PARATAXIS AND POSSIBILITY: RON SILLIMAN’S ALPHABET

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Abstract

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This study argues that Ron Silliman’s *Alphabet*, an intricate series of book-length poems published during the last three decades, forces readers to analyze connections between form and content. While many contemporary critics have examined Silliman’s overall formal constructs, this study focuses on sentence construction—especially on the poet’s manipulation of grammar and syntax, his unique punctuation and spelling, and his reliance on indexing—in a number of *The Alphabet*’s early poems. These subversive formal practices constitute the textual practice of parataxis, which Silliman implicitly describes in his critical work *The New Sentence* as the underlying formal logic of “new sentence” poetry. I argue that Silliman’s employment of parataxis creates spaces from which readers may uncover and describe multiple narratives. These narratives reflect and expand Silliman’s concern with social issues.

The analytical movement in this study reflects its title: I document the formal innovations in the poems that constitute parataxis and open spaces for narratives, and then reach conclusions regarding the works’ suggested critiques of certain social and political practices in late-twentieth-century America. The poet, whose activism is well documented, implicitly asks readers to assume an active role in illustrating those critiques. The poems covered in this study—*Albany, Blue, Carbon, Demo, Engines, Force, Garfield, Hidden, Ink, Jones, Lit, Manifest, Non*, and ®—suggest critiques in several areas where the effects of these practices have been particularly damaging: the
environment, technology and new media, academia and publishing, and education and politics. More fundamentally, these poems interrogate the use of language itself; language, after all, motors the social and political practices to which Silliman’s work responds. As the study’s final chapter argues, Silliman’s work is important—and fosters democracy—because it can create the conditions through which active readers can become active, questioning citizens. In responding to his poems, readers are given the platform to articulate social and political narratives. Their articulation comprises a central component of democracy.

Approved: 

George Hartley

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Chapter 1: Parataxis and Method: ABC and Other Beginnings

Parataxis and the New Sentence

*Albany*, the one-hundred-sentence-long poem that begins Ron Silliman’s extended creative project, *The Alphabet*, is a hesitant beginning. Sometime in the late 1970s, Silliman, a Washington-born poet, critic, social activist and leader, and, recently, tireless blogger, conceived of what would flower into twenty-five years’ worth of creative output. He planned to write a poem for every letter of the alphabet. His first volume, published by a small press called Tuumba\(^1\) in October 1983, was titled *ABC*. It contains the first three poems of his endeavor: *Albany*, *Blue*, and *Carbon*. Since then, Silliman has completed *The Alphabet*, and is at work on a new series of poems titled *Universe*.\(^2\)

Underlying many of the poems of *The Alphabet*, especially the ones to be presented in this study, is Silliman’s formal mode of organization: the “new sentence.”

Prior to an examination of Silliman’s new sentence applications in *Albany* and the works that follow, it is important to establish a working outline of Silliman’s new sentence and its theoretical and historical foundations. The formal construct is designed to renew and reframe a poetic practice that has its roots in the work of Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound.

Traditional sentences in literature are usually referential and adhere to traditional

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\(^1\) Tuumba, founded by Lyn Hejinian, was just one of many small presses that helped define the phenomenon of Language poetry at its inception. Many of these presses were, in fact, established by women.

\(^2\) According to his entry on Wikipedia, “Silliman sees his poetry as being part of a single poem or lifework, which he calls *Ketjak*. *Ketjak* is also the name of the first poem of *The Age of Huts*. If and when completed, the entire work will consist of *The Age of Huts* (1974-1980), *Tjanting* (1979-1981), *The Alphabet* (1979-2004), and *Universe* (2005- ).”
grammar rules. They cannot be what grammarians call “fragments,” nor can they contain dangling modifiers or participles. A new sentence, on the other hand, can be a mere utterance, a fragment, a group of words stitched together arbitrarily, or a series of verbless images linked only by commas and dashes. In my subsequent analyses of Silliman’s work, when I use the word “sentence” to refer to his compositional building blocks (whether they be what are traditionally called fragments or grammatically “correct” sentences), it is the new sentence to which I am referring. This definition, however, is strictly formal. Beyond form, it is important to discuss the reading practices that new sentences promote. Because, for instance, they can be fragments or single words, there exist implied links between and among them, and these links should direct our focus. To put it another way, traditional sentences contain coherent fields and narratives that can be easily understood, particularly when such sentences are linked into paragraphs. Some new sentences, because they may lack most components of traditional grammar (subject-verb-object), neither contain nor convey an easily understood referential field. For readers to construct fields of reference, they must construct links between new sentences. These links help readers establish points of narrative coherency that may be applied to the entire work. While readers and critics of all texts perform this work to some extent, depending on the narrative coherence of the text at hand, readers of Silliman are asked to engage consistently and intensely in constructions of narratives.

Like many experimental literary phenomena, the new sentence resists easy definition. Different writers apply tenets of the new sentence to their works differently. Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, and Rae Armantrout—writers with diverse formal sensivities—apply elements of the compositional mode in ways that further their overall
poetic goals. Along with Silliman, these writers—and many more—have been called “Language poets,” another easy signifier for the wide group of experimental writers from Silliman’s generation (he was born in 1946). While this group is diverse in the particularities of their poetics and politics, they tend to share two beliefs: that the concept of the poetic line should be questioned and that writing and criticism should be viewed through the lens of political work. While it is impossible for me in this study to outline the formal modes of every writer who at one time or another has been called a Language poet, a few additional commonalities can be found among them. Many began to gain critical attention in the 1980s, a period in American literary history when writers and critics began in different ways to turn away from the dominant poetic and political expectations established by various groups of writers under the New Critical umbrella. This poetry retained some radical principles from early-twentieth-century poets (especially Stein, Pound, and William Carlos Williams), but incorporated them in ways that would not alienate readers. The New Criticism basically subsumed and appropriated innovation as it continued to dominate American poetry through the balance of the century, especially in textbooks and anthologies.¹ Aided and inspired by the radical reformulations of the poetic line conducted by Stein and Pound and later carried on in the work of mid-century poets like Allen Ginsberg and Charles Olson (and others collected in Donald Allen’s 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry*), Language poets, in large part, began questioning the easy consolidation of forms and techniques that fell under the

¹ Alan Golding’s *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* explores the New Criticism’s dominance in pedagogy and publishing during the twentieth century.
New Critical umbrella. In “Contexts,” a brief introductory note to *The New Sentence*, Silliman complicates the history a bit further:

My first critical writing came at a time when such activity was invariably associated with the academy or with that specific verse tradition which began with Pound and continued into the sixties with the work of Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. These later writers stood warily midway between the New Critics, whose positivist bias led toward an empiricist claim to transcendent (and trans-historical) truth, and other sectors of “New American” poetry whose anti-intellectualism was formed in part in opposition to the likes of [Cleanth] Brooks and [Austin] Warren [who were major theoretical proponents of New Criticism]. (3)

In addition to the influence of these poets from the Black Mountain School, he also notes the influence of the Projectionists (this is from an interview with Gary Sullivan):

I was indeed completely under the spell of the Projectivists for several years, roughly 1966 through ’70, and it was an extraordinarily useful apprenticeship in that sense. There is no question in my mind that those poets were the ones asking the most demanding questions of themselves and of poetry in the period when I first really began writing. But of those poets, the only ones that I had any sort of relationship with during the late ’60s were Robert Duncan, Ken Irby and, via mail, Robert Kelly. I met [David] Bromige in ’68 and it took us awhile to get to really know one another. (<http://home.jps.net/~nada/silliman.htm>)

The key point to be taken from these notes of influence is that Silliman has always been affected by writers who ask difficult questions and refuse to conform to mainstream modes of presentation. Pound, for example, spent much of his career searching for the term that defined his textual practice and what he valued in poetry (and the visual arts, sculpture especially): “imagism” and “vorticism” were two of the terms he embraced and later dropped. Silliman, too, struggles to define and express in critical terms his own textual practice and the practice of other writers he admires. *The New Sentence* should be read as a culmination of this struggle, but certainly not the final word, for he continues to refine his thinking about poetics. His blog, which can be accessed at <http://
www.ronsilliman.blogspot.com>, attests to his continuing struggle. Sometimes his daily entries contain a thousand or two thousand words. It comes as no surprise that he admires writers who engaged in lifelong struggles with poetics. These quotes also make clear that his innovative formal approaches should be understood in historical context as a continuation of formal modes theorized and put into practice well before their arrival.

A second commonality among the Language poets is the fact that many of them viewed creative writing, critical work, and political engagement in tandem. A creative writer was also a critic, and vice versa. They used criticism as a way to explain and advance the formal principles applied in their creative work. With his publication of *The New Sentence* in 1987, Silliman explained a number of the critical aspects of his poetry that he had been discussing in talks and workshops since 1977. Although the idea of writer as critic has existed for a long time (perhaps most famously in the figures of Horace, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge), what distinguishes the Language poets from, say, the Romantics, is their insistence on viewing and performing creative writing and criticism as community work. As such, Language poets organized numerous conferences and public exchanges. They also founded small presses and magazines to circulate their works and theories. For them, above all, writing and thinking was indeed a kind of social action: they meant to challenge not only the word and methods of the poetry establishment, but also how it was brought to readers and students in syllabi, textbooks, and anthologies. It should also be noted that a number of Language writers, notably Silliman, viewed literary work as social activism, as a way to fight against established, increasingly narrowly focused, market-driven modes of literary production and reception. A good deal of Section I *The New
Sentence, in fact, addresses literary production; Silliman, for example, traces the book as a commodity and the writer as a professional in “The Political Economy of Poetry,” noting how these categories have tended to limit critical understandings of literature. My analysis of Hidden in Chapter 6 explores why realist modes of literature are privileged in publishing. The realist novel, for instance, is a “thing” to be consumed. Moving beyond this commodity-based notion of publishing might open what has been historically a closed field. Silliman, Hejinian, and other writers even traveled to the Soviet Union in the 1980s for exchanges with experimental writers there. Soviet experimental poets and critics were always more radical and less programmatic than the Soviet government; as such, the two groups sustained tense relations from 1917 onward. In the formal analyses I present of Silliman’s works, I attempt to highlight his resistance to market forces in general, especially his framing and criticism of the West’s dominant social, artistic, educational, and economic practices.

Having provided this background, I may now propose the unifying goal of this study, which draws together the form of the new sentence and the subsequent points of social criticism engendered by that form. Through close formal examinations of a number of Silliman’s poems of The Alphabet, I will highlight his points of social criticism against the background of late-twentieth-century America. Because terms like “form” and even the “new sentence” encompass such a variety of different values, my point of emphasis will be his practice of “parataxis,” which is constituted by various, at times radical innovations in terms of grammar, syntax, spelling, and punctuation at the level of the sentence. Such innovations and manipulations of traditional writing conventions subvert readers’ expectations by inscribing space between normative form and innovative form,
or between expectations and the actual text. They disrupt traditional reading practices. Parataxis, I believe, may also be applied through a poem’s content: one of Silliman’s recurring practices is to place disparate images side-by-side. In both applications of parataxis, readers are pushed and pulled between the expected and the unexpected; this pushing and pulling generates space for them to create narratives. In my readings of *The Alphabet*, parataxis stands out as its leading formal construct, for through its application Silliman is able to establish the most pointed, compelling form of textual legitimacy for his wider, ultimately more important, social claims. My use of the term, however, is not new; it is an elaboration on Silliman’s implicit discussion of the practice in Section II of *The New Sentence*. Though he never actually names it, he discusses its foundations in linguistics and literary history (especially the work of Stein) and offers examples of it in contemporary practice. It should be made clear that the new sentence represents a creative application of parataxis. It is therefore necessary to discuss parataxis first, as it provides the theoretical foundation for subsequent discussions of the new sentence and analyses of specific passages in Silliman’s work. First, however, we must address the linguistic foundation of parataxis, the distinction between the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic axes of language, for this distinction resides at the heart of Silliman’s project in “The New Sentence,” where he concludes that “syllogistic movement” stands as the primary characteristic of new sentence writing. “Praxis and Syntax,” the final chapter of George Hartley’s *Textual Politics and the Language Poets*, explains the linguistic distinction between the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic, and the latter’s implications for reading work like Silliman’s. I will present his arguments to help lay the groundwork for my subsequent discussion of parataxis and the new sentence. This theoretical
discussion concludes with my presentation of Bob Perelman’s explicit discussion of parataxis in the context of his 1980s debate with Fredric Jameson over representation.

Although he never mentions parataxis specifically, Silliman’s discussion of the new sentence in Section II of The New Sentence explores its foundations in theory and history. The book’s seminal essay is “The New Sentence,” first published in 1977. What emerges early in the essay is the author’s frustration at not being able to find an adequate, thorough discussion of the sentence in literary history. This frustration (this lack) is illustrated by Silliman’s reading of René Wellek and Austin Warren’s Theory of Literature (1949), a book at the forefront of New Critical thought. After concluding that Theory of Literature does not “contain a coherent theory of the sentence” and offering possible ways in which their work might have been rescued (a fuller examination of sound and syntax in literature, for example) (72), Silliman shifts his critique to what he views as another weakness of Theory of Literature: Wellek and Warren’s insistence on understanding literature as

a binary scheme, one side devoted to character and plot construction, the other devoted to wordplay. Generally speaking, these become the axes of fiction and poetry. This parallels Saussure’s division of language into a paradigmatic and syntagmatic axis. And it also parallels the strategies of Structuralism.

Wordplay, the paradigmatic axis of poetry, could itself lead toward an investigation of the sentence, but it doesn’t. The realms Wellek and Warren carry it to are image, metaphor, symbol, and myth: successively broader groups of referentiality. (73)

Silliman’s reference to Saussurian linguistics here—the paradigm and the syntagm—represents the key transitional point in “The New Sentence,” and perhaps the very distinction that makes possible any elaboration of parataxis and the new sentence. Of immediate concern is Silliman’s response to Wellek and Warren: he again discusses how
their work might be rescued had they really attempted to investigate the sentence. Instead of heading toward the traditional privileging of the signified, they might have headed toward the syntagmatic axis, and thus a relational view of language rather than a referential one. Silliman, in fact, devotes the next few pages of “The New Sentence” to certain theoretical approaches that attempt to understand language relationally. For Silliman, Roland Barthes occupies an important place in literary theory for his suggestion that

the paradigm is not a constant [...] that history has seen the movement from a syntagmatic focus to a paradigmatic one, and that a break has occurred to a point when some critical mass—not specifically identified by Barthes—rendered it impossible for units to continue to integrate beyond grammatical levels, e.g., the sentence. It is just this breach—when the signifier, freed suddenly from its servitude to an integrating hierarchy of syntactic relations, finds itself drained of any signified—that Fredric Jameson identifies as the characteristic feature of postmodernism. (76)

That the signifier (the word) becomes “freed [...] from syntactical relations” does not mean that it is stripped of its relational force. On the contrary, Silliman uses Barthes to argue that when paradigmatic hierarchy is stripped away (governing metaphors or themes, for instance), words are freed to mean differently, on different levels, and in relation to each other. Silliman’s use of the phrase “hierarchy of syntactic relations” is not meant to undercut the syntagmatic axis of language and the possibilities for interpretation it offers; rather (and this formulation tends to be confusing), it is meant to restore syntactic relations from the horizontal ground up. In later chapters, I will consider this restoration as a democratic textual practice that empowers readers to interpret without the governing forces of literary history upon them.
These linguistic terms, however, deserve further discussion. Perhaps the most accessible theoretical elaboration of the two axes appears in George Hartley’s *Textual Politics and the Language Poets*. Hartley sees the work of Silliman and other Language poets to represent something considerably more complex than an attack on reference. In fact, as he stresses in the early pages of “Praxis and Syntaxis,” critical approaches that frame the practices of Language poets as anti-referential miss the point altogether. Hartley points out that Silliman himself, in his introduction to *In the American Tree*, remarks that reference never was “the enemy” (76). According to Hartley, attacks on reference actually fall into the category of the paradigmatic, which he explains as such:

Saussure, as we have seen, divided *parole* or the spoken utterance into two axes, the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic or, as Roman Jakobson later called them, the metaphoric and the metonymic (“Two Aspects of Language”). The paradigmatic axis refers to the word’s “vertical” relation to a given *langue*, all other words which could associated with or substituted for the word, as in metaphor when one word stands in for another. The paradigmatic axis also represents the possible connotations of the word and, ultimately, the word’s signified. Questions of reference, then, examine the paradigmatic extensions of the sign. The syntagmatic axis, in contrast, refers to the word’s “horizontal” relation to other words around it, as in a sentence, the chain of contiguous signifiers. It is the syntagmatic axis which limits the possible connotations on a given word’s paradigmatic axis. (77)

My focus in this study, my way of reading Silliman’s poems, involves intense analyses of the syntagmatic axis. In order to reach sets of meaning in new sentence writing, especially Silliman’s, readers must consider the sentences reflective of the syntagmatic axis, for such an approach means that they must pay close attention to the surrounding words (the words within and among individual sentences) and the relations among them, “the chain of contiguous [and also distant] signifiers.” Parataxis is not synonymous with the paradigmatic axis. On the contrary, it is a practice that encourages readers to interpret
poems on the horizontal axis, to gauge connections between and among words horizontally and in more equivalent relation. Because Silliman’s poems gain their momentum through accretion—through the building and bridging on of image after image and sentence after sentence—and not through metaphor, approaching his work horizontally allows readers to reach wide ranges of meaning because they are given the opportunity to be inventive and speculative in how they make connections. My readings in this study consistently account for accretion within and among Silliman’s sentences and paragraphs.

Bob Perelman, a proponent of the new sentence, may be best known for his debate with Fredric Jameson, when he responded to Jameson’s claim in “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” that new sentence writing was little more than “schizophrenic fragmentation” intended to display the postmodern notion of composition that “difference relates.” Jameson was not convinced that Perelman’s poem, “China” [see the text of “China” in the Appendix], demonstrated the “more positive conception of relationship” apparent in “the most interesting postmodern works” like the tele-visual art of Nam June Paik (Postmodernism 28-9, 31). In other words, Jameson was critical of Perelman’s (and Silliman’s) compositional strategy, which to his reading seemed largely indeterminate and bound by little more than excited arbitrariness. Perelman countered Jameson with the concept of parataxis. In one of the clearest explanations (and defenses) of the new sentence in theory, Perelman uses the term paratactic when describing it. “Parataxis,” he writes, “involves placing units together without connectives or subordination” (The Marginalization of Poetry 59). According to Perelman, readers of new sentence poems must gauge “the degree of separation or connection” among sentences and paragraphs in
order to draw conclusions about meaning (61). In many cases, they must gauge the
degree of separation or connection that occurs in individual sentences. To create
narratives of meaning, readers must do the same.

Perelman’s firmer response to Jameson’s critique of “China” and paratactic
writing in general involves a portrayal of the ironic disconnect between Jameson’s
arguments about Perelman and Jameson’s own organizational style in “The Cultural
Logic of Late Capitalism,” which became the first chapter of Postmodernism. According
to Perelman, Jameson

not only identifies language writing with the new sentence but with
depthlessness, Lacanian schizophrenia, the erasure of history, and the end
of personal identity. [His] style, with its long periodic sentences, the
clauses packed with qualification, seems far removed from such
phenomena, but in the overall organization of its materials, his essay is
itself paratactic: Andy Warhol’s Diamond Dust Shoes, my poem “China,”
Michael Herr’s Dispatches, the Bonaventura Hotel are among the units it
yokes together. (63)

Perelman argues that Jameson’s dismissal of “China” as “a rubble of distinct and
unrelated signifiers” is misleading. There are narrative connections in the poem: readers
need to be disciplined and imaginative—and attentive to form—to reveal them. Jameson
himself hints at this when he remarks that “China” “is in some curious and secret way a
political poem” (28). My own analysis of “China” attempt to uncover the “unified global
meaning” that Jameson senses by focusing on the role of speaker. My work posits the
speaker as a schoolchild struggling with her own identity and surroundings in
contemporary China. Jameson’s critique of “China” is problematic because it fails to take
into account the speaker’s perspective. While “China” is not driven by a particular voice,
one still must account for the speaker and her perspective on the confused social climate
of China. The “discontinuity” Jameson writes of is the most significant part of this child’s experience of the world around her. The switching from public to private, from school to home, marks the child’s thought processes. “It’s always time to leave,” she says, implying her frustration at constant change and indicating her desire for stability. From the speaker’s perspective, then, there actually is no “unified global meaning” in the poem because a child’s worldview is necessarily fragmented; a child’s thought processes are “paratactic”—the term that Perelman isolates as the defining essence of new sentence writing. Therefore, we could claim—ironically—that the poem’s unified global meaning is that individual human perspective tends to fragment and that we all understand the world paratactically. Parataxis, or “placing units together without connectives or subordination,” is the key textual practice at play in Silliman’s *Alphabet*, encouraging readers to think upon syntagmatic, horizontal lines and to note the connections within, between and among sentences, paragraphs, and the entire work.

The terms paradigmatic, syntagmatic, and parataxis form the foundation of the new sentence in theory. In the last half of “The New Sentence,” Silliman focuses on the dominant characteristics of new sentence writing and presents poems that illustrate those characteristics. Among those characteristics, I will emphasize “syllogistic movement,” as that phrase most clearly anticipates the mode of critical reading I find most useful with regard to *The Alphabet*. The dictionary tells us that “syllogism” refers to a kind of argument based on two congruent premises. Silliman quotes Italian semiotician Ferrucio Rossi-Landi to illustrate syllogism. Rossi-Landi argues that the *syllogism* is the classic paradigm for above-sentence integration. For example, the sentences “All women were once girls” and
“Some women are lawyers” logically lead to a third sentence or conclusion, a higher level of meaning: “Some lawyers were once girls.”

The core argument that emerges from Silliman’s discussion of syllogism in “The New Sentence”—and especially following his analysis of two creative paragraphs by Barrett Watten—involves readers’ “presumptiveness” when they encounter texts, i.e., their “willingness to ‘complete the syllogism’” and consistently move toward higher levels of meaning (77). Seeming to understand that this cycle of presumption and completion is likely to occur regardless of what the text in question actually states (whether it’s heavily paratactic, as in much of the work of Watten and Steve McCaffery or more mildly so, as in Hejinian’s *My Life*), Silliman’s work actually encourages the practice:

> In fact, increased sensitivity to syllogistic movement endows works of the new sentence with a much greater capacity to incorporate ordinary sentences of the material world, because here form moves from the whole downward and the disjunction of a quoted sentence from a newspaper [as in David Bromige’s “One Spring”] puts its referential content (a) into play with its own diction, as in the sentence “Danny always loved Ireland,” (b) into play with the preceding and succeeding sentences, as quantity, syntax, and measure; and (c) into play with the paragraph as a whole, now understood as a unit not of logic or argument, but as quantity, a stanza. (90)

Silliman’s refusal to demonize reference in his introduction to *In the American Tree* now becomes clearer. His position on syllogism indicates that a significant part of his compositional strategy is to encourage readers to build narratives syllogistically. To what extent those narratives will conform to Silliman’s social and political beliefs becomes a concern secondary to *how* readers will work in and among the sentences themselves.

Although I have already covered most of the “qualities of the new sentence” in my discussion, Silliman’s list heeds a few crucial characteristics of syllogism:

1) The paragraph organizes the sentences;
2) The paragraph is a unity 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. (91)

The qualities that require elaboration are 5 and 8. Quality 5, I would argue, concerns the role of the author in the production of new sentence poetry more than the role of the reader. To limit and control syllogistic movement requires the author to furnish at least minimal points of narrative cohesion to readers. The author must ensure that the work moves, at least to a minimal degree, toward higher levels of meaning. It also means that the author must not err in the opposite direction by making the work too obviously referential, thereby imposing some direction upon readers. Quality 8 is a companion to quality 5 in that Silliman reasserts the primacy of language. He encourages authors and readers to consider the materiality of words themselves as they appear on the page. A poet like Steve McCaffery, for example, strives to emphasize the materiality of letters and words in some of his poetry, where he disperses bits of text (apparently randomly) all over the page.

Silliman’s historical tracing of the prose poem in “The New Sentence” allows these new sentence qualities and theoretical foundations to be understood differently. He sees the prose poem as the literary antecedent of new sentence poetry. He considers Stéphane Mallarmé and Fenton Johnson to be among the first prose poets, but argues that the true sentence innovators in American letters were Williams and Stein. Williams’s *Kora in Hell* and Stein’s *Tender Buttons* represent the closest historical antecedents to
Silliman’s new sentence work. On Stein, Silliman writes, “Who but Stein would have written a sentence in 1911 that ends in the middle of a prepositional phrase?” (he is referring to “Roast potatoes for.”) He then theorizes Stein’s sentence work by quoting Stein herself, who makes the distinction in prose between “emotional” paragraphs and “unemotional” sentences in an essay titled “Sentences and Paragraphs.” According to Silliman,

> What Stein means about paragraphs being emotional and sentences not is precisely the point made by Emile Beneviste: that linguistic units integrate only up to the level of the sentence, but higher orders of meaning—such as emotion—integrate at higher levels than the sentence [...] The sentence is the horizon, the border between these two fundamentally distinct types of integration. (87)

Think of Silliman’s new sentences as little “horizons,” for they contain “linguistic units” (an emphasis on textuality and the materiality of letters, words, and word clusters) and work toward “higher orders of meaning” simultaneously. Inward and outward: materiality and syllogistic movement, the sentence being the hinge unit. I am drawn to this characterization of the new sentence because “horizon” is the root word of horizontal, and thus works as another reminder of the syntagmatic axis of language. Such a sentence has a “pressurized quality” (87), a provocative phrase that must not be left to stand on its own. The pressurized quality of Silliman’s new sentence writing is born out of the two factors with which I have been working. The textual pressure is generated by parataxis, which itself is constituted by Silliman’s manipulation of grammar, syntax, and punctuation. Because this manipulation occurs at the level of the sentence, often by the minutest alterations in, say, punctuation, there doesn’t appear to be wide-scale radical innovation. As his innovations take place rather minutely, often within the sentences
themselves, the textual application produces an inward, or bubbling, pressure. But because these innovations occur in many sentences across the length of a poem, their pressurizing force tends to accrete. It is in this accretion faced by the reader, this mounting string of manipulations (for a single one may be easily overlooked) that the critical, or socializing, work comes to bear. My readings of *The Alphabet* are meant to highlight that socializing work.

These characteristics of the new sentence are, in fact, not new after all. Silliman mentions quite explicitly in “The New Sentence” that one common aspect of new sentences—their “continual torquing”—“is a traditional quality of poetry, but in poetry it is most often accomplished by linebreaks, or by devices such as rhyme. Here poetic form has moved into the interiors of prose.” Further, when Silliman defines torquing as “the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into that of combination,” we are reminded again (indirectly but carefully) of the syntagmatic axis of language, where words in combination and relation with each other are restored the capacity to generate multiple narratives and meanings. While poets throughout history have worked to generate such multiplicity and openness, Silliman tells us, they did it by virtue of the line; what the poetic line can achieve is limited by what he calls “external poetic form” (89). At play in poetry since at least the work of Stein is the interior manipulation (in grammar and syntax) that effects sliding and shifting in meaning. Earlier in this chapter, I also noted that some mid-century poets (Olson, Creeley, and Ginsberg in particular) employed new sentence principles in their work. My favorite example from Ginsberg (because it concretizes the concepts outlined so far and previews my interest in Silliman’s suggested social critiques) appears in a verse from *Howl*: “who sank all night
in submarine light of Bickford’s floated out and sat through the stale beer after noon in
desolate Fugazzi’s, listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox” (126). I am
particularly drawn to his image of the “hydrogen jukebox” and the space in between
those presumably disparate signifiers. The image represents an application of what
Ginsberg called “gapping.” The gap—the space between two words that appear next to
each other in a work—calls for reconciliation on the part of the reader. In this case,
readers are urged to note (and subsequently complete) the space between the two sets of
feelings evoked by the images. Because hydrogen (especially in a 1950s way of thinking)
evokes nuclear annihilation and the jukebox evokes music and dance (a party), there is a
tension between the pair of images for which readers may account. The tension, I would
posit, involves lifestyle conflict in the Cold War fifties, and is charged with the forces of
politics and social conformity. Howl, as we know, revels in politics and social
conformity. Such a reading makes the syllogistic leap (or more plainly, the narrative
connection) in two directions: between the two words of the image and toward the work
as a whole. My readings of Silliman’s poetry will do the same.

**Parataxis and ABC**

The key point to remember about parataxis is that it is constituted by formal
manipulation and in turn—with the reader’s work and input—generates layers of
meaning in a text. The conditional sentence that begins Albany, for example, or rather the
conditional itself as a formal device of composition—“If the function of writing is ‘to
express the world’”—leaves open a good deal of possibility beyond the limits of the
sentence. Obviously, it is crucial that this conditional is the first sentence of the poem,
and the first sentence of Silliman’s *Alphabet*. Readers encounter a paratactical moment right away, and this encounter offers a precedent for the entire work. It is as though the speaker is preparing readers for this kind of formal complexity, a complexity that will open up avenues of meaning. The sentence itself, as an axis or point of origin, opens up fields of reference and possibilities for meaning. The if- statement, in this case, reinforces the very idea of possibility, of an opening up. Because the sentence is not finished, or closed, or limited, and because it lacks an obvious predicate, we are at liberty as readers to provide one or more for it. We are at liberty (and implicitly asked) to provide meaning this way. As readers, one of our tasks is to finish the sentence by reading the rest of the poem (and perhaps the rest of Silliman’s *Alphabet*) as if it were a response to this initial open-ended proposition.

It is also important to note the hesitant tone of this half-completed conditional that begins *Albany*. As readers, we join the speaker on a hesitant trip into the unknown of his project, *The Alphabet*, asking alongside him: will this undertaking develop and work? Or, to borrow from T.S. Eliot, “Do I dare disturb the universe?” Do I dare attempt to “reflect the world” with my poems? This conditional underlies the risky nature of creation and also the uneasy pact between author and reader. In fact, the speaker notes in the second-to-last sentence of the poem, “Here, for a moment, we are joined.” Indeed, it is risky for any writer to believe that he and readers will ever be truly joined—or even on the same page. As such, the poem ends as it begins—with a hesitant feeling: “The want-ads lie strewn on the table.” The poem is done, but there are other options, and I might have to look elsewhere for work. The circularity of *Albany* will be repeated with *Blue*, although it
is a poem that begins and ends in a much different tone and demands reference to Paul Valery’s failed attempt to compose his own *Alphabet*.

Parataxis in Silliman’s new sentences occurs in several ways. First, it occurs through grammatical manipulation, as in the above-mentioned conditional statement. There, we are given a grammatically incomplete sentence that implicitly calls for completion on the part of the reader. Silliman, however, opens up his sentences through other grammatical means. His use of coordinating conjunctions, frequently at the beginning of sentences, automatically calls the sentence’s referential field into question by hinting at material that cannot be recognized immediately. In Section I of *Carbon*, for instance, every sentence begins with a coordinating conjunction or some word that performs a similar function, frequently an adverbial modifier:

> But this is a false tart, the trap door insecurely latched, a tear in the velvet curtain. Yet the tear was but a drop of glycerine sliding down her cheek. Nonetheless skin is not porcelain, however it spots. (Non-paginated edition)

This formal innovation affects how readers approach the sentences because it hints at the existence of material outside the sentences’ frames. Because conjunctions traditionally are connective words, we expect there to be connective material somewhere, but nowhere in the text can we locate it. We are thus forced to add material to the given text to produce a more usual reading experience, or at least an echo of narrative. This process of augmentation happens automatically—at least for Western readers—regardless of their political or social views. Reading, I would argue, is about fulfilling expectations; I see no way out of that process. Readers will read in ways that fulfill their expectations about a given text, even if the text is totally non-conducive to their expectations. This is certainly
not to claim that readers are dumb or Philistine; it is nearly impossible to overcome decades of learning and experience and adjust one’s reading patterns to a particular text. Silliman is aware of these patterns and therefore makes formal decisions that force readers to fulfill their expectations and create narratives that lead to interpretations. I must make clear, however, that when I write “fulfill their expectations,” I am not suggesting that that fulfillment will be generic, simple, or obvious. Because every reader brings different expectations to a text (shaped by that reader’s politics, education, experience, etc.), the range of meanings and conclusions that are generated is likely to be diverse. This diverse range of interpretations—or more ideally, this multiplicity of responses—will assist me in framing Silliman’s project as anti-authoritarian. Later on, I will outline the relationship between reader and text that The Alphabet promotes (and thus different critical perspectives) that Silliman’s new sentence writing makes possible.

In the above passage from Carbon, the “But this” that begins the paragraph begs a question in readers’ minds: what occurred (beyond the stated text) to foment the “But this” statement in the first place? In other words, where is the first half of the sentence? It is precisely the opposite of the unfinished conditional that begins Albany, where readers are left wondering where the last half of the sentence is. Silliman has provided the formal groundwork and distinct points of focus; readers provide the connectives so that the socializing force of a narrative can come to bear. How readers provide those connectives, or “fill in the blanks” cognitively, determines meaning in this work.

The paratactical innovations discussed so far—Silliman’s use of conditionals and conjunctions—suggest the existence of material outside the actual text. A conditional statement suggests the existence of a “then-” response somewhere; when a coordinating
conjunction begins or ends a sentence, there is an implied but unseen “other half” somewhere. From another perspective, conditionals and conjunctions might be understood as “bridges” that subtly challenge readers to make connections, either to (1) material that doesn’t exist in the text but comes into being as part of the critical reading process (from the reader’s imagination), or (2) other, actually-existing material in the text (other sentences or paragraphs, nearby or more distant). Put another way, the immediate grammatical effect of conditionals and conjunctions is that they leave sentence fragments, and readers are implicitly asked to complete the connective work of cognitive and/or grammar formation. Indeed, fragments appear frequently in Silliman’s poetry, much of the time without conditionals or conjunctions. I am referring here to the numerous times when Silliman simply states the name of an object, place, person, or idea, and lets that name stand as a sentence. In *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Myths*, Rosalind Krauss identifies this textual practice as “indexing.” According to her, the named thing functions as a “trace,” the narrative significance of which must be filled in by the reader. (More examples of indexing and a fuller elaboration of Krauss’s theory appear in Chapter 2.) To what, then, do the following paratactical traces from *Albany* lead? (I number them merely for clarity; they are not numbered in the text.) (1) “Live ammunition,” (2) “Eminent domain,” (3) “Rotating chair,” (4) “The history of Poland in 90 seconds,” and (5) “Lit drop.” While all of these sentences name things, ideas, or places, they require different kinds of analysis because they constitute different applications of parataxis. Example 1 is unique in that the word “live” could be understood as a modifying adjective or a verb. In either case, the meaning changes. The other examples are more regular in that they contain no words that can be construed as
verbs, with the possible exception of 5, although I have no idea how “lit” could be a noun. So what is left, and how do these examples apply paratactical principles? What are readers implicitly asked to complete so that narrative can come into being? More fundamentally, why does the poet signify like this? Such questions are difficult to approach without first examining a key element of new sentence writing: the critical importance of context. The five new sentences I’ve listed only begin to gain momentum and make sense when read next to, and in combination with, the surrounding sentences. In *Albany*, examples 2-4 appear consecutively: “Eminent domain. Rotating chair. The history of Poland in 90 seconds.” Seeing them in sequence allows readers to make connections between and among them. Readers might pose the following questions in the process of doing so: What do these three sentences (images, things) have to do with each other? What are the connections (if any) among them? Are there similarities? How might one be construed when framed by another? For example, how might a quick course in Polish history be understood as a rotating chair? This question might provoke a critical response: outside interests have dominated Poland since its inception; in the twentieth century, the Nazis, the Soviets, and the Americans have impelled its history. Its seat of control has indeed been like a rotating chair, with Hitler in control, then Stalin and subsequent Soviet leaders, and then American economic influence following the collapse of the USSR. To take the analysis a step further, the political-economic theory of eminent domain allows us to understand Polish history similarly. Clearly, then, the poem (through the effect of parataxis) becomes prime territory for analysis from a number of critical historical perspectives. The crucial point, however, is that such analysis cannot happen
without the formal application of indexing, which is just one of several paratactical methods used by Silliman in *The Alphabet*.

Attending to punctuation is important in any formal analysis of poetry. While there is more punctuation in other poems, let us turn again to *ABC* for examples of his unusual punctuation. Silliman relies most heavily on parenthesis and commas to intensify the paratactical presentation in this work. Consider these three sentences from *Albany*:

The garden is a luxury (a civilization of snail and spider).

A shadowy locked facility using drugs and double-celling (a rest home).

Client populations (cross the tundra).

Each uses the parenthetical to reach toward unusual possibilities for meaning. In Silliman’s work, the parenthetical illustrates perhaps the clearest application of parataxis by denoting unusual narrative connections between word clusters. They formally enact bridges. The most grammatically and cognitively “regular” of the sentences is the one about the garden, which presents little difficulty. The parenthetical statement further describes or elaborates upon the idea of the garden as a luxurious place. It is luxurious for the snail and spider that inhabit it. There, these creatures find food, shelter, and bits of pleasure. The parataxis in this sentence involves an extension and elaboration of thought, and readers are not asked to do much. The momentum is one of more precise, extended, and comforting description. With his application of parenthesis, Silliman sides with readers, opening up potentially meaningful cognitive spaces so that they might build bridges between the different areas of reference.

The second sentence is more complex. While the material in parenthesis performs the same essential function as in the first example, there is a difference between the two.
First, it qualifies as one of those indexed fragments discussed earlier. There is no verb; it’s just a nominative explanation. “Rest home” is designed to offer readers a surprise, a bit of misdirection. Most readers of Silliman come to the text with progressive social understandings, particularly about the frequently abusive nature of power in military, government, and law enforcement. As such, many readers would read the first part of the sentence—about the “shadowy locked facility”—and immediately think, “this is a prison.” “Drugs and double celling” further reinforce that impression, although perhaps some readers would begin to picture a mental hospital. Therefore, “rest home” comes as a bit of a surprise by disrupting readers’ expectations. This announcement is a disruption, sending readers off on unexpected paths. This particular formal quality is the hallmark of much of Silliman’s work, and also where a great deal of his critical social impact originates. The disruption, or subversion, in this example and many others, is meant to force readers to re-evaluate their ideas about long-term health care facilities. Silliman’s motifs throughout The Alphabet suggest a rather dismal picture of the social institutions of American life.

The third sentence is even harder to discuss, primarily because there is an active verb (“cross”) included in the parenthesis. The parenthesis in the first two examples can be read essentially as techniques of elaboration, but this sentence is designed to do more than elaborate or disrupt. The parenthesis here is not just connective tissue; it is both connective and deceptive, depending on what one believes to be the implied subject of the verb “cross.” If the phrase “cross the tundra” is taken as an imperative statement ([you] cross the tundra), then the reader is asked to devise some connection between the two distinct parts of the sentence: you performing some rugged activity and the abstract
idea of “client populations.” If, on the other hand, the subject of the verb is taken as “Client populations” themselves, then what of the parenthetical? What is it doing there? Its role is deceptive. It is like pretending that something does not exist, even though that thing does not exist anyway. It seems to be meant solely to throw readers off balance or is placed in the sentence to get readers thinking about parenthesis itself as a grammatical construction. It would be like writing a sentence such as “The chef, poured sauce atop the lasagna”…the comma denoting a rather unnecessary pause, unless the writer wants readers to pause and think about chefs or how commas are traditionally used, especially in poetry. Or, perhaps more obviously, Silliman wants readers to devise some cognitive connection between client populations and crossing the tundra. However it is analyzed, I use this sentence to demonstrate the complexities that can be caused by one bit of punctuation. While I’ve limited my analysis in this chapter to parenthesis, elsewhere I will discuss commas, colons, dashes, and ellipses, all of which perform the same connective function.

In discussing the formal qualities of a poem, it is important to consider the poet’s stanza construction and utilization of white space. In the case of Silliman and his new sentence work, I will use the term “paragraph” instead of stanza, for as he writes in “The New Sentence,” “the paragraph organizes the sentences” in new sentence writing (91). In ABC, he employs a variety of paragraph constructions. Albany is presented in the form of one long paragraph, with regular indentation at its beginning. Blue, though roughly the same length as Albany, is broken into fourteen shorter paragraphs, all of which begin with regular indentation. Silliman is fond of structuring his work in sets that adhere to numeric values. The number fourteen is associated with the sonnet form (or if we consider
Wallace Stevens, one extra blackbird). As such, *Blue* might be read as a variation on the sonnet, with each of the paragraphs representing one sonnet line (or one stanza of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”). *Blue* also exhibits the rounded quality of some types of sonnet. A poem that hints strongly at narrative cohesion, its first and last paragraphs function like bookends. Though far from the standard octave-sestet structure of Petrarchan sonnets (textbooks remind us that the octave, or first eight lines, sets up a problem or situation and that the sestet, or last six lines, resolves it in some way), *Blue* presents a more cohesive picture than most of Silliman’s work. It is also considerably shorter: most of the paragraphs contain four or five sentences. My thesis, however, is that the poem forms a completed circle of a narrative about the comings and goings of a Marchioness. The poem begins with an idealized cityscape:

The Marchioness went out at five o’clock. The sky was blue yet tinged with pink over the white spires which broke up the east horizon. The smell of the afternoon’s brief shower was still evident and small pools of clear water collected in the tilt of the gutters, leaves and tiny curling scraps of paper drifting in the miniature tides which nonetheless caught and reflected the swollen sun, giving the boulevard its jeweled expression.

The speaker is mimicking the classic nineteenth-century French novel, books that often open with detailed descriptions of pastoral scenes. In fact, Silliman here draws into literary history, for his evocation of the Marchioness recalls Paul Valery’s failed attempt to compose his own *Alphabet*. In an interview with Gary Sullivan posted online at http://home.jps.net/~nada/silliman.htm, Silliman discusses *Blue*:

*Blue*, for example, was inspired by a walk that Gil Ott and I took around Manhattan one day, mostly down Orchard and Hester Streets, but the initial sentence of that work, “The marchioness went out at five o’clock,” was Valery’s example of why he could not write fiction. So that work consciously constructs a certain amount of narrative—you can follow the marchioness all the way to the restaurant. In addition to the writing
question—the problem of prose—Valery was important because he once started to write a sequence of prose poems to have been called *The Alphabet* but stopped after composed ABC—not coincidentally the title of the first volume published by Tuumba in ’83.

Two key points emerge from Silliman’s discussion of *Blue*. First, he notes Valery’s struggle to write fiction (and his struggle with prose poetry in general). Struggling to do so, I think, means struggling to write sentences. This struggle recalls another French writer, Gustave Flaubert. Barthes’ essay “Flaubert and the Sentence” chronicles Flaubert’s difficulty in composing sentences. While it is important to note that classic twentieth-century sentence innovators like Williams and Stein influenced Silliman’s conception of the sentence as a unit of possibility, the study of the sentence as a unit goes back considerably further. In the essay, Barthes repeatedly refers to Flaubert’s journal writings and marginalia that capture the arduous process of constructing individual sentences. For Flaubert, constructing a sentence was tantamount to achieving a style, which happens only through “atrocious labor, a fanatic and dedicated stubbornness” (*A Barthes Reader* 297). The part of the essay that should interest Silliman and new sentence scholars, however, contains Flaubert’s conception of the sentence as a “thing”:

> If we rid the expression of any metaphorical resonance, we might say that Flaubert has spent his life “making sentences” [...] a sentence by Flaubert is immediately identifiable, not by its “air,” its “color,” or some turn of phrase habitual to the writer—which we might say of any author—but because it always presents itself as a separate, finite object, which we might almost call transportable, though it never joins the aphoristic model, for its unit does not abide by the closure of its content, but by the evident project which has established it as an object: Flaubert’s sentence is a thing. (303)

Silliman’s conception of the new sentence echoes Barthes’s portrayal of the Flaubertian sentence. Although the new sentence can be understood “as a separate, finite object” (an
individual unit that *can* stand alone), Silliman’s privileging of the syntagmatic axis of language stresses the “transportable” quality of the new sentence. In my reading, transportability is another way of thinking about the possibility of syllogistic movement, which in Silliman’s work occurs initially across the horizontal axis of the sentence, and at times to higher levels of meaning. Transportability makes relationality possible. In short, Silliman’s sentences are things that can work together and become different things in different combinations.

The second key element that emerges in Silliman’s reference to *Blue* involves the notion of narrative circularity. The sentences in the first paragraph of the poem indeed form a coherent narrative, referring to a particular location, time, and mood (the grounds of a luxurious home, sunset, still and reflective). Readers will likely approach the second paragraph expecting more of the same, but this is not Valery:

Government was therefore an attitude. Dour, the camel pushed with his nose against the cyclone fence. The smell of damp eucalyptus is everything! You stare at your car before you get in.

The tone and imagery change. The scene has shifted from the French suburbs to nowhere-land, and each of the next eleven paragraphs will shift constantly in tone and imagery. Not until the end of the poem does the cycle come full-circle with the re-emergence of the Marchioness.

At the arched door of the restaurant she checks her watch, a delicate gold bracelet dangling from her wrist. Bands of a deep orange streak a near purple sky, the brisk air shuddering in the small trees, slender branches bending back. Children begin to gather up their toys; lights on, their homes begin to glow. The host, recognizing the Marchioness, invites her in.
The style of the first and last paragraphs of Blue—adjective-driven, lush, descriptive, and pastoral—sharply contrasts with most of Silliman’s new sentence work. What does this formal circularity accomplish? Where is the parataxis? In this poem, parataxis is constituted precisely by that sharp stylistic difference. It is as if Blue contains two poems, and readers are implicitly asked to construct some bridge between them. As is the case with all of Silliman’s work, readers of different theoretical persuasions will approach this task, this bridge building, differently. An extended analysis of Blue, I would argue, must account for this stylistic, tonal, and image discord, and this discord would best be accounted for in terms of the real social discord in terms of class disparity that lay at the root of nineteenth-century French life, and that also exists at the root of life in twenty-first-century America. The middle twelve paragraphs contain sentences that are somewhat violent, choppy, questioning, and almost paranoid in their social observations and insights. There is actually just one poem here, not two, but that poem encompasses two worlds or social realities. The important point to remember, however, is that such an analysis comes about only after analyzing the poem’s form. In other words, by looking closely at Blue’s paragraphing, we are able to understand how to make meaning of it.

The formal readings presented in this chapter so far fall into one of two general categories: close form or large form. Close analyses of punctuation and grammar obviously constitute sentence-level examinations, and studying individual sentences can lead to conclusions about meaning. In Blue, however, I looked at the wider formal implications of paragraphing. Because Silliman’s work is complex and variable, it is impossible to analyze every formal characteristic; we must note the dominant formal trends and work from there. Albany and Blue are really anomalies in The Alphabet owing
to their circularity in content and relative formal consistency. *Carbon* presents a greater challenge for formal analysis; it, like many other volumes of *The Alphabet*, is a variably structured work broken into sections. *Carbon* comes at readers in multiple forms. Each of its seven sections contains different formal characteristics, although this variety does possess a fundamental consistency: the number seven. For example, Sections I, II, and III contain seven paragraphs; Section IV contains three paragraphs of seven sentences each; Section V contains fourteen paragraphs (a factor of seven); Section VI is comprised of seven numbered sentences; and Section VII contains seven paragraphs of seven sentences each. Silliman’s reliance on sevens, while interesting, does not compel an analysis of its own; it is a scheme of organization designed to interrogate arbitrary numeric values in traditional formal poetry. It also provides a pre-designed template for composition. As I stated earlier, Silliman frequently structures his work in sets that adhere to numeric values. The poem’s title, however, does offer a way of understanding Silliman’s application of sevens. The element carbon appears in material forms (diamond, graphite, etc.) that have widely varying physical characteristics; each of these material forms, however, possesses a fundamental chemical consistency, a sameness at the most minute chemical level. Although the analogy is rough, we might look to the sections of the poem, too, for fundamental consistencies. Aside from applications of seven, what do the sections share? First, they are all comprised of new sentences of varying lengths; more interesting, however, is Silliman’s unusual use of coordinating conjunctions in the majority of the sections. Section I consistently displays these words, which constitute parataxis in multiple sections of *Carbon*. 
Teachers of grammar and composition generally discourage students from beginning their sentences with coordinating conjunctions. Silliman, who manipulates traditional rules of grammar throughout *The Alphabet*, begins *Carbon* with a coordinating conjunction. In terms of form, the first paragraph of Section I resembles the following:

But this is a false tart, the trap door insecurely latched, a tear in the velvet curtain. Yet the tear was but a drop of glycerine sliding down her cheek. Nonetheless skin is not porcelain, however it spots.

The “But” that begins the poem is only the first of many conjunctions (or conjunctive adverbs); there are four more in the first three lines: “Yet,” “but,” “Nonetheless,” and “however.” To measure how these words constitute parataxis in the particular context of *Carbon*, we should step back and consider how they are paratactical in traditionally grammatical sentences in traditionally referential writing. Conjunctions are the natural expressions of tension in certain kind of sentences. Here is a basic example: “I went to the market, but I didn’t buy anything.” The tension in that sentence between (ostensibly) planning to buy something and then not buying anything—has become so ordinary and obvious as to become invisible. The “but” expresses that tension: the expectation of a purchase and the reality of no purchase. (Even the “and” in the preceding sentence seems awkward; we want there to be a “but” instead.) In *Carbon*, Silliman works from the ordinary premise of negative conjunctions like “but” (which point to some disconnect between expectations and reality) toward a far different type of expression by leaving out one half of the equation. “But this is a false tart” tells readers very little because there is no clause preceding the conjunctive clause. The expectation that there is something besides “a false tart” and the subsequent realization that there is nothing else out there
subvert normal cognitive practices and call on readers to construct additional material, like “I thought I was eating an authentic English pastry, but this is a false tart.”

The creative bridge I propose, or how I cognitively map the field of reference suggested by the sentence, falls short, however, because I fail to account for the sentence in context. There is more going on here than a subversion of expectations through an unusual application of coordinating conjunctions. Silliman’s manipulation of sound and spelling adds a layer of formal complexity to the paragraph. “False tart” sounds like “false start.” If we were listening to the poem read aloud, we would hear “false start,” and as such would work on an interpretation that accounts for the practice of false beginnings. Such practice is designed to concretize composition theories, like a poem that begins, “I don’t know how to begin this poem.”4 Additionally, the “tear” in the first sentence (shredded fabric) becomes a “tear” (crying) in the next sentence, which is then not a real tear at all, but a chemical trick. The internal rhyme between “glycerine” and “porcelain” promotes more than sound balance: Silliman posits them together as materials counter to the organic nature of tear and skin. The use of homonyms and visual similarity underscores the theme of this paragraph: sensory deception. In Hollywood style, Silliman shows us that things are not what they appear. I will discuss deception and concealment as ingredients of social manipulation in later chapters; here I merely wish to display additional ways in which Silliman applies parataxis and how that opened form assists readers in determining meaning. If all we were given in this paragraph were false starts,

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4 Silliman perfected this practice in *Tjanting* (1981), well before the numerous mainstream poems of the 1980s and early 1990s that applied it.
trap doors, and fake tears, we would be able to focus on deception as theme; Silliman’s materialization of that theme through form intensifies it.

Silliman’s paratactical strategies affect the relationship between reader and text. Enhanced critical perspectives can come into existence as a result of this altered relationship, but only through the active participation of the reader. These enhanced critical perspectives can lead to new understandings of content and meaning in the poetry. My readings of the poems emphasize Silliman’s suggested critiques of American society and politics in a number of areas. In the chapters to follow, I will present readings of many of Silliman’s poems by focusing on formal (and, to a lesser extent) thematic parataxis. Through these practices, Silliman clears spaces for readers to understand more vividly his social commentaries on late-twentieth-century American life. Chapter 2 examines punctuation in three poems, Demo, Manifest, and ®, and more fully explores Silliman’s creative rendering of American popular culture. Two short chapters comprise the project’s center. Chapter 3 examines the ruthless, sentence-level consistency of Jones, a poem that describes the detritus-riddled American landscape. The chapter shows, however, that Jones points beyond the environmental crisis to a crisis of human conscience. Chapter 4, which is concerned with the formal logic of intersection in Xing, posits multiple interpretations in a kind of dialogue with each other based on the poem’s title and dominant motifs. Chapter 5 outlines Silliman’s persistent critique of a particularly American brand of political manipulation based on the power of language, showing how language use disguises and perpetuates violence in three poems, Engines, Force, and Garfield. Chapter 6 might be read as a companion chapter to the previous in that it elaborates on the themes of disguise and concealment; the premise of the chapter is
that social conditioning occurs when the hands of power remain concealed. I explore two long poems that work through this premise, *Hidden* and *Paradise*. Chapter 7 argues that a good deal of Silliman’s work responds to the harmful logic of the academy and academic conventions, and how the academy and its publishing houses remain exclusive places of privilege. I will explore how *Ink* and *Lit* suggest illustrative critiques of social hegemony in these areas. Finally, Chapter 8 explores the ramifications of the negative in a poem aptly titled *Non*. Through the lens of Hegel’s dialectic and an application of dialectical principles to the poem, I arrive at conclusions that allow us to frame Silliman’s work in terms of resistance.

In organizing the chapters as such, I aim to describe and augment Silliman’s social critiques in a range of vital contexts. Language use might be considered the motor of social manipulation as it functions in the media, advertising, and political and academic discourse, but it impacts a number of areas of daily life, including the environment, the labor system, and schools. I focus on both of these areas in this project, language use and the social, constantly charting the relations between them. To do so, I must first outline in detail the ways in which Silliman’s poems employ parataxis and, in turn, lead to deeper, perhaps more unusual, interpretations of content. As readers come to produce meanings through the articulation of narratives, their voices come to represent the very values of pluralistic democracy.
Chapter 2: A Trademark Style: Demo, Manifest, and ®

Silliman calls the new sentence his “default option” of composition. That being the case, I would argue that his default option in structure—the structure or arrangement that I would call his trademark—is the short paragraph. The three installments of The Alphabet discussed in this chapter, Demo, Manifest, and ®, provide clear and direct examples of the new sentence as the baseline structure of short (and, in the case of Demo, one-sentence) paragraphs. Unlike Carbon, these poems are regularly structured, and offer little formal variation on the large scale. Readers must therefore examine the form and structure of the sentences themselves—what Silliman terms “hinge units”—to arrive at meanings. Such analysis is micro-formal rather than macro-formal, meaning that readers must look inside the sentences—at their grammar—prior to examining the sentences in the context of paragraphs and the work as a whole. In this kind of analysis, readers must determine how the sentence itself—as an individual unit—is propelled forward before considering how the sentences and paragraphs work together to propel the poem forward.

Crucial in this type of work, and especially in my formal analysis of Demo, is the concept of parataxis. In Chapter 1, I indicated that Silliman applied parataxis most frequently through grammatical and syntactical manipulations, creating spaces between a reader’s expectations and the actually existing text. Chapter 1 discussed how parataxis is applied in Silliman’s ABC through punctuation, conditionals, and coordinating conjunctions. In the section to follow, I will analyze Demo by examining how its punctuation constitutes parataxis, which in turn generates meanings. As is the analytical method of this study, I begin with a seemingly insignificant formal device and move
outward toward wider conclusions. While my analyses of Demo and ® proceed from the premise that Silliman’s purely formal decisions constitute parataxis, my analysis of Manifest in Section III emphasizes image-driven parataxis—in the collision of contrasting images that subvert and complicate the reading process.

Demo, the first poem in a 1992 volume of The Alphabet titled Demo to Ink, begins innocuously enough with the following sentence, “This is a test.” The sentence, which constitutes an entire paragraph, possesses multiple layers of meaning and provides an important segue into my analysis of Demo and other volumes of The Alphabet by suggesting valuable questions. What is “This”? Is Silliman referring to the single word “This,” which happens to be the name of a magazine and small press that featured Language-oriented poems in the early years of the experimental movement? By extension, Silliman could be stating, “what I and poets like me are doing is inserting a mode of presentation and poetic theory into the wider field of discourse called ‘poetry’ in late-twentieth-century American letters.” This would constitute a testing of the field, so to speak, with the introduction of a new way of thinking and composing into an already deeply established discipline. Is Silliman referring to the sentence itself—“This is a test” (the word “This” refers to the sentence at hand) —and thereby attempting to pose the sentence itself, the new sentence, as ultimately the most important unit of poetic composition? Is he making a theoretical claim for new sentence poetry itself, continuing the debate about what constitutes the essential building block of poetic language: the line or the sentence, the stanza or the paragraph, simply named object-fragments or the “well wrought” images that populate the work of the New Critics? To do so would, of course, represent a challenge to traditional ways of conceiving poetry. Is he referring to the
standard emergency warning system on television and radio (“in the case of a real emergency…”), positing it as an object in itself. Or—in what is the usual reading of the sentence—is Silliman referring to Demo itself, claiming that the poem at hand is the test? After all, a demo is a kind of test. And in this poem, he sets out to demonstrate his theories of composition over many pages. By extension, because Demo is the first poem in a volume containing five other poems of The Alphabet, Silliman could be referring to the collected volume itself, claiming it to be a test or demonstration of his poetic theories.

In addition to the ways in which the sentence, “This is a test,” shapes possible interpretations of the poem, there is a theoretical foundation involving the notion of indexing that informs the sentence. In The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Myths, Rosalind Krauss analyzes examples of 1970s visual arts that elaborate on Roman Jakobson’s definition of the sign. As Krauss points out, signs like “this” are “shifters” in that we must “wait […] each time it is invoked for its referent to be supplied. ‘This chair,’ ‘this table’ […] (197). Silliman and his contemporaries who began publishing seriously in the 1970s were informed by such discourse. Silliman’s work is filled with similar examples: “This is a ______.” According to Krauss, the “logic [of such a practice] involves the reduction of the conventional sign to a trace, which then produces the need for a supplemental discourse.” “This is a test,” then, could be understood as an example of a “trace,” which Krauss claims, “speaks of a literal manifestation of presence in a way that is like a weather vane’s registration of the wind.” The difference, however, between a weather vane and a Silliman trace is crucial: whereas a weather vane signifies a “coded” phenomenon, wind direction, which is something easily understood, a Silliman trace signifies an uncoded phenomenon—a “message [that] is disengaged from the codes
[of writing]” (211). How readers code that message (i.e. how they fit it into a narrative) will finally inform it, as I have attempted in my interpretations of the sentence.

All of the preceding interpretations are viable, but most of them require a kind of literary-historical excavation that is outside the realm of this study, so allow me to combine a couple of ideas about that beginning sentence that should form a useful segue into a formal analysis of Demo. First, I think that Silliman does intend the sentence to preview what he wants to accomplish in Demo. Like Albany, which begins with the conditional proposition, “If the function of writing is to ‘express the world,’” the first sentence of Demo implicitly calls on readers to read the rest of the poem against that ambiguous but powerful statement. Because Albany begins with an unfinished conditional, readers can read with an eye to complete the sentence. Doing so forces them to consider possible meanings. In other words, to complete that sentence effectively, readers must carefully consider what it means to “express the world,” which requires a consideration of what the world actually is—or at least the world in the context of the poem. Although “This is a test” is a grammatically complete sentence that requires no cognitive work in terms of form, it too requires readers to make connections between it and the rest of the poem. In other words, for readers to make sense of the opening sentence, they must read the rest of the poem against it or as an extension of it. Now it becomes clear that the only difference between the beginnings of Albany and Demo is grammatical. And soon, readers will understand that Demo, like the poems of ABC, requires close attention to grammar.
From Peanut Butter to Resistance: Punctuation in Demo

In most prose, good punctuation does not call attention to itself as punctuation. In verse, standards in punctuation, especially in use of periods and commas, were challenged by a variety of poetries (not just experimental poetries) in the twentieth century. The Language poets heavily manipulated standard punctuation use. While it cannot be considered radical or avant-garde, Silliman’s use of punctuation in poems like Demo calls attention to itself primarily because of the variety and frequency of his punctuation devices: parenthesis, commas, colons, semicolons, and dashes. Examining them—as occasions of parataxis—will allow me to formulate limited critiques of the social in the poem.

Consider these two sentences from Demo, which at first glance are considerably more interesting in terms of imagery than of grammar or punctuation:

The oil atop the peanut butter when one opens a new jar is my index of resistance, homeboy. (10)

Father was an absence a post-structuralist might have use for, music piped into the aquarium. (9)

These sentences, each of which comprises one of the poem’s paragraphs, lead us down different avenues than we expect. While the sentences make sense grammatically (subject-verb-object, with a modifying clause preceded by an invisible “that” in the second example), they do not conform to readers’ usual expectations. We would expect to read, “The oil atop the peanut butter when one opens a new jar is...part of the manufacturing process.” In the second example, we do not expect Father to be a theoretical construct. Subverting readers’ expectations in this way accomplishes two things. First, it keeps readers alert to language as language and sentences as sentences,
disrupting our tendency to see without really seeing. It also forces the inventive reader to come up with some connection between the parts of the sentence or to ask questions. What does peanut butter have to do with resistance? Is there, perhaps, some invisible political connection there? These sentences are more complex than what I’ve covered thus far, considering what follows the comma in each. Such material offers another direction, a different field of reference, and a new way to make a connection; this formal characteristic defines Demo. Many of the sentences contain utterly distinct fields of reference. In the examples above, a comma separates those fields. Many sentences in the poem are similarly structured:

Lick my balls narrative sequence, tugboats in the discontinuous bay. (7)

Man with a large head and feminine face, the microwave oven buzzes “done.” (11)

While commas frequently separate fields of reference, other types of punctuation do the same. My commentary on grammar is in brackets.

To as in today…interlibrary loan (the new watch with the leather watchband). [Ellipses and parenthesis divide three fields of reference.] (9)

To Do list: that jogger’s step is but a half skip (smash pumpkin time). [A colon and parenthesis do the work.] (8)

High heels grind pavement into paste (memory of color scheme popular in past war)—the construction is not parallel (taster’s choice), pruned tree’s new sprouts. [Parenthesis, a dash, and a comma divide this complex sentence.] (2)

The punctuation in these sentences, however, shouldn’t necessarily be conceived as a fence, separating two or more fields of reference; sometimes the punctuation acts like a bridge, actually linking fields of reference that might not be so distinct after all. Readers
should see the punctuation as a bridge, as doing so will enable them to link ideas and
begin creating narratives. Consider this sentence once again:

Man with a large head and feminine face, the microwave oven
buzzes “done.” (11)

While it may look like the two halves of the sentence have nothing to do with each other,
what if the man with the large head and feminine face is standing in front of the
microwave waiting for his food? What if he sees his reflection in the microwave window
and is commenting upon himself (or food, microwaves, or even technology?) This could
be a real link, but it’s one that comes about only after the active reader thinks carefully
and creatively about the sentence and forms a narrative. Silliman’s sentences, I argue,
encourage this kind of responsiveness. They encourage readers to participate in the
making of meaning by constructing links—not only among parts of sentences but also
among sentences themselves. Readers can work on this concrete task and begin to
establish narratives (which, depending on the reader’s beliefs, might or might not be
socially critical) and this process can guide their reading of the rest of the poem if they
consider questions such as: What other sentences pose implicit critiques of technology?
How can connections be made among these other technology-based sentences? Do these
sentences generate a consistent position with respect to technology? Here, readers are not
imposing their will over the sentences in the poem; rather, they are grouping sentences
and forming connections. The key point to remember is that such external connections—
or connections among sentences from different parts of the poem—cannot be made
effectively without first making connections within sentences themselves. Studying
punctuation is the initial step in the process. Similar kinds of work can be done with all of the examples I’ve cited. More extensive analyses of these sentences are in order.

“The oil atop the peanut butter when one opens a new jar is my index of resistance, homeboy” differs from the other examples in that it demonstrates that punctuation isn’t the sole divider of referential fields within sentences. While the comma that precedes “homeboy” performs that work here, so does the verb “is,” which casually, invisibly, and smoothly forms the transition between peanut butter oil and resistance. Nothing in the grammatical construction of the sentence suggests anything unusual or radical; it’s a simple construction: this is this. The truly radical element here is the utterly casual transition. It’s arresting in its casualness, like holding up a convenience store while talking to Grandma on the cell phone. Although it’s hard to notice at first because it’s so smooth, upon being noticed it compels readers to consider the connection, and to build some bridge between the two halves separated by the “is.” To paraphrase Jameson in his reading of Perelman’s “China,” is there some secret, political connection here between peanut butter and resistance? Between food and resistance? The twentieth century is filled with such connections. Cesar Chavez’s biography is a compelling story of nonviolent resistance. Chavez, who founded the United Farm Workers to combat grape growers in the southwestern U.S., should be regarded among the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ghandi for his lifelong struggle against injustice. There are certainly connections between oil and resistance. Look no further than the Middle East and Mesopotamia in the twentieth century. Since World War I, the West—primarily England and the U.S.—have interfered in Middle Eastern affairs and disrupted its geopolitical borders to gain access to oil. Examined historically, Silliman’s seemingly strange
transition in that sentence begins to make sense. Additionally, commercially-produced peanut butter contains no layer of oil like homemade peanut butter. Therefore, the extent to which oil rests atop one’s peanut butter might denote socio-economic status.

There is, however, more to the sentence. A comma separates the first, longer part of the sentence from “homeboy,” a term of camaraderie popularized in the 1980s by Los Angeles gang culture. Gang members are known as homeboys. While the term has gained wider currency, it was originally used not merely to designate a friend, but to refer to a comrade in arms, an ally in the struggle against other gangs (and the police and, to some extent, business owners) for urban geographical control. To control the street and the neighborhood is to control the means of production and distribution—in this case, mostly narcotics and prostitution. While it is woefully offensive to compare Cesar Chavez and Tookie Williams (the recently executed founder of the Crips gang), whose organizations differed greatly in substance and spirit, both men attempted to unify against external, powerful economic interests. Both men brought together comrades (or homeboys) in an effort to win something. Praise should be reserved for Chavez’s nonviolence, but in the context of this sentence we have identified the bridge. “Homeboy” makes sense when considered in this historical context.

“Father was an absence a post-structuralist might have use for, music piped into the aquarium” is more difficult to bridge. The material preceding the comma, though syntactically awkward, is prime territory for theoretical analysis. Studies on language and psychology describe connections between the father’s role in a child’s development and subsequent language use. If the father is absent, psychologists could draw conclusions about the child’s thinking or language without the complicating factors of the Oedipal
power struggle. The “absent father,” as much a late-twentieth-century cultural
phenomenon as a personal tragedy, has become an object of study for a variety of
sociological, political, and literary theorists. Many poststructuralists today are well-
versed in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and bring their knowledge to texts. The
power of this group of words, then, reaches into many disciplines: medical, literary,
linguistic, political, and sociological. The material after the comma complicates the
sentence. Is there any way to link these two clauses? Just what is “music piped into the
aquarium”? It’s actually nothing but garbled sound, an indistinct clutter of noise. Water is
a poor conductor of any sound, let alone music. Seen from this perspective, the awkward
theoretical discourse of the first clause and the noisy clutter of the second clause both
lack a precise base for analysis. They are equated as such, and that equation lends the
sentence its balance. Moreover, it’s what gives the sentence its sense. The two fields of
reference separated by the comma are not so distinct after all. They both pose a critique
of language: what seems to be articulate and sensible from a certain perspective is merely
nonsense from another. But it goes beyond that. This sentence aims its critique at those
who use and disseminate language and at those who hear it, negotiating the
disharmonious relation between the two sides, noting the lack of comprehension.
Parataxis here resides in the lack of communication between the two sides. Disharmony
in message transmittal (what is uttered or written versus what is received) has been a
subject for linguists and literary theorists for decades. Silliman draws upon that
theoretical tradition in that sentence.

One more reading of a sentence from Demo should complete this illustration of
the analytical method. This time I will choose a sentence that is even more complex in
terms of punctuation. In fact, the sentence beginning with “High heels” is one of the most complex sentences in *Demo*. “High heels grind pavement into paste (memory of color scheme popular in past war)—the construction is not parallel (taster’s choice), pruned tree’s new sprouts.” There are five sections in this sentence (“clauses” would not be the right word here because some of these word clusters function as appositives) separated by three kinds of punctuation: parenthesis, dash, and comma. If the last example offered a critique of language, then this sentence elaborates on that critique. It, too, is critical of the way language is used. It, too, attempts to chart the disharmony between language user and receptor. It, too, delves into the realms of sociology and politics. The material inside the parenthesis represents the personal or the subjective; the material on the outside is public and objective. Anyone can visualize the material on the outside: ground down remnants of pavement; that the construction of this sentence is not parallel; and new sprouts. They are shared images. The material on the inside, however, is not so easily shared or communicated. Consider the first parenthetical: “memory of color scheme popular in past war.” Which color scheme? Which war? Which country? I think of the light green of my grandmother’s old house, a house bought in the 1950s following World War II. My parents might think of kitchen remodeling and Vietnam. My wife, who’s from Turkey, would imagine something altogether different. This material is highly subjective and imaginary. “Taster’s choice,” in the second parenthesis, is a name-brand coffee (and this, for the most part, is a public, shared image), but the word “choice” itself implies the personal and stresses difference. Public and private images collide here. The collision of images constitutes parataxis in the sentence, parataxis that was already generated formally by the heavy use of punctuation.
In “Total Syntax,” from the book of the same name, Barrett Watten discusses Silliman’s paratactical strategies as instances of democracy. The disparate elements that comprise Silliman’s *Ketjak* and *Tjanting*, as they are expressed in the units of individual sentences (“[D]escriptive writing, journal prose, overheard remarks, media hype, complicated puns, examples of language as language, fragments of ideology […]”), possess “simultaneous value as both description and example of structure—and the argument of the work is the interanimation of this relation as it develops. Logical, narrative, or simply accretive orders build up and break down in complex displays” (107). If readers follow only one of these interpretive paths (logic, narrative, or accretion), they arrive at only limited points of meaning. More fruitful investigations, according to Watten, occur when these disparate elements are considered in unity: “the ‘self-similarity’ of statement must be established on a larger scale—tending toward more open limits, the scale of the world” (108). Readers are asked to account for what he terms “[T]he scale of the inconsequential” or “Silliman’s insistence on the unheroic particulars” (109) in the poems. These disparate elements form the “total syntax” of Silliman’s investigative poetry and point to higher levels of meaning. In his concluding note on Silliman in the essay, Watten argues that

[T]he syntax of *Ketjak* is a dialogue between the scales of these facts; the transformation of the poem is its admission to the scale of the world. The argument compels a recognition. There is a mutuality of oneself and others as seen through the text, which is structurally democratic. (111)

The “mutuality” Watten mentions guides my interpretations of Silliman’s *Alphabet* poems in this study. His recognition of the dialogue not only among the elements of the poem but also between himself and readers invites readerly participation in the
construction of meanings. In Demo, as in other works of The Alphabet, I examine elements within and among sentences to arrive at global modes of interpretation. The discourse (and discontinuity) between public and private images suggested by Demo not only responds to (on a local scale) Watten’s argument that Silliman’s poetry invites participation from the “other” (and attempts to make sense of the other—and the world—through description) but also (on a wider scale) offers an overarching theme of the work at large.

The three readings I’ve posed here—based on sentences that become increasingly more complex in terms of grammar—share one fundamental similarity beyond their punctuation. They all rely on differences in perception as paratactical applications. One might perceive a “homeboy” as a murderous thug while another might see a comrade allied for a cause. One might perceive sophisticated psycho-literary discourse as beautiful music, soothing and smart, while another hears nonsense. The first two sentences penetrate the social realities of disunity of thought and perception, and hint that the troubles that plague society can be traced to these disunities. The third sentence, while more grammatically complex, is ironically more straightforward in its assessment of disunity, noting the fundamental uniqueness and incommunicability of memory, choice, and the visual. The uniqueness of the personal is bound to collide with the mandatory features of public imagery and discourse. All poetry and art strives, perhaps, to chart this tension, and readers are likely to perceive this tension differently. Obviously, Demo’s sentences feature a multiplicity of meanings. My argument, however, is that the best way to approach the poem and ultimately arrive at such meanings and variety is through an initial recognition of form, and especially Demo’s heavy punctuation. The most fruitful
readings of Silliman’s work, in fact, must recognize form and the parataxis constituted by formal decisions.

**Manifest: A Cacophony of Styles**

Because they are long, poems like *Demo* and *Manifest* (1990) are impossible to grasp at once. It would be highly misleading to claim that one of these poems is about “idea x” or consistently demonstrates “theorem y.” They offer layers of meaning that can best be excavated by analyses of form, especially form at sentence level. Indeed, these “microanalyses” capture the spirit of the critical method more than readings that attempt to make sense of the whole poem. It is useful, however, to consider the multiple ways of reading Silliman’s titles, as they offer clues about how the poems might be approached. *Demo*, arguably, refers to a demonstration of how punctuation can be used to generate ways of reading. Like “demo,” there is more than one dictionary definition of “manifest”:

1. readily perceived by the senses and especially by sight
2. easily understood or recognized by the mind
   OR
   to make evident or certain by showing or displaying
   OR
   a list of passengers or an invoice of cargo for a vehicle (as a ship or plane)

While such definitions do not necessarily tell us *how* to read the poem, they do offer directions; they open up questions. What would it mean to read *Manifest* as a poem concerned with formal devices and images that are “readily perceived by the senses”? What would it mean to read it as a poem based primarily on the visual? How is *Manifest* “easily understood or recognized by the mind”? What makes it so? Or: what is it that the speaker is trying “to make evident or certain”? Or: how is the poem interested in lists? All of these questions present avenues of exploration. They can all shape potential
readings. They can guide and inform readings, and, most importantly, provide some initial shape or direction to texts that are always-already challenging in terms of their variety of images and formal complexity. Silliman’s poems are so vast that a little direction helps a lot. The question that will guide my reading of Manifest is: what is it here that the speaker is trying “to make evident or certain”? Allowing such a question to guide one’s reading need not be a limitation; it should open up possibilities for reading that may not be clear otherwise.

In terms of structure, Manifest is similar to Demo. Both are long poems comprised of short paragraphs made up of new sentences. Manifest, which appears in a volume all its own, is twenty-two pages long. The key structural difference between the two poems is that, in Demo, each paragraph consists of a single sentence and in Manifest, each paragraph consists of between one and four sentences, yet the paragraphs remain short. The major formal difference between the poems is that Manifest is not heavily punctuated. It contains fewer parenthesis and commas. Its lack of punctuation tempers the complexity generated by the multi-sentence paragraphs. In general, the sentences of Manifest are more straightforward and declarative than those of Demo. How, then, is parataxis constituted in the poem? Because there is not much that is highly unique about its form, we must look elsewhere to answer that question—to the speaker’s consistent mixture and inter-penetration of natural and mechanical images. The work represents a contact zone where life mingles and collides with machines. In fact, the speaker is making it “manifest” that these two worlds are engaged in a struggle, and invites readers to participate in that struggle. The constant push and pull and interfacing of these two worlds constitute a content-driven application of parataxis in the poem. To claim,
however, that there is nothing formally unique about *Manifest* is misleading, for some sentences unravel in unexpected ways, much like the “peanut butter-resistance” sentence in *Demo*. Consider the following sentences that appear early in *Manifest*:

The train does not hesitate to penetrate a grass fire, air full of cinders.

The first crocus, purple by the fountain.

Rain centers the body.

Hybrid as elegant as the First Lady herself. (7)

As in *Demo*, there is something peculiar about the grammar of these sentences. In the crocus sentence, the verb is implied: “sprouts,” “grows” or “is,” and in the First Lady sentence, the verb isn’t so much implied as intentionally left out. The “to be” verb in that case would add little to the sentence anyway, which is already complex owing to the ambiguity of the word “Hybrid.” To what that refers is a critical question, and will reveal much about how we might approach this work, so I will come to it later. In fact, there are important similarities among the first, third, and fourth sentences here, so I will begin with the second one, which is a classic example of Silliman’s project in *Manifest*: the mingling of the natural and mechanical worlds. A purple crocus has sprung up near the fountain. What we guess immediately is that the season is spring, a new cycle of life and regeneration. The crocus is among spring’s first flowers. What we don’t know—and this is critical to my reading of this work—is how the flower got there, and this is where matters get complicated. If it has appeared naturally, on its own, perhaps as part of some long-forgotten bed or carried to its place by a bird, then its appearance by the fountain reminds us of the proximity between nature and machine, and how these worlds can interact smoothly. If, on the other hand, someone planted the flower, it also reminds us of
smooth interaction—but with a twist: an agent has caused the interaction. Nevertheless, the innocent, surface reading of the sentence is crucial: nature and machine can thrive side by side.

The other sentences I’ve cited contain their own twists. In the first example, the collision of train and fire fills the air with bits of stone, causing a little eruption. The twist, however, is how the grass fire started in the first place. Was it caused by arson or lightning? This question is important because an act of arson would intensify the feeling of environmental degradation already hinted at by the penetration of the train into the landscape, with smoke and cinders astir. If the fire has occurred naturally, this image promotes the idea that machine and nature can coexist with little more result than a smoky cloud of cinders. Both of these sentences display environmental degradation, but they also suggest that there are degrees of it.

The third example is the most ethereal: “Rain centers the body.” What rain? What body? The usual reading would go like this: the individual inhabiting the body is standing in the rain or at a window watching the rain. Owing to the pressures of modern life or emotional instabilities inside her, she desires the kind of balance and harmony that only nature can offer: standing in the rain, hiking in the forest, swimming in the sea, etc. Interacting with nature in such a way, partaking of it as one partakes of food or coffee, brings her a sense of balance, peace, or stability. Unifying oneself with nature can, of course, bring comfort. This reading dominates because it’s rooted in the comforting clichés of nature and the body prevalent in cultural phenomena like self-help and meditation. Silliman’s twist, however, and key in his overall strategy of composition, is
that the line is surrounded by material that, in terms of style and imagery, is different.

Here are the same sentences in the context of their paragraphs:

So you’re one too. Quantify effect. The kingfisher’s blue foregrounds against the yellow-brown of winter forest. The train does not hesitate to penetrate a grass fire, air full of cinders.

Junkies in the snow in Madison Square Park. “So it wasn’t his kidneys going off.” Songs of a roomful of antique clocks. The first crocus, purple by the fountain.

White cat wends its way between the legs of the chair. Rain centers the body.

Festival of Unfinished Projects. Hybrid as elegant as the First Lady herself. I’m in line for the bathtub next. (7)

Although it’s a tragic image, there is something poignant about heroin addicts huddling against the snow in New York that captures a spirit of defiance and independence.

Human suffering lies at the heart of the image, but most of these sentences range from the comical to the usual to the melodramatic. These sentences can be read in a variety of ways. For example, one might hear beauty in the cacophony of clock sounds while another might hear meaningless noise. Differences of perception and emphasis mark the reading process and humans’ journey through the world; is this all that can be said, however, about these clusters of sentences and diverse images that populate the pages of Manifest and much of Silliman’s work? In these paragraphs, which are representative of Silliman’s project in Manifest, whatever differences there are among the sentences in terms of scope, seriousness, tone, and poignancy, many conform to the formula of something against, or something colliding with, or something merely next to, something else. It’s not always nature against or with machine, but throughout the measure of the poem, collision is a recurring motif.
The challenge is to determine why Silliman relies on this motif with such frequency in this poem and others. My belief is that he is implicitly calling attention to a competition of poetic styles or traditions. Even a reader such as me, who is very sympathetic to Silliman’s formal project, would conceivably question the sentence, “White cat wends its way through the legs of the chair”—with “so what?” “I could compose fifty pages of those observations a day and call it poetry.” These daily observations of the mundane and traditionally unpoetic, however, counterbalance other styles and tones that appear in his work: the poignant, the melodramatic, the serious, the rhetorical, etc. Like nature and machine, these different styles come together as an application of parataxis, generating a series of decisions for readers. They must first decide how they are going to read these sentences and paragraphs, for they expand in multiple directions and then contract in torque-like fashion. Are readers going to consider them poignantly, as a kind of lament for human suffering? The examples seem to support such a reading. Consider the Madison Square Park junkies in the snow, suffering with addiction and hopelessness. Then, in the same paragraph, it wasn’t his kidneys after all, but his liver. How much more can he endure? The “songs” of the antique clocks in the next sentence, when the preceding sentences are read in a lamenting tone, are a musical accompaniment—serene, doleful, and soothing—to the play of human suffering. Even the crocus, alone by the fountain, rises bewildered in the early spring chill. A reading that emphasizes the melodramatic would be even easier to articulate. One can imagine a serious, earnest reading of these sentences, as well as a comical one. Comparing the First Lady to a “hybrid” (car or rutabaga) is funny and peculiar. The point is that Silliman’s work is rich and varied enough to offer multiple reading paths. With its cacophony of
styles and tones, he is challenging the idea that poetry is a fixed entity, or that the images of a poem must be traditionally poetic. His diversity of style and imagery democratically challenges what he terms on his blog the “School of Quietude”: a derisive description of a mainstream trend in American poetry that looks back to England for its tradition. (Silliman, in fact, has become synonymous with the phrase on the blogosphere—a quick Google search confirms it.) Presumably unlike the poems produced within the School of Quietude, Silliman’s work empowers active readers by giving them the space to articulate narratives. This poem makes manifest the idea that stylistic diversity can engender a democratic, reader-empowered mode of criticism.

As with earlier readings and analyses, we don’t arrive at the idea that Silliman’s work is a force of democracy by looking at the variety of images, styles, and structures overall, as if they could be seen from the outside as a kind of melting pot. To the contrary, we must begin with a more microscopic, or inside-outside, examination of the poem’s building blocks. In the case of Manifest, I examined the collision or togetherness of different kinds of images that appear in the same sentence. From this initial work, I was able to make claims about variety, tension, and difference. It’s not, as Jameson states in The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, that “difference relates.” Actually, difference empowers because it offers discontinuities in tone, imagery, and style that can appeal to wide ranges of sensibility and experience and promote multiple articulations of narrative. The empowerment, however, doesn’t happen automatically. Readers are empowered (and become critically-thinking citizens) only when they make the determination to read the poem in more than a single key. Silliman’s work is ultimately anti-authoritarian because it doesn’t impose a single kind of reading; Silliman is a poet of possibility.
In twenty-first-century America, everything is reducible to a slogan: political beliefs, social values, works of art, and even individuals. Once that slogan gets stuck in our heads (so many of the sentences in ® contain the idea of not being able to get something out of one’s head) it works its worldview, shaping and influencing how we interact with the market and popular culture, and indeed how we interact with and see the individuals around us. The marketplace is insidious because the products and images it offers subtly but surely transform us into happy consumers. When we respond positively—and who can’t respond positively to the catchy jingles on TV?—we indirectly support the market (and, indirectly, its oppressive attributes). I believe that is Silliman’s message in ®. In a seemingly lighthearted way, with the inclusion of numerous advertising slogans, variations on those slogans, and snippets of pop culture, he suggests the insidious nature of the market system and our implicit endorsement of it. This section will consist of analyses of seven pop culture references that suggest the manipulative work of the market system.

There was a young man from Nantucket. (23)
Wake at dawn with a song in my “heart”: “I love what you do to me, Toyota!” (24)
Rome if you want to (all around, all around this world). (24)
Swamp thing, you make my heart sink, you make everything Post-X. (24)
I don’t think we’re in Leningrad anymore, Toto. (25)
James Brown singing It’s a Man’s World plays endlessly (ironically) in the imagination. (26)
A song in my head of easier banking, of B of A. (40)

Although the majority of Silliman’s poems features the element of pop culture pastiche, the inclusion of (and in Silliman’s case, the manipulation of) material from multiple pop culture sources, in ® this pop culture pastiche is used frequently enough to become, I
think, the dominant motif of the poem. In the examples I’ve cited above, Silliman draws on a wide array of pop culture: the potentially obscene limerick, a Toyota commercial featuring a popular slogan, variations on a late-1980s hit from the B-52s (“Roam [If You Want To]”) and “Wild Thing,” a song originally recorded in 1966 by The Troggs, a British group (Wikipedia), as well as The Wizard of Oz, James Brown, and the southern banking giant, Bank of America. I will analyze each of these slogans and snippets individually, but should first make some general statements regarding their use.

First (and this point must direct the analysis of ®), Silliman is not merely being playful or funny by including these slogans and snippets. They do supply a level of lightness to the work, but I believe that Silliman has a definite purpose in including them. Nor should we believe that these references are haphazardly plucked from pop culture and tossed into the poem as if to season; on the contrary, I will argue that these references are carefully chosen and that Silliman uses them to suggest socio-political concerns about people living in late-twentieth-century America. They serve a purpose, and that is to help portray the mental habits and mindsets of late-twentieth-century Americans. There is a prerequisite, however, for the content analysis that will form the rest of this chapter: to make sense of the content from a socio-political perspective, we again must begin with a formal analysis. In terms of form, it is obvious that the above slogans and snippets are not exact references. Silliman employs them in combination with other (original) material and also alters them both slightly and substantially. In other words, he weaves the references into his text in his own language to create something new. He doesn’t merely plop the references into the text of ® at given points; rather, he consciously shapes and
manipulates the pop culture material to establish his goals for the work, which in this case constitute suggested social and political critiques of late-twentieth-century America.

This formal manipulation—or shaping of the already well-known (for the most part) pop culture references—constitutes the parataxis in ®, which always spans the space from the known (the text) to the unknown (the reader’s imagination). Consider the first example above, “There was a young man from Nantucket.” Practically everyone is aware of these racy limericks; there are a thousand variations on the Nantucket theme, all of them ending with a sexual command. In this poem, however, Silliman doesn’t finish the limerick for us; he leaves it to readers’ imaginations; he makes readers do the work. Recall that he used a similar device with the first sentence of Albany, calling on readers to use their imaginations to finish the sentence, to provide a predicate. In providing a predicate, readers would thereby supply the cognitive backdrop against which they would read other images of the poem. Silliman uses the device here, in Albany, and elsewhere to invite readers into the creative process. In the case of the limerick, the reader is likely to conclude it sexually—and this is crucial, for Silliman is suggesting that our relations with and responses to pop culture are charged with sexuality and raciness. Sex sells. This is evident, but again—in the context of this poem and others—we arrive at this evident conclusion/observation by way of the formal analysis of the line. We get from a limerick to sexiness via an examination of form.

In the Toyota example, a colon separates (and therefore implies the existence of a bridge between) the original material (“Wake at dawn with a song in my ‘heart’”) and the commercial jingle. In this sentence, Silliman is hinting at the insidious, intrusive nature of advertising, and how it affects people at many levels. How sad, he implies, to wake with
a car jingle in his “heart.” How sad that this jingle is the first thing to pop into his head in the morning. The quotes around the word “heart” distance himself from the phenomenon (and question the sentimental exploitation of the “heart” used by marketers), but there’s nothing distant about his critique. Commercial products and the ways in which they’re marketed, he suggests, have found ways into our hearts and into our beds. This romanticization of the market (“I love what you do to me, Toyota!”)—or even the sexualization of the market—is not so much a romanticization of mere products, but a romanticization of the system itself. To love an entity (romantically or sexually) is to guarantee and perpetuate its existence. The love here would be, ironically, a love of the forces that also oppress (and many people do, in fact, love their oppressors). Consider what kind of love this is: cheap and tawdry, an infatuation with sparkle, gleam, and surface comforts. This cheapening love reduces it to a monetary transaction: the love of spending and receiving, the love of trade. The idea that love—something sacred and vital to human experience—can be reducible to a car slogan (and is reducible to a car slogan, considering the intrusive nature of the market) should challenge readers to reconsider their relations with and responses to the market.

Silliman’s spelling of “Rome” in the next example (instead of “Roam”) alters the meaning of the sentence, as does his tweaking of the material in parenthesis. In the B-52s song, there occurs only one “all around” in the chorus. Again, the difference constitutes the parataxis. Read aloud, an audience would no doubt visualize “Roam,” not the Italian capital. Audience perception differs from the reality of the text, causing tension between the there and the not-there. So what is Silliman trying to accomplish in that tweaking? Primarily, the punning constitutes the idea of difference itself, generating parataxis and
multiple readings. In terms of content, how should we read that line? How should we wrap our imaginations around that word, “Rome”? Travel to Rome if you want to? Or: Rome, if you want to be a powerful force in the late twentieth century, go ahead. Or: is this perhaps a (very) latent critique of the Catholic Church? If it’s a poem about advertising and pop culture, the fact that Rome plays an important role in the fashion industry could lead to readings. If it’s a poem about the intrusive, destructive nature of the market system, perhaps the implication is that we have to look for centers of authority other than commerce. Is the Catholic Church still a viable base of authority? With scandal, corruption, a rising interest in self-help, and cultural phenomena like *The Da Vinci Code*, the influence of the Church wanes. And it, too, is a commercial center and an oppressor we love.

The next example is also a reshaping of a popular song, “Wild Thing.” The wild thing has been replaced by “Swamp thing,” a B-movie monster (even pop culture of low-production quality has its allure and its icons) that doesn’t make the speaker’s “heart sing,” but rather “sink.” Until this point, the sentence remains at the level of vague punning reminiscent of the previous example. The material after the second comma, however, adds a layer of theoretical complexity lacking in “Rome”: “you make everything Post-X.” This layer turns the sentence into a generational comment. Generation X “includes within it those people who grew up in a period of transition (1945-1990) beginning with the end of World War II and the decline of colonial imperialism and ending with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War” (Wikipedia). The rise of Generation X influence in the arts, business, and technology corresponds with a rise in quick link (the allure of the Internet) and quick cut (the mode
of cable television) styles, which one might describe pejoratively as a “dearth of attention.” They were raised on the kind of “fragmentation” in the arts and advertising that Fredric Jameson writes about in “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” For them, parataxis became the norm, of which the presentational modes of cable TV and the Internet are the greatest examples in media. And here we are faced with the term “pastiche,” a productive strategy based on the paratactical principle of disparity that became especially popular in the 1980s. Artists who employ pastiche techniques draw on various modes of media from different eras in constructing their works. As such, 1950s-style film-noir became popular in some films in the 1980s. The pop culture word for this phenomenon today is “retro.” “Swamp thing,” then, a movie monster from the mid-twentieth century, would have been a likely candidate for reinvention for late-century audiences as an application of pastiche. In this sentence, Silliman is commenting on the pastiche device (in his blending of modes and genres) and on what might come next, or what artistic techniques might thrive in the next generation. We have seen in recent years that the world of Generation Y, in terms of art and media, is an intensification of the previous generation. To “make everything Post-X,” then, would be to imagine future modes of artistic production and reception on even faster technological scales.

The Wizard of Oz continues to enchant viewers with its music, vivid color, and larger-than-life characters. Dorothy’s famous pronouncement from Oz—“I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore, Toto”—is replaced in the next example with “I don’t think we’re in Leningrad anymore, Toto.” What looks like a funny, little throwaway line is ripe for historical analysis. Silliman and a handful of other experimental writers visited the Soviet Union in 1989 and had meaningful cultural and literary exchanges with Soviet
writers. While this sentence may represent nostalgia for that trip, the real nostalgia is much deeper and works on a number of levels. First—and this, I believe, would be the dominant, mainstream reading of the sentence—there is nostalgia for the simpler times of bifurcated world power and economic structures. In the late 1940s and 1950s, for instance, the USSR posed the only threat to the relative prosperity and stability of America. The “Russian bear” was recognizable and tangible. Images of Nikita Khrushchev slamming his shoe on the podium at the UN burned into the country’s collective mind. Some older people nostalgically reminisce about the 1950s because “the enemy” was clear and life was simple. On the other hand, the more radical reading of the sentence is the utopian one. This reading is also based on nostalgia, but not nostalgia for the simplicity, clarity, and naiveté of the 1950s. Rather, it is based on possibility: the possibility of a utopian society based on certain socialist principles, the possibility of genuine equality, enfranchisement, and human and civil rights. In other words, this sentence represents nostalgia for the possibility of socialism—as it existed as a concept before the corruption and brutality of Stalin and subsequent Soviet leaders. It represents a dream—an alternate belief system or something to strive for—for the millions of Americans who suffered (and still suffer) under the harsh realities of the market system.

The last two examples I will discuss resemble the Toyota sentence in that a song or slogan has lodged itself in the speaker’s consciousness. I will devote my analysis to the James Brown example, however, because of the obvious similarities between the B of A and Toyota examples. To have an advertising slogan in your head, heart, or soul constitutes a romantic or sexual relation that is in the market’s interest to construct. Again, to love a product is to maintain and perpetuate the system that supports its sale. To
love the product is to love the wider system. To sing the song or slogan is to endorse that system’s hegemony. In the James Brown example, the same system is endorsed; only the perspective shifts: the market relies on gender inequality and exploitation for its maintenance and control. That this song from the “Godfather of Soul” (“It’s a Man’s World”) should play “endlessly (ironically) in the imagination” reflects the gender inequality still prevalent in the nation’s corporate institutions. Moreover, feminism has become a dirty word in many circles in the twenty-first century, perhaps most notably the college classroom, where not a single one of my students (women or men) in a recent informal poll indicated that they identified themselves as feminists. The song plays “endlessly” because the cycles of sexism, objectification, and subjugation of women continue. The song plays “ironically” because it is indeed a man’s world in the serious way of inequality; it’s more than an aesthetic or artistic expression. It wields power in the collective conscious because of its truth. To sing the song is to verify, endorse, and even worship (perhaps unwittingly, in karaoke bars across the country) that system of exploitation.

The beauty of ® is that Silliman’s method of composition mirrors how we respond to the world of advertising. He weaves pop culture references into the fabric of his text (and in doing so, re-forms them) to produce something new. He interacts with the world of pop culture in the production of his poem. We interact with pop culture the same way: such elements and references become part of the way we think and talk, and in fact become integral to how we view the world. Therein lies the success of the market. And therein also lies the way in which form relates to theme in ®: the world of slogans is a world of its own form; appropriating those forms (and integrating them into poems or our
own daily interactions) entails a transition from form to theme, from aesthetics to meaning. Because when Silliman or we appropriate and integrate those forms, we cozy up to the market in ways that benefit and support a system that is actually oppressive. Silliman’s writing process in the poem and our process of endorsing the market system run parallel.

My analyses of the three poems in this chapter demonstrate the crucial role of receptors in the artistic process. Silliman empowers readers and consumers (two kinds of receptors) in different ways. In Demo, he tasks the consumer-as-reader to overcome unusual punctuation and build bridges of narrative reference. In Manifest, a poem where images oppose each other, he tasks the reader to formulate what is created by the opposition and not merely to define the conflict. ® is arguably the work where Silliman most succinctly empathizes with the contemporary American consumer. As consumers, we are bombarded daily not only with the material images meant to symbolize success, but also the slogans and jingles that accompany them. To overcome visual stimuli is one thing. To “wake with a song in your head” is altogether different. ®, a work of resigned warning, pushes readers to recognize the mechanisms of the marketplace.
Chapter 3: *Jones*: Insisting on What’s Present

In *Manifest*, the side-by-side placement and mingling of images from the natural world and the mechanical world offer a recurring motif. In *Jones* (1993), that commingling is not a motif, but the driving thematic force of the work. Within many of the poem’s individual sentences, natural and mechanical images collide. In my 2002 interview, Silliman noted that every sentence in *Jones* describes the ground. I would expand his definition by arguing that *Jones* not only describes the ground, but also the inevitable and gradual transformation of the ground by human activity and natural phenomena. The baseline it describes is constantly changing, and the poem’s descriptive power lies in its chronicling of that change. Like *Manifest*, *Jones* is a poem that portrays the interplay of two worlds: the world of machines and the world of nature. The difference between the two is that *Jones* does so strictly at ground level. In analyzing poems that portray the interplay of machines and the natural environment, it is important to consider both physical, literal relations and figurative ones. By focusing first on the literal relations of these worlds via the poem’s concrete details, we can eventually come to critical conclusions about what the poem says about the environment and society’s relationship with the environment. In other words, in a poem dedicated to a close examination of the ground itself, we study the actual ground of the poem (imagery and form) to arrive at the ground of critique. My analysis in this study relies on that method.

Of all of Silliman’s books, *Jones* most succinctly describes the interplay between earth, humans, and machines, and the scars left upon the earth by the latter two. He presents an earth being swallowed up, slammed, dented, damaged, and displaced by the
commodities that we produce. He does so by carefully examining the ground. The poem presents an array of different surfaces and maintains its momentum by constantly gazing downward. The form of *Jones*, like a number of Silliman’s poems, varies. The first five and a half pages are comprised of long, block paragraphs of new sentences. In the middle of page six, Silliman shifts form, breaking up the sentences into a series of four-line stanzas, each line having four words. This is an example of form being artificially imposed upon content. In “Artifice of Absorption” (a critical essay written in verse), Charles Bernstein describes what he sees as one of the most important components of experimental poetry, especially new sentence writing like Silliman’s. “Anti-absorptive” poetry, of which the new sentence is an example, destabilizes us, wakes us, and denatures us, and in doing so calls attention to what otherwise would be ignored: the constructedness of the text itself. Bernstein equates the terms “anti-absorptive” and “impermeable”: *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate* tells us that impermeable means “not permitting passage (as of a fluid) through its substance.” This definition recalls Silliman’s discussion of “syllogistic movement” in *The New Sentence*. Permeability is another way of describing movement—through the text to levels of higher meaning—syllogistically. Impermeability, then, would seek to restrict or constrict movement through the text. In the essay, Bernstein argues that

*Impermeability* suggests artifice, boredom, exaggeration, attention scattering, distraction, digression, interruptive, transgressive, undecorous, anticonventional, unintegrated, fractured, fragmented, fanciful, ornately stylized, rococo, baroque, structural, mannered, fanciful, ironic, iconic, schtick, camp, diffuse, decorative, repellent, inchoate, programmatic, didactic, theatrical, background muzak, amusing: skepticism,
doubt, noise, resistance.

Absorptive writing, on the contrary, emphasizes narrative development and receptive ease:

By absorption I mean engrossing, engulfing completely, engaging, arresting attention, reverie, attention intensification, rhapsodic, spellbinding, mesmerizing, hypnotic, total, riveting, enthralling: belief, conviction, silence.

By forcing us out of our normal reading routines (the smooth, placid, receptive work of the receptor-consumer), anti-absorptive writing radically confronts us, and then forces us to think through that confrontation and make sense of it. Finally, Bernstein reminds us that “Absorptive & antiabsorptive works both require artifice, but the former may hide / this while the latter may flaunt / it” (A Poetics 29-30). Bernstein’s presentation of the essay in verse—a flaunting introduction of artifice into a usually standardized medium—reinforces his points about text reception. The serious points he makes in “Artifice of Absorption” may remain obscured (“unintegrated”) for readers.

Bernstein’s discussion helps to frame the formal analysis I work toward in Jones and other Alphabet poems: Silliman’s serious suggestions of social and political critique often remain unintegrated in his impermeable texts, locked within scatterings and interruptions. As such, it is incumbent upon readers initially to engage the works in terms of form. Jones is no exception. As we look to form in Jones, we realize that what otherwise would be ignored is not simply the text’s constructedness or the environmental crisis (popularized today by the key phrases “Al Gore” and “global warming”), but rather a crisis of conscience, an unwillingness to think about the intricacies of the text or the earth too closely. This unwillingness (perhaps “hesitancy” is a better word) leads to a
failure to articulate crucial messages. Silliman’s reminders of the crisis of conscience in
Jones (like the earth’s reminders of its ongoing crisis), therefore, often go unrecognized.

It would be fairly easy to analyze Jones in terms of the environmental crisis (the
human desire to consume degrades the earth); Silliman’s moves in the poem, however,
suggest a different reading: the key crisis is not the environmental one, but rather a crisis
of conscience. Although Silliman never uses the phrase “crisis of conscience,” his images
work like reminders of the crisis. The figurative power of the poem is that it frames and
responds to that crisis. In Jones, the crisis of conscience involves environmental
degradation. As I will show, the poem is more than an environmental protest or call for
political action; it provokes a crisis of conscience, calling upon readers (us, the receptors
of this detritus-riddled landscape) to make sense of why we live among this debris. In a
Silliman poem, a “sock on the floor by the door” is much more than an easy rhyme or a
forgotten article of clothing; put together with all of the other forgotten objects strewn
about, it symbolizes a wider, more serious problem. This floor is our earth, the surface of
which is riddled and scarred by socks and more dangerous objects. But we can’t get to
that critique without first examining the material at sentence level, as this material
constitutes the parataxis that makes the critique possible. Examining the first sentences of
the poem in detail will help us better understand formal parataxis in Jones.

Socks on the floor by the door. After the rain the sidewalk dries unevenly.
Pyramid of cans in the corner of the yard, waiting to be crushed by a
hammer, then piled into a plastic bag (bags of cans stacked high against
the fence). Yellow thorny weed that rises between the cracks in the
cement. Small grey dead bird, crushed, feathers matted, nearly
unidentifiable in the rain beside the sturdy motorcycle chained to the
phone pole, glistening. (1)
What do socks, the fact that the sidewalk dries unevenly, a pyramid of cans, a little weed, and a dead, “nearly unidentifiable” bird have in common? These images are worthless and meaningless, things to be ignored, discarded, and swept out of mind. They are detritus; they are waste. They are meant to be bulldozed over in our quest to accumulate money and materials. They get in our way; they are obstacles to what humans have been taught to conceive as progress and success. On our way to work, who sees these things? Each of the sentences in Jones describes the ground in some way, but more crucially (Silliman’s social critique rests upon this notion), each sentence names and/or describes some bit of detritus that’s trapped on the ground and trampled upon. Each sentence puts on vivid display the unnoticed. For practically all of the surfaces that appear in the poem—and they are numerous (“floor,” “sidewalk,” “yard,” “cement,” “walk”—some unnoticed thing also appears (the weed, the dead bird, etc.). Parataxis here generates the push and pull between the presence of unnoticed, discarded detritus and the surfaces themselves as walkways or paths that lead to success and direct human endeavors to accomplish and accumulate.

In Jones, arguably the darkest, most violent of Silliman’s works (even the cover of the book itself is depressing and foreboding: shades of gray streak across it, and the title and author’s name are in black), living creatures assume the brunt of human endeavor, especially animals and birds. He names these creatures in an effort to restore their identities and places, but their restoration is always marred by some intrusion or collision, as in the following:

Dark dead bug foregrounded against the brilliant sunlit snow (duck down feather clings to the rug’s fiber as the vacuum passes overhead), mountain chickadee small next to the red-breasted nuthatch. Sprinkler’s pipes jut
through the dry earth (stump of a felled tree, the cut still fresh), welcome mat of astroturf. Grease on the rainslicked pavement forms a discolored rainbow (thick gum sole of a cop’s shoe), dark gum stains of the train’s carpet. (5)

There are birds, but they fight for space with the sprinkler. There’s a welcome mat, but it’s made of AstroTurf. There’s a rainbow, but it’s discolored. The speaker recognizes the potential for beauty in this place, but human products like tires, “soap granules,” and the “streetsign at the corner” (5) constantly undercut that potential. Moreover, not all of the discarded creatures are named because, in many cases, they are not seen or noticed in the first place. This absence becomes apparent in the above passage: as the “pipes jut through the dry earth,” the habitat of something unseen is potentially dislodged and rearranged. The speaker notes the “stump of a felled tree, the cut still fresh,” but fails to note the invisible environment disrupted by that intrusion. There is grease on the pavement and gum on the floor, but what’s happened as a result of that alteration of the environment? The lives of colonies of organisms we never cared to know about in the first place have been altered.

Now that we’ve established that the environmental ground in Jones is presented as a location of disruption and displacement, filled with detritus usually ignored, we can gain an avenue into the work’s more pointed, urgent social criticism: to disregard creatures (and even to deny their existence) sets the stage for one to ignore fellow human beings in their suffering and plight, as well. In our interview, Silliman concurred that Jones is a work that stays focused at ground level, even to a more disciplined extent that I had noticed on first reading. The most interesting aspect of this portion of the interview, however, is Silliman’s description of the Tenderloin district in San Francisco. It provides
a valuable segue into the poem’s most pointed criticism, owing to the place represented by the title and the people who inhabit that place.

*Jones* is a work in which each sentence describes the ground—one sentence per day for a year, to be exact. Jones Street, from which I derive the title, is—or was in the late 1970s, early 1980s, when I worked in the Tenderloin—the most déclassé street in San Francisco. It was where the transvestite prostitutes worked, for example, and it had unquestionably the worst residential hotels. So that’s what is invoked by that title, but in practice, I wrote about whatever bit of ground I found myself in. A few times, such as once in New York while staying with James Sherry, I remember running downstairs at one point to his street, Bowery off Houston, in order to be able to write something.

It is no accident that “the most déclassé street in San Francisco” should center this work as its title, for it is in places like the Tenderloin, the ghettos of New York and Detroit, and the seedy underside of dock life in places like Baltimore and Los Angeles that the remnants of market exchange fall down and reside. Unlike Silliman’s other work, few people appear in *Jones*. Those that do appear are ghostly, like remnants from another age. They are like echoes of human beings. Is Silliman suggesting that humans, like the landscape, are also facing doom? Let’s see what’s here: “Phil Laponovich, surrounded by cops, shot himself in the head” (12); “Jogger alone on the empty street” (13); “a small three-sided fence, to surround the ‘man’hole when it’s open and occupied” (13); and later, “An image of a body sprawled, broken upon Houston Street (grey sky, brick walls), young woman struck by a motorcycle” (17). Most of the people who appear in the poem, like many of the animals, are dead. *Jones* amounts to a kind of lament for those who suffer or are displaced for reasons beyond their control. From insects to adult humans, Silliman presents the entire range of suffering life before the forces of time and money in the landscape of urban America. Few people notice (or take the time to notice) the
habitats of tiny creatures; few protest when their environments are destroyed or displaced in the name of human progress. Perhaps few want to notice. Is it not the same for society’s human victims—the prostitutes and the impoverished to which Silliman refers in the interview, but the homeless, the hungry, the beggars, and the broken? Few people care to recognize their plight in the workday routine of the American city. Few people care to notice them or help them, but they are there, on the silent margins of our collective conscience. In Jones, Silliman points them out and, in doing so, reminds readers to take notice. The dark, implicit violence of this poem is not that there are homeless, broken people (although that is bad enough), but that people sweep them aside and ignore them as if they were waste. The impact of the poem’s social criticism shouldn’t stop there. Silliman uses Jones to illustrate the idea that the market system transforms life into detritus in the first place because it casts aside life that it deems not valuable. A geographical analysis of the poem supports this interpretation.

Silliman notes the cities of San Francisco and New York as inspiration for the poem in the interview. What links these two major American cities? They’re both known for shipping, they’re both near oceans, and they’re both ports. The significance of this is that they’re both “gateway cities”: a good portion of the goods that come into and out of the country go through San Francisco and New York. They represent the poles of physical market exchange. If commerce happens theoretically (with numbers, losses, and gains) on Wall Street and Chicago, then on the docks of San Francisco and New York commerce happens literally—engines fume and water churns as people and machines transfer crates of goods from water to rail and roadway. Materials change hands, the remnants, the detritus being
empty plastic trashcans stacked three deep
wire shopping cart, abandoned, tipped on its side
hand tool combines forklift and dolly

one imagines the necessary (soil,
air, light) coming here together
brook by the bridge

bale of crushed cardboard wrapped in wire
out by the loading dock
next to the bright yellow dumpster (20-1)

Left behind in this landscape are the remains of commerce, and those remains are dirty and greasy. “Stain” is a word that appears in Jones repeatedly. The market stains the natural world. The market and the national circulation of commodities abuse the natural world, hog it, contaminate it, and selfishly grip it. Silliman shows us the dire results of two hundred years of lack of restraint on the part of the capitalist system. He shows us huge gashes in the earth’s surface, the “L.A. quake, people trapped in elevators screaming, October 1, 1987” (22), as well as the tiny cuts, the “skin’s dead layer flakes away” (16). The clash zone not only appears on the earth’s surface, but acts upon the skin of our bodies, too. Humans don’t cause earthquakes, of course, but our constant desire to build taller skyscrapers and housing complexes intensify quakes’ deadly results. Our responses to natural tragedies like earthquakes and hurricanes are driven by market forces rather than human ones, as well. The first areas to be cleaned up are usually the wealthiest. Parts of New Orleans remain untouched today, nearly two years after Katrina.

Early in the poem, Silliman urges, “Insist on what’s present…” (3). He not only insists on it, he describes it with an overload of detail, seemingly every scrap of the
“visibility of the informal economy” (2). Bob Perelman, whose poetry and theory form one of the primary critical strands in Language poetics, argues that “Silliman’s writing can be read as an exemplary guide to contemporary urban life” (The Marginalization of Poetry 67). If Jones is such a guide, and if Jones is accurate, then things can’t get much worse. Bernstein makes a related point in A Poetics, arguing that Language poetry can do the job of fighting against “official” culture because of its “care in particulars, in the truth of details and their constellations” (3). He makes an important point, but what does it mean to have a “care in particulars”? On one level, it means to consider poetry like Silliman’s that pays close attention to the intricacies and minutia of the earth and the social world. His “care in particulars” forms an acute account of the physically destructive aspects of market culture. All of his poems are populated with such images; Jones is just one example. Silliman understands the battleground and he understands that this is a battleground. No longer can we afford to take language for granted, and no longer can we afford to take life for granted. Jones is just the edge of a beginning.

There is, however, more beyond that edge. The beauty of Jones is that Silliman describes an array of remnants that suggests an impending or ongoing environmental crisis without resorting to overt politics or rhetoric. An analogy might illustrate. In February 2003, the Space Shuttle Columbia exploded and crashed onto land, leaving an incomparably vast field of debris stretching through much of Texas and Louisiana. While the human tragedy of Columbia deserves special attention, I find the length of the debris field stunning, just as aerial photography from southern Mississippi and Louisiana following Katrina was stunning. To me, the remnants of the tragedy speak considerably louder than the source of the tragedy, or even the tragedy in real time. The achievement
of *Jones* is that Silliman offers a bird’s eye view of the aftermath. A lesser-skilled poet might have tried to describe the environmental crisis in political terms or with journalistic urgency. The real poignancy, however, is in carefully displaying and calling attention to the remains, even the tiniest bit of life that gets lost in the crisis, like the “dark dead bug foregrounded” against a new sheen of snow. That bug, a chickadee, or even a plastic sack tangled up in pine boughs—in the context of the poem—constitute that poignant edge. It’s the reader’s responsibility to recognize that edge, to empathize with the remnants of that edge, and to consider social action. Where a direct call to action in *Jones* would fail, its indirect reminders are asked to perform tremendous and important work. Recognition, empathy, and the consideration of social action on the part of readers constitute the basis from which they might create and articulate critiques of the social and political forces that ignore environmental tragedies and, in fact, portray global warming as a myth. Market interests often lay behind these passive or ignorant attitudes.
Chapter 4: *Xing*: Negotiating Intersection

I choose the term “negotiating” for this title of this chapter because the work that I examine—perhaps to a greater degree than the other poems presented in this study—hinges heavily upon the reader’s role in the production of meaning. Readers, in fact, negotiate meaning as they negotiates their way through the formal complexities of *Xing* (1996). I choose the term “intersection” because the work under analysis displays, through content and form, types of intersection. In fact, the very title of *Xing* suggests intersection: it could be read as shorthand for a railroad crossing or street intersection (as in road signs), and the physical structure of the letter “X” itself denotes a kind of crossing.

While the title of *Xing* alludes to the idea of intersection as a general motif in form and content, a deeper question remains: what is important enough about the motif that makes it worth exploring in the first place? First, I am drawn to it because it illustrates the theoretical construct at the heart of Silliman’s creative project and offers a new way of framing parataxis, providing an alternative illustration of the critical reading process that I have used in this study. This reading process produces significant conclusions only when one takes into account the role of author and reader, creator and receptor. With his consistent manipulation of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and syntax, Silliman has provided the grounds through which parataxis comes into play. His devices create a ripe environment for formal readings based on paratactical principles. The role of readers is equally important, for they must recognize the altered textual landscape and move forward with a reading process that takes those textual practices into account. As a
term of denotation, “intersection” nicely illustrates that critical process because it suggests a kind of interface or negotiation between the author’s role in textual production and manipulation and the reader’s role in textual reception. Theories of criticism are contingent upon this concept. Barthes’s “Death of the Author” (1968) calls for such a negotiation by questioning the practice—standardized in literary criticism throughout history—of associating the content of works with their authors’ personal characteristics. As he writes,

[...] a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. (Image-Music-Text 148)

Barthes’s notion of the multiple origins of a text is especially relevant when we consider Silliman’s work. Parataxis is generated through content by multiple observations, thoughts, and references on the part of the speaker. Watten’s analysis of Silliman hinges on the notion of multiplicity. As Barthes’s imagines, Silliman’s poems compel the reader to act as a kind of quilt on which multiplicity is stitched. To be sure, Barthes’s depiction of the reader is especially relevant when we consider Silliman’s work, which displays a heightened degree of indeterminacy, both in form and content. His poems could not stand on their own without a substantial negotiation on the part of the reader. As such, Silliman’s texts present especially fruitful grounds for reader response theory, an interpretive method that calls on readers to consider their thoughts, emotions,
backgrounds, beliefs, and values as they make meaning of a text. The process of making meaning in an *Alphabet* poem is a shared experience between author and reader that calls for a kind of negotiation. While this is not to argue that reader response theory offers the best method of reading Silliman’s work, a number of the interpretive concepts I discuss in this study call the theory to mind.

In addition to the motif of intersection constituted by Silliman’s formal decisions and the critical process promoted by those decisions, readers must take into account his interest in society and politics. In other words, what we’re given in *The Alphabet*, in large measure, are poems that are disconcerting in form but at the same time display recognizable social themes. While it’s tempting to divorce form and content in these poems, the rewarding account of his work occurs when the critic attempts to construct links between the two. As a motif, intersection becomes a helpful way to enact that bridge, from the realm of form to the realm of content.

Like *Jones*, the intersections suggested *Xing* reflect crises of conscience that readers are implicitly asked to negotiate. Although that crisis of conscience may not resonate as seriously as environmental degradation, the work nonetheless calls on readers to negotiate a detritus-riddled landscape. In *Xing*, as I will ultimately show, the landscape is not the physical ground we tread upon, but the exasperating landscape of American culture, simultaneously exhilarating and deadening in its intersections of images and ideas. It, too, requires careful navigation.

In terms of sentence-level form, *Xing* does not greatly differ from the other works of *The Alphabet*. I choose it to appear in the context of intersection because of what it offers in terms of content and style. The very question of organization with respect to
Silliman’s works—how to categorize his poems and where to place them in the framework of a larger study—is a tricky one. In a sense, his poems (especially those that appear in *The Alphabet*) are of a single piece; we find the repetition of formal devices from poem to poem and also the repetition of motifs of content. This is not to argue, however, that one could just as well organize the works randomly; differences in form and content among them are enough to preclude random organization. In this chapter, I have worked to choose a poem that specifically applies the concept of intersection, through content, metaphorically, or in more rigid textual ways. In addition to this concept, Jones suggests an interest in temporality and how it affects the process of composition. Time itself, I will argue, may be conceived as a kind of intersection, for it meets us just as we meet it. Part of the analysis to follow includes accounts of how Silliman depicts time in his writing and the effects of that depiction on the critical reading process.

*Xing* (which could be pronounced “crossing,” “exing,” or “jhing” [Chinese]) appears to be the poem in which the most specific, formal, concrete application of the idea of intersection takes place—the letter “X” and the title itself clearly suggest the idea. The poem’s structure, however, doesn’t necessarily assist in formalizing the notion of intersection. Its regular three-line stanzas of enjambed new sentences do not appear conducive to the idea of crossing. No pictographic X’s leap from the page and the lines don’t seem to intersect in any way. Our task, therefore, with respect to *Xing*, will be to determine why Silliman chose this stanza form and why he followed through with it to the end of the poem. Its multi-layered title, formal parataxis, and numeric aspect (the number three is significant) will become important in my analysis.
Like the analyses in previous chapters, parataxis remains the dynamic hinge of this work. One way of conceiving the effects of parataxis involves collisions (or intersections) of expectations, or the known (or objective) and the unknown (or imaginative) coming into contact. In *Jones*, for example, the speaker’s ruthless consistency in observation and the reader’s impulse to turn elsewhere—the space between the “absolute here” of the ground and the usual impulse in poetry and poetry reading to turn toward the imagination—constitute parataxis. In *Xing*, parataxis (at higher order levels) is constituted by the struggle among three courses of interpretation, suggested immediately by the three ways of reading the poem’s title. These three courses of interpretation engage in constant competition with each other. When a reader begins to privilege one reading (one strand of the three-strand braid of interpretation), the other two strands inevitably creep in, disrupting one’s course. Even though *Xing* is one of the most regular poems in *The Alphabet* in terms of structure—with its regular tercets—ironically it is one of the most ethereal. It calls for levels of abstract thinking that are hard to formalize. The logic of *Xing* fades as soon as it is grasped. This quality, which is common in Silliman’s work, can be witnessed within many of the poem’s individual sentences, or units of meaning. The logic (or presumed logic) of the sentences fades as soon as one begins to grasp it.

**The Braided Figure**

The titles of many of Silliman’s works invite multiple interpretations. I began my analysis of *Manifest* by listing possible ways of reading the title, noting that the key point about Silliman’s titles is that they offer possibilities on how the poem might be
approached. *Xing* is one of Silliman’s most provocative titles, and I think it can be read three ways (and also pronounced three ways): “exing” (as in “xing” something out, scratching something out, revising or rethinking one’s decision or course of action, or changing one’s mind); “crossing” (as a kind of intersection—of paths or ideas); or “jhing” (as the word would be pronounced in Chinese).

*Xing* is a Chinese word, and a very common Chinese name, and the term has myriad meanings in Chinese. One online Chinese-English dictionary I checked out, <http://www.tigernt.com/cedict.shtml>, produced a list of thirty translations, including “white dwarf” (a kind of star), the “Big Dipper,” “common people,” “natural instincts,” “amoeba,” “burly chap,” and “ground beetle.” Those are just a few of the nouns. It is also listed as a verb (“to rise suddenly” and to “run parallel”), as well as an adverb (“unfortunately”). *Xing* also appears in the title of a very famous Chinese book, the *Bai Jia Xing*, or *Book of a Hundred Surnames* (<http://genealogy.about.com/library/authors/ucloo1a.htm>). According to this website, “The surname [in China] is the most important part of one’s own personal symbol and is the hallmark of a clan. It is closely related to social life, history and traditions.” The *Bai Jia Xing* is a book of genealogy, and has been widely read and respected for many centuries. Finally, the word “*Xing*” appears as part of the popular phrase, *Wu Xing*, which signifies the “Five States of Change.” According to one website,

> Whereas Western thought developed the idea of elements as substances (*sic*), and Indian thought as emenations (*sic*), Chinese philosophy conceived of the five elements, or *Wu Xing*, as dynamic states of change.

The concept of Wu Xing is central to all elements of Chinese thought, including science, philosophy, medicine, astrology, and Fengshui.
Although the term is generally translated as “five elements”, this is incorrect. The word Wu does indeed mean “five”. But there is no simple translation for Xing. Translations such as “five elements”, “five agents”, “five qualities”, “five properties”, “five states of change”, “five courses”, “five phases” and “five elementals”, are all used. ([http://www.kheper.net/topics/eastern/wuxing.html](http://www.kheper.net/topics/eastern/wuxing.html))

So what does this research tell us about the word “Xing”? First, and most obviously, we should keep in mind that it’s a common term with a vast array of meanings depending on the context. Second, however, stands the thesis that “Xing” is representative of change or the indeterminate. The notion of indeterminacy—that units of composition generate a multiplicity of possible interpretations, especially when they are considered relationally—becomes central to an analysis of Silliman’s work. Because the range of definitions for the Chinese word “Xing” seem to be indeterminate, and because there is an edge of limitless possibility in the principle of indeterminacy itself, considering the term in relation to Silliman’s work and style provokes an interesting commentary. While artificially imposed forms (numerical sequences and regular stanza formation) shape some of his works, there is little in the quality or substance of the images themselves that guides those works in a linear way. The very concept of parataxis, according to Perelman, “involves placing units together without connectives or subordination.” Without connectives among the individual units of content of a work (i.e., among the images of a given work), there is little urgent direction. In other words, the first sentence of a poem may as well be the 197th sentence, for content usually plays a secondary role in poetic development and composition. Image A does not usually determine the content of image B in sequence, although there may be points of connectivity between them. Even within individual sentences, there is often little connectivity (in terms of content) between
subject and predicate; I discussed this idea in Chapter 1. In Silliman’s poems, we do not know what to expect next; we practically never have an indication of which direction the speaker will go next. Because sentence A refers to an oven, that doesn’t mean (and usually won’t mean) that sentence B will refer to a dinner table or a concentration camp. *Xing* (the poem) exhibits this quality of indeterminacy to a heightened extent; the title, with its allusion in Chinese to change and limitless possibility, reinforces this quality. In fact, the title suggests that the notion of indeterminacy itself should direct critical readings, as should the concepts of crossing and scratching out. These three elements constitute the strands of the poem’s interpretive braid.

Unlike the title analysis I did with *Manifest* (where I chose an interpretation and worked almost exclusively with it), here I think the most beneficial course of analysis requires us to consider all three of my interpretations simultaneously. Like the strands of a well-crafted braid, each interpretation should influence readings of the poem in some way. As in my analysis of *Manifest*—where I discussed the tonal competitiveness inherent in the language—the three readings here engage in mutual dialogue with each other, and readers are drawn into that dialogue as they consider how the three readings work in tandem and what they offer in tandem. Before engaging the poem directly by examining some passages, we should work to locate commonalities in the three strands of the braid. What do the three interpretations of the title have in common? How might they be linked through definition? Linking them, if only superficially, will establish a point of entry into an otherwise complex poem.

(1) “*Xing*” (Chinese): my presentation of translation, genealogy, and the “Five Paths” connected to the notion of indeterminacy
(2) **crossing**: an intersection (pictorially); a place where ideas or paths meet; the action of traversing something and leaving it behind

(3) **scratching out**: indicates a desire to rethink or reconsider something; a desire to begin again

Arguably, we can find links among these three definitions by considering temporality and the struggle to know. The concept of indeterminacy is marked by the inability to know (what comes next). The concept of crossing involves a present (known) reality that changes or is altered in some way through the act of meeting or traversing something. Scratching out involves the desire to start over; one endeavors to delve once again into the future. As I describe and link these three interpretations of title, I am in fact describing the process of composition. Writing, especially creative writing, is an indeterminate activity: few poets know what the finished product will look like when they begin. Writing also involves the kind of dialectic posed by definition 2: when ideas or courses of action intersect (and engage in a kind of battle), a new idea or course is generated. And finally, writing is revising; the writer must constantly be reevaluating his position. Writing is a kind of struggle between “what I have now” and “what I will have later.” The concept of temporality is therefore inherently inscribed in the writing process.

Little of the preceding discussion makes sense without looking at passages from *Xing*. The opening stanzas are representative of the work as a whole, as Silliman maintains this rigid structure throughout the work. It resembles other volumes of *The Alphabet* in that its indeterminacy is tantamount to parataxis, which is constituted grammatically by subject-predicate manipulations, spelling, and punctuation. In *Xing*, however, paratactical subversion is heightened.

Karaoke Shakespeare: day awash with rain
stains the windows. That woman
forms the voice of Homer

Simpson. One person’s horizon
is the next one’s limit. Yo
lama (one “l” or two), comma

nlist. Acer palmatum (Japan-
ese maple) from Holland,
branches bare in mid-winter

light. Obsessive recitation of detail
prefigures legal disposition (my hood
crushed into your rear end), the light

high atop the freeway as we
gather at the shoulder, the river
of vehicles slower now, is

bright flat gray. Grammar
of suspended predicates
lunes at me with a knife […] (1)

Even a cursory reading of these stanzas shows us that Xing is concerned with form and
the structures of written language. Silliman specifically mentions “comma,” “[G]rammar
of suspended predicates,” and “[O]bsessive recitation of detail.” His references to the
spelling of the word “llama” and “Acer palmatum” suggest that spelling and alternate
kinds of expression will be featured in this poem along with an examination of form.
Xing is therefore a work in which the writing process itself (which is formalized
expression, after all) will be a central focus of the speaker’s observations. Indeed, Xing is
a kind of ars poetica: a poem especially concerned with the formal aspects of
composition.

To really understand what’s going on here, however, we must break it down even
further, covering many aspects of form alluded to in previous chapters. The opening
phrase, “Karaoke Shakespeare,” is an example of image incongruity. In Chapter 1, I discussed this poetic concept with respect to Allen Ginsberg’s image formation in *Howl*; the example I provided was “hydrogen jukebox,” noting that readers must perform the critical task of bringing those two disparate elements together to form a seamless, incomparably more powerful, insightful, brighter image. The gap between them constitutes parataxis, like the two ends of a taut slingshot at the ready, separate but ready for meaningful collision. “Karaoke” and “Shakespeare” are also fairly incongruous and call for extended analysis. Karaoke (a Japanese word translated as “empty orchestra” in Webster’s that subtly connects with the “Japanese maple” of the first stanza) conjures images of tipsy patrons belting out pop standards at taverns; during karaoke sessions, non-professional singers get their chance at two and a half minutes of fame. Everyone, in fact, gets a chance to sing, no matter how talented. There is something democratic—something populist, to be sure—in the notion that all willing people can have their voices heard and judged. Perhaps that’s why karaoke—and recent television phenomena like *American Idol* and *Nashville Star*—have become so popular. Not only do they offer shots at glory and wealth, they embody populist ideals in the political sense of the term; they are “for the people.” In the political climate of today’s America—where secrecy and spin have become the norm—these entertainment outlets offer transparency. Viewers (voyeurs) are given the opportunity to watch folks succeed, and, more importantly, to watch them fail.

Debates on literary education (pedagogy and the syllabus) have emerged at the forefront in what have become known as the “culture wars” in America, and perhaps no subject polarizes debate more than required reading of Shakespeare. Some universities
have made headlines recently by dropping Shakespeare from the course requirements for English majors. Understanding Shakespeare (as a field of study) in this context might help to construct a bridge between it and karaoke. If there is something inherently populist about karaoke, does it follow that there is something inherently anti-populist about Shakespeare? One could conceivably argue that the works of Shakespeare (primarily because of their language and the history of drama as a privileged discourse) promote obscure values with respect to culture, and that obscurity should have no place in democratic education. In the opening two words of *Xing*, Silliman subtly enters this debate by positioning these two views of culture together: the populist and the obscure, or if you prefer, “low” art and “high” art. Without making claims or judgments, he offers the discourse to the reader’s imagination. Not only is the reader nudged to see the culture bridge he poses, but also to make some evaluation: which is preferable or, even better, how and why can they be positioned side-by-side?

The material after the colon in the first sentence (“day awash with rain”) is seemingly incongruous with the first part of the sentence (“Karaoke Shakespeare”). Can we forge some link between the two? If we understand “Karaoke Shakespeare” as a guide to the culture wars, as shorthand for pedagogical conflict, does a rainy day resolve the conflict? Silliman negates any solution with the imagery (and color) of the post-colon material, which is gray, foggy, and unclear. The implication is that the culture wars are not resolvable in the near future because the issues themselves are unclear—or because its examples are taken to irresolvable extremes, as in the next sentence in the passage where we are left dangling at the end of the third line, unclear as to *which* Homer is being referred. Classical scholars would immediately think of the epic Greek poet, while others
would think about the cartoon character. What a disparity of reference!—but with real-life ramifications. Arguably, the mention of Homer in most college classrooms would conjure images of Bart Simpson’s cartoon father, not the author of *The Odyssey*. With professors and students’ minds on such different wavelengths, with such different points of reference, how can the culture wars ever be resolved? How, in fact, can they even be debated? Silliman sums up the problem in the next sentence, alluding also to the theoretical constructs discussed in Chapter 1: “One person’s horizon is the next one’s limit.” Differences in imagination and perception are hard to overcome, especially if one person understands the horizon (perhaps as the new sentence) as a limiting factor and another sees in it the reflection of the syntagmatic axis of language where relations between and among words are multiplied and the possibilities of meaning are practically endless.

The next two sentences,  

Yo lama (one “I” or two), comma  
nist. Acer palmatum (Japanese maple) from Holland,  
branches bare in mid-winter  
light[,]  

are actually easier to analyze than the preceding sentences, even though their language and punctuation are more unusual. The first parenthetical questions normative spelling practice, previewing the concerns about grammar and social status that I will discuss later. The second functions as an appositive, explaining or renaming the material that comes just before. Unlike the gap between Karaoke and Shakespeare, they offer readers little imaginative space because there are already firm points of connection between them
in the form of parenthesis. Puns run rampant here: “Yo lama” invokes “Yo mama”
(which could be spelled with one “m” or two) and the theoretically complex construction
“comma / nist” alludes to the politics of grammar. Half pun, half homonym, it refers to
the politicization of grammar, and that how we write and use grammar are indicators of
social and political status. Even how one uses commas is telling: it can indicate one’s
level of education, how and where one was educated, one’s national or ethnic
background, and even one’s personality. All of these aspects of personhood can be
heavily politicized, depending on the theoretical route one takes. A “comma nist,” for
example, could refer to a writer that uses in commas in ways that promote egalitarianism.
It could also refer to a thinker who believes that normative rules of grammar are merely
standards for inclusion in the dominant culture.

In terms of form and length, the next sentence is the most complex in the passage:

Obsessive recitation of detail
prefigures legal disposition (my hood
crushed into your rear end), the light

high atop the freeway as we
gather at the shoulder, the river
of vehicles slower now, is

bright flat gray.

The first independent clause (“Obsessive […] disposition”) seems to have no connection
whatsoever to the rest of the sentence. What does this vague assessment of early
personality traits have to do with the apparent car accident at the center of the second half
of the sentence? Moreover, how can it be linked to its neighboring parenthetical prior to
the comma, apparently a vivid description of the accident, “my hood crushed into your
rear end”? To make a link, we must rethink the content of the word clusters themselves.
“Obsessive recitation of detail” is a symptom of obsessive-compulsive disorder. For those suffering with OCD, feelings of personal security and comfort can only be attained through the repetition of acts or rituals, like hand washing. If such rituals aren’t performed, awful consequences will affect the sufferer. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Sigmund Freud explores similarities between modern neuroses and the rituals of ancient cultures, noting that “[I]t is in obsessional neuroses that the survival of the omnipotence of thoughts is most clearly visible and that the consequences of this primitive mode of thinking come closest to consciousness.” Some ancients believed that they could alter large events with thought. According to Freud, that notion survives in patients with obsessional neuroses, who “are only affected by what is thought with intensity and pictured with emotion, whereas agreement with external reality is a matter of no importance.” Freud’s emphasis in these pages is on the imagination, not the originating trauma, although he does concede that “it is true that in the last resort those imagined experiences go back to actual events or are based upon them” (108). Although the originating event may have been sexual, the development of obsessive acts [...] begin by being as remote as possible from anything sexual—magical defences against evil wishes—and [...] end by being substitutes for the forbidden sexual act and the closest possible imitations of it. (109-10)

The “obsessive recitation” passage from *Xing* contains latent sexual language in the parenthetical. A faint sense of sexuality is also inscribed into a later observation (“we / gather at the shoulder”): the orgasmic crash has passed and now we come together differently. In any case, imaginative readers are given this scene to picture, which—in a different context—could leave a powerful, unrealizable, and ultimately harmful trace
upon human development. Soon after the original event (the “accident”), the memory fades into the unconscious, just as (in the poem) everything slows and the night itself fades into a “bright flat gray.” The memory will dissolve, but the trace of trauma remains.

The three commas in the sentence should be read as buffers between event and memory, slowly nudging the event from memory with their accompanying periods of pause, reflection, and eventual release. Elsewhere in his discussion of obsessional neuroses in Totem and Taboo, Freud characterizes obsessive rituals as “charms” or “counter-charms” enacted to ward off death, which is “the expected disaster” (109). This portion of Xing is powerful because it combines sex and death in the form of an accident, blurring the lines between them.

Many of the sentences presented here and in the rest of Xing demonstrate the “[G]rammar of suspended predicates,” which is a poetic, insightful summary of the compositional practice that drives much of Silliman’s work. The Alphabet begins in Albany with a predicate-less fragment, “If the function of writing is to express the world.” As my analyses have demonstrated over the first three chapters, Silliman leaves it up to the reader to (1) supply predicates where there are none, or, more frequently, (2) construct cognitive, creative bridges between and among subjects and predicates that are suspended or seemingly unrelated. As such, like the karaoke phenomenon, Silliman composes sentences and groups of sentences with an inherently democratic—or populist—feature: the implicit call for readers to bring their own imaginative and cognitive powers to bear on the work. This feature is evident in most of the poems of The Alphabet, but especially in Xing, a poem in which indeterminacy breeds richness.
Indeterminacy also breeds a multiplicity of readings, as many as there are ways of understanding the Chinese concept of “Xing.” In this multiplicity of readings, there will be points of collusion and points of diversion, points where readings cross and points where they meander distantly, points where readers must scratch away the old and begin again, and points where—as in the logic of the Chinese—the new is the old. Judged from this perspective, the title of the poem—in the three-strand braid (“Jhing,” crossing, and scratching out)—would be seen as little more than a play of discontinuities, suggestions, and indeterminacies enacted at the level of form. My analysis of education and culture, “high” culture and “low” culture, and how these labels impact Americans’ social discourses, seem to add a new dimension to the work’s formal indeterminacies. As with the three ways of reading the title, which work best in combination, we should also engage form and meaning in combination, and consider them against the backdrop of American life in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century. To refer to a term used earlier, American culture today is in fact a cacophony, a competition of voices and perspectives. So, too, is this poem. It reflects a reality that is at once exhilarating in its variety and, ironically, deadening in its indirection and discontinuity. That no single voice can be heard above the others and that no single image dominates the scope of the poem testifies to the populist form so loved and admired in America. The fact that no single voice or image ever rises above the others permanently, however, might also be viewed as a deadening attribute, for nothing really lasts. While this is the case in market cultures worldwide, in America the speed of technology and communications intensifies the turnover of voices and fads. The value placed on a voice or an idea is only as powerful as the market forces that worked to produce it in the first place. What’s
deadening—and even tragic—is that it’s only the market that lasts. Subsequent chapters will present poems that illustrate this “exhilarating tragedy” in other forms; the poems presented in Chapter 5 display how language use enables market hegemony.
Chapter 5: Language and Violence: Engines, Force, and Garfield

The three relatively short works analyzed in this chapter constitute the middle section of Silliman’s Demo to Ink (1992). Engines, Force, and Garfield, with different motifs and formal strategies, display the violence that resides at the heart of American culture. Although this violence need not be the sweeping, militaristic violence pervasive in Engines—the violence seen daily on the nightly news from the Middle East, both instigated by and against Americans—its effects rein down with similar consistency and terror in Force and Garfield. Whether America’s particular brand of violence (from the Vietnam War forward) should be regarded as a type of international terrorism is a question for political scientists and historians; my analyses in this chapter, however, are designed to show that the underpinning structures of this violence are rooted in language, which is indeed the construct that shapes and drives, and conceals and secures, cultural life in America. While I’m certainly not the first critic to note this language-as-violence phenomenon (George Orwell’s “The Politics of the English Language” and 1984 remain perhaps the fundamental expressions of it), my critiques here hopefully add a new dimension to the discourse in that they fully begin with an interrogation of language at sentence level. As always, Ron Silliman, with a sensitive ear to the cultural and political discourse of America, is able to reflect and reproduce in his works the strategies of cultural control precisely at the level of language. He provides these grounds, which are suggestive of deeper socio-political critiques; the critic must work through the ramifications of these grounds in order to narrate those critiques.
In considering the shorter poems of *The Alphabet*—especially *Engines* and *Force*—an even greater degree of attention must be paid to form. A helpful attribute of these poems (as compared to the much longer works presented in Chapters 2, 3, and 4) is that their short length allows for fuller analysis of the overall, guiding structures of the poems. The overall structure of *Engines*, for instance, is easy to recognize: its fourteen paragraphs each contain fourteen sentences. The title of the poem and its apparent structural simplicity call forth two related points of analysis right away: first, that Silliman, with his heavy and direct application of the number fourteen, is interrogating the sonnet form; and second, that he is using the title as a way of claiming that the historical form drives, or motors (i.e., “engines”), his process of composition. While such analysis is a useful starting point, it undoubtedly overlooks the poem’s subtleties and complexities. At any rate, what does it mean to interrogate a formal practice? Analyses of *Engines* must address that question and others, for Silliman isn’t merely interrogating that form, he is also interrogating the pedagogy and practices that complement that traditional form: particularly dominant strands of literary history, teaching practices and syllabi construction, and also the very idea of form in poetry. Subsequent chapters will address Silliman’s critiques of pedagogy in more detail, but the present chapter will preview some of those concerns. Ultimately, however, I will go beyond Silliman’s interrogation and critique of form to arrive at his most pointed critique in *Engines*, which involves the violence and effects of U.S. militarism (with its inevitable corporate accompaniments) overseas. I will examine both the “macro-” and “micro-formal” elements of the poem to do so—its overall structure and its sentence-level form.
Engines, Force, and Garfield are poems with a particularly global feel; they are rooted in the causes and consequences of globalization, a phenomenon that is underpinned and maintained by violence. I’ve already alluded to militarism in Engines, but Force, too, contains high levels of violence. These poems, which are driven by action, show how violence impacts human lives. Although I explored this theme in Jones with respect to environmental degradation and apathy to suffering, the tone of Jones is rather depressed and resigned compared to the works at hand, poems where the tone is considerably more dynamic and sweeping. Jones is a poem that revels in effects; Engines and Force revel in causes. The latter explores the brutality of corporations (multi-national corporations) upon workers, the public at large, and the environment. Corporate modes of violence didn’t begin with Enron and they don’t necessarily involve fraud; throughout the 1970s and 1980s, corporations within and outside America’s borders wreaked havoc on people’s lives and the environment. As I analyze Force—beginning, as always, with a detailed examination of form—I will piece together Silliman’s powerful critique of damaging corporate practices. Although Force’s references are somewhat dated to the 1980s (the period of the poem’s composition), they still resonate today.

Garfield, even with its seemingly innocuous title and domestically oriented content (a major motif of the poem is its recitation of ingredients and culinary practices), also puts forward a kind of recipe for violence. Its twenty-one paragraphs of twenty sentences also contain numerous oppositions and contradictions, formalized by the poet’s reliance on “and/or” and “something versus something” constructions. I will analyze these two dominant motifs with respect to form as a way of framing and describing the poem’s critique of the market system. In Garfield, as in society at large, it matters little
what the recipe calls for or the content of the opposing forces. Content is insignificant; the formal repetition of the motifs, characterized in the recipe by a grammar of commands ("stir," "add," "season," etc.) and characterized in the and/or/versus constructions by a grammar of conflict, is significant. My thesis is that Silliman designed these motifs to illustrate the way the market works by directing us or commanding us to do something (either implicitly or explicitly) and by offering us an illusion of choice (you may have this or that). In American market culture, however, it is as impossible to escape the commands of authority as it is to find genuine choice. If Silliman leaves his readers with a message in Garfield, it is that the market, through its array of formal practices, limits freedom. I draw on Adorno and Horkheimer’s “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” to frame my analysis of Garfield.

“Scuds in the night”: Violence and Ambiguity in Engines

For those old enough to remember the U.S. aerial invasion of Iraq in January 1991, the scenes broadcast on CNN remain etched in collective memory. The bright orange and squeals of the American bombing campaign interspersed with the blue and green tracers of Iraqi anti-aircraft fire illuminated Baghdad. Although frequently considered a heroic moment of American patriotism and power, the TV coverage generally failed to bring to light the suffering of those Iraqi citizens huddled in the dark under their beds and kitchen tables hoping merely to survive until morning. The scenes have played out in Baghdad again—and in Kabul, Bosnia, Beirut, Tripoli, Grenada, Vietnam, and elsewhere—often punctuated by American and American-made bombs and missiles. It has been a regular scene on TV since the late 1960s.
Engines (1983)—a collaboration between Silliman and Rae Armantrout—captures those scenes from the perspective of the bombed. Unlike most TV news coverage of war, the poem neither glorifies nor romanticizes battle; rather, it puts war into the context of lived human experience. And while it’s not a “war poem” in the sense of Wilfred Owen’s poetry, not a systematic, measured attempt to capture the brutality of war firsthand—after all, no Silliman poem is ever about any single thing or event—it does portray the violence of war at multiple levels. When most people think about the effects of war, they imagine burned-out buildings, mothers weeping in the streets, air raid sirens, rationing, long lines, and military funerals. Silliman and Armantrout, on the other hand, imagine war in a more mundane sense. Unlike the speakers in Owen’s work, the prevalent voice of Engines is detached from battle, an insulated observer that notes effects, much like the typical American who watched the bombing of Baghdad from home, safe from the physical effects of the bombs. Can “mundane” or “detached,” however, ever be the right words in thinking about war? The experience of the Iraq War (2003 to the present) shows that it can, as the daily violence and atrocities so far away are often relegated to the newspaper’s middle pages. For many Americans (and, for that matter, many Iraqis), the war has become an afterthought, like a low-grade fever or glare that can be brushed aside and forgotten about. Perhaps the idea that war can be framed in

As noted previously, an important aspect of the loosely configured movement that became known as Language poetry was its community-oriented effort. One part of that effort involved collaboration on texts; Silliman routinely collaborates with other poets in the production of creative works, anthologies, and criticism. In addition to this textual collaborative effort, writers also organized conferences, readings, and discussions. Whether Silliman and Armantrout share the same political sensibilities is impossible to answer for sure, but it is apparent that they have similar ideas about the line. Armantrout frequently uses the new sentence in her own works.
language of the mundane at all (as these writers do) should be regarded as a great
testament to war’s violence. I would posit that Silliman and Armantrout’s rather
mundane, detached, multi-layered account of military violence in *Engines* speaks most
loudly as a critique of war itself.

Such a critique is on the horizon. To get there, however, it would be useful to
allude to a poem that stands as an historical precedent to *Engines* in terms of language
and subject matter, Randall Jarrell’s “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner.” The
overwhelming similarity it shares with *Engines* and much of Silliman’s work is its
application of ambiguity to generate meanings. Ambiguity is, of course, apparent in much
poetry that’s considered great; it adds layers of meaning. The poem begins:

> From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State,
> And I hunch in its belly till my wet fur froze.
> Six miles from earth, loosed from the dream of life,
> I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
> When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose. (*The Collected
> Poems 144*)

The word “State” in the first line—carefully capitalized—simultaneously refers to a
“state of being” or “state of existence” and also to the machinery of government, which in
this case is England’s war machine. The words “belly” and “fur” in line two achieve the
same objective: belly refers to the mother’s womb and also to the womb of the State—its
Plexiglas ball turret beneath the bomber jet. “Fur” refers both to a baby’s hair and the fur
that edges classic leather bomber jackets. Readings of “Ball Turret Gunner” are
contingent upon how one reads “State.” Jarrell wishes to portray the horrors of war and
the horrors involved in the State’s treatment of the individual. Silliman would certainly
understand how the State, at many levels, dehumanizes the individual in pursuit of
broader geo-political aims. Much of Silliman’s work, like Jarrell’s poem, portrays this process; my presentation of *Hidden* and *Paradise* in later chapters deals with it more directly. *Engines*, however, does more than merely note or describe that process; it offers a critique of the forces *that* dehumanize and oppress. Ambiguity—as a textual practice, as a variation of parataxis—aids in that critique.

A relevant passage from *Engines* displays a similar application of ambiguity. Through an analysis of it, I will also come to some understanding as to why these poets chose to interrogate the sonnet structure, the most recognizable form in English poetry. Note the violence in the images and the verbs chosen by Silliman and Armantrout in the poem’s first paragraph:

> A herd of wild helicopters scuds in the night. Syllabics penetrate the red mulch of values, skeletons bloom at the rear of the lab so recently repainted a pale green. Fingers curl slowly in sleep. The logic of ambition is to seem a straight line. In the butcher shops of the North End blood stains the flesh of skinned rabbits. Style is its own mark. Electrical storms in the skull cloud the eye. The volley maintained nears orgasm. Narc prefer down vests, the low cut in the rear concealing both gun and handcuffs. The smell of curry in the corridor of the small hotel. You stand in the glass booth, pretending conversation. Under the back stairs cobwebs define the spiders’ hunt. The noise of the fan cooling the slide projector is punctuated with clicks. The cosmos is a purple flower. (*Demo to Ink* 47)

There are images and verbs here that possess an obviously violent nature: “scuds,” “skeletons,” “butcher shops,” “blood stains,” “skinned rabbits,” “Electrical storms,” and “gun and handcuffs.” More interesting and revealing, however, are the images and verbs that would not be considered violent in different contexts. In using these words, Silliman and Armantrout draw a deeply ambiguous line of meaning. By using rather non-threatening, mundane words as those in the cited passage, they are able to lure the reader into recognizing the double-edged impact of language. Sometimes the most ambiguous,
non-threatening words are the most pointed. The verb “bloom,” for instance, normally conjures images of springtime and garden serenity, but here skeletons are blooming. “Penetrate” is a fairly ambiguous verb, but here (also in the second sentence) it assumes a rather hostile tone. The next sentence, “Fingers curl slowly in sleep,” if it were taken out of context, would convey a rather peaceful feeling, but here there is concern and possibly terror in those curled fingers, as though flesh were being gripped against a nightmare or a rocket in the distance. At minimum, there is tension in those fingers. For critics of the “American dream,” for instance, “ambition” can be seen as an evil word, for people are led to believe that hard work and ambition alone guarantee their places in higher socio-economic brackets. Many would see such rhetoric as downright deceitful; ambition rarely offers a “straight line” to success, even though the figures idolized in the media and popular culture (business entrepreneurs and million dollar athletes) make it “seem” that way. “Seem” is a deceitful word itself, ambiguous by nature. The real, physical violence of the butcher shops, therefore, pales in comparison to the violence perpetuated by the language of success, dreams, and ambition.

“The volley maintained nears orgasm” is a rich and complex sentence that also delivers layers of meaning owing to the ambiguity of the words “volley” and “orgasm.” “Volley,” which suggests a back-and-forth motion, is most frequently associated with the fields of athletics and combat. Tennis players volley the ball back and forth across the net; volleys of gunfire report across fields of battle. The sexual implications of the sentence, however, are equally compelling: “orgasm” refers to the culmination of sexual activity and, ironically, helps to generate life itself. The verb “maintained” is deeply ambiguous and could refer to either field of meaning, the literal or the sexual. This easy
analysis, however, falls short when we consider further implications of the word “orgasm,” which famously translates from the French as “little death.” Death, then, seems to be the consistent point of reference in the sentence, and carries with it obviously violent connotations that reflect in the paragraph’s other details: the guns concealed beneath the down vests of law enforcement can bring deathly consequences to suspected drug dealers. Like the butcher’s blades or the lightning from “Electrical storms” (sentence seven), guns are instruments of killing. Death and violence abound here, even though their ambiguous applications resonate at different levels.

The narc sentence and the electrical storm sentence contain another parallel, and here the comparative analysis springs from thinking about power and social and political control. Such control is best advanced when the real aims of the powerful remain concealed from view. The Iraq War illustrates as a case in point. While the rhetoric of the neo-conservatives continues to frame the 2003 invasion and occupation as a means to generate and establish democracy in Iraq and the greater Middle East, many critics argue that the Administration’s real goals involve capitalist profiteering (see, for example, Kevin Phillips’s well-researched *American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush*). With time, this fact becomes more evident. In politics, rhetoric functions to hide and blur real motivations and moves to power. In the two sentences noted earlier, the narc’s gun concealed beneath his vest and the storms not only can inflict damage, they also “cloud the eye.” Realities and genuine intentions are hidden and become blurred in these examples. Perhaps Bob Dylan put it best in 1965’s “Ballad of a Thin Man”: “Something’s happening here, but you don’t know what it is.”
Whatever their ultimate aims or results, forms of absolute power contain one constant: the ability (and need) to obscure reality to help maintain that power.

The two sentences that follow the narc can also be analyzed in terms of power’s need to obscure. “The smell of curry in the corridor of the small hotel” appears rather innocuous, but active readers might ask, “What is symbolized or enacted by the smell of curry?” Parataxis in this sentence, as in others, is generated in the space between what’s obviously there (the smell of curry) and something else to which the sentence fails to refer. Because it is a sentence fragment (there is no verb or action in this new sentence), readers are implicitly to imagine a predicate to complete the space between the said and the unsaid. “The smell of curry in the corridor of the small hotel…conceals the smell of mold on the walls…or covers up the prostitute’s lingering perfume.” Of course, the sentence need not be concluded so negatively (no aspersions need be cast on south Asian communities), but, owing to the context of the rest of the paragraph, readers are likely to structure violent or troubling predicates. “You stand in the glass booth, pretending conversation” also appears fairly non-threatening, but it can also be analyzed as a critique of social control. What is first striking about the sentence (what makes it stand out among the others) is the second-person address; there are no other pronouns in the paragraph, and this formal practice gives a face (albeit a vague, featureless one) to the paragraph in such a way as to hint at the tense relation between the individual and the State. The individual “pretending conversation” is inside a “glass booth,” which means that she is visible to the powers that be. She cannot conceal herself; her sense of privacy is an illusion. The idea of concealment becomes crucial here again. Recall that the State’s ability to conceal is what allows it to maintain power. Our watched person in the booth,
understanding that her actions are not private, is only “pretending conversation,” for she
knows that the authorities can listen to her calls. What can we then conclude about the
position of the speakers, who know somehow that the woman (the “you”) is merely
pretending to speak? Where does their insight come from? I would posit that they, being
sensitive to forms of social control themselves, create the image of the woman in the
booth to draw attention to control at multiple levels, not the least of which is gender. As a
woman, she is locked within but visible; she is simultaneously free and restrained. Power
and authority in America grant a certain level of freedom, but snatch away real liberty by
limiting choice and movement.

Indeed, the woman in the booth is caught in authority’s web, watched and listened
to by patient agents perched about. This form of violence is creepy, and indeed the next
sentence literalizes creepiness with actual spiders. “Under the back stairs cobwebs define
the spiders’ hunt.” Spiders, like agents of power, lie concealed and let their webs do the
work of trapping—with information, wiretaps, codes, and documents. Cobwebs linger in
dark corners or the corners of our imagination. “The noise of the fan cooling the slide
projector is punctuated with clicks” dulls the senses with its patient, static hum. It can put
one to sleep; it can make one unaware. The mesmerizing sound of the fan and its staccato
clicks play in this paragraph like the soundtrack to social control, where the eventual
subjects doze in a false sense of security until the comfortable lull of daily life—work,
bills, family, and sitcoms—evaporates in an instant of terror or recognition. In such
moments of realization, “The cosmos [can become] a purple flower,” for the organized
reality we thought we knew blooms (or explodes) into something far different, something
beyond our imaginations. The final sentence of the paragraph provides closure: the vast
becomes small, the chaotic becomes serene and lovely, though, perhaps, no less complex, as the cosmos transforms into a flower. The paragraph has come full circle. As skeletons (almost unbelievably) bloomed earlier, now the cosmos (completely unbelievably) has bloomed, supplying a dash of peace, perfection, and beauty to a paragraph given over to violence and suspicion.

Earlier in this section, I argued that *Engines*, through its mundane, ambiguous word choice and non-threatening tone, is best understood as a multi-layered critique of violence, especially military violence. My analysis shows that violence (even military violence, or violence sanctioned by the State) assumes multiple forms. Of its numerous facets, perhaps the most violent is State propaganda. Propaganda, the often-subtle manipulation of a citizenry’s collective conscience, works most thoroughly and insidiously through language. Framing violence through language involves altering people’s perceptions of what violence is and how it operates. The State, especially the American State, has been successful at this for a long time by using what William Lutz famously analyzed as “doublespeak” in his book of the same name. As he argues, the Pentagon doesn’t “destroy” targets, it merely “services” them. Misguided bombs don’t kill people; they merely produce “collateral damage.” Silliman and Armantrout’s poem does much more than condemn military violence; it exposes uses of language that make such violent acts seem acceptable, inevitable, and even ordinary. Their language in *Engines* is more than ambiguous and non-threatening; it offers a kind of “doublespeak” all its own. Such language is designed to conceal the horrifying effects of violence. Seen on one level, for instance, the “volley maintained nears orgasm” can refer to an intense backyard game of badminton or passionate lovemaking. In the context of the poem,
however, the critical reading process reveals that this volley is gunfire that ends in death and destruction. Narcs might dress in spiffy down vests, but beneath their J. Crew threads rest loaded pistols. We need to strip away those vests to reveal their real missions locked inside. Readers of *Engines* must strip away the ambiguous doublespeak of the sentences to reveal the true thrust of the work: its critique of the multi-layered forces of violence.

It is, therefore, no accident of composition that these poets chose the sonnet form as the clothing of their critique. The sonnet holds a unique place among forms in English; it is an esteemed, treasured form. When most people think of the sonnet, they think of Shakespeare’s love poems or the beautifully crafted works of John Keats. The traditional Petrarchan sonnet contains its own logic: the first eight lines (the octave) usually pose some problem or emotional quandary while the final six lines (the sestet) offer some solution or alternate way of thinking. Silliman and Armantrout’s variation on the form in *Engines* holds no such method. But they do have a purpose in choosing this form, and, again, it goes beyond vague notions of formal “interrogation.” Based on my analysis, I posit that they are asking the question, “What does form conceal?” In poetry discourse, the usual questions that arise when connections between form and content are made are these: (1) what does the chosen form reveal about the work’s content? and (2) how does that form work with the images to reinforce sets of meanings? (How does form illustrate meanings?) The verbs I’ve chosen in those questions—“reveal,” “reinforce,” and “illustrate”—are all positivist conceptions of how poetic language works. They imply that poetic language is meant to enlighten or to show. Silliman and Armantrout approach the question from the opposite direction. Their premise is that language—whether poetic or bureaucratic—is used to conceal. Going forth from that premise, they have made
language choices that are deliberately ambiguous and disingenuous. They mean to show
the nefariousness of language. In other words, they do what politicians do—but to a
greater degree and with an eye to pose a critique of what they would understand to be
nefarious language use. They are trying to bring the master down with his own tools, with
his own engines. The form that they appropriate to do so is the sonnet.

News and Noise: The Double-Edged Critique of Force

As my analysis of Engines claims, language is often at stake in cultural and
political battles. In today’s society, where communication and news is instantaneous,
such battles are shaped by how effectively the participants use language. Because politics
today has become synonymous with television and the Internet—especially cable
network news television and myriad political blogs—the true opponent is no longer one’s
political adversary, but rather the race to “get out” and “stay on” message. During the
2004 American presidential campaign, George W. Bush and John Kerry weren’t so much
battling and debating each other as they were jockeying for prime position on cable’s hot
political talk shows and time slots. Their campaigns—and this has been true in American
politics since at least the 1960s—focused on image control and spin. “Spin,” a political
term that became popular in the 1990s, refers to one’s ability to shape and manipulate
information and news for the greatest benefit to one’s candidate. The best political
“spinners” became known as “spin doctors.” Mostly pundits and failed policy-makers,
spin doctors’ influence rose during the 1990s as the popularity of cable political talk
shows rose, programs like Hardball, Crossfire, and Hannity & Colmes, which essentially
are spin-offs themselves from earlier hits like Donahue and Springer. While the subject
matter of the former and latter sets are different, their forms and tones are similar: these programs earn high ratings because they feature confrontation. *Force*, a work that also features confrontation, was published during the rise in popularity of spin and political talk shows, during an era in which politicians and their supporters sought a studio audience as well as a voting audience. The beginning of the poem resonates of political discourse in some new arena:

The audients of politics
in the –torium sounds
eye is for fours
is thus tragedy first
then farce, majestic speech
muttered under morning’s breath
while brushing. Against news, noise. […] (57)

The dictionary definition of “audient,” a word derived from the Latin *audiens*, meaning “audience” is: 1. the act of state of hearing; 2a. a formal hearing or interview; 2b. an opportunity of being heard; 3a. a group of listeners or spectators; 3b. a reading, viewing, or listening public; 4. a group of ardent admirers or devotees. By using this word as the first major word in the poem, Silliman is making a powerful, immediate statement on the political arena of the 1980s; this arena may be called the “auditorium.” As he frames it at the beginning of *Force*, the political landscape today is no longer a landscape at all, but rather a noisy arena in which multiple voices are vying to be heard, where a Babelesque cacophony of auditors strive to make their messages stand out. What they actually say matters little: simply being heard among the din of others is what counts. Positioning oneself to be heard (like Bush and Kerry during the 2004 campaign) is what counts. The auditors’ messages may contain “tragedy” or “farce,” and indeed may be intoned tragically or farcically. They may be funny or poignant, truthful or deceptive, earnest or
ironic, compassionate or cold, “majestic” or commonplace—again, it matters little. As Marshall McLuhan noted decades ago, “the medium is the message.” Getting that message out is the real task. This political auditorium constitutes Force’s backdrop. There is no “news” today—no meaningful dialogue, careful listening, or contemplation—just “noise.”

Force’s auditorium backdrop should be understood as a microcosm for larger society, where sound bites and mechanical talking points have replaced sincere expression and honest discourse. The kind of talk that began as a political phenomenon (no doubt brought about by the influence of electronic media) has spread to wider society, but is especially prevalent in the news and education (where information itself precludes analysis and discourse). And while I will not argue here that Silliman is criticizing the technology that renders spin so prevalent, he does wish to illustrate the numbing effects of this type of political language, which ultimately precludes real social and political change. The task of the critic, therefore, in this work as in others, is to describe the form of the poem itself as it expresses and relates to this phenomenon. My thesis is that its mixed form, its back-and-forth presentation—from short fragments to long fragments, from incomplete sentences to grammatically complete sentences, and from short lines to longer lines—is designed to represent modern-day political speech, which has spread to media itself and, in fact, to many social sectors. The sector of society where Silliman notes particularly violent effects on human lives is the corporate sector. Like Engines, this poem exposes particular language practices. The difference between the poems is that, in Force, Silliman poses a side critique of corporate practices, while in Engines he reserved his critique for military violence. The connections between the
military and corporate worlds are well known; writers like Kevin Phillips have connected the current Iraq War with corporate profiteering. Halliburton and its subdivisions are the poster children for such practices.

The shortest of Silliman’s works in *Demo to Ink*, *Force* allows critics to examine the overall structure of the poem (its macro-qualities) and also its individual sentences, lines, and word clusters. Unlike the other poems I’ve analyzed, *Force* is partially broken down into lines. The line, as in traditional verse poetry, generates meaning here in the same way that Silliman’s new sentences and paragraphs generate meaning in other poems. In fact, parts of *Force* look like a typical free-verse poem, with lines of varying length and carefully chosen points of enjambment. At the level of sound, Silliman experiments freely with musicality: rhyme and alliteration bounce around this poem regularly. Silliman’s careful attention to how *Force* sounds when recited attests to his critique of political language: as I argued earlier, it’s not so much what the message is today as how it sounds. And here a connection can be made between Silliman’s choice of the line rather than the sentence as the dominant formal unit of composition and his heightened attention to the sound qualities of the language. What bridges these two formal dimensions of the poem is the (relatively) recent communications phenomenon known as the “sound bite.” In today’s political discourse, the sound bite represents the formal unit of spin; it could be considered the spin doctor’s poetic device. The sound bite must be short and catchy; it must capture the hearer’s attention in some unique, memorable way. As such, it can contain no lengthy rhetoric or thorough explanations; it must be sweet, simple, and easy to remember, like an advertising jingle. The poetic line, therefore, rather than the sentence, is the ideal form for sound bites. It is shorter and more
conducive to fragmented, catchy thought than the sentence, which is historically a unit of logic. The passage cited above contains two new sentences, but its formal logic is that of lines. We tend to pay more attention to the lines because Silliman has constructed conscious line breaks. The rather mysterious material in the short line above—“eye is for fours”—presents challenges in any case, whether we consider it alone or in context, but it, like “Against news, noise,” resembles a jingle or slogan. It possesses a kind of condensed power. The challenge will be to build bridges of reference from these short, enigmatic lines to their surrounding context.

Therein lies the primary application of parataxis in *Force*: the inconsistency between short lines (sound bites) and longer sentences (units of traditional logic), how each works to generate meaning, and the differences in the kinds of meaning they offer. Readers, as they are with respect to Silliman’s many paratactic works, find themselves caught up in this inconsistency, in this back-and-forth motion, and are implicitly asked to make sense of it by constructing cognitive bridges between and among the formal units. Analyzing a lengthy representative passage will allow us to gain a sense of the contrast in line length and help illustrate the critical process. As such, two questions will guide my analysis of the passage: (1) what effect does the inconsistency have on readers? and (2) if reading poetry is about making choices about what to privilege and how to privilege it, then how does that process play out here with respect to the changeable line lengths? In other words, are readers implicitly asked to privilege the shorter lines because they hold more “force”? This approach was emphasized when I was an undergraduate student. In my experience, young poets are advised that short lines are crucial because they slow down the reading process, causing readers to linger on them.
Earlier, I quoted the six short lines that begin the poem. The line beginning with “while brushing” (and including the sentence “Against news, noise.”) begins a section of six long lines. To clarify what I mean by “short” and “long” lines in *Force*, short lines occur when Silliman consciously breaks the line, causing enjambment; the long lines in this poem are *not* reminiscent of the classic lines of Walt Whitman or Ginsberg, which are broken by the poet eventually. In fact, they are not “lines” at all; they are prosy clusters of new sentences. This distinction intensifies the poem’s fundamental formal inconsistency: it is more a distinction between verse and prose rather than between short lines and long lines. Thus, we should reframe the basic question posed by the poem: how does the reading experience of verse differ from that of prose (in what is called a “poem”)? Now we begin to see just how complex Silliman’s project is in *Force*. His mingling of forms is actually a mode of intertextuality. This concept will guide my discussion of *Garfield*, but here what does it attempt? What is this consistent back-and-forth motion between genres designed to achieve? To answer this question, we should look closely at a long passage. (For the sake of analysis, I will not break the “new sentence prose” portions of the passage the way they are broken in the text, where page margins dictate the endings of lines.)

I rose at 5
   to type these words
   swords heard in dream
   clashing after strong
   seams signed the writing
   as scaffold to building
   reveals little within, tents
   to attentive eyes, child’s
   circus peek yields pitch
   of memory years after. Prime rate or chuck, dehydrated syntax in the
garden of arrows, thoroughly misgiven, perfects a hum within. Next scene
the cabinet is on the telephone, but the key offers a line of blow to Best Boy, not what they mean by Greek. Thus to pipeline of steaming prunes the resin of critique is so much KY if the budgie’s lost in the chandelier, our deficit climbing. At Smith-Barney we make money the old-fashioned way, we steal it. Sirens […] (57-8).

The first half of the passage (the broken lines) looks like traditional verse poetry, and *is*, where each of the line units possesses a force of vision and meaning all its own. Taken together, however, the nine lines cited also relay a narrative that documents the fuzzy area between dreaming and composition. As most writers and athletes could attest, sometimes one gets “into the zone”—an ethereal place where scoring baskets or producing language becomes mysteriously easy. Lines like “swords heard in dream” and “seams signed the writing,” however, can also be removed from context and analyzed individually, just as students of poetry are taught to examine individual lines for how they impact and illustrate the work as a whole. For example, “swords heard in a dream” is an ideal description of the enigmatic aspects of composition. My thesis with respect to these lines is that they are “meta-poetic”: they describe the processes of poetic composition. The fact that they’re rather cryptic (just what does “swords heard in dream” mean?) supports such a position. The writing process itself (or how a work of art is created—how it goes from imagination to medium) is enigmatic. I write creatively, but am unable to answer the question of how poems “get to” the page; they just seem to appear. To answer the question with certainty would discount the mystery in the process, but Silliman offers a partial response in “I rose at 5 / to type these words/ swords heard in dream.” If the words are swords (the visual rhyme here is significant), and the swords are like elements from a dream, then he’s suggesting that the materials of poetry (words and language) are
like shadows and fog, abundantly clear but ethereal one moment (as in the moment of a
dream) and gone the next. The idea of writing before dawn (5 a.m.) sheds little light on
the process: at that hour of the morning (or late night) no sun illuminates the process. In
fact, it’s a hazy, blurry hour between night and day, a hazy, blurry hour between sleep
and waking. How can one define that period? It’s as difficult to do as it is to define the
place where poems come from. Samuel Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” is perhaps the finest
expression of the ethereal, slippery nature of composition.

The “words” (literally, here, the short lines that refer to the writing process)
contain no social critique. They “scaffold” the “building”; they form the structure that
houses the real message of the poem; this message of corporate critique resides in the
new sentence sections. Before getting to that critique, however, before entering the
building, we should determine why Silliman chose the more traditional verse form for his
meta-poetic commentary, for his scaffolding, for his self-reflectivity. It is actually a mode
of critique in itself. By making the verse sections of Force relatively empty and ethereal,
with images (“swords heard in dream”), rhyme (“tents”—“attentive”), alliteration
(“seams”—“signed”—“scaffold” and “pitch”—“peek”), and normative, narrative syntax
(“I rose at 5 / to type these words”), Silliman is commenting on the traditions and claims
of verse poetry itself, especially what it has become over the last half-century. These lines
convey his subtle critique of what he calls the School of Quietude, the dominant network
of university-based poets and workshops, prizes, and presses that have, for the last half-
century, come to embody poetry. Silliman, with the relative emptiness of these lines in
terms of social commentary, and also with their ethereality and note of self-reflectivity, is
suggesting that the poetry establishment has become overly immersed in itself, too self-
reflective, and too hesitant to make claims outside the text regarding society and politics. I would argue that he’s not so much offering a critique on what the entrenched, arguably academic, modes of poetry production and reception are, but rather what they are not. His is not a heavy-handed critique, but rather a suggestion as to what a poem might accomplish if it weren’t so self-reflective.

That being the case, Silliman reserves the new sentence portions of Force (his trademark mode) for his trademark social critique. References to the world of finance appear in the passage above (“Prime rate” and “deficit climbing”), which is capped by his variation on Smith-Barney’s advertising slogan, which actually reads, “We make money the old-fashioned way, we earn it,” not “we steal it.” While he comments on language here (“dehydrated syntax in the garden of arrows”), he is merely reinforcing what he did more subtly in the verse section. Syntax in the School of Quietude has lost its water, its life force; therefore it can longer grow or become strong. Like elevator Muzak, it is little more than a “hum” against the backdrop of the increasingly business-oriented nature of poetry. In this world Silliman describes, things are upside-down: “the cabinet is on the telephone.” We have lost our way in mazes of money and greed, and poetry suffers because of it.

The fact that Silliman continually shifts modes is not coincidental. My previous analyses of the cacophonous qualities of his work were designed to reflect the form of American culture today, with the competing voices of politics, pop culture, education, and the media, but those qualities also reflect competing modes of composition. In Force, the modes point toward a kind of struggle in today’s poetry landscape. Each can perform its own kind of work; each can be seen as a critical force in its own way. From this
perspective, it should become clear—again—that Silliman’s project is not completely to
reject, say, the traditional line in poetry, but rather to show how it can assist in the social
commentary he understands as central to any poetic project. Just as important, it would be
a mistake to argue that one mode (for example, the new sentence) is consistently earnest
in its criticism and the other mode (the traditional line) should be consistently read as
ironic in its self-reflectivity. One could not with any real success completely separate and
isolate Force’s dual modes and argue that mode A achieves this and mode B achieves
that. They are of a single piece, and are consistently brought together with transitions. In
fact, he blurs the lines between the critical modes with his unifying transitions. He does
not mean to confound critics, but rather to force them to see that the lines between
competing compositional modes today are impossible to define once and for all, just as
the lines between modes of criticism (or modes of power in twenty-first-century
America) are impossible to define once and for all. With his mixing, Silliman has put
forth a formidable model in Force: because it is neither completely traditional nor
completely experimental in its application of form, it calls the critic to determine where
tradition ends and experimentation begins, and thus where self-reflectivity ends and
social commentary begins.

Force finally should be read as a double-edged critique. Its verse sections hold a
critical mirror to what have become admired poetic practices in terms of form, tone,
rhyme, alliteration, and image construction, and its new sentence sections reflect and
criticize the violent acts done by corporations under the guise of free enterprise. The two
kinds of language that Silliman generally employs, or his two voices (the mimicry of
rather self-righteous verse and the more earnest, obviously critical one), are apparent in
the majority of *The Alphabet*. On the one hand, his language tends to be lush and poignant. Elsewhere, it is earnestly rhetorical and politically cutting, tinged with notes of humor (as in the Smith-Barney variation and the variations of songs and ads presented in previous chapters). Both are political and both are powerful weapons in the struggle against power. It is not inevitable, however, that the language of poetry must look or sound like what has come to be conceived as poetic language in the mainstream. Nor is it inevitable that corporations must confuse and defraud in the name of greater profit. Owing to the prevalence of both of these ways of thinking, however, many have come to believe that poetry is lush, compact, and mysterious, and that the business world is hard, closed, and contaminated with greed. Silliman suggests that appearances can be deceptive, and that ways of thinking survive primarily because appearances and slogans tend to go unchallenged. He establishes the foundation for this point of criticism at the level of form by interrogating assumptions about long lines and short lines. My own preconceived notions about line length were challenged in analyzing *Force*. I had previously believed that, the shorter the line, the more powerful its impact. Perhaps Silliman’s greatest achievement in this poem is his complication of that widely held belief, which itself is part of the relatively unchallenged discourse on the line in poetry since the establishment of New Criticism.

**Versus and Violence: Garfield’s Recipe of Oppositions**

Striking in a cursory glance at *Garfield* is the poem’s structure of opposition. Many of the work’s twenty-one paragraphs contain oppositions in the form of versus statements: “Deckled vs. wisps” (para. 1, 67) “Ribbed vs. ochre” (2, 67), “Fallen vs.
brass” (4, 69), “Barking vs. justified horizon” (5, 69), “Cups vs. algae” (8, 71), “Random vs. yellow” (9, 71), and so on. Frequently these “something vs. something” oppositions occur in the text near “and/or” constructions, which are even more numerous: “Filmy and rusting” (3, 68), “Glassy and damp” (4, 68), “Oiled and buttoned” (5, 69), and so on.

Sometimes these constructions are grammatically more complex than the simple fragments I’ve listed: “This glass is for wine, that for milk” (5, 69) or “Expedite or clarify the personality or butcherpaper to which priorities or waver” (9, 71), a sentence in which the or’s leave one swimming in misdirection. Instead of listing all of these constructions, I should note one basic observation. Despite the fact that they occur with formal regularity—most often with “and,” “or,” and “vs.,”—no pattern of similar content emerges. In other words, the constructions refer to a wide variety of phenomena: colors, objects, shapes, and textures. And though many of the constructions are descriptive in character, they fail to lead the reader toward any meaningful conclusions. The content of the constructions is highly indeterminate, and, I would argue, meaningless. While this observation might look like a dead end, the fact of the constructions’ indeterminate content actually opens up a field of inquiry. Why has Silliman chosen not to establish a referential pattern for readers in Garfield? Of course, this is not to claim that there are obvious patterns of reference in The Alphabet’s other poems, but here Silliman seems deliberately to undercut any such hope that the reader might have of connecting the dots of image or content reference. Why is this the case—and what can we do when all we’re left with are formal patterns and repetitions?

To best frame these questions, we should refer to one of the twentieth century’s most resonant essays into ideology. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s “The
Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1944) offers a way of thinking about (seemingly) meaningless repetitions of reference. The most compelling part of the essay is their argument that

[T]he culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu. In front of the appetite stimulated by all those brilliant names and images there is finally set no more than a commendation of the depressing everyday world it sought to escape. (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 139)

“The Culture Industry” is a modernist text, drawn from some of the same principles that characterize some modernist texts, especially the realization that the central spheres of authority in life (the family, religious institutions, the school, the State, etc.) had begun to deteriorate, causing breakdowns in the fundamental relationships of human existence that such spheres seemed forever to afford (for example, familial, religious, educational, and governmental relationships). These central spheres and relationships defined and supported life in the industrial West from the Age of Enlightenment onward. As these guiding principles of life were gradually but sweepingly challenged by new sciences and new philosophies in the early twentieth century, art and social thinking responded. Adorno and Horkheimer’s text, written at the height of World War II, typifies the disillusionment that many felt toward the new modern world. Where once strong and seemingly indestructible principles girded social life, what kind of relationships and values would arise in the absence of such foundations? What ideologies would arise? Arguably, the three most obvious and brutal new relationships of power that arose in the twentieth century were (1) German Nazism (which formed the backdrop of Adorno and
Horkheimer’s work), (2) an extremely violent, decadent form of American capitalism (as described in the novels of Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and F. Scott Fitzgerald), and (3) Stalin’s brand of communism in the former Soviet Union (characterized by genocide, greed, and corruption).

All three of these ideologies, each vicious in its own way, thrive on the colonialist drive for land and resources. All three ideologies use both military and economic might to gain more resources. Adorno and Horkheimer’s essay is a critique of the operative tendencies shared by these three ideologies. All three thrive on what these thinkers call “the promise,” and the promise assumes related forms in each of these three ideologies. For the Nazis, the promise was economic freedom, social purity, and retribution for World War I. For Stalin, it was the utopian dream of communism. For American capitalists and their attendant politicos, it was (and is) the “American dream”—the notion that a middle class life of relative luxury and material wealth is available to all who are willing to work for it. The American dream—and the fact that it’s not universally attainable—is perhaps best portrayed in literature in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949). In an article written near the time of the play’s composition and originally published February 5, 1950 in the *New York Times*, Miller characterized Willy Loman as a tragic hero (note the similarities in tone and language between “The Culture Industry” and Miller’s comments):

To me the tragedy of Willy Loman is that he gave his life, or sold it, in order to justify the waste of it. It is the tragedy of a man who did believe that he alone was not meeting the qualifications laid down for mankind by those clean-shaven frontiersmen who inhabit the peaks of broadcasting and advertising offices. From those forests of canned goods high up near the sky, he heard the thundering command to succeed as it ricocheted down the newspaper-lined canyons of his city, heard not a human voice,
but a wind of a voice to which no human can reply in kind, except to stare into the mirror at a failure. (Bedford Introduction to Literature 1866)

It’s that “wind of a voice” that is no voice at all, that “thundering command” that comes from somewhere invisible and intangible that doomed Willy. Miller is right; no humanity exists in these sounds and echoes; no humanity exists in the impenetrable voices of ideology. Adorno and Horkheimer write about these voices in “The Culture Industry,” voices that seem to offer endless promises and endless choices, but really turn out to be mirrors. And when one summons the courage and wisdom to try to penetrate those voices, all one sees through to are mirrors, and in those mirrors appear images of life wasted in the pursuit of the joys and comforts promised by ideologies like the American dream. It is an endless maze of carrots and sticks that these writers contemplate: if you do this, then that will come; if you achieve A, then B will follow. In the end, however, the maze offers no way out and no redemption. More like a hamster’s wheel than a maze or path, the dream maintains its hegemony because it offers illusions and the hope of something greater as it doles out only minor material comforts. Genuine joy and comfort are, of course, found outside the realm of it and the material wealth it promises, in one’s relationships—with a lover, family, friends, nature, learning, or a higher spirit.

These last few paragraphs form the backdrop against which Garfield can best be read. The poem is like a maze through the American market system, punctuated at points along the way with choices (this vs. that, A or B) and possible routes that one might take. These choices, however, are nothing more than a series of false premises. Choosing “Ribbed” or “ochre,” or “Random” or “yellow,” won’t alter one’s life or course in any meaningful way. Engaging in the act of choosing, being given the illusion of free choice,
merely allows you to continue “in the game,” to let you continue your implicit support of the system itself. Whether you turn to the Coca-Cola or the Pepsi machine, to the Chevrolet or the Ford, the difference in products is minimal; the real outcome is a dollar-signed Yes! to market powers. By participating with your choice, you allow those forces to continue their hegemony. Parataxis in the poem is therefore not generated by the textual space between these choices, oppositions, and contradictions. Readers aren’t really swayed back and forth between “Ribbed” and “ochre.” The spaces in between (the uncertainties in between) really don’t generate meaning in the poem. The real paratactical strategy in the poem, as it is in, say, the market system, occurs in the spaces between choosing and not choosing, between participation and non-participation. If a reader (or citizen) chooses not to play the game, not to engage the system, then a real rupture in the social fabric occurs. The subject “out of line” is the real threat to the machinery of the system. The reader who demands a “third choice” from Silliman is the poem’s most insightful critic, for the third option involves stepping away from the poem’s confines and seeing it externally. Silliman’s poem does offer a way out for attentive readers. They are implicitly urged to note the illusory, absolutely formal, nature of the choices provided by the poem, and are therefore urged to recognize the formal nature of the choices themselves and to read beyond them. This is not easy. The reader’s first step in the critical process is to understand that there really is no difference between “Ribbed” and “ochre,” and that the opposition really isn’t a true opposition at all, merely a formal device that guarantees one’s advancement through the indeterminate work toward an ending that is really no ending at all, merely a point of departure into the next installment of *The Alphabet*. 
How, then, does this special mode of formal indeterminacy in *Garfield* allow us to read the poem as a critique of the market system? If Silliman’s achievement in this poem is that it might stand forth as a kind of miniature model for the far wider, impossible-to-gauge-at-once, American marketplace, then the reader is given a unique opportunity to witness that system played out across the pages. In seeing Silliman’s model, the reader sees with a supreme clarity given only to historians the workings of a system. Like an astronaut who gazes down upon not only the geography of a land but also its social constructs, *Garfield*’s reader might glimpse the workings of a world kept hidden by the social and political constructs that shape it. The content of Silliman’s poem—the words and images he chooses—matter only as much (or as little) as the contents of the market. As market forces are always changing, what’s valued today may be shunned tomorrow. As such, the images that stand forth as important today might change tomorrow, and so they will change from reader to reader. While it might seem that this kind of indeterminacy (in terms of form and content), makes analysis in the first place useless (and the critic’s job unnecessary), sometimes the best criticism (and much of Silliman’s work, to some extent, invites this analysis) is that which opens the playing field (the macro-structure) so that later criticism might focus on the players (or the micro-structure). As such, a description of the differences between “Ribbed” and “ochre,” and the possible effects of such differences, would be useful in the construction of critical motifs. Other critics may pursue those individual points, just as critics of ideology may investigate the marketing strategies of individual companies, like Coca-Cola or Pepsi.
The other major motif in *Garfield* is its gradual construction of a meal. Practically every paragraph contains one sentence that refers to some recipe in progress. Put together, the recipe instructions look like this:

Chop the vegetables coarsely. Put ingredients in saucepan. Dip in milk and dredge in breadcrumbs or seasoned flour. Saute (*sic*) onions in a skillet, stirring constantly. Strain the sauce and pour it over the fish. Combine in a blender. Add and stir until smooth over low heat. Stir constantly. Slice the rind away from the meat. Fold into the batter. Fold the ribs in half. Serve at room temperature. Let thaw. Cut into slices one-half inch thick. Let sit for 15 minutes. Beat this and return to mixture. Preheat the oven to 350º. Separate the whites. Brings (*sic*) to a boil, cover tightly, and let sit for two hours. Heat in a heavy skillet.

Although the poem contains other instructions, the ones pertaining to food appear most consistently. Obviously, it would be impossible to put this recipe into practice. Like the content of the oppositional constructions presented earlier, the content of this recipe is meaningless. No pattern emerges and it adds up to nothing in the end. But again, content is not the point here. The real message—again harkening back to McLuhan—is the medium, and in the case of poetry, the medium is the form. The sentences above share a formal characteristic: they are all commands. Each begins with a command verb. The sound of the recipe that reverberates forth is “not a human voice, but a wind of a voice to which no human can reply in kind.” This recipe is the voice of social control. It is commanding us to do as we’re told, to do it by the book, if we want to be satisfied. Although this voice sounds harmless enough (one doesn’t usually sense the threatening tones of power in cookbooks), this recipe is deceptively harmful, a seemingly monotonous litany that actually aims at its target with cold precision. In my analysis of *Engines*, I noted the apparent innocuousness of sentences like “Fingers curl slowly in sleep” and “The smell of curry in the corridor of the small hotel,” yet claimed that they
actually conceal threatening forces. The same logic can be applied to Garfield. The recipe appears non-threatening, and even warm and comforting in tone, but it conceals a deeper strategy: it persuades subjects to move about in obedience; it constrains their movements within its pages. Because the language of cookbooks is non-threatening, Silliman has chosen the perfect motif on which to build his critique of language. As is the case with Garfield’s oppositional constructions, the critic should step away from the largely confounding, indeterminate text and focus on the form of the language—the commands.

These three poems display the idea that language is the most powerful force of social control. Silliman’s critical achievement in this tandem of works is his appropriation of this language, controlling and propagandistic—in multiple modes—to show just how devastating and violent it can be. Again, he is using the tools of the master to poke holes in the master’s house. As always, it is the form and structure of the language, or how something is expressed rather than what is expressed, that possesses the real impact. To conclude, let us return to the political auditorium—in this case arguably the grandest of political auditoriums, the United States Congress. Every January, the President is required to report to Congress and the American people on the State of the Union. What’s consistently striking about the “spectacle” (Adorno and Horkheimer’s word) is never the speech itself, neither the policy initiatives nor the battlefield rhetoric. What possesses the real impact is the spectacle itself: the parade of Senators, cabinet members, and Supreme Court justices that lead the President down to the podium, the gleaming wood and brass of the House chamber, the flag, and the deference usually paid in gestures toward the President. In no other setting could an individual appear more leader-like. Spectators are meant to receive this impression. All of these elements are
designed to showcase *how* the President looks, not *what* he says. In the age of the Internet and television, social control works best on the visual—or formal—level. The poems to be analyzed in Chapter 5, *Hidden* and *Paradise*, suggest additional, more specific, critiques of American market forces.
Chapter 6: Formal Concealments: *Hidden and Paradise*

My analysis of *Engines* in Chapter 5 emphasizes motifs of concealment and disguise. I argued that details from the poem—like the narc’s handcuffs and cobwebs—symbolize wider systems of political and social control. Concealment and forms of control work in tandem: power, especially imperialist power, operates most smoothly when its real aims are kept hidden from view. Power and control are best achieved under the guise of other, softer, more pleasant-sounding aims. Globally, these aims include nation building, democratization, and socio-economic reform. Throughout Western history, the term “civilizing” was the preferred designate for these aims. To make their missions appear good-natured and free of self-interest, imperialists couch them in more comforting language. On a number of levels, Silliman’s *Alphabet* suggests critiques of imperialism, both local and global. My thesis with respect to many of his poems is that he employs form and content to illustrate and pose critiques of the historical patterns of imperialism that more strictly social and political theorists also investigate. I use the term “concealment” to designate a facet of his poetic, critical approach. The points of focus in this chapter are two poems that illustrate the mechanisms of social control in particularly interesting, critically pointed ways: *Hidden* and *Paradise*. His formal practices in them show how power conceals.

*Hidden*, from *Demo to Ink*, is a long poem of new sentences broken into couplets. It shares formal similarities with *Engines* and *Garfield* in that its overall structure is repetitive and consistent. *Engines*, as we recall, is structured in fourteen paragraphs of fourteen sentences each. As my presentation in Chapter 5 argues, it interrogates an established, esteemed form in English poetry: the sonnet. It forces readers to consider
how the sonnet might best be read as a structure of concealment. Asking the question of what the sonnet form conceals rather than what it reveals guides my analysis in that chapter. Garfield, although it mimics no traditional form, is nevertheless vigorously consistent: its twenty-one paragraphs of twenty sentences each contain numerous oppositions and instructions. The market system works through oppositions (which are actually false, forced choices) and instructions (which are actually harmless looking commands). Absent the illusions of free choice and carefully engineered commands, the system might come to pieces.

Within the creative landscapes of Engines and Garfield (and somewhat differently in Force), Silliman’s critique is suggested at two levels: in form and content. The same can be said for Hidden: its seemingly endless series of couplets makes it appear on the surface like a poem that is especially reliant on enjambment and line breaks (which are meant to indicate the poet’s sensitivity to the line as a unit of meaning). Its consistent structure is mesmerizing, designed to lull readers into a comfortable sense of textual familiarity. A poem should not look like prose; a careful craftsman must respect the power of the line by paring it down to its essential content, with line breaks that call attention to the line’s last word. Those lines must be surrounded by sufficient white space to make that essential content appear even more significant. Ironically, that’s precisely what Silliman has done with form in Hidden:

Is this form? My mother comes home from her date with both eyes blackened. The perfectly overcast sky gives even this glade an indoor feel like swimming in too-chlorinated water
the way antihistamines clear sinuses

while they cloud the mind. A weaving
pressed against a damp clay dish

[...] (83)

What, then, distinguishes it from the kind of (mainstream) poetry that Silliman would place in the School of Quietude\(^6\)? My formal analysis, beginning with the first sentence of the poem (“Is this form?”), will present it as a critical replication of standard forms. In copying the forms of the dominant (School of Quietude) group, Silliman affords readers the opportunity to see that form anew. “Is this form?” he asks. “Is this what I’m supposed

\(^6\) On a recent blog entry (April 8, 2007), Silliman lists the poets who received 2007 Guggenheim Fellowships: Christopher Buckley, Greg Delanty, Erica Funkhouser, A. Van Jordan, Dana Levin, and others, then muses ironically:

It would appear that
just maybe
not one
post-avant poet applied

(Sure is a good thing
that the division
between
the Mainstream & the Other
tradition doesn’t exist any more…

Otherwise,
this list of poets
just by itself
might cause one
to feel queasy
as to the integrity
of the Guggenheim process).

Silliman uses the term “post-avant” to designate contemporary poets (rooted in what he calls the “Other tradition” of poetry) who challenge normative standards in terms of the line and subject matter.
to be doing? Is this how I’m supposed to be writing?” As with Engines, I will argue that Hidden challenges established ways of thinking about poetry. Form alone, however, doesn’t generate Silliman’s entire critique. Form, in this poem as in others, must be considered in conjunction with content and tone, as these elements serve to solidify and intensify his critique. The three most pervasive image motifs in Hidden—fog, housing, and clothing—should be understood as phenomena that conceal reality.

Paradise (1985) is a book-length poem comprised of long, sprawling paragraphs of new sentences. Because of the poem’s length, my analysis will be limited to its first three paragraphs. Once again, investigating mechanisms of the marketplace will frame my reading of Paradise, which I see as a kind of blueprint for life in late-twentieth-century America. While the nature of that blueprint sounds broad, the poem’s power and insight is born of a contrary vision: its red thread is the workday life of an individual whose day is governed by time, schedules, and routines. The theme of time—of calendars, seasons passing, and clocks ticking—is presented in the poem through a number of images. I will highlight these images and show how they exert social control. The figure in Paradise is not snuffed out by vengeful narcs or by the obvious violence of war or corporations, but rather by a much more subtle (but equally violent and oppressive) governing power: the idea (or rule) that time is money. In Paradise, the social mechanisms of the market are inscribed upon the daily life of an individual. In terms of form and structure, its long, block paragraphs offer little white space or breathing room. Very different than Hidden in this regard (a poem that on the page contains far more white space than print), the text of Paradise, with its dense appearance, makes a statement about life in late-twentieth-century (or early twenty-first-century)
America. How much time is free? How much time is given over to reflection and quiet? These somewhat sweeping political questions are broached, as I have argued throughout this project, at the level of the sentence, especially here through Silliman’s use of pronouns.

“both eyes blackened”: Social Conditioning in Hidden

One of Silliman’s strengths as a writer is his ability to establish connections with readers, to invite them into the discourse of the poem, even though the formal complexity of his work prevents easy engagement. I have argued elsewhere that his application of parataxis allows readers to become part of the meaning-making process. In the first three lines of Hidden, Silliman achieves the rhetorical goal of bringing readers in by posing the question, “Is this form?” The question itself retains paratactical qualities in that it is indeterminate, pointing to no definite context. Like the sentence “This is a test” that begins Demo, the “this” of “Is this form?” is a floating signifier that affects readers on a number of levels. First, the mere fact of it being a question (instead of, say, “This is form”) paints the speaker as hesitant, unsure, and doubtful at the beginning of the poem, where otherwise he might be confidently dazzling readers with images or complex metaphors. In noting the speaker’s uncertainty, readers begin to feel empowered; they begin to feel that this poem will be a shared, writer-reader experience in which they will be able to exercise a degree of control. Readers might respond to the question of form and read the poem itself as a response. In any case, the bridge that Silliman enacts toward readers in the opening of Hidden is an application of parataxis from the perspective of the speaker-observer-documenter, who at one moment appears uncertain and the next
moment almost clinically sure, as in: “My mother comes home / from her date with both
eyes / blackened.” The reader, therefore, is at one moment drawn into meaning
collection and the next simply offered a flat observation regarding domestic abuse, a
highly charged, emotional subject. How readers position themselves—if they can at all—in relation to the speaker’s shifting position constitutes the first step in establishing an
interpretation of Hidden.

Much of Silliman’s work is marked by the kind of shifty, unstable dance between
speaker and reader established at the beginning of Hidden, where a statement or question
like “Is this form?” seems simultaneously specific to a certain context (this poem will
investigate form in poetry) and mysteriously non-contextual (given the poet’s range of
observations, it could point to something mundane). This fuzzy area between context
specificity and indeterminate possibility marks that unstable dance. This is one of the
qualities that makes a poem a Silliman poem: readers’ inability to find a secure, stable
position of analysis as the poem shifts constantly, in tone, image type, or form. The
speaker’s general field of reference remains the same, but his manner of observations
constantly changes; his focus changes. In Force, I analyzed the constant shifts in line
length and how they constitute parataxis. Because Silliman’s poems vary in terms of
form, tone, and image, readers are unable to locate stable perspectives, and their
responses to the poem likewise vary. The only constant in Hidden is its consistent couplet
structure, and therefore the one element that readers will be able to respond to on a
consistent basis, intellectually and emotionally. Historically, forms were usually intended
to convey a specific purpose (the octave-sestet logic of the Petrarchan sonnet, for
example), but repetition of the form itself over time (without that initial motivating
purpose) guaranteed them as established, highly regarded, and *acceptable* forms. Of course, what I’m describing are trends; poets along the way have certainly “reinvented” or “reintroduced” forms as a way of recovering their original, critical power. Silliman is one of those poets. He reintroduces readers to what has become a rather unthinking form in *Hidden* to recover (or reappropriate) the form’s capacity for critique. As such, the poem appears inviting from the outside, with all of that white space and those careful line breaks, but within the lines potency resides along an undercurrent of violence. This inside-outside contrast is a kind of parataxis in itself, and one more element that is meant to destabilize readers.

To show this contrast in *Hidden*—this crossing of an external, widely used and acceptable form with a potent, almost violent, internal message—I will present the series of couplets that follow the line ending with “damp clay dish” several pages earlier. First, however, reconsider the images in those first four couplets. Following the question “Is this form?” (which is intended to empower readers and to bring together the speaker and readers more intimately), the next sentence reads, “My mother comes home / from her date with both eyes / blackened.” This complex sentence should affect readers at several levels. First, that one’s mother is on a date works against traditional notions of the family, suggesting that the father is absent. Right away, then, within the poem’s first couplet, traditions themselves are being dislodged and manipulated. To hear fifty years ago that mother is on a date would likely disrupt all notions of normalcy. While much has changed in fifty years, I think that the statement is still meant to disrupt the norm. Second, and more powerfully, mother comes home “with both eyes blackened.” What a violent sensory image—indeed more powerful than “beat up” or “abused.” The mother’s
face has been disfigured; we see the results of the violence instead of the violence itself; this image is ominous and mysterious. Third, the woman’s eyes have been blackened, not her nose broken or lip split. Eyes and vision constitute important motifs in many Silliman poems, especially *Hidden*, where being able to see (and to see through forms of social control) is critical. In a poem populated with images of fog, clothing, and houses (all of which conceal), being able to see is vital. Without vision (and mother’s vision is impaired in the first few lines), life obviously becomes more dangerous, but one’s vulnerability to forms of social control also increases. This theme will dominate as we continue.

The next lines quoted above,

> […] The perfectly overcast sky
gives even this glade an indoor feel

> like swimming in too-chlorinated water
the way antihistamines clear sinuses

> while they cloud the mind […]

expand on the idea of sensory disruption instigated by mother’s blackened eyes. Mother’s world has changed because of a violent episode, and now the speaker’s world has changed, too, because his normal perceptions have been disrupted. The sky has clouded his mind, interfering with his mental and imaginative capacities. Not being able to think clearly in a world filled with forces intent upon altering perceptions about reality in the first place makes for a dangerous combination. This sluggish feeling born of blurred vision continues in the following lines:

> […] A weaving
pressed against a damp clay dish

> will leave a residue of texture
beneath the brown glaze. We roll
when first we wake, and before
we rise. Row houses. I say

this way. The eyes of all
raised to the line fall silent.

In Britain, monarchy is but
a theme park. The thick brush

of the blackboard’s eraser
is entirely sensuous—chalk
dust smells sweet […] (83-4)

The idea of an imprint in the first two couplets suggests the workings of normative,
conditioning culture. Through a number of social institutions (particularly schools and
places of worship), and also through the socializing environment of the media
(particularly television and movies), individuals are conditioned to (1) behave in certain
ways and (2) respect established institutions (which tend to be linked to the market). As
such, they are conditioned to respect (and even love) the “rules” of market culture.
Silliman may well term it the “imprinting” process, for in these lines “a damp clay dish”
(material that is vulnerable to the manipulation of external forces) comes into contact
with a weaving, and a mark on the dish is clearly and irrevocably left in the form of “a
residue of texture.” The next sentence in the passage, “We roll / when first we wake, and
before / we rise,” also alludes to the vulnerability of those being made or awakened. The
pronoun “we” is crucial here, for Silliman is referring to all who are born and live,
suggesting that we must unify to fight against this conditioning (or imprinting) process.
(This idea is even more apparent in Paradise.) Humans are susceptible creatures. A
skeptic might argue that Silliman is merely describing in these lines the inevitable
processes of socialization that all humans go through: people and other outside forces leave their prints upon us constantly, and bad outcomes don’t necessarily result. In conjunction with all of Silliman’s arguments in form and image, however—the black eyes and loss of vision, the clouding of the mind, and the concealment, in Hidden and other works—the process he describes is neither natural nor well intentioned. There is violence in these images, and we should not misunderstand the ambiguity of “a residue of texture” to be a good thing, any more than we should read “Fingers curl slowly in sleep” from Engines to be anything less than a tense anticipation of violence. There is too much obvious violence in these works not to read the ambiguous images as masked forms of violence, as damaging to individuals as obvious ones.

In the next sentence, Silliman names a kind of dwelling place, “Row houses,” one of several instances in Hidden where he refers to living places. Others include: “Mondo condo: in the epoch of ear cuffs / and jelly bracelets” (86), “House at the hilltop / offers generous vista” (88), “a tall / grey concrete highrise / with redwood balconies” (95-6), “new condos // ‘ideal for adult living’” (96), “row houses built over dunes” (100), and “Homeowner thought / to paint bricks red” (101). What theme is this recurrent motif meant to express? To answer this question, we must locate similarities among the above examples. What do these portrayals of living spaces have in common? Aside from the first and last examples (where the type of home is ambiguous), the homes described are all unit-type housing: condos, row houses, and high-rise apartments. Little difference exists among the units themselves. They are similar in look and structure. In one respect, this lack of variety brings to mind the housing system of former-Soviet countries, where, especially in urban environments, all of the apartment buildings look the same. In cities
like Kharkov, Ukraine and Sofia, Bulgaria, for example, it is nearly impossible to distinguish one apartment building from the next. But it is not, of course, a Communist phenomenon, as the same holds true in most American urban environments (this poem seems to be set in San Francisco). Silliman’s point, therefore, is not that such dwelling units signify Communist ideology. On the contrary, he is suggesting that such architectural patterns signify market culture at its most intense, where maximum space efficiency (the condo is the unit of efficiency \textit{par excellence}) yields maximum profit. The only real difference between the two systems in this respect is that, in Kharkov, profits went to State-affiliated people or institutions, and in San Francisco, profits go to private business interests. Where a lack of individuality is present in housing (or perhaps any marketed product), be sure that profits, as always, are the guiding force.

What, then, is the significance of Silliman’s critique \textit{vis-à-vis} housing? I posit that it goes back to the notion of concealment. The housing units he describes in \textit{Hidden} are designed mainly for middle-class urbanites, but the same logic of profit holds true for lower-class housing projects, which are also designed for maximum efficiency. Simply put, the primary difference between the two (middle/upper and lower classes units) is location. Both types of units yield high profits with minimal building costs. What’s concealed in the rhetoric of both kinds of units (“ideal for adult living,” “redwood balconies,” “first month’s rent free,” “satellite hookup,” or “pool access”) is the violent logic of the market as it is expressed in real estate. Real estate, as the story of Donald Trump displays, is largely a closed business. Basically, one needs enormous capital to crack the business in the first place, and often this capital is inherited. (Trump’s father was the real building mogul, considerably more successful than his famous son.) The
American Dream of real estate development is open only to a select few. The rest are literally and figuratively shut out, locked within their $2000 downtown high-rises or $300 HUD projects. Perhaps Willy Loman put it best in the opening scene of *Death of a Salesman*: “The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks.”

Willy’s rant will turn ecological (“you can’t raise a carrot in the back yard”) and nationalist-protectionist (“There’s more people! That’s what’s ruining this country!”) (17), but his true, unspoken enemies are the nepotistic building moguls themselves, represented later by Willy’s boss.

Willy senses, but cannot see, the reality around him. His suicide ends Arthur Miller’s play with a metallic crash, but in reality he dies silently, as his dream died silently decades before. Vision and silence are powerful motifs for Silliman, as well.

“The eyes of all / raised to the line fall silent” might be read as a metaphor for Willy’s situation, the situation of the condo tenants, project tenants, or the reader of this poem. Faced with a dominant system of logic—be it the logic of housing or the accepted logic of the poetic line—what can one’s eyes do except to stare and “fall silent”? In fact, silence is one of the things that keeps power functioning. To fall silent against it is to implicitly accept its control over our lives and decision-making processes. To fall silent against it is to be given a mandate: where to live or how to write. Silliman’s dual critique in *Hidden* (of the idea of poetic form and its standardizing impulse and of the housing market) illuminates how power affects lives, both in day-to-day experiences and intellectually.

Like Willy Loman, many are drawn to the false premise of the American dream, tantalizing with the sparkling materials promised by wealth. There is certainly, however,
another aspect of social conditioning, another mode of concealment. While it conceals itself beneath the rhetoric of the American dream and the material comforts it might provide, it also conceals itself beneath a veneer of play. Consider Silliman’s next sentence in *Hidden*: “In Britain, monarchy is but / a theme park.” Two powerful forces work here: the force of power, privilege, and wealth embodied by the British monarchy (politically weak but culturally powerful) and the force of leisure embodied by the theme park, and these forces work in tandem to affect people’s lives. The common factor shared by the two forces is the notion of fantasy: both offer escapes from what Wordsworth termed in “Tintern Abbey” “the dreary intercourse of daily life.” The royal family in Britain continues to be a powerful cultural force because it conforms to and confirms the myth that some individuals and families are chosen by God, that royal blood is indeed divine. People want to believe, I would argue, that there exist figures among us who have been ordained by some higher being as fit representatives of God. Combine this myth of the divine with the royals’ extreme wealth and good looks and the fantasy intensifies. What little girl doesn’t dream of becoming a princess? The royals feed our imaginations like an absorbing novel; they take us away from ourselves. Away from ourselves and our daily surroundings (if only for brief moments in the imagination), we become ripe subjects for social conditioning. By offering a dream of a better life (perhaps the kind of life led by the royals), we begin to neglect the most important, meaningful aspects of life: basic needs with regard to education, health care, the environment, and familial and romantic relationships. When those needs are neglected (or even relegated to secondary positions), our real lives (as opposed to our dreams and fantasies) worsen in the long run.
In the last line of the above passage, Silliman presents the eraser as a powerful symbol of social conditioning; its “sensuous” sweep across the chalkboard figuratively expresses the mechanisms of control that I have been describing. The sentence reads,

> The thick brush
> of the blackboard’s eraser
> is entirely sensuous—chalk
> dust smells sweet (84).

The key word in the sentence is “sensuous,” signifying pleasurable, sexy, and satisfying. Like the fantasy perpetuated by the British royals or the thrill of a rollercoaster, the American Dream works by offering a sensuous escape from daily life. The metaphor here is particularly telling: I would posit that the marks on the chalkboard constitute (1) our basic needs and (2) newspaper headlines (poverty, violence, and war) that many choose to ignore. The eraser, with its sensuous sweep, is able to make those realities disappear, if only for a short time. It takes us away from all of the death and destruction in the Middle East or the violence in our own back yards. In times of war or national crises (economic crises, unemployment, etc.), fantasy becomes a powerful force of distraction. As such, we can understand the popularity of television shows like *American Idol*, which actually do more than offer an escape from reality; they create a cultural environment where realities are actually pushed aside permanently.

Houses are an important motif in *Hidden*, but Silliman also draws heavily on images of fog and clothing, two entities that also work to conceal and, in the context of the poem, express mechanisms of social conditioning and control. Consider this passage (which directly follows the last cited passage):
The arc of park sprinklers, automatic
in a summer rain. T-shirt
beneath linen sport-jacket,
collar up, is this year’s fashion
for about six weeks. Realism,
so-called, alienates, by virtue
of the shell posed around objects. (84-5)

Three motifs of concealment appear in this passage: the sprinklers/rain dynamic, the T-shirt/jacket dynamic, and the realism/shell dynamic. Although these images obviously constitute different forms, their functions are similar. At first glance, it seems that they work in tandem to portray a kind of double concealment. On closer inspection, however, the case may be considerably more complex. First, unlike my analysis of Silliman’s housing motif (where the high rhetoric of “living well” concealed real estate profiteering), in these examples it is hard to say exactly what is being concealed. It’s far too general to claim that sprinklers, men’s clothing, and the literary practice of realism conceal the logic of the market. One could make the case, however, that the dominant literary mode (here termed “realism”) fuels the profits of publishing houses by connecting with consumers on very basic levels of reading and comprehension. Silliman partially makes this argument in The New Sentence, offering the following analysis:

‘Educated’ speech imitates writing: the more ‘refined’ the individual, the more likely their utterances will possess the characteristics of expository prose. The sentence, hypotactic and complete, was and still is an index of class in society.” According to Silliman, such writing, call it realistic or “expository,” “foregrounds the syllogistic leap, or integration above the level of the sentence, to create a fully referential tale” (79).
Because consumers have been conditioned to appreciate writing that points smoothly to higher orders of meaning, i.e. most popular fiction, large publishing houses feature it and their profits soar. According to Silliman and most critics from recent experimental schools, “realism” is not realistic, after all. The last line of the passage suggests this idea. “Realism” is actually a writing practice that presents objects and phenomena how they ought to look or have traditionally been construed. By putting a shell around objects, so-called realists refuse to allow objects to be viewed for what they are, let alone viewed in new ways. Silliman writes that this practice “alienates” because it separates people and objects, vision and things, perception and phenomena, discounting the power of imagination.

My point concerning realism and Silliman’s creative critique of it should be further elaborated. Consider again the triad of images/ideas that he posits in this section of Hidden: sprinklers, men’s clothing, and literary realism. The key practice is to read the first pair of specific images (sprinklers and men’s clothing) against the literary standard of realism, as doing so generates a kind of tension that lies at the heart of Silliman’s project. The specificity of the objects counters standard realist modes of presentation. In other words, taken by themselves, they would fail to generate “sense” in the realist mode; they are out of place and iconic. In terms of a literary construction, they are neither “hypotactic” nor “complete”; they do not refer to or mark a space that readers would easily recognize. By forcing readers to generate a new space, or a new field of reference—perhaps one born out of thinking that equates these objects with market decorum (fashionable clothes and manicured lawns and gardens)—Silliman achieves a double-edged critique. He (1) has offered a counter-practice to formal literary realism in
terms of the production and reception of texts and (2) has, assisted by readers’ experiences and worldviews, provided the grounds by which a critique of market decorum might come into focus. In doing so, he suggests alternatives both to market culture and market-driven reading practices. This dual critique stands as one of the key elements in *The Alphabet*.

Like the rhetoric of housing, the fashion industry manipulates consumers to maximize profits. By constantly reinventing itself and what’s in style (Silliman notes that this happens every six months), the fashion industry keeps turnover brisk. The only twist in the fashion style mentioned in the poem is the “collar up” on the jacket. This twist is not a revolutionary moment for the industry, just a tweak of width or cut. Ironically, these extremely minor changes in style, cut, and color maintain people’s interest, even moderate consumers. While it is easy to see how the fashion industry replicates the workings of market culture (and indeed drives market culture), and relatively easy to understand how the publishing industry, with its insistence on “realistic” writing, keeps people interested, the sprinklers/rain image is more complex. These images don’t appear to conceal anything, except, perhaps, each other. Walking under a sprinkler in the rain is like swimming in the rain. What’s most striking about the image, however, is its lack of logic. A lack of logic is, ironically, the logic of market culture itself. One is struck by the wastefulness of running a sprinkler in the rain. The illogical forces of marketing waste water, an especially precious resource in California, where *Hidden* appears to be set. The sprinkler, set on a timer, waters the landscape of an office complex, a shopping center, or some municipal area. The desired beautification aims not for beauty for beauty’s sake, or for the health of the environment, but rather enhancement for marketing purposes. In
considering ways to maximize profits, market CEOs assume that most people want to shop and work in well-landscaped environments, even if the practices deplete natural resources. Business interests, in this sentence and in much of Silliman’s work, routinely trump environmental concerns. The image of the illogical sprinkler reinforces Silliman’s critique of market culture, providing it a powerful environmental impulse.

The third motif of concealment in *Hidden* is the recurrent image of fog: “the fog bordering / on mist” (94), “Fog / burns off” (100), “At dawn, in fog, in the park / two men play tennis” (109), “Doves against fog, / the range of gray” (121), etc. The easy understanding of fog has to do with the poem’s location, which is likely San Francisco, where fog rolls regularly off the ocean. Silliman lived in the Bay Area in the 1980s, at the time of this poem’s composition. Many of his poems, in fact, contain fog as a motif, especially the works in *Demo to Ink*. But simply because fog is there, in the poet’s line of vision, doesn’t necessarily account for its pervasiveness as a motif. Motifs are chosen to express themes; what better motif of concealment is there than fog? Like William Faulkner’s repetition of “acrid dust” in “A Rose for Emily” or Eliot’s yellow smoke in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Silliman’s fog is designed to interfere and obfuscate, indeed to alter our perceptions of reality. Like royal fantasy, amusement park diversion, and realist fiction, fog symbolically prevents us from seeing the underlying market machinery at work in our lives. As my analyses of *Engines* and *Force* make clear, an isolated instance of concealment in a poem would not be enough on which to base these readings, but in these poems concealment comes in so many forms and from so many angles that it cannot be overlooked or excused as a coincidence of observation. Silliman asks in *Hidden*: “is recurrence itself sufficient / to state theme?” (85-6). I would
argue that it does more than “state theme”; it calls forth the imperative of performing this kind of criticism. In poems so centrally located in the social world, within the (often) mundane fabric of daily life, a social criticism based on formal analysis (the concealing couplets in *Hidden*) and the image motifs produces valuable insight because it takes into account what Watten sees as the unifying project of Silliman’s work, getting us closer to the world Silliman strives to describe.

**“The penultimate violence is to / fuck with my time”: Work in Paradise**

Like many of Silliman’s titles, *Paradise* offers a variety of possible interpretations. I begin by posing some simple questions that will lead us toward the theoretical backdrop that frames my analysis of the poem. What is paradise? What constitutes paradise in any society? Paradise, of course, originally designated untouched nature, the garden of Eden (the first definition provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*)—a place contaminated not by market development, class strife, or conscious desire, but rather by humans’ quest for knowledge—of themselves and the cosmos. Interestingly, the *OED* also lists paradise as a verb: “a. To make into Paradise. b. To place in Paradise, to imparadise; to make supremely blessed or beautiful” (www.oed.com). Considered as a verb, the concept of paradise involves human action. This is significant because if one does not believe in God, or take at face value scriptural texts, one does not believe that there was ever a Garden of Eden or that there is a heavenly afterlife. Certainly, however, one might believe in paradise without believing in a heavenly Paradise; one might believe or have faith in some utopia beyond what seems possible or likely in this world. For that paradise to be realized, human agency must be
involved; humans must not only believe in it and strive for it, but also *work* for it. “To
imparadise” involves work and struggle. The crucial question, then, is not “what is
paradise?” but rather, “what are the obstacles to paradise and where do these obstacles
come from?” I prefer to frame the question like this for two reasons. First, “obstacles”
implicate the idea of struggle, or *jihad* in a scriptural Islamic context, the idea that there is
something in the world to be overcome. In the context of Silliman’s *Alphabet*, that
“something” is the set of beliefs and practices associated with market culture. My
readings of Silliman’s poems seek to uncover those beliefs and practices, rendering them
available for critical examination. My reading of *Jones* emphasized environmental
*Paradise* differs somewhat because it explores the paths of work and home of people. It
portrays market culture’s exercise of social control as it is inscribed upon people in the
spheres of everyday life.

The quote that begins this section, “the penultimate violence is to / fuck with my
time,” actually comes from *Hidden*, and reinforces the notion that Silliman’s *Alphabet*
should indeed be considered one long work. His concerns and critiques overlap from
poem to poem. Often, his critiques are suggested in more than one poem; they are merely
clothed differently depending on the work’s guiding structure, grammar, and dominant
motifs. One factor that remains constant, however, is the fairly stable social position of
the speaker. His tone and patterns of observation—indeed his line of vision—remain
relatively unchanged in the works I’ve presented so far. That the speaker’s position and
sensitivities are relatively stable through the span of these individual poems supports the
notion of reading *The Alphabet* as one long poem; *Paradise* offers no real exception to
this pattern of stability. Even though the poem was composed and published some time before the works of *Demo to Ink*, the speaker’s observations, which are largely bound to the individual, domestic realm, with numerous images of house, yard, and neighborhood, resemble those of later works. Like the poems I’ve analyzed in this chapter and the last, *Paradise* suggests mechanisms of social control, but here the focus is on time and the traditional workday. Through the themes of temporality and standardization, this poem suggests processes of social control and conditioning.

Prior to beginning the analysis, let me say what first struck me about *Paradise*. Unlike most writers and academics who bow to political correctness and would never use the pronoun “we” (how dare one speak for *us*, after all?), Silliman is not afraid to use it, and uses it liberally in this poem—a willingness that I consider to be a nod to the necessity of unified struggle against the forces of market culture. To use the pronoun “we” is to push for paradise. Nevertheless, here, as in most of Silliman’s work, it is a single figure that mostly emerges as the actor, observer, and commentator. This leads to a critical quandary regarding Silliman’s use of pronouns, which is resolved precisely by seeing the work against the backdrop of Silliman’s socialist beliefs. In his merging of the “I” and the “we,” of the individual and the whole, he is working against culture’s tendency to privilege the individual. This pronoun inconsistency is no accident of composition; it is actually a carefully placed political suggestion. In the analysis to follow, I will sketch this figure’s (who, for simplicity’s sake, I will refer to as “he”) path and thoughts as he plods through a usual day of work. Because *Paradise* is so long, I am forced to limit my analysis to the first three paragraphs. I simply cannot maintain the kind of reading that I find most useful over the course of a sixty-three-page poem. I also think
that the first pages of *Paradise* offer significant clues to the overall themes of the work. In these paragraphs are pointers, or little signposts, that direct the rest of our reading.

*Paradise* is comprised of new sentences organized in paragraphs of varying lengths, some as short as two or three sentences and some as long as two or three pages. An abstract line drawing adorns the cover of my edition, curvy and Picasso-like with regions of beige. The central figure seems to be human, but its shape is distorted and distended by geometrical shapes. The drawing is somewhat disturbing; though I desire to see a person, I see neither eyes nor ears, just a general head and torso. Perhaps the cover of *Paradise* indicates something about the book’s theme. Missing eyes and ears, the figure lacks the ability to see and hear, and therefore lacks the ability to recognize the cultural forces that work upon it. The lines that distort and distend this figure—and render it non-human—represent the forces of market culture. They twist, push, pull, and shape with alarming vigor, isolating the figure in the center of the swirl. On the pages of *Paradise*, Silliman provides eyes and ears to this figure *and* to the reader, providing the language in which the forces of market culture might finally be recognized.

The beginning of the poem, however, announces that what’s fundamentally at stake in culture is language. Before coming to the culture of the standard workday—and the deceptive nature of time, movement, and materials—we must first examine Silliman’s nod to the power of language as a shaper of reality. He shows this power in the poem’s first sentences in form and in content.

Words slip, does type, hand around the pen a clamp, a clip. Visible breath against constructivist past. The shed crowded, write in a sweat. We celebrate the agreement of a new year, the head shrouded, bright in a knit suit. Loop conceived in a line, the spine with its regions, reasons. On
another, sweaters hang by the wrist to dry. The list is sweet. You lie. The eye is met by the season. (9)

The first sentence attempts to describe the writing process. For this poet, the writing process contains an aspect of mystery. The first sentence of *Paradise*, itself mysterious owing to unusual syntax and indeterminate punctuation, illustrates the mysteries inherent in the writing process. The form of this sentence requires unpacking. “Words slip” intends to describe the slippery nature of the signifier; the idea that words signify differently owing to changes in context, tone, and grammar is an insight—borrowed from linguistics—that informs much of Silliman’s work. Although strands of literary and linguistic theory (covered in Chapter 1) teach us that it is rather obvious that “[W]ords slip,” in Silliman’s hands the phrase conjures a literal interpretation, as well, which comes into play in the second part of the sentence, “does type.” Here is where the mystery begins. If “does” is conceived as a verb, then what is the subject of “does”? “Words…does type,” although ungrammatical, makes a kind of sense. Two other ways of reading the phrase emerge, as well: (1) “does” as “as does”: as such, the grammar of the two clauses is reconciled: “Words slip, as does type.” Interpreting the clauses like this helps turn the linguistic sense of “Words” into the more concrete sense of printed type, as in “the typewriter slips” and its output is therefore altered; (2) reverse the order of “does” and “type” to “type does”: this is another way of expressing the interpretation that compares words and type, again making the jump from the linguistic to the concrete. After these mind-bending formal manipulations, it is a pleasure to read the abundantly visual “hand around the pen a clamp, a clip.” But this phrase, too, contains a twist. While it’s relatively easy to interpret these words grammatically and syntactically, what does it
mean to equate the (presumably human) hand with a clamp or clip? Confronting this question in conjunction with the two following sentences will establish the critical groundwork of *Paradise*.

Silliman, at the end of the first sentence and in the next two, performs another kind of leap. Here, however, we do not go from the theoretical to the concrete (as much of his work does), but rather from the organic (the human) to the inorganic. Consider the three human images in the first three sentences (“hand,” “breath,” and “sweat”) and place them against their inorganic counterparts: “clamp” (or “clip”), “constructivist past,” and “crowded shed.” In a kind of image-driven, mathematical logic, Silliman has framed the dichotomy between humans and machines. He puts them against each to display difference. To conceive of one’s hand as a clamp for writing (or any other activity—typing, sewing, etc.) is to see that hand as a machine part, performing a function that is likely separate from the mind. This vision suggests the separation of the laborer from his product, for who controls the hand: the individual or the business? I will focus later on the socially constructed nature of time (“constructivist past”) and how it also contributes to the pervasiveness of market (especially work) culture. Inscribed, however, into the sentence about the past and human breath are additional questions. What possible dent in history can the human breath make? What is the role of the individual in the construction of history? Still other issues arise in “[T]he shed crowded, write in a sweat.” Although we have returned to the theme of the writing process, this sentence is imperative in both senses of the word: formally, it’s a command, and content-wise, a sense of urgency arises. “Sweat” suggests that time is running out and that the place is filling up more, I think, than it suggests hard work. The analysis of *Paradise* to follow advances the portrait
of a figure set against the wider culture or, in different terms, the human against the all-
too inhuman world. Market culture, as I have argued, conceals the forms of its own 
power and maintenance in its imperialist aims; it also conceals the form of the worker, 
lost in the world of minutes, commerce, materials, and promises.

The theme of time emerges prominently in this opening paragraph. “[A]gainst 
constructivist past […] We celebrate the agreement of a new year…” Humans shape time 
to account for their own desires, unable or unwilling to deal with it on its own terms. 
Celebrating the New Year on January 1 is an unnatural, artificial action. There is nothing 
inherently “new” about January 1. The only thing new about it is that it falls on the first 
square of the Western-Christian calendar. The more penetrating question, however, 
involves social constructivism. What constitutes the human desire to manipulate time, 
make schedules, and erect calendars? One could argue that it brings happiness, that we 
gain a certain satisfaction in the knowledge that we cross temporal thresholds, and that 
we gain contentment that we endure even as time passes. By this evening, for example, I 
will be content in knowing that I have worked several hours on this chapter, drafting and 
revising, making progress toward the end. Individuals feel content after eight hours on 
the job, happy that the cycle of work is once again complete. Deeper questions still 
linger, however, like where do these feelings of happiness come from? The market 
system has conditioned me to take pleasure in the ideals of progress and goal completion. 
It encourages me to delight (at least temporarily) in the advancement of my labor, 
whispering, “You have worked hard today. ‘This Bud’s for you’ because you have 
performed your duties (for that system) well. Now remember to do the same thing 
tomorrow.” Market culture, which is progress-oriented, emphasizes results, not the
intrinsic value of work. The value is the result, and the best way to measure those results is by placing labor against the constructed system of time. Time is always the measurement; time is indeed money.

Yet, as Silliman’s speaker notes, we do more than “agree” to this temporal scheme; we “celebrate” it. But what happens if we choose not to agree? Ancient cultures conceived time differently. “The eye is met by the season” evokes yet another understanding of time, the Native Americans’ more natural relation to it, in which time was measured by the cycles of tilling, planting, and harvesting. Their concept of time was considerably more genuine. Modern market culture, however, doesn’t merely condition our relation to time; it enforces it through a number of mechanisms. There is a time for work, a time for pleasure, a time to eat, and a time to sleep, and these notions are based on Christian scripture, for the Book of Ecclesiastes lists these outright. That “list is sweet” to the system because it functions to uphold exploitative labor conditions, but it’s rather sour to us because we’re the victims of that system. Indeed, much of Western capitalism is based on the Bible, which is another mechanism used to condition our lives. Silliman’s speaker alludes metaphorically to this conditioning process. As we “celebrate” time, our heads are shrouded so that we cannot see the processes at work; they remain invisible to us. The only thing “visible” to us, paradoxically, is breath. We cannot recognize the forces at work, but we know our humanity only through the felt sense of our breathing—and the system is even gradually stripping us of our ability to breathe by polluting the air with its byproducts of industrialization. We are victimized and deceived at every level so that the system may intensify and expand. “You lie,” Silliman writes, addressing the system and referring to its inherent deceptiveness. “You lie,” however, is
also a dart addressed to readers, who must deceive themselves in order for the system to maintain its hegemony. Such self-deception, however, is really little more than a kind of agreement to take part in the wider market system.

Silliman pays attention to time throughout *Paradise*, noting how market culture distorts both it and the environment. He’s often preoccupied with the cycles of labor and their (un)relation to time. “Sleep surrounds. Dawn’s crack invades dark at the horizon, somersaults underwater, duress. Naturalism is administered, bite-size. The charge is reversed, ticket torn in half” (9). Here the speaker presents the beginning of the workday. He is roused from sleep by “Dawn’s crack,” a force that “invades.” Optimistic readers might take this crack to be a crack of light through the bedroom window that naturally awakes the sleeper. In the context of Silliman’s scheme, however, it’s better to understand it as the crack of the alarm clock, jarring the sleeper, reminding him of his work duties. In the shower or bathing “underwater,” he feels the sting of “duress,” for he struggles between two spheres: the pull of work and the comfort of stillness. Where does he belong? At a foreign, hostile work place or at home? He chooses the former, or, more accurately, it’s chosen for him—he won’t survive if he doesn’t go. So he eats some breakfast cereal, advertised on the box as “natural” but actually chemical-laden. Nothing in nature is “bite-sized.” He boards the bus or subway, nameless and faceless like the rest of the commuters, just a number on a ticket that’s torn in half.

On the bus that weaves its way through traffic and the sprawl of suburbia or inner-city destitution, the figure, silently abhorring the hours that lie ahead, thinks about himself, his future, and what he sees before him. “Many await to be one for a time, then two. Cargo cult salute at reef. Nothing in your ear larger than New Hampshire, the oven
off. Clouds blot light of the sky” (9). He’s a middle-level manager, factory worker, or
computer programmer, but it matters little as to what he does because his life’s become a
waiting around: maybe he wants “to be one for a time”; maybe he wants to be the man in
charge just once in his life, taking orders from no one. Even number two would be all
right, the second in command, with a plush office on the ninth floor and long lunches. He
knows, however, that the system in which he finds himself (and constantly gives to), only
few get the chance to be number one or two; only few get the chance to be really
comfortable. So his thoughts wander to the landscape before him, which only makes him
more depressed. There he sees a kind of environmental clash zone, cargo mingling with a
reef and clouds of smoke blotting out the sun. Where can this man find comfort? Where
can he locate satisfaction? Neither at work nor in the land, for both have been
contaminated by the forces of market culture. What about home? “Did I leave the oven
on?” he muses, “I hope the house doesn’t burn down” (9). What about the newspaper
he’s picked up to read on the bus? Is there anything there that might bring him solace?
No, not there, either. There’s nothing in the news except more bite-sized bits that are easy
to swallow: tidbits from the world of entertainment or sound bites from the President’s
latest speech—easy to digest and easier to forget about.

The first three paragraphs of *Paradise* offer a partial sketch of the man’s workday.
By the beginning of the third, his shift has ended and he finds himself at home. Much of
*Paradise* is set inside the home, in kitchens and living rooms, where one is supposed to
be comfortable amid personal possessions. “It’s only five, the pleasure of nouns, cat coil,
the sky very low today in the cloth. By the pepper grinder a red pen has run dry.
Elizabeth Taylor, from pinup to gargoyle. Books slouch on a shelf” (10). Although the
man notes that “[I]t’s only five,” implying that it’s still early enough in the evening to do something enjoyable, the truth is that he’s too tired to do anything. The workday has drained him physically and emotionally, stripped the best of him, and this reality stands behind the “humane” market guise that guarantees free evenings and paid vacations for workers. All he can do is gaze around at the objects in the room, emblazoned with the promise that they’ll provide “pleasure,” but the objects that he sees are empty shells of their originals, supposed to be “realistic” and “authentic,” but actually neither. The promised “pleasure of nouns,” which I interpret as the promised “pleasure of material ownership” or the “pleasure of things,” like the man, turn lethargic and useless. The cat is sleeping, the pen is empty, the books “slouch,” and Liz Taylor, once the epitome of beauty and grace, has become ugly and menacing. The man gains no pleasure from this place or its objects, even though material pleasure is precisely what the cultural system of labor has promised him. Why, then, should he even work when the promised rewards are empty? The intrinsic values of work—personal satisfaction and the opportunity for social interaction—are lost in this system.

Whatever “paradise” might be, it’s a place without empty objects, promises, and deception. It’s a place where one’s desires aren’t always-already shaped and answered by the labor system. It’s a place where human needs dictate schedules, not the clock and calendar. It’s a place where the cargo ship doesn’t crush the reef and the clouds don’t blot out the sky. It’s a place where the market doesn’t penetrate every aspect of life. In *Paradise*, Silliman shows us what paradise is *not*, providing us the framework to see (through) the mechanisms and lies of market culture, which consistently damage the lives of individuals. This poem’s images of personal despair, hopelessness, and environmental
abuse occur throughout *The Alphabet*, but here seem more resonant owing to the domestic scene, usually considered comforting and warm. Not only are the endless objects that populate the poem mostly cold, empty, and useless, the figure that speaks to us through the pages also senses the meaninglessness, personally and politically, of life under market culture. Even the poet senses this despair, as later in the poem Silliman seems to address the reader directly, “I was working in a different poem. Descriptions of daily life decay” (19). He appears tired and disgusted with the work of writing about the decaying conditions of life, but almost all of his poems deal with the decay brought about by market culture. *Paradise* is simply the most pointed, owing to its heightened focus on home and workplace conditions and its portrayal of a single figure.

Both poems presented in this chapter, in fact, suggest the decay that resides in the interiors of market culture, and indeed life in late twentieth-century America. The key difference between them involves how Silliman uses form to depict the processes of social control and conditioning at work. The classical couplets of *Hidden* shield readers from realizing how the poem challenges dominant thinking. Silliman subtly turns the tables against market culture in that poem. *Paradise*, on the other hand, is more overt in its rhetorical methods and goals. Its paragraphs accrete with the dreary details of a figure’s life—perhaps our lives—as he moves about. Like *Jones*, *Paradise* is replete with objects, the detritus cast upon us by culture’s whim: old Liz Taylor photos and broken oven dials, pepper grinders and dried up pens. In this poem, life is totally and sadly materialized, and these materials build up and overwhelm in paragraph after paragraph. Whereas *Hidden* succeeds with subtlety, *Paradise* succeeds with overload.
Chapter 7: Academic Conventions: *Ink and Lit*

Throughout this study, I identify parataxis as the element that provides Silliman’s work its formal complexity. Silliman’s applications of parataxis through manipulations and innovations of grammar, syntax, and punctuation were consistently featured in the poems analyzed in the first four chapters. Though formal investigation remained important in my analyses in Chapters 5 and 6, my attention shifted to the works’ suggested critiques of market culture and its mechanisms of social control, especially in Silliman’s choice of images and the roles and positioning of writer and critic in determining ranges of meaning. The machinery of the market in Western societies, especially the United States, generates a kind of tension all its own. The forces of politics and the media constantly pull us in the digital age as we try to make meaning in life and reflect on our situations and desires. The present chapter will outline a slightly new shift in focus toward what I term “academic conventions,” the cultural factors at play in the construction of poetic texts, literary history and criticism, publishing, pedagogy, and syllabus construction. These factors, which are rooted in the schools of criticism and pedagogy left over from the strong influence of New Criticism in the mid-twentieth century, represent sets of standards that academics usually consider.

While experimental writers all the way back to the Beats and the Black Mountain poets challenged these conventions, perhaps the writers and critics associated with Language poetry in the 1970s and 1980s gained the most notoriety in challenging them. Arguably, historical and political timing and trends aided in their work. Their popularity coincided with a rise in postmodern, poststructuralist ways of approaching texts. Academic theory provided these writers (many of whom, ironically, distanced themselves
from the academy) tools for conceiving and composing texts. In doing so, they sought to reexamine poetic conventions. Different writers, of course, undertook the process differently. One of Silliman’s major contributions to the discourse was his conception of the new sentence, which, through grammar and syntactical subversion, opened the poetic line. He and many other writers employed parataxis as their preferred compositional technique. While the extent to which new forms of media in postmodern society (especially cable television and computers) influenced or guided their use of parataxis remains unclear, the work of Silliman, Perelman, Hejinian, Steve McCaffery, and others clearly reflects changes in social communications. In addition, these writers’ political awareness and risk-taking must be emphasized: they traveled to the Soviet Union before the Curtain fell, instigating dialogue and forming a community with other experimental writers and artists. Again, while the extent to which radical politics foments textual experimentation (or vice-versa) is unclear, the fact of Silliman’s social activism, at minimum, informs the content of his work, which challenges the conventions of market culture.

Another fact of Silliman’s life—the one relevant to this chapter—is his distance from institutionalized academia, which has been the focal point of the poetry industry since the middle of the twentieth century. The majority of American poets who have published books teach in colleges and universities. The majority of books of poems and literary criticism are published at university presses. Throughout his career, Silliman has published exclusively at small presses, which are regularly under-funded and under-staffed. Market forces are, of course, at work in the publishing industry. Although
Silliman has gained a degree of acceptance in the margins of academia as of late, his relation with mainstream academia remains tenuous. In our 2002 interview, he commented on the academy, first by noting the critical reception of his work:

Some of the most very positive articles about my poetry have struck me as being the crudest readings imaginable. And I think that one result of that is to reinforce some of the stereotypes of language writing or of my poetry, even when the article was intended in a helpful way.

A number of critics have dismissed Silliman’s work on the implicit assumption that it is—to borrow from Truman Capote’s criticism of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*—not writing, but *typing*. The assumption is that Silliman presents strings of signifiers without signification, and that assumption lingers, for example, as the unstated point of criticism in Oren Izenberg’s “Language Poetry and Collective Life.” Izenberg, who teaches at the University of Chicago, quotes from Silliman’s *Tjanting* to show what he terms its “anaesthetic qualities” (134), quickly glossing over its “questions about the simultaneity of representation and misrepresentation raised by a poem that begins by pointing away from itself: ‘Not this’” (135). By 2003, when *Critical Inquiry* published Izenberg’s article, issues (especially) of creative misrepresentation as a form of *process* (often in the shape of postmodern *ars poetica*) had been in vogue for more than twenty years in mainstream work: false starts and stops, bemused, writerly questions of whether or not these lines before me actually constitute a poem, etc. Silliman published *Tjanting* in

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7 A quick search on Wikipedia reveals, for example, that “in June 2006, Silliman taught at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa in Boulder, Colorado.” Once considered a fringe institute, Naropa has become a magnet for many mainstream writers. Nevertheless, Silliman’s recent blog comment concerning the 2007 Guggenheim Fellowships (see footnote 6 in Chapter 6) and his continued criticism of the School of Quietude confirm the tension that still exists between the mainstream poetry establishment and marginalized writers.
1981, applying to it some of the most radical tenets of modernism before it became part
of mainstream practice. Izenberg seems to overlook such innovations.

While such oversights are frustrating, two primary claims that Izenberg puts forth
in the article need to be challenged. First, he claims that *Tjanting* formally resembles
most other Language poems, arguing that the diverse body of work known as Language
poetry is a single, deadening mass:

And now imagine that there are thousands upon thousands of poems
bearing more than a passing resemblance to it, not in diction or sensibility,
but in paratactic structure, low affect, quizzical tone, and theoretical
orientation (because there are). Consider them together as a whole, as
“Language poetry”—one vast, overwhelming corpus whose internal logic
(like that of *Tjanting* itself) is the open-ended algorithm of addition. Soon
the rising tally of similarities places impossible demands on our attention
and will to articulate and catalogue the manifest differences between one
poem and another until the effort to immerse oneself in Language poetry
produces the sensation that language as Language poetry imagines and
manifests it has neither affect nor tone.

First, I believe that Izenberg’s understanding of Language poetry as an indistinct
conglomerate of work reveals his privilege for canonized poetry. After all, couldn’t the
same critique be posed with respect to virtually any other poetry trend or movement?

This project stands to combat Izenberg’s desire to lump together all Language poems.

Although I have clearly noted that Silliman’s *Alphabet* poems significantly resemble each
other in terms of form, content, and tone, I have described substantial differences not
only among poems but among the parts of them. My readings have shown that they can
be understood in various ways if attention is given to how form illustrates and impacts
content through parataxis. Nowhere in the article does Izenberg mention form except to
characterize the form of *Tjanting* (and by his own extension—all of Silliman’s work) as
“the open-ended algorithm of addition.” I must also reject his claim that Language poems
(and especially Silliman’s work) are simply not open—or designed to be open—to critical judgments. This claim is, of course, based on his notion that, because no real differences exist among Language poems (except in “diction or sensibility,” however vague these terms are), readers are simply “overwhelmed” by the mass and are unable to examine poems as individual units of art.

I will suggest that under these conditions, indifference and inattention to the specifics of what is being said is not only a plausible response, it is the strong response that such writing demands. It is precisely in our indifference to actually existing Language poems, in our perception that these poems do not mean to become available for judgments of taste—do not mean to be understood, or revisited, or even well-perceived—that we register an interesting sense in which Language poetry might be said to be social, as well as the significant sense in which Language poetry is experimental. (135)

For Izenberg to claim “that these poems do not mean to become available for judgments of taste—do not mean to be understood, or revisited, or even well-perceived” miscalculates the enormity of Silliman’s project because it fails, as many critics fail, to adequately examine the formal mechanisms of the poems and how they generate patterns of meaning. Because this critic has not examined the formal anatomy of Silliman’s project, he cannot make any conclusions about The Alphabet’s capacity for social and political critique. Izenberg also arrogantly implies that the poet’s intention is to eschew or remain free from critical discourse. Silliman certainly welcomes such discourse; too few critics, however, have engaged his poems formally. When they do engage form, they tend to consider what I call “macro-form,” the overall guiding structure of the work. To Izenberg’s credit, he uses these assumptions to frame Language poetry as an “interesting” social phenomenon—essentially devoting the rest of the article to the writers’ visit to the Soviet Union and the collaborative volume (Leningrad: American Writers in the Soviet
that came out of it—yet this is more a matter of illustration than criticism. Izenberg chooses not to tackle a Silliman poem on its own merits—with a critical eye to form—as he would, for example, an Eliot poem.

Fredric Jameson’s dismissal of Perelman’s “China” in 1984’s “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” as “a rubble of indistinct signifiers” also failed for its lack of formal engagement—and for his notion (as Izenberg would hold) that “China” lacks a speaker, or some central unit of observation. More harshly, Eliot Weinberger characterized Language poems “like a ghazal on amphetamines […] changing the subject with every line” (quoted in Rasula 282). This dismissal simply signifies a lack of comprehension and engagement with parataxis or similar formal strategies. Weinberger never seems to ask the question, “what does this method of composition aim to accomplish?” His reference to amphetamines resembles Jameson’s portrayal of “China” as “schizophrenic.” Using the pejorative language of mental health simply precludes any real examination of poetic form or engagement with alternative literary histories. Weinberger is just one of many anthology-makers who, according to Jed Rasula in “The Emperor’s New Clothes: Anthologizing American Poetry in the 1990s,” have systematically excluded Language poems from their collections. In his article, Rasula notes that:

Rasula lists here the most dominant, influential anthologies of the era. At the liberal arts university I attended in the 1990s, where experimental theory was in fact vogue, I distinctly recall being assigned two of those anthologies, the *Morrow* and the *New American Poets of the 1990s*. Moreover, even as poetry itself gained a kind of resurgence in the 1990s with the annual publication of the *Best American Poems*, many special-interest anthologies, and the rising popularity of street poetry and poetry jams, still no language-oriented work was placed at the forefront; to my knowledge, no Silliman poem appeared in the *Best American Poems* series until recently, even though he has been a dominant voice in American poetry for nearly forty years. Currently, he is the most engaged voice of criticism and poetry on the blogosphere. Silliman’s work failed to conform to the academy’s mold twenty years ago, especially in terms of form and tone, and in large part fails to conform today. Part of the rejection can be understood politically, but much of it stems from a technical rejection of the new sentence and the prose-oriented poem. The most compelling problem, however, with the critical reception

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8 While this list of anthologies is rather exhaustive, Rasula focuses on two anthologies in the article: J.D. McClatchy’s *Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry* and Weinberger’s *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*. His argument is that such collections—notwithstanding the provocative title of the latter—fail to account for the real diversity in American poetry over the last forty years, paying ultimate homage to mainstream writers like Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, and William Carlos Williams. Rasula states, “What makes an anthology lively and tractable are its internal contradictions” (275). According to him, these anthologies contain none.
of Silliman’s work, as I have mentioned, involves the paucity of criticism that examines form at all. Formal innovation, as this project has made clear, is the driving force behind *The Alphabet*. It demands thorough study for any real determinations about content to be made.

Nevertheless, Silliman keeps open the possibility of working in the academy full time someday.

Having said that, though, I’m hardly an absolutist in opposition to the academy or to teaching. I’ve taught at San Francisco State, UC San Diego, New College & the Naropa Institute over the years and enjoyed it every time. There is a genuine value to spending one’s time talking intensely about something you love with people who share that interest. But I am very sensitive to the proclivity of the academy toward abusive relationships, both of faculty and students. And while I’ve declined tenure track appointments, I’ve never been offered an academic position that did not propose to cut my earnings by at least 40 per cent per year.

But if a school were seriously interested in having me teach, I wouldn’t be shocked to find myself doing more of it in the future.

Silliman’s reference to “abusive relationships” in the academy is perhaps his most provocative observation here. In answering my follow-up question, he elaborates:

When I went to school in the 1960s, sexual harassment was the norm, not the exception, even figuring into tenure decisions at a place like Berkeley (as in gay professor declines to sleep with “faculty wives,” is not given tenure). It was all pretty blatant. By the 1980s, feminism had at least curbed the worst of such abuses, but the sort of in-fighting you saw on any professional journal over reviews and citations—or the sort of bad-faith reviews that I still see as normal in any “refereed” journal, people slamming other people over what are really issues of turf, not intellectual discipline, is all pretty distasteful. Refereed journals are the ultimate joke in the system of academic discourse, the bureaucratization of thought. The system of graduate student and adjunct faculty teaching is entirely exploitive. And the whole idea that people train for positions, only to be forced to move to these distant locales, is no fun either.

Much of it comes down to a system that has only marginally updated itself since its feudal origins that continues to exist at least partly outside of a
market economy. With “nothing” (i.e. no serious capital) at stake, humanities programs tend to function by economies of prestige. It’s not an accident that the two industries that come closest in structure to the academy are the Catholic Church and the penal system.

Inscribed into this dialogue, I would argue, is a kind of tension that will stand as a point of departure into the analyses in this chapter. This tension involves Silliman’s relations with and thoughts about the academy, which has become linked with poetry publication. With a few exceptions, during the last fifty years, “poetry” has become synonymous with university-based writers. To be a poet working outside of that rather insular environment, to note its “abusive” nature, and to make it clear that salary is a real factor in his decision not to teach on a regular basis, generate personal-institutional tension, played out as one of the dominant modes of critique in his work. The two poems I present in this chapter—Ink and Lit—are fairly explicit critiques of academic conventions. Even their titles suggest publishing and canonization. Ink is somewhat preoccupied with surfaces (though not to the extent that Jones is), depicting them as stacked pages of printed matter. Its motifs of ink and pages point toward the wider theme of publishing. Although the work contains no consistently guiding structure (it is comprised of paragraphs of varying lengths), Silliman’s sentence-level grammatical decisions reinforce the poem’s larger themes. Lit, on the contrary, does contain guiding structural forces. Most of its twelve sections are propelled forward by the repetition of the number twelve. Hesitant applications of the Fibonacci series are apparent in the work’s first two sections, and the rest of the work, with its apparent numerical boundaries, is also conducive to different kinds of sequential formal analysis.
More Surfaces and Scars: Ink’s Critique of Publishing

_Ink_, the last poem in the collected volume titled _Demo to Ink_, comes right before _Jones_ alphabetically, and previews _Jones_’s intense interest in surfaces. We should recall that _Jones_ is a work in which every sentence describes the ground. Literally a poem that remains at ground level, it gains its momentum as a social critique when we frame it environmentally. While _Ink_ is not as intensely preoccupied with surfaces, its surfaces are worth noting. In the first paragraph of the poem, they are the surfaces of the printed page, where

[Ink] spreads, content centered, then sinks into the fibrous mesh that forms the page. Each strand close up a cylinder, rough about the edges, wrapped in its own web, coated with pigment. Not to defy silence, but to define it. Thus letters shadow space. An invisible barrier is called a margin. A version of marking, any one at all, fills the territory in. The toy monster, dropped into a jar of water, grows vast, but is slime to my touch. The eyes, dotted, remain opaque, vicious. (143)

Silliman achieves a great deal in this opening paragraph, and its movement and rhetorical strategy indicate the movement and rhetorical strategy of the entire poem. He begins with a minute, literal examination of the printing process: actual ink colliding with the surface of the page. After examining the ink close-up—objectively and scientifically—he moves into different concerns. He goes from _printing_ as a literal process to _publishing_ as a figurative practice. This transition, which occurs with “Not to defy silence, but to define it,” constitutes Silliman’s first critique of historical practices in publishing and criticism in the poem. He even gives shape to the trope of publishing by referring to houses and stories a few pages later [my commentary is in brackets]: “They’ve added a story to the top of that house, giving the new wood a thin coat of primer paint [think of “story” as narrative and “primer” as an elementary school grammar book—these details seem to
invoke a literary quality], but never following up” (149). This line seems to suggest that, for the publishing industry, as is the case with a good deal of entertainment and big business, surface glitz is more important than foundational integrity, as it produces profit. Good, sound writing does not guarantee success or profit.

Silliman’s references to silence, defiance, and definition, however, are more valuable here, for he is noting the political aspects of the publishing industry, questioning its motives and concerns. He is questioning whose interests and what agendas does publishing serve, especially the big, wealthy publishing houses? Do these houses really give voice to people, the oppressed or the powerless (i.e., do they assist in “defy”ing silence?) or do they merely provide a platform for the powerful, who then in turn “define” silence? It is an important question. In her 1993 Nobel Lecture, Toni Morrison referred to Abraham Lincoln’s stance at Gettysburg, where he refused the language of definition, of easy summary. As she stated, “[…] his simple words are exhilarating in their life-sustaining properties because they refused to encapsulate the reality of 600,000 dead men in a cataclysmic race war” (http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html). Lincoln understood that no speech can or should attempt to define or even respond to such tragedy. Adorno had the same intuition when he famously proclaimed that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz. Words, creative or strictly rhetorical, would necessarily fall short, and their failings actually trample the legacies of the dead souls. Silliman re-ignites this stance within the framework of contemporary publishing. In their attempts to define silence (or tragedy, joy, or life), printed words “shadow space.” Language inherently falls short when compared with phenomena. As such, we should avoid definition and concentrate on the resistant capacities of language.
Silliman’s poetry responds adequately, I think, to the legacies of Lincoln and Adorno because it defies silence—the silences of platitude and standardization that work through dominant culture—through formal innovation and activist foundations of content.

The following two sentences in the passage, “An invisible barrier is called a margin. A version of marking, any one at all, fills the territory in,” reinforce the notion that the printed page has become the ideal forum for what Morrison terms “encapsulation,” a fancy word for making the complex seem simple in an effort to ease people’s consciences. It has become through the repetition of accepted standards. Standardization is a form of social control. We must—especially writers who desire to be published—follow standards of decorum and procedure. While Silliman doesn’t specifically refer to standardization in the passage, he does imply the existence of social and political barriers to publication. In these two sentences, he reverts back to the literal kind of examination that began the paragraph by noting the “margin” and “marking” of the page. These elements constitute the literal phenomena of the book, of the publishing process. Like the ink that has spread through the “fibrous mesh” of the page, open a book and you will see margins and marking. The critical twist in these sentences, however—the generator of tension—is the simultaneous presence of figurative ways of understanding publishing. A margin is an “invisible barrier,” a kind of arbitrary standard that separates the powerful from the voiceless. Like literacy itself, which is all too often an invisible or latent force of oppression, a literary standard like the margin is more than just a device. It is a device that has been accepted and normalized so as to become a social boundary. Silliman is suggesting that literary conventions, through their codes and jargon, constitute an exclusive, closed field. By the same token, the word “territory” in
the next sentence doesn’t simply refer to the literal territory of the printed page, but to the whole territory of the industry. The “toy monster” that the book has become—a symbol of this closed field—is “slime to my touch.” It dissolves upon contact, it’s nothing, and it’s dirty. Although its influence seemingly “grows vast” and claims to be inclusive, it remains exclusive. For the most part, it rejected Silliman’s work. The final sentence of the passage is an additional example of Silliman’s dual representation of the literal and the figurative aspects of publishing: “The eyes, dotted, remain opaque, vicious.” The dotted “eyes” (or i’s), opaque and black on the page, constitute literal aspects of the book. “The eyes,” however, are “vicious” in their evaluation; here is the figurative aspect of publishing. A closed field inherently desires to remain closed because power interests and money are at stake.

I have tried to demonstrate that Silliman’s rhetorical strategy in the above paragraph involves a sliding movement between the literal and the figurative, the literal view and the figurative assessment. Although poets have always achieved this sliding, (it was, after all, Percy Shelley’s method of composition in poems like “Mont Blanc”), Silliman displays a kind of “hyper-application” of it by sliding within and among individual sentences. Without examining sentences and parts of sentences in isolation, this sliding would be hard to recognize. The movement that I am describing is another example of the “back and forth” action (the “here and there” motion) of Silliman’s work. This motion, as I have similarly described it in previous chapters, generates tension in the texts, and, just as importantly, provides spaces for readers to enter and make critical assessments. Tension, from this perspective, may be conceived as an application of paratactical principles that allows (and incites) readers to form critical assessments.
Silliman performs his role as writer by inserting this space. If Silliman were merely being critical, then perhaps his work couldn’t properly be called poetry at all. Perhaps that space he creates for readers (which is the outcome of the paratactical mode of composition) is one of the things that lends his work its truly creative element.

The rest of *Ink* follows the same pattern of literal-figurative investigation, but with a sturdier nod toward the figurative aspects of publishing and the printed word in general. The printed page—in many different forms—continues to be the work’s dominant motif, but the beginning of the next paragraph presents the motif from a different perspective: “Slightly palsied loping gait of hippie circular distributor, long blond ponytail but a reddish beard, moving slowly door to door, walking just part way up the steps to each porch, in his own world beneath walkman headphones” (143). Note the contrast in images in the first half of the sentence: we do not normally associate the distribution of circulars with hippies. Two social phenomena collide here unexpectedly in the hippie and the ads that he’s distributing. How does one begin to make sense of this weird conflation? An analytical clue can be found at the end of the sentence with the addition of the walkman to the image set. The walkman appears frequently in Silliman’s poems, especially in *Demo to Ink*. (Frequently he observes a figure with a “walled-off” look with dark sunglasses and walkman.) The introduction of the walkman forces us to consider the hippie (here “in his own world” listening to music) differently. He’s no agent of the marketing industry with his circulars. The presence of the walkman calls into question his interest in the work at all; in fact, it distracts him and likely *separates* him from his work. This hippie in *Ink* should therefore be seen as a cog in the machine.
Aware of his alienation from market powers, he materializes his separation by way of musical distraction.

Other forms of print show up elsewhere in the poem, and they, too, are accompanied by or promote cultural commentary.

I think that was a print shop, but now the building’s vacant, scars on its surface where the signs were removed. Generations of graffiti gives layered effect. Lines of seniors (tiny filipino women) queued up outside the storefront travel agent’s office, waiting for the bus to Reno. Skimming *Crusoe*. (144)

The “print shop” obliquely alludes to the publishing industry. The now-vacant walls of the building have become printing surfaces. We should emphasize two aspects of these walls and note how they work together to form a theoretical construct. First, they are covered by “[G]enerations of graffiti,” the “layered effect” visible after multiple coatings of spray paint. This image might be read as a symbolic representation of the history of publishing itself, where layers of print stack up (literally) on library stacks and bookshelves in stores and (figuratively) on syllabi and anthologies. The fact, however, that “the signs were removed” from the storefront calls for more complex analysis. From the perspective of modern linguistic theory, when “the signs [are] removed,” the function of the sign itself is vacated. When the sign as a system of referential designation is vacated of its power, then the signifier retains the capacity to point to multiple levels of meaning. This opening up of the processes of creative composition and reception challenges established, standardized ways of understanding texts. Imagine the possibilities for poetry if the signifier “chair” didn’t necessarily have to refer to this object I’m sitting on. The possibility is chaotic and somewhat scary, but also liberating. While I don’t wish to endorse such linguistic experimentation in this project, I do raise it
as a possibility. It is important to note because, as even Silliman raises in *The New Sentence*, the maintenance of the traditional sign system can lead to one-dimensional, referential language, which is often the language of oppression. In “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World,” he suggests that referentiality can turn language into “a system of commodities” (11), best exemplified in modern market culture by the realist novel. The language of realism, as noted in Chapter 6’s analysis of *Hidden*, actually obscures objects and phenomena, dictating what people ought to see. Enacted especially through publishing and education, realism can demand an oppressive single-mindedness.

To develop a social critique, we should focus on the folks in line waiting for the bus. These “tiny filipino women” are not only diminutive in stature, but also small, weak, and voiceless in the nation’s cultural fabric. Silliman reinforces the notion of their strength and stature by not capitalizing the “F” in filipino. They hold no capital; they hold no power in the market system. Silliman’s implicit pun on capital (lack of capital letter/lack of financial capital), however, is complicated when we consider where the tiny women are headed: to Reno, one of the capitalist powerhouses of the West, a center of the gaming industry. Are the seniors going to the casino to gamble and possibly double their social assistance checks? Although that would appear inconsistent with their social standing, it does demonstrate the enticing grip of the system—in particular the gaming industry—which tends to target the elderly and the poor. The final sentence of the passage, “Skimming *Crusoe*,” a fragment with an absent subject, begs the question of who is skimming Daniel DeFoe’s famous novel of colonial abandonment and survival, a novel which has, by the way, recently been invigorated with anti-capitalist interpretations. The continuity of the passage suggests that the filipino women are doing
the skimming. If so, how would that affect our understanding of them? Recall that Robinson Crusoe, an adventuresome sailor on a merchant ship, was lashed by a storm at sea, carried through the “womb” of the waves, and deposited (given a new life, “reborn”) on a deserted island. He became a new person on the island as he struggled to survive.

What if we place the filipino women in the role of Crusoe? Their similarities are striking. Both itched for something new in life, something built upon the idea of economic opportunity. Yet both found themselves stranded in vastly different environments with few friends where survival itself (eating, communicating, etc.) became a daily struggle.

From a provocative critical perspective, DeFoe’s novel suggests the plight of immigrants.

The physical landscape of *Ink* is also troubled, disturbed by stacks of printed material. On several occasions in the poem, Silliman observes stacked newspapers or other kinds of printed material: “Two doors down, the old woman’s crumpled newspapers into plastic bags, piled high atop one another under the corrugated fiberglass awning of the back porch where they’ve dried, yellowed, cracked, begun to crumple into dust” (149); “By election day, every power pole in town will be thick with posters” (149); “Abandoned gas station covered with campaign signs” (150-1); “Grandfather tumbling in the air, falling three storeys from a mountain of old newspapers at the pulping plant (wrists and ankles shatter on impact)” (167); “The train is empty now, end of the line, newspapers strewn about the car […]” (171); and, in a different vein, we are given stacked ink in a different form, the pen, as Silliman writes, “People chuckle at the idea of seven pens in my pocket” (171). Literally, all of these references could be seen as mere detritus stacking up and polluting the environment. On this level, they are remnants of the real discord between the publishing industry and the environment. Newspaper will soak
through and dissolve in time, but not before altering the environment. The possibility that these observations may be read figuratively, however, is more interesting. Perhaps these multiple references are meant to describe the history of writing itself, to denote it as one of the poem’s most powerful themes. In Silliman’s handling, this history appears as a series of stacked surfaces, of old writing stacked upon old writing, through the generations. This assessment poses a critique of English literary history, for nothing fresh appears in the portrayed scenes. Although he doesn’t refer to “literature” explicitly, he invokes a few of its satellite contexts in printing, publishing, and education, as in “Boarded windows of an abandoned school postered over” (166). In all of these contexts, the materials of writing are decaying. In a poem thematically concerned with literary conventions, Silliman suggests that the products of the old literary conventions are gradually dying, giving way to new modes of creative work and critical response. Although the old school has been abandoned, and one cannot see inside because of the posters, the new activity in literary creation is outside the school, anyway. While I don’t think that Silliman is totally convinced that the future of poetry lies outside of the academy, he envisions a more thriving, influential poetry scene elsewhere.

Arguably, Silliman’s critiques of publishing and other aspects of market culture are rendered even more powerful because he maintains a detached, toned-down perspective. How much poetry fails because it’s too journalistic, designed to shock readers with, say, horrifying images of poverty or violence? Designed to move readers to such emotional pitches that criticism becomes impossible? Silliman avoids the journalistic trap by detaching his voice, by removing it from the visceral scene, and in doing so actually provides space to readers, giving them the opportunity to think about
and analyze what he’s described. By avoiding extreme poignancy and emotional pitch, he
does a service to readers, actually encouraging them to participate in the processes of
making meaning in the poem. This fact is worth noting, as critics of Silliman frequently
note the overly rhetorical nature of his work. While there are explicit rhetorical moments
in his work, the best passages (like the ones above) suggest critiques of society and
politics in non-theoretical terms.

“so many little resiliencies”: The Formal (Dis)Continuities of Lit

Casual readers of Silliman’s poetry would likely be acquainted with two of his
early works, *Ketjak* and *Tjanting*, both of which adhere to the Fibonacci mathematical
sequence in structure. The Fibonacci sequence, once the domain of numerologists and
statisticians, goes as follows: 1-1-2-3-5-8-13-21- etc. The continuation of terms in the
sequence is based on the sum of the preceding two terms (2 is the sum of 1 and 1, 3 is the
sum of 1 and 2, and so on). In the case of Silliman’s work, the sentence, or, more
precisely, the number of sentences in a paragraph, constitutes the set. In his application,
the first paragraph of the work contains one sentence, the second paragraph contains one
sentence, the third paragraph contains two sentences, the fourth paragraph contains three
sentences, and so on. The paragraphs become progressively longer, and terms often
repeat (albeit sometimes in different forms) from paragraph to paragraph. In theory, the

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9 In my estimation, Silliman’s most resounding moment of pure rhetoric is this tidbit,
which is a paragraph in itself from the middle of *Demo*: “The discourse of Marxism
obscures the state’s monopolization of capital within the form of the state (them): the
discourse of individual liberty and democratic choice obscures capital’s ability to
predetermine desire through mass market technology (us)—socialism (economic
democracy) nowhere exists” (18-9). The passage performs subversive labor because it
stands out as an anomaly, surrounded by figurative representations of the same concept.
sequence could be applied with different terms and variables. Poet A might use individual words as the terms; poet B might apply it using syllables. In *Ketjak* and *Tjanting*, Silliman applied the sequence exactly, following through consistently to the end. *Ink*, on the other hand, constitutes an inexact formal application of the sequence. A surface glance at the poem reveals what looks like the Fibonacci sequence. Its first two paragraphs contain roughly the same number of sentences, the third paragraph a few more, and so on, giving the appearance of rigid application. Upon closer inspection, however, *Ink* merely adheres to the sequence *visually*. But even with an inexact application of the sequence—or a hint of application—Silliman provokes speculation, causing careful readers to count sentences and paragraphs. Although it’s a rather painstaking endeavor, he succeeds in making readers pay increased attention to form with a mere visual approximation of a recognizable form.

The first section of *Lit* (1987) appears to hearken back to the form of *Ketjak* and *Tjanting*. It looks as though Silliman applies the Fibonacci sequence precisely in this section of the work, reminding readers right away to attend to the poem’s form. Upon closer inspection, however, the sequence is not applied precisely. It begins but quickly discontinues, leaving the reader to speculate why Silliman merely toys with the form. I believe that he wants readers to pay attention to form and make cognitive connections among his works. He means to heighten anticipation and awareness. I believe that his approximation—his inexactness—is designed to highlight formal discontinuity and therefore to subvert what otherwise might be an “easy” reading experience. It constitutes an application of what Bernstein calls “impermeability.” He claims a middle ground
between sustained formal engagement and arbitrariness, and the fact that he clings to this middle ground should shake readers from their usual patterns of approaching texts.

Notwithstanding its inexact application of the sequence, *Lit* is nonetheless a visually arresting, repetitive, inventive poem, initially engaging readers at the level of form. It is a variable form poem structured in twelve Roman-numbered sections. Twelve is the dominant mathematical term of the poem, and, arguably not by accident, “L” is also the twelfth letter of the alphabet. (*Lit* is Silliman’s “L” poem.) These rather obvious observations form the foundation by which we approach the following basic analytical questions: Why write a poem in variable (mixed) forms? What is it meant to achieve? Why not be consistent throughout, as in *Tjanting*? Why is “12” important here, aside from being the alphabetic value of “L”? And perhaps most importantly, how do these variable forms contribute to meaning in the work? As with my other readings in this study—which all begin with explorations of form at some level—I will describe how *Lit* offers a critique of standards and practices. Because this chapter deals with academic conventions, it is appropriate that this section should deal directly with applications of traditional forms in poetry. While this study is not an historical work (historians of poetic form would explore how and why certain forms came to be privileged), it is my duty to show how Silliman interrogates the systematic standardization of forms by uprooting and manipulating them. The formal discontinuity of *Lit* should be understood as a challenge to the continuity of formal standardization, which is part of the continuous process of standardization on a wider cultural scale. Before getting to the important work of analysis, however, we must describe form and the appearance of form in *Lit*. I will be focusing on the first two sections. Again, as with most of Silliman’s work, it is
impossible to sustain the kind of detailed formal analysis necessary to come to valuable conclusions across the entire poem (*Lit* is a book unto itself, seventy pages long).

The anxious critic, however, might already be speculating as to what Silliman means to reveal with the title of the book. Many of his titles function as open signifiers; my reading of *Ink*, for instance, focused on the publishing aspects of the word, while another’s might work from its homonym—Inc.—and its corporate significance. English literary critics would likely read “Lit” as the shortened version of “Literature.” There are, however, other ways of interpreting the title, and these lead toward different readings and critical priorities. “Lit” is a verb form, of course, meaning “illuminated.” Does Silliman wish to illuminate readers with this work? Better, does he wish to illuminate the history of form in poetry with this work? “Lit” is not only a shortened version of Literature; it might also be short for “literal” or “liturgy,” which comes from the Greek and refers to a set of codes for worship. Interestingly, the third dictionary entry for “liturgy” reads, “a customary repertoire of ideas, phrases, or observances” (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate*). From this perspective, a liturgy could represent a standardized set of religious or behavioral codes, or a set of rules. Poetry studies have their own sets of standardized rules and practices, often coded as forms. An analysis of “Lit” as “Liturgy” can take into account the dominant literary interpretation (of “literature”), as well. All of these interpretations could be made to work, and all could be made to work in tandem; I will discuss these implications more fully when I come to the work’s capacity for critique.

As noted earlier, the first section of *Lit* appears to adhere to the Fibonacci sequence. More specifically, section I operates with individual sentences as terms. Recall that the one-word expressions function as new sentences in Silliman’s project.
Blue.
Lube.
Big. Boy.
Then. Theme. On time.
Sloop. Lien. Armor. Samantha’s. After the ballgame. Utilitarianistic. Pronominal Andrewsiana (s)talks without. (1)

Up until the fourth paragraph, everything goes according to plan. The first two paragraphs contain one sentence apiece, the third contains two, the fourth contains three, the fifth contains five, but the sixth contains six, not eight, as the Fibonacci sequence would dictate. Why does Silliman choose to rupture the sequence in this way, while at the same time making it appear as though he’s following it? Why does he discontinue the sequence? These questions involve Silliman’s visual representation of the series. From the outside, these paragraphs appear to correspond to the sequence, and thus we might speculate that Silliman’s point of critique is the rather obvious one: individuals fail to see beyond the surface of things. He is specifically calling upon readers to see beyond the surface gleam of forms into what that surface conceals. More generally, he is challenging readers to deal with form in the first place. The impact of his innovations has hitherto been insufficiently explored. For example, I can attempt to describe the form and what it’s supposed to accomplish, but I may fail to ask the fundamental question of what the form conceals. Asking what form conceals can promote a discovery of forms of social control. I referred to this point in my analysis of Engines, which interrogates the sonnet
form. In rupturing the easily described form, as he does here, Silliman also ruptures the easy position of the reader who fails to (or refuses to) address how poetic form itself functions as a form of social control. With this rupture, he is effectively mocking the pseudo-authority of readers who (1) see what appears to be a poem guided by the Fibonacci sequence and (2) then produce a commentary based on preconceived notions of the form. Such commentary is not really commentary at all; it is merely rehashed argument based on previous work. To put it concisely, Silliman—with his unique manipulations of form—forces readers to see and respect the language anew. He rewards readers who (1) are patient enough to do the work and (2) refuse to fall back onto old ways of seeing. In the poems of The Alphabet, he constantly complicates by forcing the refinement of old notions. In Section I of Lit, his refinement becomes clear after further study. It’s not so much that he’s not following the established sequence; he is creating a new kind of sequence. By the sixth paragraph, it becomes apparent that Silliman designates the number of the paragraph in sequence by having it consist of that same number of sentences. Thus, the sixth paragraph contains six sentences, the seventh paragraph contains seven sentences, and so on. Without first retracing the (ruptured) Fibonacci sequence, however, readers might overlook this new sequence. We cannot rely solely on historical patterns in interpreting Silliman’s work.

Section II of Lit helps to advance the analysis. Like the preceding section, it begins with a precise application of the Fibonacci sequence. The twist in section II, however, is that the line (each line consists of a single sentence), not the sentence or paragraph, is the sequential term. The beginning of the section illustrates:

Bead it.
Throngs lean aslant.
The barking is set to strings.
Numbers harden.

Green Ford emerges as pump siphons basement.
Fed Workers Face Furloughs.
Or that new math predicts cholo in a hairnet.

Whipped by street sounds or small scale of Central Park Zoo.
Bloom on the phone tree.
Heat’s moisture thumbprints window.
Bites lips, bites glass.
Bodega stanza under new management sells time. (4)

The fifth paragraph in the sequence contains five lines, which is the sum of the number of lines in the two preceding paragraphs. Although it is unlike *Tjanting* (where words and sentences repeat in sequence), here Silliman seems to maintain the sequence until the end of the section. The sixth paragraph contains eight lines, the seventh paragraph contains thirteen lines, the eighth paragraph contains twenty-one lines—but, wait—the ninth paragraph contains eighty-eight lines! Again the sequence breaks down; again Silliman ruptures it. Almost as if to deceive readers who are looking for an easy pattern, Silliman presents a visual approximation of an established pattern but quickly ruptures it. In section I, my notice of the rupture led me to discover a nonce form in which the *n*th paragraph contained *n* number of sentences. Is there a nonce form in this section, as well? The tenth paragraph contains ninety-nine lines; the eleventh paragraph contains 143 lines. I see no regular pattern emerging here, but that is not to say that an experienced decoder or mathematician couldn’t find one. What I do notice is that this section contains only eleven paragraphs (section I contained twelve), so Silliman has effectively inscribed a
second rupture into this section by rejecting the “12” motif prevalent throughout the rest of the work.

Minus the “11-based” section II and three other sections (III, IV, and X), all of Lit’s sections rely on numerical applications, divisions, and multiples of the number 12. For example, section IV consists of twelve paragraphs of twelve sentences each, section V consists of four sets of twelve numbered sections, and section IX consists of four twelve-line stanzas. The most unique sections, however, are VII and VIII. To read section VII, one must rotate the book ninety degrees counterclockwise, as that is how the typeset is positioned. The entirety of section VIII consists of a quote from Henry David Thoreau. I will focus on these sections as I search for more detailed ways of considering form; locating them will help us arrive at some tentative conclusions regarding the meaning of Lit with respect to the fundamental questions posed earlier. The Thoreau quote of section VIII, dated November 12 (not surprisingly), 1851, could be read as a statement describing Silliman’s own compositional style:

“Write often, write upon a thousand themes, rather than long at a time, not trying to turn too many feeble somersets in the air—and so come down upon your head at last. Antaeus-like, be not long absent from the ground. Those sentences are good and well discharged which are like so many little resiliencies from the spring floor of our life—a distinct fruit and kernal itself, springing from the terra firma. Let there be as many distinct plants as the soil and the light can sustain. Take as many bounds in a day as possible. Sentences uttered with your back to the wall.” (44)

The sentences of Silliman’s poems seem to touch upon “a thousand themes”—or, better, a thousand places, objects, people, sounds, and observable phenomena. From these myriad phenomena, he establishes a certain number of themes that come to light through careful analyses of form and content. Working with these themes helps readers pinpoint
the poet’s areas of social and political critique. From the multifaceted array of Silliman’s forms and content, we are able to locate various strands of critique, which tend to repeat across the poems of *The Alphabet*. One simply has to substitute the word “critiques” for Thoreau’s “resiliencies,” and the parallels become clear. *Lit*, at least from the perspective of form, is *The Alphabet’s piece de resistance*, for this is the poem where Silliman most fully materializes the essence of Thoreau’s admonitions. Each section is like a “distinct fruit”: the differences among the sections resemble the differences among fruits. Apples and pears are similar in form and organic structure (like sections XI and XII), but yield different tastes, colors, and shapes. Silliman is also drawn to Thoreau’s language of nature. I have presented a few of his poems that respond to today’s environmental crisis; *Jones*, especially, is derived from his observations of the *terra firma*. The “bounds” to which Thoreau refers might be understood in modern poetic discourse as “leaps”:

Silliman’s project is full of creative, stylistic, and structural leaps—quick shifts in image, direction, and grammar. It is precisely Silliman’s willingness to make leaps—sometimes gracefully, sometimes clumsily—that gives his work its distinct flavor. Making leaps or “taking bounds”—either through form or content—provides space for readers. After all, such activity is really another way of talking about parataxis. Although one would be hard-pressed to call Thoreau’s compositional style paratactic, he recognizes in the above passage the paratactical quality of the natural world (its absolutely changeable, always-dynamic nature), to which his work responds at many levels.

Section VII might be read as the practical application of Thoreau’s compositional theory. First, it disorients readers from the very beginning with its unusually rotated typeset, pulling them from their comfortably established reading practices. By implicitly
asking readers to adjust their processes, Silliman pushes for adjusted results. In other words, not only the experience is new, but what’s received from the text is also new. Is the unusual orientation of the text designed only to jar readers’ expectations of how a page should look? Is Silliman disorienting readers merely for the sake of disorienting them? I believe that there is more at stake here. He is working from the idea that forcing readers to reposition themselves during the act of reading will generate new ways of reading. We tend to see and understand texts differently when they fail to conform to our usual expectations. First, the rotated page lengthens the line, making Silliman’s work appear even more prose-like than usual. Work that looks more like prose fosters a different kind of critical reception, as the reader will be more cognizant of the work as prose. Obviously, we are taught to read prose differently than poetry. It alters the whole way we approach the text in the first place. Different expectations yield different results. I posit that differences in ultimate experience stem mostly from differences in mental preparations based on expectations. Reading is the same way. Our different expectations with respect to poetry and prose (i.e., our biases) affect the reading experiences in question. Although the words might be exactly the same, the experiences will be different. It might be argued, therefore, that Silliman is not just disrupting readers’ expectations; he’s also challenging their biases regarding the journey itself known as reading.

To extend the argument, this challenge involves not only a kind of alteration within the context of the individual poem or section of the poem, it also constitutes a rethinking of the entire set of pedagogical practices and standards involved in text reception and response. *The Alphabet* is a powerful, provocative literary work because it
challenges, with almost every poem at every level, our normative reading methods and expectations. Silliman’s constant formal disruptions—when they are given ample attention—reveal mechanisms of social control and standardization and pose critiques of established social and political practices. No critic of whom I’m aware has devoted sufficient attention to understanding the impact of Silliman’s formal maneuvers and innovations; this is natural, as no critic has yet put forth an outline of *The Alphabet’s* formal anatomy in any detail.

Finally we may offer a few answers to the fundamental questions raised earlier. With a few notable exceptions (the multi-form works of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, to name a few), the classic English literary canon is populated with works that adhere to the formal principle of consistency, no matter the length or breadth of the works in question. While a continuum of conformity and innovation exists in any body of literature, it seems that for a work to be embraced into the canon, it must (1) adhere to the formal nature of its predecessors, even with slight variations or (2) forcibly challenge the established field with work so new and daring that it cannot be classified. This high modernist ideal was exemplified by Pound’s declaration to “Make it new.” Silliman’s critical reception (or, actually, lack of critical reception)—and his basic exclusion from the canon—should be partially understood in terms of his refusal to fit into one of the above categories. Recall that he’s always-already excluded because of his job outside of academia. While that fact is at play in his exclusion, I would posit that, because his work assumes some middle territory between formally adhering to and completely challenging the modernist tradition, most mainstream critics today simply don’t know where to place him. Because these critics haven’t fully considered (or are blind to) the categories
mentioned above, they resort to dismissals based on the idea (most frequently lodged in
the 1980s) that his work lacks reflection and thematic consistency. My analyses have
proven that this is simply not the case. His work displays a great deal of consistency, both
in form and content. The problem, therefore, is that he is not consistently consistent, nor
consistently disruptive (especially in terms of form), nor consistently poignant, nor
consistently political, nor consistently anything, for he understands that it is precisely his
inconsistency (as an extension of parataxis) that invites readers into the meaning-making
process. His work resists easy categorization; ironically, however, it is that resiliency that
makes critical reception of his work so daunting and rewarding. And *Lit*, in the final
analysis, may be his most resilient and daunting (and rewarding) work.

While many poets and critics pay lip service to the idea that form is a
materialization of content, very few follow through on that notion. Very few poets
interrogate form in such a way as to understand its historical implications, and even fewer
consider form’s cultural implications as it works in the maintenance of standards.
Silliman’s interrogations of form work on several levels: they pose critiques of standard
academic and publishing practices (and sometimes celebrate their decay), push readers to
rethink their expectations of the reading process, and urge poets and critics to regard form
carefully in the composition process. And above all, Silliman’s formal manipulation and
interrogation, his establishment and subsequent rupture of patterns, and his creation of
nonce and visually arresting forms all work to invite readerly participation. He opens
spaces between the expected and the unexpected, between the known and the unknown,
and between the standard and the avant-garde, and these spaces are another way of
discussing parataxis in his texts. Sometimes the spaces are narrow, sometimes they are
wide. Whatever the case, readers find locations from which to think against and alongside the poems.

The next chapter concludes this study. In it, I will analyze Non as a poem—in the tradition of Tjanting—of negative energy. Hegel’s dialectic informs my reading of the work, the themes of which involve resistance at a number of levels: to self, to others, to society, and to the State. I conclude the chapter by arguing that Silliman’s use of language should ultimately be understood as reformist in its capacity to empower readers and to make them articulating citizens.
Chapter 8: Parataxis and Resistance: Non

Form and Resistance

In terms of the poems’ overall structures, the formal anatomy of Silliman’s Alphabet varies. From the long, chunky paragraphs of Paradise and Ink to the trim couplets of Hidden to the complex, multi-formal Lit, there are real differences among the forms. There are also similarities. Silliman works with the sonnet form in more than one work, ruptures the Fibonacci sequence in a couple of works, and carefully puts together paragraphs with equal numbers of sentences in many poems. His application of parataxis through various devices and innovations, especially through grammar, syntax, punctuation, the interrogation of traditional forms, and even titles, however, holds the poems of The Alphabet together. As I have argued, parataxis in these poems is a critical practice designed to provide interpretive spaces to readers. Multiple readings of the poems based on consideration of context and form can thrive and come to light in these spaces. Parataxis, in the case of Silliman’s work, often results in a clash of expectations or a subversion of normal reading practices. Perhaps it’s best illustrated by way of a concrete example. (I presented the example in a previous chapter, but it will help to refocus the discussion here.) The Alphabet begins in Albany with a new sentence that has no predicate: “If the function of writing is to ‘express the world.’” In a normal grammatical construction, readers would expect to be given a predicate for that sentence, as in this hypothetical example: “If the function of writing is to ‘express the world,’ then Albany expresses it at the level of family relationships.” While that was not my specific argument, I might use the hypothetical predicate to accomplish two things. First, I would
use it to argue that Silliman has produced essentially what can be termed “a poetry of conditionals” with respect to the reader’s role. The use of the conditional without predicate constitutes a paratactical application (and therefore a dynamic between the stated and the unstated), which in turn provides space against which the reader might occupy to respond to the conditional. In that space, the reader can state the unstated as long as it’s supportable by motif and context (in my example, the bit about family relationships); that statement constitutes the first part of the critical process, guiding readers toward supportable conclusions that they may come to regarding the text. I outlined this process in Chapter 1. Second, Silliman’s application of parataxis at the textual level should in many ways be understood as his own creative/critical response to the last twenty-five years of life in the United States.

In previous chapters, I’ve outlined his responses to the symptoms of market culture. In this chapter, I will posit Silliman as democratically empowering, owing to how his formal practices in *Non* offer ways of understanding resistance. Here we might advance a thesis: Silliman’s application of parataxis (through grammar, punctuation, etc.) is an effort to illustrate the social tension (suggested in *Paradise*, for example, as an abyss between the individual and the labor system) that I have been describing. In *Non*, Silliman’s application of parataxis through form should be analyzed in terms of the Hegelian dialectic, especially Hegel’s conception of the negative. For Hegel, the negative is really a positive, insofar as it moves the dialectical situation toward reconciliation and resolution. It might also be framed in terms of resistance, and will assist me in arguing that *Non* is a poem about resistance in many aspects. To understand how, we must first consider form.
**The Negative Energy of Non**

With its opening tercet, *Non* (1994) announces itself as a poem concerned with form:

So then go back  
to the old forms  
as if they were forms at all (9),

Silliman writes, in a tone that I find both resigned and challenging. Whether we consider the tone resigned or challenging, or both, depends on how we understand the verb phrase in the first line. With “go back,” is Silliman signaling a regression to easy, established forms, or is he challenging poets (and himself) to reappropriate those forms, to invigorate them with new life? Based on my analyses in this study so far, in which I have argued that a number of Silliman’s works should be read as reappropriations of certain established forms (the sonnet or the couplet), I would favor the latter interpretation:

Silliman here challenges himself to continue questioning form in poetry. The third line quoted above alludes to a kind of challenge; “as if they were forms at all” is, in one aspect, a mocking assault on poets who settle into established forms (and, arguably, modes of composition) without considering questions such as: (1) what do I hope to accomplish by using this form? (2) what historical factors rendered this form “essential” or “important” in the first place? and (3) what is this form designed to conceal—how is it meant to deceive? In just three lines, Silliman separates himself from poets who settle into established forms without historical or personal reflection about the social mechanisms at play in those forms. In another aspect, “as if they were forms at all” is a questioning of the idea of form itself. What is form—or better—does form really exist as its own entity, or is it merely clothing for social manipulation? Certainly no form is *intrinsically better* than any other form or even aesthetically more pleasing; certainly we
can’t place forms on a continuum based on quality or appearance. Perhaps forms aren’t
“forms at all,” as Silliman suggests. Perhaps they are empty signifiers—or empty
spaces—meant to give false substance to social or political constructs. Forms, then, are
never really stable or unitary, but are constructed and presented at the whim of those in
power. The fact that Non’s forms shift so rapidly and consistently illustrates the arbitrary,
constructed nature of form; note the multiple formal changes in just the first three stanzas
of the poem:

So then go back
to the old forms
as if they were forms at all

wood frame
of a new structure, a theatre
soon to be covered by stucco
sort of a foam cement

or across the street the small
delicate elderly Korean lady
with her thick
and curiously deep red hair
squats in her garden

so damp that frogs thrive
coming up from the creek (9).

These first three stanzas offer a cross-section of Non in terms of rapid shifting and the
continual undercutting of form. I will present an introductory analysis of the book-length
poem based on these three stanzas. Here, as in the rest of the poem’s sixty pages, we see
variations in line length, stanza length, spacing, and justification. Like all of Silliman’s
work, the content, too, varies. We proceed from an abstract statement or challenge about
form and literary history in the first stanza to two stanzas containing observations.
Inscribed into these observations—as in much of Silliman’s work—are subtle critiques.
In describing the “new structure” in the second stanza, the speaker notes that the covering is made of some “sort of a foam cement.” The covering may look like solid cement on the outside, but would easily crumble. This stanza suggests a critique of modern housing construction (weak materials susceptible to the elements), but it also may be construed as a critique of poetic form—based on the issues that I have been presenting. A form, any form (the tercet, the quatrain, or the sonnet) may look lovely and impenetrable from the outside, but crumbles when exposed to critique. If we consider how form works to preserve and expand the interests of power—as I have done in previous chapters—we can pick it apart. The third stanza seems to contain only pure observation, but Silliman’s curious use of language opens itself up to analysis. Isn’t “delicate” a rather stereotypical description of Asian women—the “China doll” stereotype? Moreover, what is “curiously deep red hair” meant to suggest? The lady no longer fits the stereotypical appearance of Asian women, for where is her straight, blue-black hair? Silliman purposely employs this stereotypical (and oddly non-stereotypical) language to force readers to see through stereotypes themselves. He wants us to see individuals for themselves, not for what we think they ought to look like. Form, whether of a poem or a person, must be examined closely if we are to see really what that poem or person is all about.

Although the content of these lines illustrates Silliman’s formal concerns (with a certain kind of analysis), the crucial point to remember is the *purely* formal one. The passage I’ve presented is just a sample of a long poem that is really a cacophony of different forms that continually change. The poem—in terms of form—doesn’t stand still. As soon as we think that we’ve uncovered some pattern, the pattern abruptly changes. As soon as we think that *Non* is a work where white space will be crucial, Silliman presents
long, block paragraphs. The question is how to interpret this variability in a poem that is more collage-like than any other Silliman poem. As in much of his work, the title offers a clue, suggesting that this work breaks expectations: it’s “not this” and it’s “not that.” It is a poem the sole purpose of which is to defy. This concept is nothing new to Silliman. In *Tjanting*, Silliman opens with the lines, “Not this. / What then?” While *Non* is much different from *Tjanting* in its concrete application of form (*Tjanting* follows the Fibonacci sequence and *Non* is multi-formal), I think it retains and expands on the spirit and energy of those lines. The poem itself, I believe, should be considered an application of the negative energy inherent in those two lines. To put that negative energy into some theoretical context, we should revisit Rosalind Krauss’s discussion of indexing in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Myths*, and then consider her discussion in the context of Hegel’s dialectic.

In Chapter 2, I referred to Krauss’s notion in my discussion of the opening line of *Demo*, which reads, “This is a test.” As I noted, Silliman’s application of indexing (“This is a chair,” “This is a plate”) is an example of a “trace.” As Krauss argues, “the “logic [of such a practice] involves the reduction of the conventional sign to a trace, which then produces the need for a supplemental discourse.” The supplemental discourse is necessary because Silliman’s application of the concept remains uncoded; that is to say, Silliman’s moments of indexing fail to conform to a particular narrative pattern objectively and easily understood by wide numbers of readers. Silliman’s practice might be set against another kind of indexing: Krauss’s example of the weather vane. The weather vane, she argues, “speaks of a literal manifestation of presence in a way that is like a weather vane’s registration of the wind.” It conforms to a “code” understood by a
wide audience. Silliman’s uncoded traces remain open to narratization. This project has, in fact, been an attempt to narrate his indeterminate sentences. I have tried to construct narratives that link together the parts of Silliman’s sentences, as well as his individual sentences and paragraphs. In other words, I have tried to render into positive codes his neutral traces. That is one definition of criticism, which entails a process of making sense. With Silliman, the process is doubly difficult because his parts of sentences, sentences, and groups of sentences tend not to conform to usual narrative standards. Clearly, the reading practice that Silliman’s work engenders is considerably more difficult than that of a best-selling novel. The twist in the opening lines of Tjanting, the complicating factor, is that Silliman isn’t merely indexing or “tracing” in the sense described by Roman Jakobson and Krauss, he is creating a negative trace. It’s not “This is a test” or “This is a chair”; it’s “Not this.” First, no referent is offered for the “this,” and even if one were offered, it’s “not” that referent, anyway. Such negative traces, then, point to nothing; in fact, they point to the opposite of being or existence itself. They constitute one of Hegel’s key concepts in his discussion of the dialectic.

In Hegel’s Grand Synthesis: Being, Thought, and History, Daniel Berthold-Bond formulates the critical importance of the negative for Hegel’s dialectic, and indeed his entire philosophical project:

Dialectic is defined by Hegel as the power (or energy or force) of negativity. Negativity involves, in general, the opposing of something to its “other.” When applied to epistemology, this is the “pathway of doubt” and “loss of immediate certainty” involved in the disparity between subject and object in the course of consciousness’ experience of the world. And when applied to ontology, negativity is the Entäußerung of substance by which it “becomes other” to itself.
According to Hegel, there can be no dialectic (and thus no conciliation of thought or spirit) without the opposing force of the negative. It is the negative or, in Hegel’s phrase, the “loss of immediate certainty,” that fuels and propels the mind’s journey toward understanding. We cannot know God or pure spirit without the interjection of the negative. This concept is critical to Hegel’s philosophical conception. More crucial to my discussion of Silliman’s work, however, is Berthold-Bond’s next formulation, which involves, ironically, the ultimately positive character of the negative:

[…]Entäußerung is one of two basic features of becoming, the other being the feature of concretion. We may say now that both of these features of becoming are due to the principle of negativity. Negativity is externalizing, because, according to Hegel, “what is undifferentiated is lifeless” (HPh 2:67), and it is precisely the immanent impulse of negativity which accounts for differentiation. Self-identity without negativity spells the death of being for Hegel, whether this being is the being of an individual existent or the historical being of world culture. Hence, Hegel writes in his Philosophy of History that

the nation lives the same kind of life as the individual: …in the enjoyment of itself, the satisfaction of being exactly what it desired to be, … [and the consequent] abandonment of aspirations, … [the nation slips into a] merely customary life (like the watch wound up and going on of itself), into an activity without opposition. And this is what brings on its natural death…Thus perish individuals, and thus perish nations, by a natural death. (83-4, my italics)

Without the negative, the individual and, in Hegel’s extension, the nation, face “natural death.” The same might be said of the poem. If a poem—or any text or artistic endeavor—is “activity without opposition,” then it is likely to be flat and uninteresting. In the case of Silliman’s Tjanting, opposition is present in the form of the negative trace in the first two lines of the poem. In the case of Non (which immediately announces itself as negative in the title), my thesis is that negativity is dispersed throughout the poem through its formal variability. That negativity might also be understood in the context of
resistance. Resistance is offered in this text (and in Silliman’s *Alphabet*) through formal dislodgement; Silliman’s formal decisions and manipulations—at sentence level and beyond—confound and dislodge readers. This observation, however, contains an ironic twist. The formal resistance inherent in the text (i.e., that which gives readers difficulty and pulls them away from normal reading practices) actually engenders a healthy resistance to the social and political forces that bind them and keep them from personal fulfillment. Ironically, we might finally claim that it’s the *difficulty* of Silliman’s texts that ultimately produces social and political awareness on the part of readers, inciting them to articulate narratives of discovery. In other words, working through the challenging formal constructs of the work—manipulated and paratactical—and formulating social narratives from them, necessarily entails an engagement with society and politics.

Silliman has gone beyond the limited application of negativity in *Tjanting* to a fuller, more complex application of it in *Non*. The title and opening tercet give a sense of specificity and focus to an otherwise dispersed sense of the negative in *Non*; without those bits of focused negativity early in the poem, an analysis of the poem’s negative energy would not be possible. These elements guide our reading of the poem initially, yet additional factors of negativity soon come to light when they are examined in the context of this already-established, dispersed negativity. Two stanzas after the stanza portraying the “elderly Korean lady,” Silliman, seemingly well aware of the formal difficulty that *Non*’s reader will face, writes,

> Continuity demands a margin
> What is the import of detail?
> How do we stake that claim?
Here we fathom connection
  each word an accident of letters
  ink bleeding into the page

  the cage is open
  but the canary’s dead (9),

confronting and questioning the text the way a confused reader might. Perhaps

“Continuity demands a margin,” but the hinted-at truth of that line is that the reader
demands a margin to give the work a sense of continuity. Margin, a word that arose in my
analysis of *Ink*, is crucial here, too. A margin is more than the margin of a printed page; it
guides readers through a text as a construct of demarcation, providing a reading path. The
absence of margins (literal or figurative) creates confusion in text reception, but also
promotes new ways of reading. Without margins, we must adjust our reading habits and,
in the adjustment of those habits, we might see the text anew. Silliman’s poems are
occasionally marked by the absence of normative reading structures like regular margins,
but that absence is filled in with an overload of detail. As I have documented, details in
the form of observations, snippets of songs and advertisements, and direct political
rhetoric tend to overwhelm the reader who is accustomed to a reined-in, concise poetic
voice. How to make sense of that detail—determining its “import”—informs the work’s
social critiques. The “claim” that “we stake,” or what one might term “the message” (i.e.,
the critical claim of the poem) is arrived at through an examination of the absence and
manipulation of traditional formal structures and an overload of detail. In these lines and
those that follow, Silliman indirectly refers to the formal negativity of his project;
negativity is understood here as the absence of controlling, normative textual standards
that traditionally guide and substantiate reading practices. In these lines, Silliman doesn’t
merely apply negative principles by constantly undercutting and altering his forms, he alludes to the practice in meta-poetic fashion.

In the following stanza, Silliman continues his meta-poetic allusions. This stanza is key in *Non*, and indeed to Silliman’s *Alphabet*. On the whole, readers of *Non* must “fathom connection[s].” Silliman, like Pound, Stein, and other writers in the experimental modernist tradition, doesn’t provide obvious cohesiveness for readers; he doesn’t connect the dots of the text. In paratactical writing, readers must supplement context to establish a narrative. “Fathom” here refers to imagination, for there is an imaginative element to this work, which is not unlike decoding a dream where visual details and bits of language dominate with no context. In dream decoding, individuals must imagine some context (or code) for the dream, one that is usually available only through psychoanalysis. Silliman’s poems require different kinds of interpretive labor, yet the sense of imagining context where none seems to exist is the same as dream interpretation. In the second line of the second quoted stanza,

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Here we fathom connection
each word an accident of letters
ink bleeding into the page[,]```

deck is “accident.” In my initial readings of Silliman, my instinct was to conclude that his compositions came together by accident; now I understand that indeterminacy is an artistic strategy designed to combat narrow methods of interpretation and open the text to multiple readings. Indeterminate texts actually invite wider audiences. “[A]n accident of letters” is truly no accident, just as the disconnections between parts of sentences are not accidental; they are meant to open up the text. Indeed, the form of the lines that I’m working with now is untraditional: are the lines of this
stanza meant to designate a sentence? Without punctuation, readers are hard-pressed to form a sentence; the lines are like three separate attempts at formulating the notion of indeterminacy. Here we can see that Silliman evokes that notion through meta-poetic language (the content of the lines) and through the formal application of the notion through parataxis. Negativity—and I would construe indeterminacy as a form of negativity—is then doubled. It is applied in both content and form.

“[T]he cage is open / but the canary’s dead” powerfully and concisely depicts the double negative through the trope of double emptiness. It also stands as another example of Silliman’s paratactical manipulation of separate sentence clauses (although it’s a sentence with no period). From one perspective, the sentence begins optimistically: readers are given hope that the songbird has been freed from its domestic cell. From another perspective, however, the canary has lost its protection from predators. Nevertheless, the fact that the cage is open portends some change for the canary’s situation. It has been given the opportunity to alter its future. I read the first half of the sentence pessimistically, owing to the conjunction “but” that begins the second half of the sentence. The “but” that immediately precedes the rather optimistic description of the cage is an emotional downer. Even by itself, absent any context whatsoever, the word “but” tends to portend something ominous. Arguably, even if we considered the first four words of the sentence as a statement unto itself, “the cage is open,” I imagine a “but” there, anyway; there is one inscribed into the silence. The pessimistic outlook—the negativity, if you will—is therefore subtly established in the first half of the sentence. Our knowledge that the canary’s dead by the end of the sentence acts as a double-negative, confirming the omen we guessed at already. Although the confirmation could
be understood as a positive development (i.e., “I was right all along about the bird”), Silliman’s variety of ways of expressing negativity in these lines counteracts any positive connotation one could take from them. His negativity is actually threefold: in content (the signifying quality of the words), in form (the disjunction between the two halves of the sentence, owing to the line break and the ominous conjunction “but”), and in tone (the hopefulness of the cage being open versus the realization that the canary is dead). This threefold dose of negativity renders the sentence more complex than it looks.

How might Silliman’s applications of negativity, however, be framed in terms of the Hegelian dialectic? Like examples from other poems, he provides the groundwork here for social resistance. I have alluded to this groundwork with respect to readers encountering his challenging and multiple forms. Construed as negative (indeterminate, pathless, and lawless), the forms actually present opportunities for readers to construct types of narratives that poems in more traditional forms may not sanction. For example, readers might establish a narrative different from mine with respect to the canary and the cage. They might take a formal detail—the lack of a period following “dead”—as an opening for a different interpretation of the lines. Without the period, perhaps the story isn’t over yet. Readers might do the same by examining the line break. If we’re considering formal elements that inform interpretations of the lines, then we must read those lines in context. The next line in the poem, a stanza by itself, reads, “Dylanologists who bet on the wrong man” (9). How can we even begin to “fathom a connection” among this tremendously paratactic, mysterious line, the cage/canary couplet that comes before, and the four-line stanza that follows:

Sam Donaldson shouts
First, the “Dylanologists” are most likely Bob Dylan fanatics, many of whom, like A.J. Weberman, invest their whole lives in attempting to decode the songwriter’s lyrics. Weberman, in the 1960s and 1970s, even went so far as to pick through Dylan’s garbage to find clues to his songs. The key point is that they are decoders; they look for narratives in songs that tend to resist narratization, especially Dylan’s songs from the mid- to late-1960s. They try to decode Dylan’s traces and shifting signifiers. In this respect, the line becomes ironically self-reflexive. Silliman’s poems, because they are paratactic (and therefore resist narrative, as well), offer up the same kinds of traces to critics. One must examine form as well as content to piece together narratives. Only examining one or the other (or failing to consider how form and content work together) becomes a futile exercise that leads to emptiness, or scattered, dispersed interpretations that leave one treading in negative space. In addition, the line lacks a verb and predicate: “Dylanologists who bet on the wrong man…[fail in their interpretive endeavors] or [wind up with negative traces and negative energy].” Is Silliman hinting that there is someone else (some other “man”) on whom the Dylanologists should be betting? Is he suggesting that Dylan’s lyrics hold no real keys? Are these obsessed individuals looking in the wrong places? Silliman’s own words about Dylan might hold a clue. In my interview, I asked him to comment on Dylan’s impact on experimental poetry.

[…] Dylan’s sense of what his style was or means has changed constantly, even restlessly, over the years. When I last heard him live just about a year ago, he was singing “Blowin’ in the Wind” in a style that was on the hard edge of Nashville-type country, closer in tone to the Southern rock group Alabama than to either his earlier versions or, say, Peter, Paul & Mary.
And the songs on his last two albums show him as somebody still responding actively and formally to his environment. At a time when most of the other members of his own generation have turned into historical recreators of their own younger selves—viz., the Stones—Dylan & Neil Young (inventor of that neglected genre, folk-metal) seem to be among the few still pushing themselves as artists [...] 

Silliman’s italicized “and formally” provides the key to his thinking about Dylan, whose accomplishments (especially in his last three albums, including 2006’s Modern Times) involve a re-evaluation of America’s values. Dylan laments in these albums for what we have lost in America, what we have sacrificed, and what we have traded away in exchange for material wealth and security. According to Dylan, perhaps the most important thing we have lost is our sense of history and community. His lament not only comes through in his lyrics, but, perhaps most powerfully, in the forms of his songs. Throughout his career, Dylan has championed the rich traditions of American music, especially the blues. His preserving of tradition, I would argue, is the point with which Dylanologists should be concerned, not the hidden drug references on Blonde on Blonde or the coded rants against LBJ on Highway 61 Revisited. Form provides the best clues to an artist’s project. The same can be said of Silliman, and this is where the line becomes self-reflexive. He is suggesting that critics pay attention to form. So to answer the question I posed earlier, there actually is a connection among these disparate fields of reference. The empty bird cage and the empty White House are linked by the empty search for meaning conducted by Dylanologists like Weberman.

In the next stanza, Silliman shifts away from socio-political rhetoric to the depiction of a pastoral scene. By the end of the stanza, however, criticism creeps in:

Little hill shrouded in rain
the way shingled houses streak when wet
or the concrete block apartments
with their bland identical drapes (10).

My analysis of the empty cage and the dead canary emphasized the trope of double
doom. It’s not enough that the cage is open (offering a faint trace of possibility that the
bird is free and unharmed), but that the very possibility of freedom is undercut by the
realization of the bird’s death. There is also a double emptiness inscribed in the Sam
Donaldson stanza: whether “the prez” is home or not is of no consequence; either way,
his mind is elsewhere and he’s not there for the people. He is always absent from people.
Here, the trope is presented in a different context, but one in which Silliman ultimately
shows compassion for people. An implied simile drives this stanza’s logic: the shingled
houses and the concrete block apartments are like the little hill. I also recognize faint
echoes of William Blake in the stanza’s first line; I hear his sunflower here, rugged yet
struggling against greater powers:

Ah, sunflower, weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the sun,
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveller’s journey is done (The Complete William Blake 25).

Confronted with time and turmoil, the passing of love and the coming of winter, the
sunflower displays great resistance. This sense of struggle against great odds prompted
Allen Ginsberg to hold this Blake poem up as ideal. Ginsberg, gay and politically radical
in the ostensibly straight and sterilized 1950s, identified with the sunflower. For him, I
would argue, it became a symbol of resistance and what was wrong with the world. The
same analysis may be applied to Non’s lines. Although the simile pushes Silliman away
from the natural world, whereas Blake remains focused on it, Silliman’s sense of the
oppressive, cold nature of the social world remains strong, especially when we consider
the invisible lives inside those shingled houses and concrete block apartments. We are led to believe that the activity behind those “bland identical drapes,” like the rainy scene, lacks color and life. Two words in the stanza lead me toward that suggestion: “block” and “bland.” Block apartments conjure up images of American inner-city project housing or the rows of apartments in black and white movies from Bucharest or Moscow. In my analysis of the housing motif of Hidden in Chapter 6, I claimed that, for Silliman, “architectural patterns signify market culture at its most intense.” They signify one of the most evil and irresponsible aspects of the State: inadequate housing forced upon the poor for maximum profit. In Non, a poem that hinges on the double negative (inscribed through tropes of double emptiness), we are not merely asked to ponder the brutality of the market (a system that frequently mandates and maintains poverty through inadequate housing), but to imagine the people inside, whose bland lives match the “bland identical drapes” through which they peer. Two types of emptiness work in tandem here: the emptiness of the structures and the emptiness of the lives.

The following stanza departs from the line of social criticism established by the housing images, but still puts forward a sense of gloom:

women my own age
making the transition
away from youth (10).

In what may be the most poignant moment of self-reflection in The Alphabet, Silliman acknowledges—albeit in a roundabout way—the aging process. The real poignancy of these lines, however, and what connects them to the shingled houses stanza, is the idea of struggle. In the preceding stanza, the struggle might be framed as that of weakness versus power, as that of people versus an unforgiving system. Here, the struggle is against life
itself, and, interestingly, it’s not the women who are truly struggling. They are
transitioning. It is the speaker here, it is the observer who, by inscribing the process upon
the opposite gender, is actually refusing to acknowledge that he is one of them, that he,
too, is moving “away from youth.” Note that he is not referring to himself; he is referring
to women his own age. His greatest desire is to establish a buffer-zone between himself
and “them.” His attempt to construct that zone indicates that he is unwilling to accept his
aging. In fact, he is struggling to deny it. The poignancy, then, is not that he is getting
older, but that he is having difficulty dealing with it. In the next two stanzas, he continues
(perhaps unwillingly) to hold a critical mirror to himself, yet he continues to project the
process onto those around him (the barber stanza) or generalizes it to the extent that he is
actually removed from it (the brain stanza):

telling the barber
I part it on the right

fever crowds the brain
its thinking convulsive

porch lights on signal winter dusk (10).

The speaker’s struggle with physical and mental aging and his psychological projections
continue in these couplets, the first of which is seemingly so innocuous as to be boring.
As with much of Silliman’s work, however, what appears boring holds clues to the
overall analysis. Because so little context is offered in the first couplet, readers are
implicitly asked to supply some narrative backdrop. I imagine the speaker seated in the
barber’s chair staring in the mirror, a little surprised and saddened by the way he looks.
While the speaker is disappointed with his physical appearance, his directions to the
barber (“I part it on the right”) suggest a good deal of critically self-reflective force. In a
very subtle way, he allays responsibility to the barber for not only how his hair looks, but also for his growing old. For many men, hair is wrapped up in what it means to look and feel young. Visiting the barber (like visiting the doctor or dentist) results in a confirmation of the aging process. This kind of analysis obviously wouldn’t hold up if it weren’t for the preceding stanza about youth and the women. And while the brain stanza is even less explicit about aging, the speaker’s effort to remove himself from the moment—to project psychologically—remains in play. The key words in the stanza are the article “the” and the neutral possessive “its”; they are not “my” and “my,” which would personalize the scenario he offers. “[T]he brain,” instead of “my brain,” distances the speaker from critical self-analysis. “My” brain, of course, could never be crowded by fever; my thinking could never be convulsive, but “the” generic brain could be susceptible to such ailments. Even though the speaker finds some success, even though he pushes away the aging process through distancing and projection for a little while, the line that follows makes the others seem hollow and futile. It presents the deepest moment of self-conscious reflection in the poem: “porch lights on signal winter dusk.” In this line, the trope of double doom returns. “Winter” and “dusk” both signify the end of a cycle; that they are put together intensifies the sense of the end only hinted at by the prior stanzas.

The projections that I have been describing in the preceding paragraphs may be more properly termed—in the context of this chapter’s goals—“resistances.” The poignancy of lines such as “Little hill shrouded in rain,” “women my own age,” and “porch lights on signal winter dusk” do not spring from a pseudo-psychological evaluation of the speaker (or the living man behind the lines), but rather from the notion
of resistance. In the “Little hill” stanza, Silliman creates a double trope of emptiness not merely to raise awareness of poor housing conditions in the inner-city, but to create conditions of resistance. If a reader chooses to construct a narrative of housing in *Non* and *The Alphabet*, informed by stanzas like “Little hill” (and “Row houses” from *Hidden*), then social action on the issue has already begun. Silliman establishes the groundwork for resistance; the reader, by creating and articulating a narrative, compels that resistance into action. I have tried in this study to put forth a number of social and political narratives based on formal analyses of Silliman’s works. *Non*, however, requires different kinds of analysis because the speaker focuses more intently and reflectively on himself than in other poems. We see that intense, reflective focus in the “women my own age” and “barber” stanzas analyzed earlier. In these stanzas, the speaker is not resisting the State, market forces, or the pressures of work, but rather his own aging. The stanzas are poignant because the resistance is human and contained. I will continue this analysis in the following stanzas, turning my attention more clearly toward resistance of a personal nature.

From “women my own age / making the transition / away from youth” a few stanzas earlier, the speaker turns his attention to a man who is likely coming home from work. The stanza appears to contain a rather ordinary portrait of a businessman or mid-level manager seen on most any city bus in the evening, but one detail of his appearance—the unkempt tie—works to deconstruct the routine portrait:

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man in a three-piece suit
with a buttoned-down shirt
but the striped tie
hangs loose in two strands
holds his briefcase in his lap
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open, a kind of desk (10).

Formally, the disruptive conjunction “but” and the indentation of the last two lines of the stanza call into question the routine nature of the scene. Neither punctuation nor use of a capital letter occurs between this stanza and the line that precedes it (“porch lights on signal winter dusk”); formally, all we are given is a line of white space and justification back to the left. Without any solid points of demarcation between that line and this stanza (especially the fact that “man” is not capitalized), we are forced to consider that there may be some continuity between them in terms of content. In other words, the sense of ending inherent in “porch lights on signal winter dusk” may carry over into the following material. At first glance, however, nothing about the man seems cyclically ending. But, as is the case with much of Silliman’s work, we must look beyond the surface portrait of the man, pinpoint the one detail that seems out of order, and, just as importantly, consider how Silliman’s formal decisions in the stanza work with that content to enhance the portrait. Doing so will enable us to maintain interpretive continuity over that rather un-barrier-like white space. Nothing about the man appears out of the ordinary at the beginning: he is wearing classic businessman’s attire: the three-piece suit, the buttoned-down shirt, and the striped tie. He seems well put together. Things begin to unravel, however (formally and figuratively), where Silliman inserts that provocative coordinating conjunction, “but,” at the beginning of the third line. Conjunctions are crucial to Silliman’s formal project in *The Alphabet*, and especially in *Non*. Earlier, I outlined the significance of “but” in the passage about the bird cage. Here, the “but” also lends an ominous sense to the man’s appearance. The striped tie suggests that something is wrong with this picture, for we learn in the next line that it “hangs loose in two strands.” The
question is whether this detail signifies a sense of ending on the part of the man. It does reveal a few reliable things: the man has likely reached the end of the workday (we should assume that if it were morning the man’s tie would be in order) and he’s no longer attempting to look the part of a businessman. These things are rather innocuous, relaxed, unlike the double ending of winter and dusk in the preceding stanza. There is nothing permanent about the particular end of this workday: many workers find it as a sign of happy relief. How do we, then, forge some continuity between these stanzas? How do we construct a narrative from the disparate fields of reference here? As in the analyses so far, we must examine form more closely.

The most glaring formal attribute of the stanza is the right shift in indentation for the last two lines. Not surprisingly, the speaker’s sensibilities also shift in these lines—from the objective observation of the man’s attire to the brief commentary about the briefcase at the end. The shift from observation to commentary—a common shift in much of Silliman’s work—accompanies the shift in form. Form and content complement each other here, but what does Silliman intends to achieve with this note about how the briefcase is “a kind of desk”? In a subtle, seemingly innocuous way, he is suggesting how the workday intrudes into people’s personal lives. The man is on his way home; that his tie has come undone suggests a tough, busy work day; finally, at the time he should be putting the office behind him, work returns in the form of a portable desk. Silliman suggests in these lines that there is no escape from the demands of work. I posit that this social commentary is rooted in Silliman’s activist beliefs concerning labor, and should be understood as another part of the groundwork that he establishes for social resistance. In providing this portrait of a man who cannot escape from work, he challenges readers to
become aware of the controlling nature of the labor system. We must resist such demands lest they consume what little free time we do enjoy. In the market State in the late twentieth century, with the workday getting longer for everyone, an active labor movement seems more necessary than ever. Silliman indents these two lines of commentary, the key lines in the stanza, to draw attention to them.

The following stanza departs thematically from the briefcase stanza, but hearkens back to the winter dusk stanza that came before. It completes the cycle of light and dark initiated in that stanza. It also hearkens back to the “fever crowds the brain / its thinking convulsive,” both in content and form:

compulsive eye,
    mottled world
old friend but an unfamiliar street
too brightly lit
sharpens the dark—
big glimmering headlamps
cars behind them not visible
float past (10).

The adjectives “convulsive” (to describe the thinking in the brain stanza) and “compulsive” (that describes this stanza’s eye) comprise more than a delayed rhyme; that they appear so similar visually suggests that they are linked. In constructing a bridge between them, we could also render continuous the thematic approaches of these two seemingly disparate stanzas. My analysis of the “convulsive” stanza emphasized the speaker’s desire to project the incapacities of his own thinking—affected by age—onto a generic figure by utilizing the impersonal article “the.” Later, I framed his projection (or distancing) as a kind of resistance. Here, the question to consider is to whom does the “compulsive eye” belong? No article precedes it; it floats without owner or referent. Is it
the generic, collective eye, the eye of society that finds itself facing a “mottled world” and “an unfamiliar street”? I think that the eye, similar to the brain and thinking of the earlier stanza, in fact belongs to the speaker, who introduces resistance not with the impersonal article as before, but with the “old friend.” The old friend and the speaker are two versions of the same individual who happen to find themselves in different places and in different states of mind. The speaker is thinking back to times of different light and vision (not the porch light that signals winter dusk), but “an unfamiliar street / too brightly lit.” This different, more powerful light does more than merely signal through the impending dark; it “sharpens” it. It actually intensifies the dark, so the old friend finds himself in deeper darkness: the “big glimmering headlamps / [of] cars” cut a path that deepens the darkness, that “mottle” the world even more.

If this stanza concerns the old friend (who is another version of the speaker), then it is significant that his darkness is deeper. To measure this significance, we should revisit the trope of the double and Hegel’s thinking about negativity. The two stanzas in question suggest two different degrees of darkness, which in turn constitute a continuum of darkness experienced by the speaker over time. If we substitute “negativity” for “darkness” and consider negativity in terms of hardship and struggle, it is feasible to claim that the speaker has come through his time of darkness and found something greater. He has struggled through and resisted. In the sense of the Hegelian dialectic (which employs negativity as something to be embraced and eventually reconciled), he has traversed and reconciled his hardship and become something else. He has gained, perhaps, a new identity: he is no longer that old friend on that unfamiliar street or the man talking to the barber. The voice of this section of the poem, the Hegelian essence behind
these lines, has resisted, overcome, and become something else. Like the invisible cars
behind those glimmering headlamps, he “float[s] past” his past. His reconciliation,
however, has not been easy. The form of this stanza—jagged, inconsistent, and pierced
by the dash after “dark”—illustrates the hesitancy and difficulty of transition. In Non,
jaggedly-spaced stanzas tend to represent hesitancy of movement, as in

one-legged woman
swings on her crutches
onto the escalator’s
  first step
shining black skin
  pulled tight
and through her nose
  two gold loops (11),

which appears a few stanzas later. Three characteristics mark the woman: she has a
physical disability, she’s black, and she displays prominent piercings. Each of these
characteristics marks her as a minority. Together, they mark her as considerably different
from the dominant population. It is therefore fair to presume that she has faced hardships
in her life—in the context of the dominant, normative socio-economic system—that an
able-bodied white man with no piercings would find hard to imagine. To an even greater
extent than the man (speaker-double) who overcame darkness in earlier stanzas, this
woman is the Silliman hero—heroic in her capacity to resist. In her, the speaker offers a
model for readers who dare challenge the mainstream socio-economic system. From a
strictly formal perspective, the indentation system of these lines portrays resistance
pictorially: from the left side, the first three lines (as she approaches the escalator)
actually look like evenly-spaced, ascending steps. As she approaches the “first step” (line
four), the pattern appears to break down, but actually doesn’t. Examine the last five lines
from the right side, and you will notice a smooth descent. What initially appears jagged and irregular reveals hints of smoothness upon closer examination. This revelation possibly points to the idea that the woman has genuinely overcome obstacles and has finally encountered smooth sailing. Strictly visually, the same cannot be claimed for the man in the previously-analyzed stanza.

I analyzed the preceding two stanzas side-by-side to show that resistance is the key analytical construct in two seemingly disparate stanzas. These two stanzas contain formal similarities (in the jagged spacing), which lead me to interpret their content similarly. Just before the “one-legged woman” stanza is another stanza that reiterates an earlier motif: darkness and light. The “glimmering headlamps” and “too brightly lit” street of the “compulsive eye” stanza return in the form of

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  dim blue lights
  leave tunnel in shadow
  bright burst
  arrives the station (11).
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I cite these examples to show that more is at stake here than mere repetition of theme. The interplay of light and dark between non-contiguous stanzas illustrates human struggle and resistance. In Hegelian terms, it illustrates the forces of positive and negative working together to form the dialectic. Light and dark go back and forth in these stanzas, constituting a kind of struggle. The “dim blue lights” stanza, however, suggests that the forces in opposition aren’t always clearly delineated: gray areas exist between them. For example, the lights in the first line here are neither “bright” nor “sharp”; they are dimmed. There is light, but it’s murky and shaded. The logic of the “shadow” in the second line is similar. Shadow is neither darkness nor light; both must be present to
comprise a shadow. Line three—“bright burst”—however, shows no such uncertainty or middle ground. The burst of light indicates that positive forces have won, and that the dialectical circle is complete. These notions of struggle and circularity play out through the rest of Non.

Sandwiched between the stanzas about light are two meta-poetic couplets in which Silliman steps back from individual poetic motifs and considers Non’s formal development. In doing so, he provides clues about how to read the poem:

as the reader turns the page
you glimpse the shape of stanzas (10).

The most interesting formal aspect of these lines is the referent-pronoun shift: “the (third-person) reader turns the page,” but the (second-person) “you glimpse the shape of stanzas.” Why not “he or she glimpses”? With this bit of parataxis, Silliman suggests that “the reader” and “you” are not the same individual. If they’re not the same individual, how might the two lines be read consistently? In other words, how might we construct a bridge between the two oddly non-parallel referents? In this application of parataxis, the reader is tasked to put together a narrative that reconciles (or bridges) these referents, taking into account the context of the passage in question. Because I have been analyzing Non in terms of resistances, the question then becomes: how might I construct a narrative that bridges these referents with respect to resistance? The phrases “shifting identity” and “sliding identity” are common in much contemporary theoretical discourse. For example, when gender (or race, sexuality, or class) is understood on a continuum, it becomes harder to discriminate. Silliman applies the same principle in these lines. Going forward from the premise that readers, when they construct meanings and articulate narratives,
acquire social power, why should that power be limited to a single individual (like “the reader” or “you” or “she” or “he”)? If the sources of power constantly shift, no reactionary force will be able to pinpoint and attack that source of power. By dissolving and disseminating referents, Silliman opens the field not only of interpretation, but—in this case—of who gets to do the interpreting. What at first seems to be a grammatical error is in fact a pre-emptive strike against reactionary critical forces.

The second meta-poetic couplet asks readers to see beyond the individual critiques I have presented in this study to Non and The Alphabet’s wider implications. My interpretation of the preceding couplet hints at those implications. They involve more than resistance; they involve the acquisition of power via the articulation of narratives.

What’s the plot of this song? Be sure to include the quotes (11)

resists interpretation on a number of fronts. There is no song anywhere near (unless the poem itself could be called a song). In fact, nothing in context suggests any connection whatsoever to this couplet, except that it’s another meta-poetic moment. I will therefore interpret it from two angles: I will accept the figurative possibility that Silliman is challenging readers to come up with an actual plot for this work and I will also accept the literal possibility that he is referring to an actual song. Ideally, both angles will eventually merge to produce a concise, coherent interpretation in the conclusion of the study.

**The “plot of this song”: Democracy and Conclusion**

The only song referred to in Non is Barry McGuire’s “Eve of Destruction.” Silliman, with his typically playful irony, has no need “to include the quotes” at all because he adapts it with his own lyrics. Examining Silliman’s adaptation of the song
allows for fuller consideration of market culture and power, which are involved in the
modes of resistance described throughout this chapter. To be sure that readers know that
it’s a song, he calls it “Song”:

Song:
I said over and
over and
over again my friend
I really fear
that we’re in the mirror
of production (65).

On September 25, 1965, McGuire’s “Eve of Destruction” rose to number one on the pop
charts, two months after Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone” reached number two. It
would be McGuire’s first and only hit (Wikipedia). The original refrain reads:

And you tell me
Over and over and over again, my friend
Ah, you don’t believe
We’re on the eve
of destruction. (http://artists.letssingit.com/barry-mcguire-eve-of-
destruction-s1m88lj)

The song remains the classic pop music expression of ultimate doom. In the spirit of
Dylan’s “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” McGuire sings about a world consumed with
violence and terror, poised on the brink of nuclear annihilation. It became an anthem of
protest, a symbol of the struggle against the military-industrial complex steered by LBJ
through Vietnam and Cambodia. That Silliman applies McGuire’s vision and form for the
final lyrical portion of the poem (the last two pages are composed of prosy blocks of
writing) is appropriate, given the equally disheartening but less terrifying theme of
economic exploitation hinted at by his lyrics. To be “in the mirror / of production,” is a
metaphor that requires unpacking. From a literal point of view, the mirror of any system
would contain that system itself. So how does one put a face onto an economic system?
In Silliman’s logic, the face of production is precisely the face into which the speaker likely stared in the barber shop: his own. In a final touch of self-reflection, Silliman finally suggests that it is we who indeed comprise and maintain the system (here called a system “of production”) that ultimately accounts for our unhappiness and destruction.
While this suggestion is nothing new (I ended Chapter 2 with the statement that “we cozy up to the market in ways that benefit and support a system that is actually oppressive”), this is Silliman’s most explicit (and ironically self-critical) expression of that idea. Here, we have moved beyond aging and limited critiques of the practices, causes, and effects of market culture in America to the essence of how it retains its grip on us: we allow it to.
That this admission comes from a social activist gives it all the more gravity: Silliman’s willingness to look in the mirror and note his (at least) implicit endorsement of the system that he’s devoted his life to fighting is perhaps his most powerful rhetorical moment. But the fact that he performs the moment in song—through another’s lyrics and form—once again removes him from the scene. After all, this stanza is another kind of projection. Instead of allaying his fears and struggles onto the figure of another, or distancing himself through objective articles and possessives, he does it through a well-known pop song. Readers are left wondering: whose words are these, Silliman’s or McGuire’s?

Considering this question offers the ideal way to conclude this study, for the range of Silliman’s paratactical devices that I have outlined in these pages—the absent predicates, the distorted punctuation and syntax, the named things of one-word sentences, the dangling conjunctions, the empty traces, and the snippets of pop songs and
advertisements—all serve to create distance between “Silliman” and “the speaker,” between the text and its interpretations, and, strangely enough, between readers and themselves. These devices render the texts strange and incomprehensible at times, but their greatest impact is that they offer distance, which is Silliman’s greatest gift to readers and critics. Without that bubble of distance, without that range of uncertainty and indeterminacy created by empty signifiers, “floating” signifiers, traces, and paratactic moments, there would be less distance, less space for readers to insert themselves into the text, and therefore less space for interpretation. Parataxis, which is an ideal way of generating that critical distance, provides the continuum upon which interested readers place themselves and push forth with their analyses. It offers readers the kind of mirror of self-criticism that is such a major motif in Non and other poems, and provides the grounds from which they may construct narratives that resist the dominant cultural and economic systems. In Silliman’s work, distance leads to the possibility of resistance and the articulation of narratives, and therefore to the possibility of democracy in its truest form.

Silliman is a genuinely democratic writer because he is willing to take risks. One of the greatest risks a writer can take is to use non-traditional forms. Assuming risk means being willing to alienate, confound, deny, and lose readers, and being willing to face the establishment’s ridicule. This study is important because it presents and analyzes the formal methods that confuse readers. These methods are not designed, however, to alienate readers. To the contrary, they are designed to empower readers by giving them spaces to construct, substantiate, and defend their own interpretations of the poems. And while these interpretations need not be politically or socially activist, Silliman’s inserts
enough contextual observations and outright rhetoric to guide and shape activist interpretations. I have reached this confluence of the textual and the political in my readings of these poems; Silliman’s points of obvious social and political criticism have guided my focused analyses of form and vice versa.

Lately, Silliman has begun using the phrase School of Quietude to designate the work that comprises poetry’s mainstream. His designation is ideal because it gets at the tone of that mass of work that unfortunately, during the last half-century, has become synonymous with “poetry” in America. The magazine titled *Poetry* and its clones are replete with such work, as are most of the textbooks and anthologies used in high schools and colleges. Silliman believes that the poets who comprise the worst, most deadening portion of the School of Quietude publish poems of false coherence, and that they trick themselves (or are tricked) into believing that what they write is coherent and accessible. On his blog as part of my interview, Silliman posted his response to a question posed by Daisy Fried about conservatism and coherence in poetry. Fried’s argument was that poets who aim for coherence in their writing (closure and accessibility) are not necessarily politically conservative, and that sometimes those words are unhelpfully conflated in the discourse. Silliman’s response is important because it offers what is perhaps the best definition of the School of Quietude:

Too often, bad writing within the school of quietude presumes that simply by positing a narrating persona, coherency will follow. That is precisely the same kind of presumption that lies behind the use of family or workplace as the contextual site for almost all television sitcoms, and to parallel result. If anything, poets of the easy coherency tendencies have it harder, because the idea that the work of the poem has already been done for them is so terribly seductive. Those who can write past this do indeed achieve something worth note. But my experience of most poetry of the
easy coherency variety is very much like my experience of most television sitcoms—they’re unwatchable. I’d rather have a root canal than read 30 lines by 98 percent of the poets who simply think they’re coherent when they really aren’t. For me as a reader, the far greater problem is how to find that mysterious two percent who consistently do reward my effort.

Silliman’s analogy to sitcoms is perhaps more telling than he wishes it to be, and I think there is much more at stake here than boring, “unwatchable” television or poetry. Silliman is right about sitcoms: whether they win critical acclaim or not and whether they draw large audiences or not, they are all basically the same in terms of setting. They present familiar settings with which people can identify. Most sitcoms also run similar content: relationship struggles predominate, and always the characters are able to overcome some problem by the end of the episode. Sitcoms are popular because viewers can identify with the warm settings and neat, friendly solutions. Sitcoms aren’t like real life at all. In fact, they offer an escape from real life, the problems of which are complex and endless. Sitcoms therefore perpetuate market culture in that they offer people false comfort and hope. They shield, if only for thirty minutes a night, people from their hardships and anxieties. They offer stability and ease in place of real life, where stability and ease often seem very far away. Silliman, I would posit, rejects these sitcoms (and poetry that is similar) not merely because they’re boring and painful, but because they deaden sensitivities, making people amenable to economic exploitation.

The value of Silliman’s work and the poetry he finds vital is that it’s destabilizing rather than comforting. Still, however, this argument is nothing new. Bernstein fleshed it out in “The Artifice of Absorption” almost twenty years ago. My argument—that Silliman’s work destabilizes normative reading practices because of parataxis, opening
up spaces for interpretation—is a departure from Bernstein’s in that it emphasizes the
active role of the reader in the process of interpretation. Most work in the School of
Quietude prevents the reader from taking on this role because it tries (often
unsuccessfully, according to Silliman) to establish a coherent narrative persona. When
readers are forced to be active, when they are not just given, but indeed pushed into, the
gaps where they must construct, substantiate, articulate, and defend their interpretations
of the works, then we have moved beyond destabilization toward an empowered
citizenry. Citizens who assume the power to articulate their critiques of society and
politics represent the ideal forces of democracy. History may well regard Silliman as a
poet who gave voice to the people.
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Appendix

China (Bob Perelman)

We live on the third world from the sun. Number three. Nobody tells us what to do.

The people who taught us to count were being very kind.

It's always time to leave.

If it rains, you either have your umbrella or you don't.

The wind blows your hat off.

The sun rises also. I'd rather the stars didn't describe us to each other; I'd rather we do it for ourselves.

Run in front of your shadow.

A sister who points to the sky at least once a decade is a good sister.

The landscape is motorized.

The train takes you where it goes.

Bridges among water.

Folks straggling along vast stretches of concrete, heading into the plane.

Don't forget what your hat and shoes will look like when you are nowhere to be found.

Even the words floating in air make blue shadows.

If it tastes good we eat it.

The leaves are falling. Point things out.

Pick up the right things.


The person whose head was incomplete burst into tears.

As it fell, what could the doll do? Nothing.
Go to sleep.

You look great in shorts. And the flag looks great too.

Everyone enjoyed the explosions.

Time to wake up.

But better get used to dreams.