, one day to discover her own desire for one of her employees, an older married man entirely inappropriate for her future: what should she do? Velcro sandals.

The sky grows lighter before it starts to rain. I stand in an empty attic studio, wondering where to put the desk. Young poodle lopes up to the wire fence. Fan rotates slowly over the vacant kitchen.

XXIII.

Sun is in the trees behind which a train rushes north to New York. The day after you die, people still sip coffee in fast food joints as a thunderstorm gathers in the sky, newspaper headlines proclaim great events overseas, stupidity and corruption at home, suffering everywhere. In the video game arcade, someone sets a new high score for Tetris.

House at the edge of the forest. Two swans amid the geese by the small lake could they be anything but domestic? One can hear the freeway here, but that sense of mass urgency feels wildly out of place. High above the canopy, a deep-throated, curling birdsong I've never heard before.

Catbird hops onto the grass. Carrying one side of the sofa bed, he steps backwards through the moving van's side door, foot missing the long metal ramp, so that he falls from the side of the truck, the large couch crashing down in the dark vehicle, twisting as he drops to catch himself so that he hits the pavement with his hands out, right wrist shattering on contact. Woodpecker taps out a message.

In the park, volunteer fire department uses the toddlers' climbing structure to practice blindfold maneuvers. Wind in all these trees *breathes*. What bird answers the call of my alarm clock?

Wooden children's climbing structure narrativized as a sailing ship, a Cessna, a train. In this scene the monkey has become an elephant and carries the pretend prince through the narrow streets of the city. Most of the volunteer fire crew are in their early 20s and stand around holding their heavy rubberized jackets, baggy pants held by red suspenders, passing a single pack of cigarettes between them as they watch the demonstration, fireman blindfolded, face mask covered by aluminum foil, crawling through the play structure, following the yellow rope headfirst down the slide.

Dinosaurs strewn across the vast plain of an attic rug. Fireflies glitter in the back yard, half moon making its way over the tops of these trees. Mall lot in which people don't appear to lock their cars. The beautiful dentist half jogs, is half dragged by her large dog, through the forest.

Angles vs. shadows in an attic room. Bookcase full of children's toys, overseen by a bespectacled Mr. Potato Head in a green baseball cap. Every asset management program is built either from the procurement database out or from an inventory function up. Horizontalizing that work force made each member expendable. Angels and shadows.

Dec. 14, 1997

Jeff,

Thinking perhaps too literally about your interest in contradiction, the following revision of Bob Grenier's 1971 declaration¹ popped into my mind:

I hate speech but like talks

I'm interested in the relation(s) between opposition and contradiction. Poetry, like so many cultural phenomena, proceeds by apparent opposition. I say "apparent" because it always seems to be possible to step back from the immediate context only to discover that the seeming difference is instead just the next step in a larger logic that proves all encompassing. Langpo opposes the speech-based poetics of New American poetry, yet is on another level just the next generation of a tradition that goes back through Creeley, Olson, Eigner, the Beats and the New York School, through the Objectivists and high modernists all the way to Whitman, Blake, Dickinson, and even, if you look at the work of Charles Bernstein and Bob Perelman, Alexander Pope. Langpo's evil twin, the so-called New Formalism, opposes all variations of modernism, yet it and langpo have remarkably similar things to say about the McPoem of the Writing Workshops. Step back further still and all three tendencies are making a parallel argument about the value of something called poetry in an increasingly post-literate world. It's not unlike the problem some people were faced with in the 1960s when, having heeded some bad advice to drop out, found that "out" was already a position *within* the same general economy.

So my question is this: is there a deeper relation between contradiction and opposition, or is it merely (only) the entropic one of scale? What about other "apparent" oppositions – for example, between prose and verse? Or between national traditions, the whole spectrum of identarian differentiation? How does this play out in your own writing?

Ron

from **“But Could I Make a Living From It”**

That’s a nice sunset you have there.

I’m three years younger than the term *Third World*.

This is where your body goes after you donate it to “medical research.”

I’m a cultural nationalist waiting to happen.

“Note: these awards are custom made to individual requirements and are NOT mass-produced.”

Is longing desire stretched over distance.

This landscape demands another attention span that mediates me flatly and broadly.

The apex of the swoon is where sexuality’s spliced in.

Do you really want to use it that way, I mean to *use* it?

The sun reflects off the triangular glass tower downtown and into my bedroom – I sprawl on this corporate light.

“Writing can be no more definitive than can one’s place in history.”

Just don’t touch me during the drum solo.

Trees are cod.

Outside of a metaphor I would like to have a body, but as a statistic I can at least show up on a bar graph.

1976: 0.9861.

“Land Rover owners go on forever.”

Canadian dollar?

But the city is an architectural mistake imposed on a place that makes sense – a monument to a certain model of history.

By this I mean I’ll take the bigger one and put it on my card.

To be in the “world” in the position of quotation marks.

I would rather have your fingers in my mouth than “find my own voice.”

“Mr. X, a capitalist who produces woolen yarn in his spinning mill, has to ‘reproduce’ his raw material...”

Grass is trees.

This “transaction” translates me until I become my own ethnographic smear.

A tendency to read all languages as anagrams of english – as slang gauges.

“The flow of thought is not accompanied by a simultaneous unfolding of speech.”

The corporate core without a body.

I respond with my managerial skills, organizing genitals into discourses.

If white people can find *one another* exotic, that’s how I find you.

The kind of consumer support of the Third World.

And a rusty gas barbeque on every balcony.

Something deep inside “synchronic ethnographic liberalism” says “Can I borrow that for a minute?”

“A colleague of mine insists the color of a man’s watchband should match that of his belt and shoes: Who is correct?”

Porque soy Jeff, hijo de mi madre.

He carefully explained his “I’m so privileged that now I’m marginalized” position to me.

“Let us now return to Hegel.”

Walking, drunk with a cup, it’s nationhood.

Leisure is just organized pleasure.

A proud yet flexible and disposable worker.

“On the other hand many well-intentioned people have resisted jumping on the guilt bandwagon for lack of convincing data.”

In the morning I want a voice to attenuate touch.

“Uninhibited working class sexuality” in the basement.

Technicians of the Abbreviated.

1978: 1.1402.

It's not that the content is mine, but that it has been made generic.

Bright yellow label.

“Mr. Y, a heavy engineer producing machine-tools...”

False centre of accusation with moral funding.

I become a “world citizen” with the arrival of my phone card.

Investment banking as a sexual term.

Post-Desert Storm Tumours.

I'll stand in for form, for me.

It's the “political economy of genitals” that puts us inside production.

Desire's tendon tightens.

Bootstraps will pull me up through the masses, classes.

I could use a bit of that “privileging of the proletariat” every now and then.

Just how are you replicated in architecture?

Autonomous condo.

“You can now capitalize on emerging markets and Latin America from just L30 a month.”

Retired General “Stormin” Norman Schwarzkopf undergoes prostate surgery.

The plane drops into a cartoon version of heaven.

1980: 1.1690.

“Money traders and ordinary people.”

Tourism as a method of state control for both the tourists and the hosts.

In my name an anagram for an act.

From the air, the canals are darker, crooked roads.

Why don't you “master” your own culture first?

Clothing becomes an optional signifier this day in the park.

“At some point in my life I became obsessed with having just the right wristwatch.”

So-called maleness, so-called critical investigation.

Upper-class classism versus working-class racism.

“Latin America: Rich in History Resource Potential.”

I’ll quietly wait for my big break.

Good morning little graduate schoolboy.

If only we could elevate poetry to pop culture – smells like corporate spirit.

To give this a context, I’m writing below sea-level, but I don’t know what time it is and I don’t speak the language.

Haiti Panama Granada, Granada Panama Haiti.

1982: 1.2341.

Any mood altering substance please.

It’s erotic to say everything, but let’s just do this and talk later.

“Possible military intervention” so people can live “ordinary lives.”

If only the rich people could see us now!

Foreign policy?

Technicians of the Horny.

However, I am practicing walking the walk.

“An erogenous zone the size of an index card.”

Nice “unique moment” you have there.

“Mr. Z, etc., etc.”

I consider myself too young to be reamed in that way.

Soft tissues in three languages.

One of the four *Hs*, Haiti’s a UN crisis with unscreened blood.

The problem has not been *me*, but my inability to *admit* that I am the problem.

Junkie bike economy.

Having a “past life” only illuminates the library, among the stacks and recalls.

I aspire to a dental plan – to make myself human.

1984: 1.2948.

Rank your unhappiness and then write a book.

“My complex memories of my father are vividly colored by my recollection of Pall Malls, Heaven Hill Bourbon and Bright red Alfa Romeo Guilietta, take away any of these elements and substitute Kents, Champagne or a Pontiac, and I’d be remembering a different man.”

Loss is the pleasure of the sexualized sign.

I’m not trying to perceive the world but lozenge senses with a stroke.

Dec. 18, 1997

Hi Ron,

Following your pulling back from various poetry communities to “a value of something called poetry in an increasingly post-literate world,” I’ve been thinking of contradiction’s function or positioning within a world system (late capitalism) and how that radiates down to the national and the so-called local. Marxists framed internal contradictions as national and the external contradictions as global: but in this current multinational phase, these two distinctions blur into one another. In my own texts, I tend to work out of – as a primary frame – the contradiction of the nation being the unit or economic/imaginary construct that is invoked for state policy and as an emotional marker for a citizen, while the more dominant set of relations take place at the global level. For instance, in Canada, there is a long-standing contradiction of this sort in the construction of a national identity and culture based on “our” difference from “Americans.” Yet, at an economic level and in policy, there has been a move to erode national differentiation (NAFTA, etc). One way that I’ve tried to address this is by using the “noon spot rate” of the relationship of the Canadian dollar to the American dollar as the running statistic that provides a structure for “But Can I Make a Living from It.” This statistic seems to encompass both the relationship or positioning of Canada as a nation-state within a world system and also how it presents itself internally: the dollar rate is in relation to America, just as the Canadian identity is said to be, and this monetary relationship also situates Canada within a world market: the higher the dollar the less exports are bought, and, as an exporting nation, the economy drops, which results in the hacking away of social programs, education, etc. In terms of a national literature, I’m also aware of the reification of the local as the national: there’s the synecdoche of the local being the national (or the national being a collection of sutured locals) that fails to position “Canada” within global relations. In writing this, I’m wary of my own tendency to expand infinitely here, or to totalize, but in some ways (as with any writing project) my project takes place within antagonisms toward existing relations and in Canada the national literature (no surprise) does seem to mimic state policies toward the imagining and situating of the nation. (This is tied into Canadian cultural policies over the

last fifty years, but now the space for “unofficial” writing is shrinking as small presses lose funding and “official” literature softly expands and guides literary production and distribution through awards and other cultural policies.) The New American poetry credo of foregrounding the local, which was picked up and used in Canada,² seems to need a rearticulation to link the local and the global. (Although to look at Olson in particular, there is a situating of the local in a larger world system.) So, within my own textual production, I’m aware of being within both national and global systems and relations and the contradictions within and between them. In some ways this is close to Jameson’s “cognitive mapping” but I don’t strive toward a mimetic function of late capitalism as he seems to want political art to do.

Moving closer to the text, I’ve been thinking of a function of poetry within this larger set of contradictory relations in terms of Althusser, who writes: “I should like to suggest that an ‘*overdetermined contradiction*’ may either be *overdetermined* in the direction of a *historical inhibition* . . . or in the direction of revolutionary rupture . . .” (“Contradiction and Overdetermination,” *For Marx*,³ p. 106). If, in late capitalism, the dominant result of an overdetermined contradiction is “historical inhibition” (that history won’t lead to “revolutionary rupture”), then how do texts register or react to this? (And in *You*, I note the running commentary on history initiated by “Where in history shall we find it?” [V].) My sense of it is that writers are saturating their texts with contradiction and overdetermination which is leading to (to borrow a term from Sianne Ngai⁴) a poetics of disgust that is in antagonism to a poetics of pleasure. (And again, in *You* you write “The poem is not an instrument of pleasure, but of passion” [VII] perhaps registering as well that the trope of pleasure [as resistance] is played out.) I see this tendency toward a poetics of disgust and overdetermination in the work of “emerging” writers such as Kevin Davies, Deanna Ferguson, Mark Nakada, Brian Kim Stefans, Louis Cabri, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, myself and others as well as writers who could be defined in terms of another generation (yourself, Bruce Andrews, Steve McCaffery). I’m not keen on naming a poetics for a generation (“Ours was the age of disgust and overdetermination and a fine age it was”) but locating a tendency.

Within this frame, then, I tend to think of “opposition” not as an aesthetic function, but as an oppositional effect for a text. But, as I’ve been proposing above, the poetry I value is the work that moves into sets of relations, relations that are overdetermined, not toward an impossible outside. Predictably, a sense of opposition becomes aestheticized once texts are lifted out of social relations. To move to a more direct question, I think that a sense of opposition and contradiction that is worked out formally in the more politicized Language texts (or formally politicized texts) is being rearticulated into an aestheticized disjunction. And perhaps it’s here that an emphasis on reading the “new sentence” as a unit of a structured text where meaning is situated/produced in disjunctions tends to overlook what I feel is a more ideological function of formally politicized texts: the radical *conjunction* of texts that makes or articulates links within social relations. I was struck, in reading *You*, that both within and between sentences social contradictions which are within overdetermined relations are aggressively linked (and this is not particular to only *You*, but in *Xing*⁵ for example). This drew me to think of Steve McCaffery’s *The Black Debt*⁶ and how the comma functions in “Lag” and then drops away in “An Effect of Cellophane” and how this text is an enjambment of social relations, not a disjunction of them. In *You*, one contradiction contained within a sentence comes to mind: “From an airplane, the spokes of suburban mall (this one in Princeton is T-shaped) are indistinguishable from those of a minimum security prison but for the immense parking lot” (XIX). This recording of a social fact bluntly (yet subtly) brings forward a social logic of architecture that designs prisons and public (commercial) areas similarly. Or, this positioning of sentences where social and emotional overdeterminations are set in the same sentence next to a comment on a video arcade: “The day after you die, people still sip coffee in fast food joints as a thunderstorm gathers in the sky, newspaper headlines proclaim great events overseas, stupidity and corruption at home, suffering everywhere. In the video game arcade, someone sets a new high score for Tetris” (XXIII). I see in this method, the linking of social relations, an articulation between sites, structures, and relations where such articulations may not be readily seen:

once contradiction is seen as a social aspect of a text (or the embeddedness of the aesthetic in the social) then these disjunctions take on a radical conjunction. Oh, and the questions: so what do you think? How do this apparent opposition and contradiction fit into your writing project?

Ron, I guess I'm taking this opportunity (the Philly opportunity) to talk about some of my still-in-process thinking about poetics/poetry: and how formally politicized texts are being received.

I'm not approaching the "new sentence" as your flagship, but as a device that is being read in different and varied ways. I don't want to appear strident about it: my reaction is coming out of how "disjunction" is becoming aestheticized and how, as a term, it seems as off as "nonreferential" does now in relation to these "hyper-referential" texts.

Anyhow, I'm glad to have this opportunity to ask you these questions.

best
jeff

Dec. 23, 1997

Jeff,

Try and envision habit as an object. Imagine it as possessing size, texture, weight, density, mass. What color is it? How does it feel to the touch? Is it hot or cold, smooth or rough? Now envision habit as something more identifiable and yet, in another sense, even more amorphous, more liquid, say, than solid. Imagine it, for example, rather like *The Blob* from the low-budget 1950s sci-fi film of the same name, which made an instant star out of Steve McQueen and much of which was filmed in Exton, Downingtown and Phoenixville, just a few miles from my house, in locations that in some instances remain virtually unchanged. Now envision habit as Wittgenstein's lion, attempting to speak.⁷ What can it tell us? How can we know? Now, again, envision habit as something both so close and pervasive that it is impossible to see. Imagine oxygen, or our inability to feel the earth's rotation, or HIV or the gradual recession of other galaxies constantly moving further and further from our own. Now envision habit as a cloth, as something we wear so much that it becomes a part of our own identity, the nun's habit as well as our own.

I come from the generation that invented homelessness, which was only one one-hundredth of what it is today before Ronald Reagan became president and radically reduced the stock of subsidized housing. I live in a nation in which the ownership of weaponry is discussed in the vocabulary of rights. A nation in which every single major metropolitan daily newspaper has a business section and not one has a section on labor. Where the death penalty is considered a form of justice and not an atrocity, where an execution in Texas barely rates a paragraph in the local press unless it offers some opportunity to regurgitate titillating details of the original offense, best when horrific, sexual and committed against the very young.

A nation in which Michael Jackson is shown cuddling his newborn son on the cover of *Life* because habit plus boredom plus media requires the steady reproduction of celebrity monsters. Our celebrity monsters are nearly as infinite as they are short-lived. Susan Smith driving her children into the lake. Jonbenet Ramsey dancing in her faux-Dale Evans cowgirl costume in the not-quite-right speed of a home video. Amy Fisher. Jeffrey Dahmer. John Hinkley. Gianni Versace. Mark David Chapman. Lady Di. Who remembers Nicole Simpson now? Who remembers Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme or Sara Jane Moore? Our celebrities – and the presence of a few Europeans on this list tells us

that Yanks are not alone in this, merely out front – our celebrities are literally the media creatures of habit. In the United States, *The National Enquirer* is our paper of record.

I have a bad attitude toward habit. Habit is what makes “good Germans” of us all. Habit lets over 100 homeless people in San Francisco alone die each year from hypothermia, untreated illnesses including alcohol and drug abuse, and violence. Nobody even counts how many homeless die nationally. Habit plus the HIV virus plus the fear of sexuality...well, the button “silence = death” says it well enough. Habit is scaleable. Habit plus the fear of sexuality again also enables parents not to notice that their own daughter right there at their breakfast table is nine months pregnant until a strangled newborn is discovered in the toilet or the dumpster or at the prom. Habit enables the US to have our second-longest border with a nation of vast underdevelopment and poverty and to imagine that it is we who have a problem and that it might be called immigration. Habit has helped keep the deaths of one-third of the population of East Timor virtually out of the media for decades. Habit permits the US to ritualize our horror at the holocaust during World War 2, seldom asking much about our own role in the affair, promising ourselves Never Again without pausing to consider the lives of the Palestinian people and the possibility that it is indeed happening again, only in slow motion, even as we speak.

Any consideration of “habit” threatens to become a sort of perpetual motion machine, spitting out an infinite variety of horrors. Just to pull the veil back even a little exposes a logic that many, hearing it, would characterize as shrill. It is shrill – unquestionably. But what are you going to do? *What. Are. You. Going. To. Do?* The inverse of habit would appear to be a paralysis of horror.

What does this have to do with poetry? Nothing, except insofar as poetry itself has to do with the world, although, for the moment, I’m going to leave that verb phrase, “to do with,” deliberately vague. I take it as a given – and that means you or somebody can certainly come along and question it – that all art entails a “tuning of the senses.” I take this as a universal of being human, one of the defining aspects, as given as the presence of gender (and even more “given” than the determination[s] of gender). How we are being tuned, and to what, are questions that can be almost infinitely contested, extended and elaborated. But I think that all people are driven to do this, that our senses demand it of us, and that this leads to quilting bees, Irish step-dancing, Michaelangelo, Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers, Sam Beckett, DJ sampling in rap, fast edits in TV ads and the use of too many colors and a consciously busy graphic layout of the *National Enquirer*.

Now, within that infinitesimal slice of what constitutes The Aesthetic Impulse that we might then call poetry, the question I am confronted with, positioned as a white male hetero working-class US citizen destined to live more of my life in the 20th century than the 21st, is this: *how address habit?* Because it is through the question of habit that every other question, the whole long litany of atrocities that constitutes our dark ages, does (or does not) become visible.

I take it as no accident that Pound’s dictum to “make it new,” the Russian Formalist variant – “make it strange” – and Brecht’s alienation effect all come to us early in the 20th Century. Each recognizes that strangeness is a primary condition for perceptibility – we notice what jumps out at us. There is, I would argue, a high form of such recognition, or maybe I should say a form that proves useful, in which the senses become attuned to perceiving just those elements that fail to recede into the sheer white noise of daily life. This form offers a potential (though not a guarantee) for response and action.

There is equally (if not more powerfully) a low form, which is that of manufactured novelty – the overhyped movie blockbuster, the newest celebrity monster, the current boffo murder trial, this week’s hot new subcompact personal computer, etc., etc., etc. This mode transforms any potential for action into reaction, consumption, paralysis. Let’s stay home tonight and watch the reruns of Elton singing at Di’s funeral one more time. Or watch Pamela blow Tommy tonight on the internet. “I want a new drug,” as the song says. It’s all the same.

The question of opposition, of contradiction, of the new sentence (so-called, but then again, I

was the one who called it that), fits exactly into this space: there is a contest between these modes of recognition. A battle, to call it that, over what constitutes the new.

Obviously, in the larger scheme of things, I, my friends, the people in this room, on this campus, in this city, all the poets in my nation and yours, face a problem of resources. If the question between alternative positions should ever be defined as one of volume, we are certainly going to be drowned out. So it is instead, I think, important to define what is being done on another level, by some other code, in such a way as to make it both tangible and visible, without at the same time being sucked up into the literary equivalent of celebrity soup.

At the same time, there is no such condition as “at the same time.” The literary devices which I and maybe four dozen other people first utilized in the early and mid-1970s are by now all at least 20 years old. 1998 will mark the 19th anniversary of my talk on “The New Sentence.”⁸ The infant son whom Bob Perelman and Francie Shaw brought to his first event that September afternoon at the San Francisco Art Institute is now a student at Yale. When Bob Grenier first declared “I HATE SPEECH” in the first issue of the magazine *This* in early 1971, Richard Nixon was still a first-term president, the murders at Kent and Jackson State were only a few months old, and nobody had ever heard of Watergate. We have had seven presidential elections since then. 1971 is closer to World War 2 than it is to today.

There is a crucial and radical difference, I think, between what Williams once characterized as “news that stays news,” and the idea that somehow “the new will stay new.” The New Sentence, a title chosen precisely for the allusion to Dante⁹ and his sense both of the need for a renewed sense of language for literature and conceptualization of his craft as entirely political, characterizes a series of prose works that were written between approximately 1975 and 1979. While as a theoretical construct, it attempted to identify what those prose works might have in common –

- “1) The paragraph organizes the sentences;
- 2) The paragraph is a unit of quantity, not logic or argument;
- 3) Sentence length 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, that is, most often at the sentence level or below”

– the New Sentence as a construct of the late 1970s did not go further in attempting to identify how specific works within that same field differ from one another, the ways in which, for instance, Carla Harryman is not Clark Coolidge, nor Lyn Hejinian Bob Perelman, nor Rae Armantrout Barrett Watten. In retrospect, I can see that I identified those elements that may have most characterized my own impulses as a poet, the old problem of writing history so that one’s own face turns out to have been the image of the happy ending. Six of the eight conditions characterize the relationship of the sentence to the larger units of the work, but the other two are remarkably vague about what might go on within the sentence itself. Only one or two people have come up during the intervening years to note just how much is assumed or swept under by that curious word “torque.”

As I noted even in 1979, the term did not characterize everything that could then have been yoked together under the rubric language writing – a term that was itself less than a year old, having first been deployed by Alan Soldosfsky’s dismissive essay in *Poetry Flash* – the work of P. Inman, David Melnick, Steve McCaffery, or Tina Darragh is not characterized at all usefully by invoking the New Sentence. It could even be read, as it certainly was at the time, as an argument *within* langpo as such, positioning what was most characteristic about many of the west coast poets at the center, thus

potentially marginalizing other writers, such as Charles Bernstein or James Sherry. There were in fact arguments, muted and civil but real nonetheless, over whether or not naming my first collection of talks with that title wasn't too much of a shameless power play.

In retrospect and in my own defense, let me note that those broadly defined conditions do a very decent job of characterizing works that had not, in 1979, begun to be written, including much of the prose work by Bruce Andrews since that time or the recent non-aleatory texts by Jackson Mac Low. To the degree that the New Sentence could be said to have been a predictive construct, I'm prepared to plead not guilty to theorizing purely for my own personal interests. But it seems odd, to say the least, to presume that a gestalt that could have been roped together under such vague and general terms as those cited above might still, nearly 19 years hence, be imagined to still apply, to presume, for example, that any of the writers cited thus far is still even remotely contained by such terms. If my own writing in "You" might be thought of as "in the New Sentence," that turns out to be what would be least interesting to me about that work.

(The whole of my long poem, *The Alphabet*, beyond a few lines that turn up at the beginning of "Force" and *Ketjak*, which I use as a ground for the construction of *Ketjak2: Caravan of Affect*, were written after 1979.)

This returns me to the problem of "at the same time," the question of time itself in poetry, and especially historical time. Between 1979 and the present we have poets who have gone on and matured, sometimes changing dramatically – I don't think anyone could have envisioned the kind of satirist that Bob Perelman has become, nor Charles Bernstein's turn towards a Brechtian mode of rhyme that in some ways makes Charles the logical inheritor of the tradition of Allen Ginsberg's later poems. Even the old poems have become familiar through decades of rereading. We also have too many poets and writers who simply are no longer among us, including Ginsberg, Larry Eigner, Ted Berrigan, Lee Hickman, Dan Davidson, Jerry Estrin, Hannah Weiner and most recently Kathy Acker. Their absence is audible – I miss them every day. There are new poets, literally hundreds if not thousands of them. And the times themselves have changed. We have, to pick one example, Bob Dylan singing for the Pope, for the world leaders at the G7 summit in Lisbon, and for the 30th anniversary party of the corporation called Applied Materials. To use the theoretical constructs of the late 1970s to try and "read" the end of the 1990s seems problematic in the extreme.

I want to point to two realms relevant to this occasion that seem to me underexplained and thus worth considering. One: *what is it about language writing and all that has come after, that there has been no moment nor movement that has crystallized in anything like the same way poetry did in the early 1970s?* For all the anthologies of younger writers, many of them extraordinarily gifted, what do we find in the way of work that is actually new? I think this must be the challenge that now faces every younger writer. I must say here that the French-influenced short abstract lyric that may be the characteristic form of younger North American writers (though not you, Jeff – a distinction I'd love to hear you explore) strikes me personally as the poetry of utter habit. And you know what I think about that.

Two, and I think that the answer to this must partly explain my first question: *what is different today in the relationship between writing and the world, and within the world itself, from what it was in 1979?* I think that part of the answer must be precisely the changed condition of the state. The state is receding, being replaced instead by a web of global economic relationships. Partly this has been an act of deconstruction on the part of many western state apparatuses. Partly it has been the consequence of changes in technology and communications. Whose influence is felt more widely in the world today, Bill Clinton or Bill Gates? We may see these changes most vividly when they lead to new political arrangements, ranging from the fall of the Soviet regime and its client states to NAFTA, to the creation of the European Union – a rear guard action that attempts to recreate a viable state on a continent where none presently exists – but they surround us everywhere and the possibilities of response and action which I mentioned above become very different terms under this new arrangement.

It is in this sense that we see the double-edged sword, for example, of the influence of the New American Poetry, curiously in the form of the Spicer Circle, across several generations of Canadian verse. Is it the first seed of a transnational oppositional response or did Spicer, Robin Blaser, Stan Persky and George Stanley merely function as the newest mode of colonialism heading north in 1963 and then in 1966 to stay? You tell me.

Best,

Ron

editorial notes

¹ See Robert Grenier's essay, "On Speech," collected in *In the American Tree: Language, Realism, Poetry*, ed. Ron Silliman (Orono, MA: National Poetry Foundation, 1986), pp. 496-7.

² *TISH*, "a poetry newsletter - Vancouver," distributed by mailing list, was the principle vehicle. See *TISH No. 1-19*, ed. Frank Davey (Vancouver, BC: Talonbooks, 1975).

³ Trans. Ben Brewster. London: Verso, 1996 [1965].

⁴ Sianne Ngai's essay is forthcoming in *Open Letter's* (London, Ontario) "Disgust and Overdetermination" issue, guest edited by Jeff Derksen.

⁵ Buffalo: Meow Press, 1996.

⁶ Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1989.

⁷ "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976 [1953]), p. 223.

⁸ *The New Sentence* by Ron Silliman (NY: Roof Books, 1987). See essay therein by the same name, pp. 63-93.

⁹ Dante's *La Vita Nuova*. "In classical Latin *novus* meant not only 'new' but also 'first', 'inexperienced', 'untried'; it could also mean 'wonderful', 'marvelous', 'unheard of'" (Barbara Reynolds, trans. & notes, *La Vita Nuova* [London: Penguin, 1969], p. 103).