

Reading On The Bus: Ron Silliman's *Tjanting*

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“Not this. What then?” The writing is working on itself. The mechanics are operating on their own terms; to deal with them is to operate on one's own. The serial order of the work finding itself out is equal to the fixed attention to be found at all points. To enter the work might be possible anywhere, as one gets on or off a bus. It is possible, in fact, to read this book on a bus.

(Barrett Watten, Introduction to *Tjanting*).

THAT SENTENCES WLD CONNECT IS A LEAP OF FATE

Ron Silliman (*Tjanting* 77)

The opening lines of Ron Silliman's poem *Tjanting* (1981) are: “Not this” and “What then.” Each of these lines forms a paragraph, as indicated by the first-line-indent convention for new paragraphs. Above the “Not this” there is almost half a page, blank. According to linguistic pragmatics, the use of the deictic ‘this’ functions on the assumption that it refers to something a reader can identify from the co-text, usually the object or concept indicated immediately before. Applied in that precise sense, ‘Not this’ implies a function for the blank space we ‘read’ before the first line: it is an open beginning. Barrett Watten characterises the phrase ‘not this’ as “the significant contradiction of the Romantic” (*Total Syntax* 215). That would situate the beginning of *Tjanting* in an ongoing debate about literary history. Since “Not this” is the opening line of a poem, something must and will follow. In which case, what then?

Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* starts, not unlike *Tjanting*, with: "Where now? Who now? When now?" It ends, more than a hundred pages later, with: "I can't go on, I'll go on." In between there are several passages like this one: "And all these questions I ask myself. It is not in a spirit of curiosity. I cannot be silent. ... But the discourse must go on. So one invents obscurities" (*Beckett Trilogy* 269). So, if not this, and not silence, what then?

The problem of how to go on in *Tjanting* is self-imposed, because among the things Silliman has rejected, said 'not this' to, are narrative continuity and logical or causal progression. Those conventions would, in terms of form, imply syllogistic, hierarchical and linear structures, where each sentence is governed by its place and function in the paragraph, which has its place in the chapter, and so on, a structure that sets in motion a process of inferences and conclusions. Silliman calls this the primary syllogistic process. Rearranging the order of the sentences in such a text would interfere with that process. Instead, Silliman uses what he calls a system of secondary syllogistic means to organise his text. In *The New Sentence* he gives a list of the characteristics of the new sentence:

- 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)

In *Tjanting* the conventional structuring devices are replaced by less familiar ones. The aim is to induce a reader to replace automatic inferential processes with an active search for other structuring devices, and so be led to an appreciation of some degree of arbitrariness in any structuring devices, even the familiar, seemingly natural ones.

The absence of primary syllogistic processes means that, for the writer, the end of each sentence raises questions about how and why and from where the next sentence is to be produced: 'what then' in the sense of 'what next.' From the point of view of conventional expectations, *Tjanting* would have to be described in negative terms, saying what it is not. "Not this" means, among other things, no narrative, no constant, fictional characters, no dialogue, no consistent context that sets up a particular discourse or domain of language. Neither does the text conform to the generic expectations of lyric, narrative or dramatic poetry. There is no single voice to which all the statements can be attributed. The length of

the text, over two hundred pages, may suggest a narrative or dramatic poem, but it is neither. Again, it is 'not this.' In Silliman's own words: "He sez what his poems are not" (*Tjanting* 140). This negative is not to be taken as an absence of qualities. As Wolfgang Iser has pointed out in his discussion of Samuel Beckett, "Negativity brings into being an endless potentiality," and it is this potentiality that "stimulates communicative and constitutive activities" in the reader, "by showing us that something is being withheld and by challenging us to discover what it is" (Iser 141). Silliman's eighth point indicates the effect his stylistic techniques aim at: he wants to keep "the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language."

Tjanting is designated 'a poem' by the author: on the copyright page he informs us that "[p]ortions of this poem first appeared in ..." a range of small poetry journals. The overall structure of this long poem is based on a numerical sequence called the Fibonacci series, named after Leonardo Fibonacci (c. 1170 - c.1250), who discovered the series in 1202. From a start of any two numbers all subsequent numbers are found by adding the previous two. Silliman takes the sentence as his basic unit, and builds his text by counting sentences per paragraph, or stanza. The sentences from previous paragraphs are repeated, with variations, in each alternate paragraph. Genre conventions are stretched and questioned, so terms like stanza cannot be applied automatically. Silliman uses the term paragraph in an interview ("Interview" 39). This seems the most appropriate term, because the divisions are indicated by the familiar convention of indicating a new paragraph with a first line left margin indent, and because the term retains the 'side by side' notion that informs the book's paratactic strategy. The numerical series starts with two paragraphs of one sentence each:

Not this.

What then?

I started over & over. Not this.

Last week I wrote "the muscles in my palm so sore from halving the rump roast I cld barely grip the pen." What then?

This morning my lip is blistered.

Of about to within which. Again & again I began. The gray light of day fills the yellow room in a way wch is somber. Not this. Hot grease had spilld on the stove top.

Nor that either. Last week I wrote "the muscle at thumb's root so taut from carving that beef I thought it wld cramp." Not so. What then? Wld I begin? This morning my lip is tender, disfigurd. I sat in an old chair out behind the anise. I cld have gone about this some other way.

Wld it be different with a different pen? Of about to within which what. Poppies grew out of the pile of old broken-up cement. I began again & again. These clouds are not apt to burn off. The yellow room has a sober hue. Each sentence accounts for its place. Not this. Old chairs in the back yard rotting from winter. Grease on the stove top sizzld & spat. It's the same, only different. Ammonia's odor hangs in the air. Not not this.

Analogies to quicksand. Nor that either. Burglar's book. Last week I wrote "I can barely grip this pen." White butterfly atop the grey concrete. Not so. Exactly. What then? What it means to "fiddle with" a guitar. I found I'd begun. One orange, one white, two gray. This morning my lip is swollen, in pain. Nothing's discrete. I straddled an old chair out behind the anise. A bit a part a like. I cld have done it some other way. Pilots & meteorologists disagree about the sky. The figure five figures in. The way new shoots stretch out. Each finger has a separate function. Like choosing the form of one's execution.

(*Tjanting* 11-12)

These are the first eight paragraphs of *Tjanting*. It is easy to verify that the number of sentences per paragraph increases exponentially: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21; enough to establish the pattern of the series. For practical reasons, counting stops and calculating takes over. There are nineteen paragraphs in all, covering 213 pages, totalling, presumably, 10945 sentences. We do expect Silliman to adhere to the pattern once he has 'chosen the form of his execution.' In the absence of conventional expectations, the text creates its own anticipations and consistencies.

Using the Fibonacci numbers is not as far removed from artistic conventions as it may seem. As the series progresses, the ratio between successive terms grows closer to the formula for the golden section. This ratio has long been advocated as providing the perfect proportions for a painting, for placing the horizon in landscape paintings, and for various proportions in the human body. Leonardo da Vinci saw a spiral based on the golden section in the proportions of a human being, linking the vital points of the body. The numbers have also provided the divisions for a grid of lines placed over people's faces to show the ideal proportions between parts of the face, for instance between the width of the mouth and the distance between the eyes, said to be ideally in a ratio of 1 to 1.615. The exact ratio shows small variations: 55 (paragraph ten) divided by 34 (paragraph 9) equals 1.617, the ratio between the last two paragraphs is 1.618034. Marcus Chown gives 1.6180339887... , as the

closest approximation to the formula for the golden section after about 20 steps in the Fibonacci series (Chown 55). There is no end point to the division. “This is the golden section,” Silliman writes (*Tjanting*.171).

There is a set of New Zealand artworks, produced in collaboration between Billy Apple and Wystan Curnow, titled “The Golden Rectangle.” The works consist of seven sections each, diminishing in size at the ratio of 0.618 out of the previous whole. This means, in the golden rectangle proportions, that the rectangle gets divided into a square and a smaller rectangle, which latter repeats the golden section proportions. Put together, the seven sections spiral into the centre of the complete major rectangle. In the instance of one of the works, the Atalanta story, the all-at-once view of a painting and the process through time of reading the text are combined. To give that effect with the text of *Tjanting* one would have to print each paragraph on a set of ever-larger squares. The beginning of the text would be on the smallest square, at the centre, where in the Apple/Curnow work the story ends.

When two diagonally opposed corners of each diminishing square are connected by a segment of circle centred in the opposite corner, the familiar spiral from the nautilus shell becomes clearly visible.

The proportion also occurs in nature: the ratio at which a breaking wave in the surf narrows toward its tip is a reversed Fibonacci series, and some natural patterns, such as the spiral growth of leaves on some trees, the pattern of seeds in sunflower heads, and the spirals of univalve shells, exhibit the proportions of the Fibonacci series. Silliman: “Leaves always climb the stem in a fixed rotation” (*Tjanting* 171). The process is called phyllotaxis, the angle of rotation is 137.5 degrees, giving the maximum access to sunlight for each leaf. Deducted from the full circle of 360 degrees, the remainder is 222.5; the ratio between the two numbers is 1.6179775. The ratio between the two smaller angles is 1.6181818. The concept combines mathematics, natural science and the visual arts, and now also poetry.

A visual representation of the growth curve of the Fibonacci series in *Tjanting* can be made by representing each sentence by a graphic unit (here a caret because it creates a wave-like pattern), allowing each paragraph one line. The result looks like this:

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class struggle, but structured like it. The dialectics of class struggle would be reflected in the way the text operates. For Silliman the literary form becomes an investigative tool for a socio-political situation: he wanted “a vehicle through which to explore just this problem of ‘shaping,’ of how these exterior events act upon and enter into the subjective in order to create the Subject” (“Interview” 35). The form combines two processes, the global interactions of class struggle, and the individual effects in shaping a person. In the overall structure of *Tjanting* the emphasis is on the process of interaction between parts of the poem itself, as a formal device that echoes the interaction between economic and social classes of people. The moment to moment reading, the immediate co-text for each sentence, reflects the interaction between the individuals that constitute those groupings, evolving as the text grows. Personal pronouns and names of individual people crop up in *Tjanting*: “It is wonderful to see names in a work. Larry says, ‘You must be some kind of maniac’” (121).

Silliman’s intention was to develop two strands in which each paragraph is the antithesis of the previous one. “Any synthesis, if it occurs, does so at the level of the whole, the book” (“Interview” 35). In view of Silliman’s earlier quoted statement that there can only be a series of moments in the reading process, not a whole, this verdict warrants further investigation.

The term ‘antitheses’ that Silliman uses may create an impression of two distinct and opposing strands in *Tjanting*. But any antithesis must be closely linked to and reflect a particular thesis, *its* thesis. In the Fibonacci series, no new number can be formed without using the last number from each of the two strands. Silliman’s choice to see this as a dialectic process of antithetical classes is only one of many possible perspectives. The series can also be seen as a genealogy, where two differently ‘gendered’ numbers combine to create a new generation. The odd and even numbers of chromosomes fit in well with such a reading, though in the Fibonacci series two odd numbers are followed by one even number. The image of the double helix of the DNA molecule also comes to mind. The interaction between strands can be seen as a dialogue, or in commercial terms the new number may be a merger or a take-over: there is an inherent difference in size between any two subsequent numbers. Since the new number swallows up two smaller ones, one may see it as a conquest or an annexation.

Each new position is always a temporary one; the series is open-ended, making any synthesis also a temporary, localised one. The ‘whole of the book’ that Silliman mentions is a unit with an arbitrary cut-off point. The addition of another chapter would have added 6765 sentences; retaining the average of just over 50 sentences per page that would have meant another 130 pages. Was the decision to stop based on the fact that after about twenty numbers the proportions come closest to the golden ratio, or on practical considerations of physical size, or on Silliman’s desire to finish this project and concentrate on a new book, or

on an assessment of publishing and marketing considerations? The separation between a book that is perceived as the production of an unalienated individual and the book as commodity is not, in practice, a clear-cut line.

Creative, practical and commercial considerations all apply to conventional books as well. The difference between *Tjanting* and conventionally structured books is not that Silliman's decision on size is arbitrary, but that the cut-off point is visible. Publishers set arbitrary limits to the size of most books, with a retail price rather than writer's preference in mind. But in most cases small cuts are made throughout the text, and the seams made as invisible as possible. The illusion of an organic whole is achieved by means of careful tailoring. Silliman has considered the question of seams: "One sees seams" (*Tjanting* 12), "Won seams scene" (53), "Seams one scene" (134) and, almost at the end of the book, "Can you, later, see the seams of revision?" (193). In *Tjanting* the illusion tends to be that all these sentences were produced through simple addition, over a period of several years: the dates are given at the end of the book: "6.27.77 – 3.9.80," a span of almost three years. But "This is not the order in wch these were written ... Any page might take an hour or weeks" (107), and "Words have recently been removed" (52).

WRITING ON THE HORIZON LINE

(Ron Silliman, *Tjanting* 63)

In my view, part of the enjoyment of reading *Tjanting* consists in locating connections and interactions between sentences. The sentences in the early paragraphs return throughout the book, often in a different form, always in a different immediate context, separated by new sentences. "Earlier sentences, our old friends" (*Tjanting* 83) rings true. But these changes are not detached processes in the two strands. There is interaction between the strands which appears to influence the exact form of the repetitions and variations. For instance, in the opening section quoted above, both strands have sentences about beginning. They refer, I think, to the text itself. Gertrude Stein comes to mind: "Beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series" (*Look at me now* 23). In the even-numbered paragraphs the string of repetition and variation on beginning is as follows:

- 6 Wld I begin?
- 8 I found I'd begun.
- 10 Found start here
- 12 Here found start.

- 14 False start. ... True start. ... Start found here.
 16 False start. ... True start. ... Here found start once.
 18 Falls tart. ... True tart. ... Once here start found.

The first four of these lines perform a kind of word-golf at the level of vocabulary selection, introducing or changing one word at a time: ‘begin – begun – start,’ and the change from “I found I’d begun” to “Found start here” keeps the form of ‘found’ though it subtly alters the meaning. The continuity leads to the impression that the new string ‘false start / true start’ is some kind of offshoot from the first “Wld I begin?”

In the odd-numbered paragraphs the first sentence about beginning is “I started over & over again” in paragraph 3, which is commuted to “Again & again I began” in paragraph five. The verbs ‘to start’ and ‘to begin’ have swapped strings. Variations on ‘begin again’ occur consistently in all the odd-numbered paragraphs that follow. The series is joined by a string of variations on “I was I discovered on the road” from paragraph nine onward. The form differs but the meaning accords with “I found I’d begun” in paragraph eight. In paragraph 17 a new string appears: “All these false starts”(52). Later in the same chapter we find: “Off to a fast start” (73). This raises two questions: are these separate strings or variants of each other? And what is their relation to the “False start” in the even-numbered paragraphs? If this is a formal representation of class struggle, do we conclude that at times the divergences inside one ‘class’ may be larger than the divergences between the classes? Does “Fits and starts” (paragraph 19, p. 166) form part of this pattern or is it a red herring? And what of the sentence, in paragraph 19: “There is a problem of space in this notebook, the result of false starts” (209)? The dialectic, which started with the rejection of one solution: ‘not this,’ appears to be moving towards some kind of co-operation. The opening line of the second strand: “What then?” can, of course, be read in the spirit of a joint search for a solution, or as a challenge. The last words of the book, at the end of an odd-numbered paragraph, are “What then?” (213).

Those two voices started to mingle long before then. At first the separation is consistent: either ‘not this’ or ‘what then?’ But in the sixth paragraph, still on the opening page, the negatives move into the ‘what then’ part too: “Nor that either” and “Not so,” repeated in paragraphs eight and ten, and kept, with variations, throughout all even-numbered paragraphs. The first partial concession by the other strand comes in paragraph eleven: “Than what?” and the first “Not this” in an even-numbered paragraph comes in the twelfth one, on page 14. In the last two long paragraphs the poem’s two opening lines occur in almost equal numbers in both. It is hard to be precise, because here too there are sentences that may or may not be counted as part of the series. “All this not carving this” (94), or “Not this is thought” (134), set up the by now familiar oscillation between what is on the page and the

connections the text has set up in its reader. Is the following, most inclusive, sentence: “This & all this too” (59) also a variant?

The question is not whether Silliman has been consistent or clear in identifying old or new sentences. The point is that he wants his reader to be left with a question, not just about a few sentences but again and again, so that the wider questions about the relations between writer and reader become inescapable. The absence of causal or narrative linearity and of hypotactic structure is part of this issue. The usual support for making safe inferences from a stable context is not available. “My formalism marks a new content” (*Tjanting* 159), says Silliman. The author is still in a position of power: “Each word burnd into the paper. I insist you don’t know why” (159). But the voice is not authoritarian in the sense of demanding agreement with given answers that are backed up by tight logical arguments. “Your function here is collaboration” (118), and “You are implicated, responsible, for anything you read” (160). That does not mean that the power relations are equal. “Writing lets me penetrate you” (108), echoes Silliman’s remarks about the relationship between writer and reader:

In writing as elsewhere, this relationship is asymmetrical – the author gets to do the talking. The reader can shut the book, or consciously reject its thesis, but an actual response is not normally available. ... To have read these words is to have had these thoughts, which were not your own.

Perhaps this is the shadow side of writing, but it’s one I’ve long had a strong sense of and felt the need to explore. The dimension of *intersubjectivity* in writing is closely aligned with the same phenomenon elsewhere, which no doubt explains why writing can feel so intensely intimate and erotic. To write is to fuck. To read is to be fucked. There is pleasure to be taken in each, but it is not the same. (“Interview 45)

Other comparisons with situations of power struggle can vary from benign to warlike. The latter appears in one of the sentences in *Tjanting*: “Reading is always an act of war (between classes, over consciousness)” (142). Note that Silliman says ‘reading,’ not ‘writing’ here. The area in which the power of the writer is vulnerable lies in the variety and unpredictability of possible readers. In *The New Sentence* Silliman quotes the Russian Formalist Valentin Voloshinov:

Any utterance, no matter how weighty and complete in and of itself, is only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication. But that continuous verbal communication is, in turn, itself only a moment in the continuous, all-inclusive, generative process of a given social collective. ... Verbal communication can never

be understood and explained outside of this connection with a concrete situation.
(22)

The term “all-inclusive, generative process” implies movement and complexity. The writer can not know exactly where in that social process any given reader will be. “The potential contents of the text are only actualised according to their reception, which depends on the social composition of the receivers” Silliman writes (*New Sentence* 25). And in *Tjanting*: “The purpose of this writing is your arrival to read it You understand this, but not as I meant it” (113). This passive side of the role of writer and text redresses the balance of power. Any assumption that there is a more or less uniform readership whose reactions can be predicted, and therefore manipulated, is invalid. The understanding each reader constructs has its own context, which may help or hinder communication. For Silliman, that is a factor but not a problem. “It is not the communicability of your writing that is here at issue, because few will in any event ever comprehend, the distance between words & their causes, contexts, is too various, too vast, but the integrity with wch you approach this necessary limitation” (*Tjanting* 156-57), he reminds himself. In *The New Sentence* he shifts the emphasis clearly from the content of the text to the effects of reading:

The primary ideological message of poetry lies not in its explicit content, political though that may be, but in the *attitude towards reception* it demands of the reader. It is this ‘attitude toward information,’ which is carried forward by the recipient. It is this attitude which forms the basis for a response to other information, not necessarily literary, in the text. And, beyond the poem, in the world. (31)

Leaving aside for the moment the assumption that the attitude of active collaboration demanded by a text like *Tjanting* will be carried over into other readings and into the world, the active response is calculated to cast a reader into the role of a motivated agent who takes responsibility for her response. Silliman’s concerns about alienation from the work one produces extends to the alienation of those readers where “the consumer ... stares at a ‘blank’ page (the page also of the speed-reader) while a story appears to unfold miraculously of its own free will before his or her eyes” (*New Sentence* 13). Commodification affects not only the producer but also the consumer. The structure of *Tjanting* obstructs habitual reading attitudes and develops new ones, such as spotting versions of ‘old’ sentences and perhaps going back to find their earlier forms.

Sometimes these can be hard to find. The last paragraph of *Tjanting* has a short section where several of the new sentences sounded familiar to me, but I could not find them in the earlier parts of *Tjanting*. It took a while before I discovered that they are versions of

earlier ones, not from *Tjanting* but from a previous book by Silliman, *Ketjak* (1978). Both titles are Indonesian words. *Tjanting* means, “a small pen-like instrument used to apply wax designs” (*Tjanting* 19). There is no indication that this sentence refers to the book’s title. If you have not asked yourself what the title means, what language it might be, and found out, you may not recognise the definition. You may just assume that it is an idiosyncratic way of spelling ‘chanting.’ I happened to know the word from reading about batik work, but *Ketjak* I had to look up, at first confusing it with *ketjap* which means soy sauce. *Ketjak* is a religious ceremonial dance from Bali, in which the dancers “deliberately attempt to produce the rhythms and texture of the instruments of the *gamelan* with their voices. This is called *gamelan soeara*, voice orchestra” (Zoete and Spies 81n). De Zoete renders the sound as ‘tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak,’ a sound-effect also interpreted as replicating the chatter of monkeys, since in one version the *Ramayama* story has been taken as a libretto for the dance (Zoete and Spies 83). But the imposition of narrative coherence is as unsuited to the *Ketjak* as it is to *Tjanting*. De Zoete comments:

But to seek a consecutive theme in the wandering voices, the cracked strings and wailing cries, the various fragments of solo which occur during the dance, is a vain quest. It is like trying to find a meaning for the intricacy of melody, harmony, and rhythm in a musical symphony. (Zoete and Spies 85)

The sentence “The subtle nurse, by a shift of text, moves in front of the words in order to more rapidly board my life” (*Tjanting* 183) echoes this one from *Ketjak*: “The nurse, by a subtle shift of weight, moves in front of the student in order to more rapidly board the bus” (*Ketjak* 4). This sentence metamorphoses over the next two pages in *Ketjak* via “The nurse, by a subtle redistribution of weight, shift of gravity’s center, moves in front of the student of oriental porcelain in order to more rapidly board the bus” (5) to: “The young nurse in sunglasses, by a subtle redistribution of weight, shift of gravity’s center, moves in front of the black student of oriental porcelain in order to more rapidly board the bus home” (6).

The changes in these three versions early in *Ketjak* have to do with the amount and kind of information provided by the text. The first version can be generated from observation alone: it is often possible to infer from their appearance that someone is a student or a nurse, and we recognise a move like edging forward in a queue. We feel secure in inferring the intention from the movement. In the second version the writer ‘knows’ what the student is studying, in the third he ‘knows’ that this is ‘the bus home.’ For the nurse? The student? The speaker? How can anyone know that for other people? This is filling in the gaps in order to make a fuller, more coherent narrative. It is the difference between what anyone at that bus stop could observe and infer, and what a novelist might do with that information. In the last

appearance of the sentence two more observable details are given: “blue sunglasses’ and “the black lanky graduate student” (*Ketjak* 78). ‘Lanky’ is observable, ‘graduate’ is not: the different levels of certainty do not show in the formal qualities of the language, all are stated with equal apparent certainty. This obscures the difference in the level of reliability of the information offered. It also demonstrates the ease with which a reader may accept the different kinds of information as of equal value, and the manipulative power of ordinary language.

The *Tjanting* version: “The subtle nurse, by a shift of text, moves in front of the words in order to more rapidly board my life” demonstrates the author’s power in a totally different way. It does not consist of a claim to knowledge inaccessible to us, but in the right to construct a sentence. The sentence is changed in quite arbitrary ways from the ones in *Ketjak*, but the way the writer has worked on it is open to inspection. Our reading strategy consequently widens from interpreting what the writer means, to include a consideration of what the writing does, and how it does it. Foregrounding the linguistic device obstructs automatic reading patterns and stimulates a more active participation. And that in turn increases the likelihood of individual differentiation in response.

By bringing into play the individual cultural context for each reader, Silliman also makes us aware that our particular reactions to *Tjanting* are partial. How does a reader react to the use of ‘you’ in those sentences that appear to be a direct address to their reader? The inclination to assume that we are the person addressed is strengthened by our actual position as readers, but we are more aware of that position because the text resists easy absorption. We cannot lose ourselves in a story, and there is no fictional context for the sentences to adapt to. We have to activate our particular background knowledge, about the world and about linguistic conventions, to provide interpretation strategies.

“You obey the sound of your name” (*Tjanting* 197), but when reading *Tjanting* each reader has to decide whether to obey a particular occurrence of “you.” “You in that pullover I bought for Christmas” (*Tjanting* 151), and “With the tip of my finger I write your name in the windowpane frost” (160) do not fit into our actual position as a reader. “What you are reading is the dance of my hand” (20) and “This sentence is just as you find it” (136) clearly do. But what of the computer prompt, transposed into the poem, “Your message here” (104) or “Putting the words back where you found them”? (126). Trying to fit the sentence “We all talk about your paranoia” (*Tjanting* 163) into the writer – reader situation might posit a general opinion among writers that readers are, on the whole, paranoid. Or the reverse. The use of the second person without a circumscribed context leads to uncertainties about the level of our expected involvement. “Reading this changes you” (*Tjanting* 160), but how, and how much?

IN WORDS LETTERS KEEP SHOWING UP

(Ron Silliman, *Tjanting* 73)

Doubt occurs in the stomach & only later in the shoulders. A tall building radarlike atop each transmitter. Two commas around a word amid a string of them. Fred shouts at Ethan. The lone applauder in the filled auditorium. Recording guitar in the studio, play sitting down. Lumberjacky. Slowly the bike rider glides her motorcycle thru the streets. If there are things here you don't understand, there are going to be reasons for it (them). A bit trance. Vaseline Alley. Pen jars full of mustard. Short poems are politically correct. Weed salt in the sea foam. The achievement cancels the premises. Hummingbirds look up to see phone on a pole. I can never figure out what eidetic is. The word less. Dumb sentence. Lore more. Often misreadings are better. Yacht's white wide wake. Puffy that seeks white form. Rollers unroof loads of tar. At the end of my trope. The foot of his story. Syntax is a series of swivels on wch the words, gingerly, are lowered. To the sky the west is flat. (*Tjanting* 155)

Silliman's own words on the same page, "These sentences 'sit' beside one another with no more connection than stories in the paper," offer a first answer to our question or objection: Why such a heterogeneous collection of sentences? The short answer is: Why not? We can cope with scanning a newspaper, with watching television news interrupted by advertising items, with snatches of conversation while reading a book on the bus, without feeling confused or thinking the world is incoherent. Our expectations of a text are different: we expect to be able to read a text as a constructed whole. And the cohesive factors we expect to see are logical coherence and consistency, or narrative sequences along causal lines and psychological consistency. Those are the familiar conventions. But current conventions and pragmatic considerations are not inescapable laws. It is possible to react to the above fragment from *Tjanting* with irritation, confusion, exhilaration, puzzlement, laughter or indifference, but it is undeniably a text with a purpose: it has been submitted to be published, printed, proof-read and accepted.

Joseph Conte, in his 1991 book *Unending Design*, sees serial and procedural structures for literary texts as the new form, characteristic of and invented by post-modern poetics; not antithetic to conventional forms but complementary. Consistent order, whether understood in logical, natural or divine terms, can be seen as a projection of the human mind, based on wishful thinking because a coherent order makes us feel safe. The use of arbitrarily designed structures is both a recognition of this projection and an act of independence and

autonomy, taking responsibility for one's own choices. The intentional making visible of the constructive devices as devices, not immutable natural forces, is an implied declaration of this independence. Also, in recognising that we in any case impose structuring mechanisms on existing reality, writing that shows its structuring strategies may be called a form of realism in acknowledging that fact.

Depending on what one wants to achieve with a text, different forms may be appropriate for different effects. As demonstrated in the "Atalanta" work, it is possible to use the Fibonacci series and fit a narrative into that frame. *Tjanting* could have consisted of a series of contracting or expanding narrative chapters. But Silliman has ideological objections to narrative. In his view narrative, especially realist narrative, uses language as a transparent medium, "a mere vessel for the transfer of ostensibly autonomous referents" (*New Sentence* 11). This denies the material, gestural aspect of language use, the physical reality of writing and reading. Silliman sees this as similar to the alienation process that changes the creative person, who works towards a fully finished object through all its stages, into the anonymous factory worker who has lost all touch with the items produced, which become mere commodities. The problem with transparent language is not just a loss of aesthetic pleasure in language, but a loss of awareness of what language does, how it positions its user and the world. The use of unquestioned language amounts, for Silliman, to ignoring and, often tacitly, accepting the current normalised language and the ideologies that inform it. This stance is predicated on the view that language as we find it is not politically neutral.

Part of normalised language is the primary syllogistic structure that governs the function of sentences. To break out of this linear logical pattern, Silliman tries to avoid the creation of any necessity for the order in which sentences appear. A sentence is never simply the result of the content of the immediately preceding text. His sentences are given the kind of equal opportunity Cézanne gave to each brush stroke. As Gertrude Stein puts it: "One thing is as important as another." Or as Charles Bernstein says in discussing what he calls combinatorial writing: "you could, and might well, reorder all the sentences" (*A Poetics* 152). It would make a difference, but it would not be the disruption of a necessary order.

Silliman treats the sentence as a free-standing object that plays a different role in different contexts. Not only is it possible to read *Tjanting* on the bus, it is possible to see the sentences as bus passengers: people getting on and off the bus, the temporary distribution of passengers throughout the space of a bus, the length of time they stay, all this just happens. Passengers take an available place, their distribution is not organised by any one of them. The same people may turn up day after day or never be seen again. There is no *single* causal or logical necessity for these particular people to come together, there is no *locatable* narrative that binds them to each other: all have their own reasons. In a similar way in *Tjanting* one sentence does not of any necessity follow the previous one. But there is a

centralising context. Just as the bus moves around a particular town, *Tjanting* has a recognisably American urban setting, with sentences such as “Dime store sun visor” (14) and “Every dog on the block began to bark” (15); Watten characterises the language in *Tjanting* with the phrase “unheroic particulars” (*Total Syntax* 109). But its vocabulary also assumes that readers can cope with words like axiom, quarks, ouija, yarmulke and with names such as Polonius, Chomsky and Kerouac, and readers of *Lit* are expected to understand the joke in [Philip] “Glass is a conductor” and the reference to Paul Auster in “The city of glass is warped” (*Lit* 25).

One of the rules of narrative language is that a reader is fairly safe in assuming that the contextual situation does not change unless the text indicates it. In a dialogue set in a room, the sentence “She walked to the window,” means that she walks to a window in that room, not somewhere else in the building, the street or the town. If the scene was a living room, the window cannot be a shop window. This is an instance of one of the principles of pragmatic linguistics: we do not expand the context unless it proves necessary or a change is clearly indicated. Silliman flouts the conventions by never setting up a consistent context in the text from which to interpret a given sentence. Any referential connections we make are liable to be altered or undone at the next appearance of that sentence. The following segment is the second half of page 23 in *Tjanting*:

Enclosed in bright green scaffolding, a freshly painted white church. Watch & traffic passes. Left lane turn left. Writing standing is not simple. Infant in his arms like a dog. Spine straight, one walks. Each sentence bent towards the sun. Wind makes hat delicate proposition. I recognized her years later a block away. Remember – you’re asleep. This sketches, drawing itself out. Some weathers arouse a longing for years ago. A pair of small, silver, military jets zip past. Eyes, you hoped, were not lies. Cargo containers atop flat-beds behind cyclone fence. To the west, fog spilled over the hilltops. One spot at the bay’s center where the sun shines directly. Hand or tongue to the eye adds mind. Man sees hoss. Hear airplanes above these clouds. The London of the west. Fish-sticks wrapped in wax paper. In an of into by. Not this.

The corresponding sentences in the next even numbered paragraph occur on page 43 of *Tjanting*. I have changed the single font in the printed text into two, to differentiate new sentences from those used previously. The syntax of the ‘old’ sentences is often changed from their previous occurrence, but they are clearly recognisable. The first sentence here is one of those ‘old friends,’ the second is new.

The white church was no longer surrounded by green scaffolding. The soupy air of an indoor pool. Pass & traffic watches. Busdriver's lady friend rides along. Left turn left lane. Poetry – I quit. Not simple standing, writing. Morning's glare as fog burns off. Arms on his dog like an infant. In coffeehouses I like to watch them write poems. Straight one spine walks. Smoking universal joint. Toward each sun bend sentence. The clarity of fatigue. Proposition of hat rendered delicate by wind. Swift tufts of fog. A year later I recognized her blocks away. Boughs and eros. Remember your sleep. All of religion condensed into a single glance of a cat. Drawing itself, this sketches out. Beaus & errors. Nostalgia fills this weather. Not this. Zipping by, two small, silver, military jets. The sentence does not occur in nature, save as writing, tho something very much like it does. You were not lies hoped eyes. My sunglasses set forth a border. Beyond cargo-container-containing flatbeds a cyclone fence. A pen with a chippt-tip scratches badly. Fog to the west spilld over hilltops. Read as wld spelunkers their descent toward earth's hot core. Sun shines directly on one spot at bay's center. Unvoiced, becomes 'pay,' a whole other realm of speech. Add hand or tongue to eye, get mind. Word shuffle pricks ear. Hoss mans sea. Big dog sleeps in store's door. Above clouds planes are heard. True walking requires ablutions. Of west London. They will stand on the bus rather than sit beside me. Wax paper wraps fish stick. What did I just think? In under of into by. Straw babies. Not this. Writing toward the stain in the page. Neck bobbing, shoulders go over spine like an umbrella. Anything cld get in there. Hot Mexican chocolate. Red chalk. To protect kids, cork where once door's latch was. People milling, wanting to use the john. Lights furnace up with a whoosh. Above the old Victorian an American flag whips in the drizzle. Sight ceases writing down. (43)

Every other sentence on this page is new: starting from the earlier version anything, any sentence, could get in between any two subsequent ones, altering the interaction between sentences. Barrett Watten's comment on Silliman's *Ketjak*: "The work keeps opening up to admit more" (*Total Syntax* 108), is also applicable to *Tjanting*. The sentence from page 23: "Enclosed in bright green scaffolding, a freshly painted white church," turns into: "The white church was no longer surrounded by green scaffolding." Put together, as I have done here, it is almost impossible not to read the two sentences as a temporal narrative: the white painted church has lost its scaffolding, somewhere during the twenty intervening pages, which do not mention any church. There is no guarantee that we are justified in doing so, but we cannot help assuming that the sentences refer to the same building. It seems perverse not to read this as a small narrative, but the responsibility is entirely ours. "You are implicated, responsible,

for anything you read” (*Tjanting* 160). The distance of twenty pages between the two sentences, and the possible time lapse between the occasions on which any person reads them, may obliterate the sequence entirely for some readers. In the context of *Tjanting*’s structure, they are not a sequence of two sentences but a theme and its variation. The sequence

Enclosed in bright green scaffolding, a freshly painted white church. Watch & traffic passes. Left lane turn left. Writing standing is not simple. Infant in his arms like a dog. Spine straight, one walks. (*Tjanting* 23)

may create an image of a person standing and watching a street scene. The introduction of new sentences, creating

The white church was no longer surrounded by green scaffolding. The soupy air of an indoor pool. Pass & traffic watches. Busdriver’s lady friend rides along. Left turn left lane. Poetry – I quit. Not simple standing, writing. Morning’s glare as fog burns off. Arms on his dog like an infant. In coffeehouses I like to watch them write poems. Straight one spine walks. Smoking universal joint. (*Tjanting* 43)

confuses this single point of view. “Busdriver’s lady friend” places the viewer in the bus. “Smoking universal joint” is liable to be read as applying to the person in the previous sentence. It also sets up a possible relation between the bus and a person smoking: a universal joint is part of the steering mechanism of a car. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines universal joint as “one allowing free movement in any direction of the parts joined,” a description that could also be applied to the interaction between sentences in *Tjanting*. The addition of ‘smoking’ indicates friction and mechanical problems in one reading, and the widespread (“universal”) use, here in public, of cannabis, in a different reading.

The sentences that have something to say about the weather in the longer fragment could all belong to the same scene, but not at the same time. “Soupy air of an indoor pool” and enough wind to make the “proposition of hat rendered delicate” cannot both be the case at the same time. Not to mention the different areas of fog, cloud, direct sunshine and a flag whipping in the drizzle, all on the same page. The idea that the text is organised to refer to a single time and place must be abandoned. As the text warns further down the page: “Anything cld get in there. Hot Mexican chocolate. Red chalk.” If we choose to take the deictic ‘there’ to refer to a place in the text itself, the ‘anything’ means any sentence about any subject. But ‘in there’ might refer to the space inside the cyclone fence mentioned earlier, or to the hole in the door in the next sentence, or to something we do not get to know

at all: “What did I just think?” That question can also be applied to the first occurrence of “Not this” in this fragment (here underlined), since it occupies the place of a new sentence but is not one: “Not this” saying in effect that this sentence is not what it seems: one of the new sentences.

THIS SENTENCE IS ABOUT TO STOP

(Ron Silliman, *Tjanting*147)

Faced with a text that does not cohere in expected ways, and assuming that there is some reason for putting these particular sentences in this particular order, we start searching for clues. Silliman is consciously using this reaction. He knows that, according to the Parsimony Principle, a reader will interpret words and sentences that have been put together on a page as “having the least disjunctive meaning” (*New Sentence* 178). Its connection to our reliance on automatic assumptions is pointed out in Beckett’s *The Unnamable*:

Make abundant use of the principle of parsimony as if it were familiar to me, it is not too late. Assume notably henceforward that the thing said and the thing heard have a common source, resisting for this purpose the temptation to call in question the possibility of assuming any thing whatsoever. (*Beckett Trilogy* 359)

Beckett’s character is inclined to call all assumptions into question, and has to make a deliberate effort to apply the Parsimony Principle, in a reversal of what Silliman assumes to be an automatic limitation of the number of concepts involved in satisfying our desire for coherence.

In reading *Tjanting*, the widest general rule, that texts are coherent, comes up against the need to reassess the exact way in which this text at this point hangs together. And that question poses itself again and again. In terms of the game in children’s colouring-in books, where the task is to create an image by drawing lines between a number of dots, Silliman’s ‘dots’ vary their place in the sequence, so that multiple lines criss-cross our mental space, for longer or shorter periods. The result is not a definite outline but a web of possibilities.

The unifying assumption of coherence in a text ascribes that coherence to intentional efforts by the writer. When the writer disturbs the familiar unifying patterns of syllogistic logic, causal inferences and narrative sequence, finding or constructing the unifying procedures becomes much more the responsibility of the reader. “Active ingredients” is one of Silliman’s sentences, and we as readers are among them. Poetry writers and readers find

their way “as wld spelunkers their descent toward earth’s hot core” (*Tjanting* 43). Reading as if we are potholing: we have to bring our own light, and find the next foothold one step at a time. It could even be dangerous.

Textual techniques that force readers to find their own way to some degree have been variously described as collage and montage. Lyn Hejinian compares the two and prefers montage: for her collage can suggest

an unmotivated or unnecessitated grouping of materials. Things in a collage are like letters of the alphabet – when you put some of them together they will always appear to be seeking meaning, or even to be making it. The term *montage*, however, as it was used by and in the tradition of the Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein, is better. In montage all the above values are maintained (contiguity, contingency, etc.), but the result reflects decision more than happy chance. Also *collage* is a predominantly spatial technique (developed in paintings), whereas *montage* (deriving from film technique) employs devices that are related to time. In this sense *montage* preserves its character as a process. (*Inquiry* 190-91)

Collage, for Hejinian, is too haphazard, and leaves the writer with too little creative input or control. Silliman too questions how much disjunction is too much. Discussing Ezra Pound, Silliman writes:

Collage technique uses disjunction, or, more accurately, the conjunction of dissimilars, in order to free the structuring of the poem from the traditional demands imposed by narrative and/or exposition. Pound alters time, place, language and ostensible contents, while minimizing the reader’s perception of these differences by linking the sub-units of the piece with common elements at the level of sound, syntax and theme. ... Pound’s device is, literally, based on montage: its major shifts are scenic. The effect is one of a fragmented surface, under which lies a continuous and seamless deep structure. ... Underneath, it all coheres. (*New Sentence* 154)

Charles Bernstein too sees a difference in degrees of relation between elements: “Now a turn or a curve – that’s not disjunctive. The elements are related. It’s not collage” (*My Way* 7). We tend to assume that ‘the elements are related’ at the level of meaning. But when Barrett Watten distributes a text such as “Complete Thought” (*Frame* 87-95) in sets of two lines, it is the formal quality of the page layout that implies a meaningful connection between the lines of each pair. Their logical conjunction is not immediately clear at all, but we assume that there is good reason for their spatial arrangement, and start to search for a more than

accidental connection. I would argue that we react to any set of lines printed together by searching for such a link. In contrast, the conventions of textbooks about grammar or linguistics disable that reaction: they expect us to see sample sentences as semantically separate units even when presented on the page in pairs.

Part of film montage is the jump cut, best known as practised and theorised by Eisenstein. There too, the sequence of images creates a connection in our mind: we connect the dots. The unifying factor is the film as a whole. Charles Bernstein practises the textual equivalent of jump cuts in his placement of line-breaks. He calls it syntactic scissoring:

Given my interest in interruption (more than fragmentation), the line allows for a visual interruption of the phrase (or sentence) without necessarily requiring a temporal interruption, a pause: that's why I so often cut the line where you are least likely to pause (say between an article and a noun). When you break the line against the phrase, rather than at the end of a phrase, it's called syntactic scissoring; this preoccupies me because I can use it to set in motion a counter-measure that adds to the rhythmic richness of the poem – the main measure in the phrasally forward movement of the phonotext, and the countermeasure of the syntactic scissoring of the visual text. (*My Way* 27-28)

Interruption is a temporary break, and experienced as such. It does not let go of the existing unit which may be of a very consistent, linear structure. Fragmentation, in contrast, may make reconstitution impossible. "Interruptions wouldn't constitute a parade" Hejinian states in *Oxota* (78). Is a text like *Tjanting* experienced as a parade of diverse sentences, a collage, or a montage?

This raises the question whether total fragmentation of a longer text is possible at all: even 'chance encounters' of fragments on the same page induce us to see, make, import some connection. Connecting the dots appears to be inescapable if the distance is small enough. Also, pure chance is not so pure: even in aleatory texts like those of John Cage, the writer still selects the base text or the material source. One has to make a choice which source to cut up or to read through, from the classified ads to the Bible, or any combination of origins.

The strangeness of bringing together objects as disparate as one can think of, for example Lautréamont's "as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table" (Lautréamont 257), relies for its surreal effect on his and our knowledge that such a conjunction is physically unlikely, though less so since Marcel

Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg¹. But it also relies on the kind of linguistic taxonomy French and English use and on the images that are likely to come to mind to one living in a European culture. If we lived in a culture that conventionally used the names of objects to represent certain occupations, the conjunction might have been recognisable as a meeting of three people, perhaps a surgeon, a dressmaker and an Englishman. Or if we used a taxonomy in which all things with sharp points or edges are experienced as belonging to the same set, the conjunction of a sewing machine with an umbrella and a dissecting table might seem totally unsurprising.

Giles Deleuze, writing about film, explains: "... if one takes a space defined simply as neighborhoods joined up in an infinite number of possible ways, with visual and aural neighborhoods joined in a tactile way, then it's Bresson's space" ("Mediators" 284). This idea is based on the concept of Riemannian space, which involves the setting up of little neighbouring portions that can be joined up in an infinite number of ways. This could serve as a description of Silliman's *Tjanting*: sentences that become neighbours for other than narrative reasons, and whose order can therefore be changed, not without effect but without totally derailing the text. The repetition with variations of an original sentence both creates and exemplifies the changes a new neighbourhood brings about in how the sentence functions. The image Deleuze uses as illustration is that of repeatedly rolling out and folding together of pastry dough. Any piece of fruit in the original mix may end up adjacent to any other piece, without adding or removing anything. Or, in the child's game of 'join the dots,' there is no law that forbids a decision to join dots according to one's own pattern, and in the case of *Tjanting* the pattern keeps changing by adding new dots.

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¹ Lautréamont does not give this as an example of the unexpected but as the climax of a series of metaphors for the beauty of a boy of sixteen: "et surtout, comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie!"

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