

## Meaning Performance

TONY LOPEZ is the author of 20 books of poetry, fiction and criticism. His most recent poetry collections are *False Memory* (Salt, 2003) and *Devolution* (The Figures, 2000). He has received awards from The Wingate Foundation, The Society of Authors, and the Arts & Humanities Research Council. His poetry is featured in many anthologies including including *Twentieth-Century British & Irish Poetry* (Oxford), *Vanishing Points* (Salt), *Other* (Wesleyan) and *Conductors of Chaos* (Picador). He is well-known as a poetry performer and has given readings throughout UK, Europe and North America. He teaches in England at the University of Plymouth, where he was appointed the first Professor of Poetry in 2000.



Meaning Performance  
*Essays on Poetry*

TONY LOPEZ



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING  
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham PDO, Cambridge CB1 5JX United Kingdom

All rights reserved

© Tony Lopez, 2006

The right of Tony Lopez to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

First published 2006

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 9.5 / 13

*This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.*

ISBN-13 978 1 84771 082 9 paperback

ISBN-10 1 84771 082 3 paperback

SP

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

*For Joan Margaret Lopez  
and in memory of Carlos Lopez 1931–1981*



## Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
Limits of Reference and Abstraction in American Poetry	1
W.S. Graham's Elegies and St Ives	20
Repetition, Innovation and Authorship	32
'Powder on a Little Table': Berrigan's <i>Sonnets</i> and 60s Poems	45
Sequel Lines	58
Poetry and Performance	73
Graham and the 1940s	89
The White Room in the New York Schoolhouse	105
Innovative Poetry in English	121
Pound and Postmodern British Poets	139
Oppositional Englishness: National Identity in Basil Bunting's 'Briggflatts'	152
Pound and Contemporary Poetry	164
Thomas A. Clark, Nationality, Modernism	177
Sequential Meaning in Ezra Pound's 'Cathay'	190
T.S. Eliot and W.S. Graham	199



## *Acknowledgements*

This book collects in one volume a number of essays written over quite a long period for specific occasions and in response to a series of invitations, to give talks or write something, for which I am most grateful. I have allowed them to continue to accurately demonstrate their origins and time of writing: correcting errors where I could find them but not revising the arguments for this publication, nor taking account of what has been published since they were first written. I have arranged them in approximate reverse chronological order of publication or presentation as it seems to suit my current sense of the book as a whole.

**Limits of Reference** was presented at the Abstractions colloquium, Centre de Recherches en Littérature Américaine: Texte et Image at the Université de Paris—Sorbonne (Paris IV), November 2004. Thanks to Françoise Sammarcelli who organised the conference.

**W.S. Graham's Elegies and St Ives** was presented as a public lecture at Tate St Ives, 7 April 2004. Thanks to Susan Lamb and Kerry Rice who organised the event.

**Repetition, Innovation and Authorship** was presented at the conference Authorship and the Turn to Language at the University of Tuebingen, December 2005. Thanks to Barrett Watten and Bernd Engler who organised the conference. An earlier version of some of this material was presented as an inaugural lecture at the University of Plymouth, February 2002.

**Powder on a Little Table** was presented at The Opening of the Field: A Conference on North American Poetry in the 1960s, at the University of Maine, June and July 2000. Thanks to Burton Hatlen, Conference Director for the National Poetry Foundation (USA), and to the British Academy who funded my visit to USA for the conference. The paper is

reprinted by permission of Cambridge University Press from the *Journal of American Studies*, 36 (2002) 281–292.

**Sequel Lines** was composed for a performance at the 19th International Ezra Pound Conference, Université de Paris—Sorbonne (Paris IV) July 2001 and is made entirely from research papers delivered there by Pound scholars. I am grateful to the organising committee: Hélène Aji, Peter Nicholls, Jean-Michel Rabaté and Christine Savinel, for their interest and generous hospitality. The poem was published in *Shiny*, edited by Michael Friedman, and in Hélène Aji (ed), *Ezra Pound and Referentiality*, Presses d'Université de Paris—Sorbonne, 2003, my thanks to all involved.

**Poetry and Performance** was written in response to a request for an essay on my practice as a poetry performer. The essay first appeared in Roberta Mock (ed) *Performing Processes: Creating Live Performance* (ISBN 1841500100), © 2000, published by Intellect.

**Graham and the 1940s** was presented at Larkin and the 1940s, University of London Institute for English Studies, July 1999. Thanks to Steve Clark and Stephen Regan who organised the conference. The essay first appeared in Ralph Pite and Hester Jones (eds) *W.S. Graham: Speaking Towards You*, Liverpool University Press, 2004.

**Innovative Poetry in English** was presented at A Place That is Not A Place: A Seminar on Liminality and Text, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, March 1999. Thanks to Manuel Aguirre, Isabel Soto and Philip Sutton who organised the conference. The paper was first published in Isabel Soto (ed) *A Place That is Not A Place: Essays in Liminality and Text*, Gateway Press, Madrid, 2000.

**The White Room** was presented at Something We Have That They Don't: Anglo-American Poetic Relations at the University of London Institute for English Studies, 1998. Thanks to Steve Clark and Mark Ford who organised the conference. The paper is reprinted with permission from Steve Clarke and Mark Ford (eds) *Something We Have That They Don't: British & American Poetic Relations since 1925*, published by the University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 2004.

**Pound and Postmodern British Poets** was presented at the 17th International Ezra Pound Conference at Brunnenburg, Tirol di Merano, Italy, July 1997. Thanks to Richard Taylor who organised the conference. The paper was first published in Helen M. Dennis (ed) *Ezra Pound and Poetic Influence*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2000.

**Oppositional Englishness** was presented at Writing and National Identity, Bath Spa University College, July 1994. Thanks to Tracey Hill

and William Hughes who organised the conference. The paper was first published in Richard Caddel (ed) *Sharp Study and Long Toil: Basil Bunting Special Issue*, A Durham University Journal Supplement, Durham, 1995.

**Pound and Contemporary Poetry** was presented at the 16th International Ezra Pound Conference, Brantome, France, July 1995. Thanks to Philip Grover who organised the conference.

**Thomas A. Clark, Nationality, Modernism** was presented at Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry, 1992. Thanks to Rod Mengham, Ian Patterson and Peter Riley who organised the conference. The paper was published in *Scottish Literary Journal*, 20, (1993) 75-85.

**Sequential Meaning in Ezra Pound's *Cathay*** was presented at the 14th International Ezra Pound Conference, Brunnenburg, Tirolo di Merano, Italy, July 1991. Thanks to Richard Taylor who organised the conference. The essay was published in Richard Taylor and Claus Melchior (eds) *Ezra Pound and Europe*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1993.

**T.S. Eliot and W.S. Graham** was presented at T.S. Eliot and his Legacy, University of Glasgow, 1988. Thanks to Robert Crawford who organised the conference. The paper was published in *Scottish Literary Journal*, 19 (1992) 35-46.

I have taken advantage of fair usage for academic criticism and wish to gratefully acknowledge permission to reprint copyright material as follows:

From *Tuning* © 1984 David Antin. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation and the author.

From 'The Beckoning, Reckoning Naught' © 1995 Steve Benson. Reprinted by permission of the author.

From *In The Early Morning Rain*, © 1970 Ted Berrigan. Reprinted by permission of the estate of Ted Berrigan, courtesy of Alice Notley.

From *Collected Poems* © 1978 Basil Bunting. Reprinted by permission of the estate of Basil Bunting, courtesy of John Halliday.

From *A Still Life* © 1977 Thomas A. Clark, *From A Glossary of Old Scots* © 1979 Thomas A. Clark, and from *Sixteen Sonnets* © 1981 Thomas A. Clark. Reprinted by permission of the author.

From 'Free Running Bitch' © 1996 Andrew Crozier. Reprinted by permission of the author.

From *Brixton Fractals* © 1985 Allen Fisher. Reprinted by permission of the author.

From *Collected Poems* © 1979 W.S. Graham. Reprinted by permission of the estate of W.S. Graham, courtesy of Michael and Margaret Snow.

From *Lost and Found* © 2003 Michael Gottlieb. Reprinted by permission of the author.

- From *The Man with Blue Eyes* © 1966 Lee Harwood. Reprinted by permission of the author.
- From 'The Altitudes' © 1982 Lyn Hejinian. Reprinted by permission of the author.
- 'Legend' from *Collected Poems* by Philip Larkin, © 1988, 2003 by the Estate of Philip Larkin. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, LLC (USA) and by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd (World excluding USA).
- From *Devolution* © 2000 Tony Lopez and from *Equal Signs* © 2004 Tony Lopez. Reprinted by permission of the author.
- From *Collected Poems* © 1996 Edwin Morgan. Reprinted by permission of Carcanet Press and the author.
- From *Virtual Reality* © 1993 Bob Perelman. Reprinted by permission of the author.
- 'The Return' from *Personae* © 1926 by Ezra Pound, reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp (USA, Canada and open market); 'The Return' from *Collected Shorter Poems* © 1952 by Ezra Pound. Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd (British Commonwealth).
- From *Poems* © 1982 J.H. Prynne and from *Bands Around The Throat* © 1987 J.H. Prynne. Reprinted by permission of the author.
- From *The Big Green Day* © 1968 Tom Raworth. Reprinted by permission of the author.
- From *Logbook* © 1976 Tom Raworth and Frances Butler. Reprinted by permission of Poltroom Press, the author and the artist.
- From *Collected Poems* © 2003 Tom Raworth. Reprinted by permission of Carcanet Press and the author.
- From *Selected Poems* © 2000 Denise Riley. Reprinted by permission of the author.
- From *Four Lectures* © 1982 Stephen Rodefer and from *Villon* 1968 © Stephen Rodefer. Reprinted by permission of the author.
- 'Incident in Soho' © 2004 The estate of David Wright. Reprinted by permission of Carcanet Press.

I have benefited from sabbatical leave and research travel grants provided by the University of Plymouth and I wish to thank those colleagues who have picked up responsibilities in my absence, among them especially Anthony Caleshu. I am glad to have had Dan Lane's help as my research assistant some time back. Grateful thanks also to The Society of Authors who provided me with an E.K. Blundell award at an early stage of this project, and to the British Academy for supporting research travel to the USA.

## *Limits of Reference and Abstraction in American Poetry*

The single fact is matter.  
Five words can say only.  
Black sky at night, reasonably.  
I am, the irrational residue.

Blown up chain link fence.  
Next morning stronger than ever.  
Midnight the pain is almost.  
The train seems practically expressive.

These eight lines comprise the first two verses of Bob Perelman's poem 'Chronic Meanings'.<sup>1</sup> There are twenty-five such verses and each verse contains four lines made of five words ending with a full stop. There are no enjambed lines—each line is double-stopped with the coincidence of a full-stop and line break, renouncing the use of line breaks as a punctuation device separate from the sentence. Each line is moreover a sentence that is stopped by an imposed punctuation rule (stop after five words) before it is finished in the sense of being fully developed as a complete thought. Despite the apparent organisation into verses, there is no synthesis into larger units of narrative or argument, so that the verses are merely visual and mechanical organising structures or grids.

In some of the lines the sense of meaning cut-off, of incompleteness, is really strong: 'A story familiar as a' and 'The heroic figures straddle the' whereas in others the lines have a kind of completeness: 'Blown up chain link fence', 'Society has broken into bands' and 'tens of thousands of drops' even if they are not completed sentences. Here and there the

[1]

incompleteness is maintained by the additional punctuation of a comma within the line: 'I am, the irrational residue' and 'I took a breath, then.'

I propose this poem as an exhibit because it has certain designs on us as readers that are in some ways equivalent to abstraction in painting. The poem holds us to its surface made of separate lines. The lines of the poem are meaningful in a number of ways, including their status as lines in a poem made of incomplete sentences. There is a kind of provisional generic meaning established here first of all by the title and layout of the poem. It is a poem of regular verses. The poem's title declares the poem to be concerned with 'meanings' with attributes or functions of language. The plural form enhances this reading, as does the modifying adjective 'chronic' normally applied to illness marked by long duration or frequent recurrence. So 'meaning', a fundamental and functional requirement and basic premise of poetry, takes on a negative association, because of the normal social use of that adjective 'chronic' as in 'chronic pneumonia', 'chronic alcoholic'. And the formation of the word from French 'chronique' from Greek 'chronos' leads us to connect 'meanings' with potential disease or illness developing in time or because of time—as in the way joints become less flexible because of ageing—there is therefore a sense of semantic entropy in the poem's title 'Chronic Meanings'.

The poem is made to display small composed examples of incompleteness within a formal normalising structure. The title refers us to language and brings to our attention the possibility and fragility of a higher level synthesis of meaning by withholding any higher level synthesis. It is made of incomplete sentences cut off as they begin to develop that sense of movement and direction we recognise as higher level meaning. The poem reminds us of the variety and possibilities of lower level meaning. We can imagine endings for the sentences but those endings do not make the lines work together and build towards higher level meaning. The experience of reading the poem is that the succession of new lines wipes out the previous lines because they do not join up in coherence but remain separate and mechanically put together. Each time we project into meaning there is an ending that refuses further meaning development and duration—but each ending pause is followed by a new movement towards meaning.

I experience the first line as cut off and I don't think of an ending right away, though an ending looks possible in some contexts. For example: The single fact *is* matter exists in time. Or another: The single fact *is*

*matter* for the detective. The poem's second line seems to describe the poem itself 'Five words can say only.' Its incompleteness describes or defines all the instances of incompleteness in the poem. 'Black sky at night, reasonably' looks like a modified statement about nature, which used to be the subject of poems. It is also a variation on the weather mnemonic which begins 'red sky at night, shepherd's delight.' 'I am, the irrational residue' allows the poem to be at least partly about a sense of personal identity, a claim of individual self-expression with qualities of (withheld) specificity 'the irrational residue' just like old-fashioned identity-politics poetry. My favourite line is 'Blown up chain link fence' I think because it is a kind of picture—though the picture would be a scattering of metal fragments in an unspecified landscape. It is a completely static line because the action that is related is in the past. The following two lines seem to be connected because they could be describing a person's experience 'Next morning stronger than ever' and 'Midnight the pain is almost' and they could work within a single context of illness, remission or recovery. They both contain a statement about a specific time: 'morning', 'midnight'. Line number eight 'The train seems practically expressive' seems as it stands to attribute the expression of feeling to a machine and thus to undermine the human context that was previously beginning to be established.

It is possible to begin to account for the ways in which the lines work on us as readers but the only feature that is constant is the incompleteness of reference to any reality outside the poem. I don't mean that the poem is composed to make us doubt the reality outside the poem—I mean that its connection to that reality is begun and cut off again and again. We are kept on the surface of the poem, looking at language and thinking about language and potential meaning; thinking about what meaning is and how language works.

That is we are kept on the surface of the poem's language, not necessarily thinking about how language works in a generalised sense, but thinking about how these bits of language work together.

The coffee sounds intriguing but.  
She put her cards on.  
What had been comfortable subjectivity.  
The lesson we can each.

This verse, for instance, could be read as a playful fragmented narrative of figurative meaning and interpretation that is full of human interac-

tion. ‘The coffee sounds intriguing but’ could be a statement of consumer choice or a well-meaning, polite but negative response to a personal invitation. The next line ‘She put her cards on’ is a cliché that we cannot help but complete, but it could be read literally (undermining the cliché) or figuratively (confirming it), and it could combine with the previous line (making the invitation even more explicit) or it could, after all, have another ending. ‘What had been comfortable subjectivity’ and ‘The lesson we can each’ could also fit into a narrative if that narrative is relating subjective experience and interpreting it. And that is what good and bad traditional poems have done ever since Wordsworth’s spots of time in *The Prelude* and countless workshop poems have done in every dull writing class we could imagine. The poem allows this possibility for poetry to coexist with its denial:

On our wedding night I.  
 The sorrow burned deeper than.  
 Whether a biographical junkheap or.  
 A personal life, a toaster.  
 Memorised experience can’t be completely.  
 So shut the fucking thing.

Some of the lines look like experience but some question or mock the idea of reading and interpreting the ‘biographical junkheap’ of experience. The linkage in ‘A personal life, a toaster’ gives us in compressed form the yoking together of incompatibles that refuses certain illusory reality effects. There is a refusal of the (Romantic) realism of the poem as a meaningful experience of moral conflict and growth, underpinning that whole ideology based on long-established and deceptive figurative uses of the natural in poetry. This poem, published in Bob Perelman’s 1993 collection *Virtual Reality*, combines fragments of incompatible style registers, shifting very rapidly as virtual reality can do between kinds of depiction and ranges of scale.<sup>2</sup>

Of course the depictions of language and the depictions of painting are not the same, and the non-depictions of language and painting are not the same—but there is a connection between the refusal of transparency in poetic language and what we call abstraction in painting. In

both cases we remain at the surface and are concerned with the organisation of that surface as evidence of intelligence at play in the work. The visual surface can be organised in an ordered and intricate or in a messy or even chaotic way. The surface can register spontaneous activity that is non-repeatable or it can contain the neutral working-out of a planned construction in space. It can be contaminated with elements from other media, it can include elements of re-introduced pictorialism and text, be hung with suspended china or slashed with a razor, comprise a grid of tiny elements derived from mechanical reproductive processes, or comprise a grid of handmade patterned brushstrokes, gestural and incomplete, and so on.

Perelman's poem 'Chronic Meanings' is an unusually clear poetic example of one compositional idea carried out for us on a grid. The sentences that are rendered incompletely have a certain incongruity in combination—but the sentences are not the only sentences that would work. Another 'Chronic Meanings' could be constructed that would work just as well. There are many such poems one could imagine. The one we have is particular and the choices of incomplete sentences must be a kind of signature of the composing intelligence but the refusal of development and separation of sentence fragments conditions the composition away from a strong sense of uniqueness or originality. It is the compositional idea in the poem that is used up in making the poem. It is by no means typical in Perelman's poetry which has all kinds of particular invented forms but which generally involves a regular word-count metre including full and playful use of line break and argumentative coherence and development.

But I have been reading the poem as if I did not know the declared meaning of the poem just in order to share the experience, as it were, without any additional information offered as a supplement. This is Perelman's comment on the poem written for the anthology *The Best American Poetry 1991*:<sup>3</sup>

'Chronic Meanings' was written on hearing that a friend had AIDS; it is an attempt on my part to see what happened to meaning as it was interrupted. If one expects a poem to be more or less narrative, focusing sharply or softly on spots of time, 'Chronic Meanings' might feel evasive. But in fact I was trying to be direct; the sentences came as matter-of-factly from my experience and imagination as I could manage. At the same time I knew I would be writing down only the first five words of each sentence, so there was a great pressure for some sort of concision, though I certainly wasn't after a haiku-like or 'poetic' compression: I wanted to

feel what real-life, conventional articulation felt like when it was halted in the middle. I did work on (edit) the results to avoid habit and redundancy. As opposed to the classical received sense of poetry outbraving time, 'Chronic Meanings' seems to me to face the other way, and to try to register time's evanescence.

He elaborates on the comment in a November 1996 posting on the Buffalo electronic poetry centre listserv:

The person was Lee Hickman, who edited one of the best experimental mags around, *Temblor*, in the 70s and 80s. I didn't know Lee that well, but I certainly respected his editing and was grateful for the effort he put into the magazine. The issues were around 150-200 pp, wide and interesting ranges of work from various avant-garde territories so that constituencies were always being introduced to one another. Lee worked as a typesetter to pay for the printing; he did the production, no typos. He put 'Chronic Meanings' at the end of the last issue; so it's interesting for me to remember that he typed it. In a way, it was much more direct than any letter of sympathy could have been.

The poem 'Chronic Meanings' has thus become an example of one of the most traditional kinds of poems, a memorial poem, even if it was written before Perelman's friend Lee Hickman was dead. I find it moving to read that Lee Hickman typed the poem for the last issue of his journal *Temblor* and that Perelman says 'I didn't know Lee that well'. Indeed we don't learn anything about Lee Hickman from the poem—it doesn't do one thing that we might expect a memorial poem to do, it doesn't tell us about the dead person. It is not written because the dying and now dead person was a close friend, it is not a poem of bereavement. It is a kind of elegy even so. We learn almost nothing of Edward King from 'Lycidas' and the conventions of the pastoral elegy tend to frame and to distance us from the experience of personal grief in that poem. But it is obviously not the details of the dead person nor declarations of personal feeling that make a great elegy. The point is not just 'Lee Hickman' but 'Lee Hickman' as dedicatee, as the individual who is the focus for youthful death in this poem and for a whole generation. The significance that the poem fits into is a much wider field of meaning, by now historical, that surrounds the phenomena of AIDS in San Francisco. As the early recorded cases were concentrated in urban American gay centres there was a political activism that grew up in order to raise the profile of these unexplained deaths, to demand action from the American government including money for healthcare and research. San Francisco was hit first

and hit very hard.

Perelman's poem thus connects with the memory of a particular victim and with the wider feelings of bereavement and sympathy that are very generally felt about AIDS as an international disaster of global dimensions particularly acute in Africa. But the poem works first of all because it is a San Francisco poem, I think, that arises in the context of the San Francisco counter culture. Perelman, who is by now a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and a well-known poet in America, was in the 1970s and 1980s one of the most active and influential poets on the San Francisco avant-garde poetry scene. He edited the magazine *Hills*, and from 1977 to 1981 he founded and curated the San Francisco Talk Series (located at the Langton Street Gallery) and edited *Writing/Talks* (1985) from that series.

The poets now known as the Language Poets were associated with a number of overlapping groups working in different locations in America in the 1970s and 80s, publishing in each others' magazines and small presses and organising networks and events. The most important locations were San Francisco and New York but there were other centres. In San Francisco then, major US pacific port, there was the coincidence and history of oppositional movements, among them the anti-Vietnam demonstrations, student political organizations, beats, hippies, the gay scene, San Francisco renaissance, avant-garde poetry scene and so on. Perelman's poem 'Chronic Meanings', memorial for a poetry magazine editor who died of AIDS, is written in a form that would have been recognized by readers in a network of communities, and that form has a historical value that can be read historically if we understand the significance of what has been done where by whom in American literary culture. Look at the way the poem dates itself in these (separate) lines:

The nineteenth century was sure.

The monster struggled with Milton.

Now this particular mall seemed.

Mount Rushmore in a sonnet.

The Nineteenth century is a cut-off historical idea; Milton appears in an animated cartoon wrestling a monster; Ginsberg's supermarket in California has become a shopping mall; and national monuments and

traditional poetic forms are deployed as postmodern scale-shifters. Reading the poem historically, according to information not given in the poem, I doubt my earlier thought that one could use other sentences to make another ‘Chronic Meanings’ poem. But of course there are and there were poems closely related to ‘Chronic Meanings’ already in existence: how else could this poem have been recognised as poetry or indeed printed in anthologies such as *The Best American Poetry 1991* and *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*. By the time that ‘Chronic Meanings’ was written there was a huge range of avant-garde practice in poetry—because the movement or phenomenon we know as Language Poetry was already a belated avant-garde in the history of literary avant-gardes of the twentieth century. Let’s look at an example happening in progress in the magazine *This*, edited by Barrett Watten.<sup>4</sup>

#### The Altitudes

A water bird, kicking off, delights in the sun. Rejection of closure, of refusal to end. Totally groundless. The morning is clear and vanishing. The whole planet stands to reason over a hole in the ground. Someone else can fill the sky with clouds. A sort of breathy stir, sailing dry the wash. In rolling clusters, from these surroundings, the greenery is about to rise from uncreated cliffs. With ideal longevity it thickens the environment. A promising arrest of blue, a little breeze inflating the tops of trees. Browsing over details, we revel in education. The light breeze blows the bright leaves predominantly poleward. Concocting idylls lost in reaches. Details on the street in the wind are sketchlike, scumbled. A breeze billows the sheet; a tremor of the tree. High up where the air holds buzzards sway, dutifully reporting the rhapsodic distortion along the poetic beam. The history of the lyric clucks with the transliteration of hen songs. Unmollified exempla.

LYN HEJINIAN

I have chosen this passage because it seems to involve a kind of distorted and abstracted depiction of nature. There certainly are words that signify bits of nature included in the text: ‘water bird’, ‘sun’, ‘ground’, ‘morning’, ‘planet’, ‘note’, ‘sky’, ‘clouds’, ‘greenery’, ‘cliffs’, ‘breeze’, ‘trees’, ‘leaves’, ‘air’, ‘buzzards’, ‘hens’ but the text doesn’t seem to be simply about description or even to be mostly about description.

The first sentence is a happy anthropomorphic fancy based on an observation. It makes a connection between the beginning of the prose passage that we are reading and the beginning of an imagined scene. The second sentence has a connection back to the first sentence in that

'kicking off' is a beginning and 'rejection of closure' is a kind of continuation, even though it has introduced the idea of closure which was not previously present. But the beginning of the second sentence allies us to what is happening in the writing itself, at the level of language, and tends to obliterate the possibility of the narration of natural events. The second sentence as a whole 'Rejection of closure, of refusal to end' is also a kind of contradiction, since it is both 'closure' and 'refusal to end' that are rejected. It is not clear what is in progress that could be closed unless it is the passage of writing itself, barely begun. The next sentence is incomplete. 'Totally groundless' is lacking in a main verb and it is moreover not clear in what sense it applies to what has gone before. The following sentence 'The morning is clear and vanishing' is also an unusual construction looking at first like a statement about the weather and then like metaphysics. It is as if the sentence were incomplete or as if it has been altered or deformed. 'The planet stands to reason over a hole in the ground' is equally remarkable for its simple-seeming surrealism. One thing a planet can't do is 'stand' and the cliché 'stands to reason' comes from another register that has been applied because of the apparent fit between the activity 'stand' and a position 'over a hole in the ground' even though 'planet' and 'reason' don't work together in this sentence. 'Someone else can fill the sky with clouds' is a possible sentence—but it is one that we have to make an imaginative effort to read and accept and it doesn't work together with what we have so far—except that it includes landscape elements put together in a sentence. 'Totally groundless' includes the idea of ground present and missing in a figurative sense and 'clouds' and 'sky' equally have an origin in nature even though they seem here to be ideas or elements of a painting or piece of conceptual art. 'Sailing dry the wash' looks more like ordinary description of washing set out to dry, with the sheets or clothes being raised and filled by wind. But the tone changes as the passage progresses using a variety of poetic effects such as repetition, spoonerisms and rhyme 'the light breeze blows the bright leaves', 'dutifully reporting . . . rhapsodic distortion' to take the writing further 'along the poetic beam' away from any idea of depiction to an overwhelming sense of constructiveness and abstraction.

Hejinian's poem is an example of the New Sentence, a formal innovation that began to happen in the experimental writing of the Bay Area in the late 70s and 80s.

This was first described by Ron Silliman who had himself been writing in this way for some time and who was trying to establish a descrip-

tive theory of what was then current practice.<sup>5</sup> The New Sentence is basically a new variety of prose poetry, based on the sentence instead of the line, in which sentences are accumulated in non-narrative units to make a kind of collaged meaning of ideas and emotional effects. Hejinian's piece 'The Altitudes' is a good example, as are Silliman's writings such as *Tjanting* and *Paradise*.<sup>6</sup> Perelman's poem 'Chronic Meanings', although set out to look like regular verses, is punctuated in end-stopped sentences and is thus a particular kind of New Sentence poem based on word count.

In formulating his description of the New Sentence Silliman relies on Gertrude Stein's writings, both on examples of brief Stein poems from *Tender Buttons* and on self-referential sentences from Stein's book *How to Write*, most importantly 'A sentence is not emotional a paragraph is'. Silliman lists the qualities of the new sentence as follows

1. The paragraph organises 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.

Stein's poems in *Tender Buttons* certainly have some of these characteristics. This is the opening of 'Roastbeef' from that book.<sup>7</sup>

In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in the evening there is feeling. In the evening there is feeling. In feeling anything is resting, in feeling anything is mounting, in feeling there is resignation, in feeling there is recognition, in feeling there is recurrence and entirely mistaken there is pinching. All the standards have steamers and all the curtains have bed linen and all the yellow has discrimination and all the circle has circling. This makes sand.

The balance of the first sentence is remarkable—notice the parallel clauses, built up from the repeated phrases 'in the . . . there is . . .'. These

parallel clauses oppose the paired (stressed) words in meaning and in acoustic patterning.

inside and outside  
sleeping and reddening  
morning and evening  
meaning and feeling

'Inside and outside', 'morning and evening' are two pairs of opposites that we are used to—so a structure is set up with a momentum of formality and the other two pairs

sleeping and reddening  
meaning and feeling

seem to be recruited into the same kind of relationship—but they are not the same. Already there is a teasing detachment of reference—it is possible that the 'inside' of the first sentence refers to a joint of roast beef. 'Sleeping' might be a fanciful description of a piece of meat (it reminds us that the meat is animal); 'reddening' certainly calls up the rare inside of a joint revealed by carving a slice.

But 'inside' may equally be the location of sleeping people—a house or an apartment—'outside' the sky may be 'reddening' because evening is coming on. Morning may be the time to get business done: meaning itself, and evening the time to be focused on the feelings—sharing a meal, expressing friendship or love.

The words 'morning' and 'meaning' are related because they are identical except for one vowel sound. And each is a two-syllable word sharing an identical syllable—chiming. Chiming is a special case of rhyming normally avoided in poetry. 'Evening' and 'feeling' are related because they share the long 'e' vowel and because they also chime. The two pairs of words (all four words) have the identical syllable and the first (other) vowel is either what is different or what is shared. The relationship of the last pair, 'evening' and 'feeling' is severed from the other pairs and repeated as a whole sentence—the second sentence: 'In the evening there is feeling'. Then the phrase 'in feeling' is repeated five times in the third sentence:

In feeling anything is resting, in feeling anything is mounting, in feeling there is resignation, in feeling there is recognition, in feeling there is recurrence and entirely mistaken there is pinching.

'Feeling' changes status, from one of the first sentence's stressed words in matched and contrasted pairs to become part of the repeated phrase 'in feeling' that various states and actions are made to seem pulled out of: resting, mounting, resignation, recognition, recurrence, pinching (in negative). The pattern is 'in feeling anything is'  $\times 2$ , then 'in feeling there is'  $\times 3$  + the contrast 'entirely mistaken'. The next sentence has the pattern 'All the (something) have'  $\times 2$ , 'all the (something) has'  $\times 2$ . Held together by the pattern are the main (stressed) words:

standards  
 steamers  
 curtains  
 bed-linen  
 yellow  
 discrimination  
 circle  
 circling

The shift from 'All the—have—' to 'All the—has—' is a shift from plurals: standards, steamers, curtains, bed-linen, to singulars: yellow, discrimination, circle, circling.

There are some semantic connections in the group of main (stressed) words: curtains and bed-linen as kinds of soft furnishing (this may be how 'yellow' could be thought to have or to display 'discrimination'), circle and circling are closely related. But none of this patterned language indicates (unless I've missed it) a larger argument, what Silliman calls syllogistic movement. The final sentence of the paragraph is 'This makes sand'. The anaphor 'this' could refer to the circling, to all the matter of the previous sentence, to the whole paragraph, to the word 'this' itself or to the sentence which contains it—it is impossible to know for sure.

The last sentence in short is a non-sequitur, it is made to function as an end-stop to the reading intelligence reaching towards higher level synthesis. 'This makes sand' can't be incorporated to a higher level of meaning unless figuratively as the language becoming substance. All the signs, the local meanings, their acoustic shapes, are grains in the sound of this printed stuff under the title 'Roastbeef'. But there is no call for a metaphoric meaning here. The thing that is wonderful about the poem 'Roastbeef' is the elaboration, the invention, the sense of language running on in patterns of replication and embellishment not tied to any personal agenda, grief, confession or self-aggrandisement. It

is self-expression but a kind of self-expression that is particularly attractive because it is so innocently pleasurable. This sentence for instance, coming on the second page, seems to be generated by rhyme:

Lovely snipe and tender turn, excellent vapour and slender butter, all the splinter and the trunk, all the poisonous darkening drunk, all the joy in weak success, all the joyful tenderness, all the section and the tea, all the stouter symmetry.

The rhythm comes together and clarifies into the trochaic rhythm of 'Twinkle twinkle little star', the rhythm also of Blake's 'Tyger'. Perhaps the word 'symmetry' suggests Blake's poem.

And the title *Tender Buttons* gets into the oral play of 'tender', 'slender', 'butter'. 'Snipe' and 'slender' are combined in 'splinter'. 'Trunk' and 'drunk', 'weak success' and 'tenderness', 'and the tea' and 'symmetry'. These simple oral pleasures are pleasures because they are a kind of nonsense. Yet in the nonsense there is a thematic return—Lovely snipe, tender turn, excellent vapour, slender butter all take us back to food.

The writing is abstract in a special way—it is made from the parts (words) of the technology (language) we use to describe and thus orient ourselves in the world we inhabit. But this writing refuses any kind of instrumental grip on things in the world. I mean it doesn't recruit things via their names into an argument that builds up or makes sense. The poem, the writing, can't be completely abstract because it is made of language which is the stuff we use in our social life. The meanings that begin to form together are present but they are not allowed to join up. The structures that we use to create new sentences, our basis of creativity in language, are in play—but they are kept visible by the process of substitution, rather than being allowed as in normal language use to disappear in transparency when our attention is located beyond language itself.

Gertrude Stein was an important American presence in Paris at that time, helping to foster modernism in the arts and translating the early experiments in abstraction into her writing. Thus Stein in the extremity or inclusive complexity of her syntactic processing becomes ever more central in Modernism and the history of what follows. The syntax of the first sentences of 'Roastbeef' is procedural: the replication blocks syllogistic synthesis and transparency. Stein's use of rhyme is similarly a way of keeping us on the language surface, as any painter of cubism keeps us on the painted surface looking at fragments of standard still-life objects

broken and recombined. Stein is breaking and remaking the sentence as her unit of poetry. I'm interested in the notion of entropy, the inclusion of disorder in poetry, as a figure of complexity and thus a kind of realism that we haven't yet fully learnt to read.

According to Bob Perelman, Stein's writing represents an expression of her self and her body that is basic and unaestheticised.<sup>8</sup> He finds in Stein not conventional literary quality but anti-patriarchal cubism. Stein's writing is about her own submersion in her writing process; the focus is not on superiority or estrangement but on her own excitement. This seems accurate to me especially because Perelman doesn't praise Stein in terms of accepted theory of modernist poetry: the idea of masculine imposed form, figures of cutting and sculpting allied to 'objective' hardness and smoothly machined forms.

Stein is the most important modernist ancestor for the Language poets. Silliman establishes his descriptive theory with reference to Stein, and makes Stein a pioneer of the New Sentence. His argument is right in as much as Stein alters, works on, 'torques' sentences into new forms. There is no doubt that Stein composed her poems by using recognisable patterns of syntax and replicating them with language formulations that resist transparency. It isn't really clear whether she works by breaking and rejoining and I doubt it. The combinations of sentences have some effects in common with the New Sentence but they are not the same thing exactly. You could not find a Stein sentence in *Tender Buttons* that looks as if it comes from elsewhere. The sentences may be non-sequential or arbitrarily sequential in acoustic pattern or syntactic shape—but they do not seem to be collaged from different pre-existing contexts. They do not seem to be systematically deformed. They do come again in new contexts and have their meaning altered (as in Hejinian's writing, as in traditional verse refrains) but they don't juxtapose or conjoin different discrete vocabularies. I find it difficult to take seriously Silliman's use of Stein as a theorist since Stein's apparently theoretical statements have to be cherry picked to work in a critical context. They are not formulated as an argument with coherence. This is a strength of Stein's writing because that writing resists totalisation, précis and reformulation as theory. But Silliman picks up sentences and uses them as if they were already in a larger argument. Some of the statements are usable and some are not. This is from *How to Write*.

'A sentence is not emotional a paragraph is.'

What does this statement mean? It seems to be an insight into the process (or at least one possible process) of writing. A sentence is a unit of writing, the combination of sentences is a way to make or communicate emotion. But is that right? Are we always building emotionally when we construct paragraphs? Is that how we progress a complex argument? Isn't a sentence a unit of writing that communicates a complete thought? Couldn't that thought be an emotion? Aren't the language units 'sentence' and 'paragraph' both non-exclusive with respect to the idea of 'emotion', neither being more appropriate? Isn't this statement a false definition based on a mistaken distinction? Gertrude Stein wasn't using it in the language game of information. You can use Stein sentences to say what you want—their spread and flow makes them ideal for use as examples of anything you like. This is not a criticism of Stein's *How To Write* but a question forming about how her work is used in contemporary poetic theory.

Stein's work can be appropriated by different interest groups because you can make it mean anything you like. It is abstract writing that resists meaning so little bits of it can be made to seem full of intention that may be invention. Reading Stein's work as it is is a real and permanent challenge. She hugely expanded the possibilities for writing and we are nowhere near using them up.

I want to consider here a brilliant recent poem written by one of the Language poets that seems to have taken on both the idea of abstraction and the idea of political meaning which is not made fully explicit in the work. There was a development of abstraction, apparently away from the gestural, even theatrical self-expression involved in the heroic phase Abstract Expressionism. Minimalism looks like objects made by industry, typically machine-finished with all character removed. A piece of nondescript metal protruding from a gallery wall; a series of squares of flat metal placed on the floor; something like a ship's air vent standing in a room; a perfect surface of dipped or sprayed paint; an assemblage of wall-mounted open-ended boxes made of MDF. There is something disturbing about these constructions that are deliberately emptied of all personality, that are neatly manufactured using industrial processes. I find just this quality in the poem called 'The Dust' by Michael Gottlieb.<sup>9</sup> It is a list poem written about the dust that spread all over lower Manhattan after the World Trade Centre buildings were destroyed on 9/11. It is an extraordinarily pure work, full of significance and meaning, but emptied of all narrative and expository intention, all individual personality.

**One**

UHF Tower Mast A  
 VHF Main Antenna Bracing, Southeast  
 Left Rear Wheel Assembly, Retractor  
 Radome Array  
 First Class Galley Convection Oven Number One  
 First Class Galley Convection Oven Number Two

Knoll workstation fabric panel, 3'6" by 2', with crepe  
 Knoll workstation fabric panel, 3'6" by 2'6", with crepe  
 Knoll workstation fabric panel, 3'6" by 3'6", with crepe  
 BPI workstation ½ plexiglass panel, 5'6" by 2'6"  
 Hon workstation ½ plexiglass panel, 5'6" by 3'  
 Interior Concepts workstation T-base for non-raceway panels  
 Anderson Hickey workstation connector post, 6'  
 Global workstation full plexiglass panel, 5' by 2'6"

Seagrave Fire Apparatus Rear Mount Aerial Truck  
 Seagrave Fire Apparatus Tractor Drawn Aerial Truck  
 Seagrave Fire Apparatus High Pressure Pumper  
 Ford Crown Victoria Interceptor  
 Kroll-O'Gara Cadillac Fleetwood

Boucle short-sleeve shirt  
 Pigment-dyed oxford shirt  
 Stretch poplin shirt  
 Egyptian 60s long sleeve, barrel cuff, wing collar shirt  
 Merino V-neck sweater  
 Stretch plain-weave pleated pant  
 Stretch twill pant  
 Denim pant  
 Five button jean  
 Argyle broadcloth boxer  
 Looney Tunes characters broadcloth boxer  
 Distressed corduroy baseball cap  
 Flat black belt  
 Woven brown belt

Form F-3MEF New registration statement filed under  
 Rule 462(b) to add securities to a prior related registration  
 statement filed on Form F-3  
 Form U-9C-3 Quarterly report concerning energy and  
 gas-related companies pursuant to Rule 58 of the Act  
 Form S-6 Registration statement for unit investment trusts  
 Form N-8B-4 Registration statement for face-amount certificate

Frito-Lay Ruffles Original, 12 ½ oz  
Ben & Jerry's, Cherry Garcia, one pint  
Snapple Peach Diet Iced Tea, 12 oz  
Lifesavers Butter Rum, economy pack  
Altoids, cinnamon, 1.76 oz  
Twizzlers Nibs Licorice Bits, 2.25 oz  
Camel Light 100s, hard box

Lancome Revitalizing Cream  
Revlon Fantastic Blusher  
Chanel Age Delay Rejuvenation serum  
Clinique Pretty Long Lashes mascara  
Estée Lauder Multi-Dimension powder  
Ortho Novum, Dispens-A-Pak  
Tampax lite days  
Flonase 50 mcg  
Lescol, 25 mg

Column tree connector  
End plate and top  
Rail ¾" by 6' by 12'  
Fillet weld ¾" by 6'  
Flange connection  
Stiffener  
Spandrel

Carver Rectangular Genuine Wood Wastebasket  
Post-it 'Important' Note Pad, Assorted Neon Colors,  
50 Sheet Pad Sanford Liquid Accent Tank-Style Highlighter,  
Orange  
Avery E-Z D Ring Heavy-Duty View Binder with  
Lever-Lock, Black  
Hewlett-Packard Color LaserJet 4550 Laser Printer  
Swingline Full-Strip Desktop Stapler, Black  
Acme Forged Steel Scissors with Black Enamel Handles  
Bic SoftFeel Ballpoint Stic Pen, Black

MICHAEL GOTTLIEB

Like the Perelman poem, there is here a meaning that is not disclosed in the poem; you need to have the information in order to experience the poem with its full resonance and power. The blankness of the language is truly awful, what could be more banal

Knoll workstation fabric panel, 3'6" by 2', with crepe

The difference from the first line to the next one in this verse is the change in measurement from 3'6" by 2' to 3'6" by 2'6"; the next line makes another step to 3'6" by 3'6". Then we get 'BPI workstation ½ plexi-glass panel 5'6" by 2'6"' and the following line which is set out to the same formula but with a different brand name, 'Hon' instead of 'BPI' and a change in dimension similar to that of the previous three lines. Each of the lines in this verse specifies a particular workstation and makes it plain to us that an individual worked there at the position where that piece of functional office furniture was installed. The next verse contains vehicles. Again, as near as possible, the traditional ways of shaping verse are maintained in this list poem, thus the listing of three 'Seagrave Fire Apparatus' vehicles together so that repetition and slight variation are combined in the listing and these are followed by the other different vehicles that are nonetheless described in the same pattern of naming: brand name and model descriptors; e.g., 'Ford Crown Victoria Interceptor'

What follows is a list of men's clothing:

Boucle short sleeve shirt  
 Pigment-dyed oxford shirt  
 Stretch poplin shirt

These are commercially produced items of costume with particular descriptive and culturally specific detail. This looks not exactly alien but certainly different to an English reader. 'Looney tunes characters broad-cloth boxer' is a product I understand but it is not one I've come across before. In a developed capitalist society we are defined by our consumer choices, so in this verse every line is evidence of a particular person as costumed consumer, humorous giftware, formal or informal, particular people are inscribed there that we cannot know.

A verse of legal stationary relates to business activities concerning utilities and investments. There is a verse of food and drink items, again, completely American products with unexpected resonances that are inscribed in product names. Musician Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead is memorialised in the ice-cream product name, the butter-rum-flavoured sweet or candy is called 'Lifesavers'. There is a verse of cosmetic and female products with descriptions that promise sexual allure, social confidence, medical solutions. Again the sense of particular women who have bought these products and taken them to work is strong in this blank iteration of product names. We can imagine whole social situations in which the people who bought these items have

worked and carried on their lives. Each item on the list is a synecdoche for a person probably now dead. The building interior is detailed and made present by the list, the specificity of office business tasks is confirmed in our imagination by the detailed listing of office equipment: wastebasket, post it notes, highlighter, ring binder, laser printer, stapler, scissors, ball point pen. All the social complexity, testing and design decisions, manufacturing details, logistics, marketing and procurement are implied in the list.

The list is by no means exhaustive, but different areas of work have been identified and different groups of products are invoked. To describe them is to follow the structure of the list poem—but no commentary on a list is as effective as the list. The very fabric of the building, items of women's clothing, cell phones, watches, fire and rescue staff uniforms, various kinds of ID cards that indicate jobs and memberships and nationalities are specified. One stanza is a brief listing of people with surnames beginning with initial K. The second section is a mixed continuous list whose first item is itself a sign for an emergency exit. As the section progresses for one and a half pages more and more names are included. The list becomes a partial version of the memorial list that was constructed by city authorities and read out at the memorial service at ground zero.

#### Notes

- 1 Bob Perelman, *Ten to One: Selected Poems*, (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1999).
- 2 Bob Perelman, *Virtual Reality*, (New York: Roof, 1993).
- 3 <http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/chronic-meanings.html> accessed 16/11/2004.
- 4 Lyn Hejinian, 'The Altitudes', *This*, 12 (1982).
- 5 Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence*, New York: Roof, 1989.
- 6 Ron Silliman, *Tjanting*, (Cambridge: Salt, 2002); *Paradise*, (Providence, RI: Burning Deck, 1985).
- 7 Gertrude Stein, *Look At Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures 1909–45*, (London: Penguin, 1971).
- 8 Bob Perelman, *The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein and Zukofsky* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).
- 9 Michael Gottlieb, *Lost and Found*, (New York: Roof, 2003).

## *W.S. Graham's Elegies and St Ives*

### **The Thermal Stair**

*For the painter Peter Lanyon killed in a gliding accident 1964*

I called today, Peter, and you were away.  
I look out over Botallack and over Ding  
Dong and Levant and over the jasper sea.

Find me a thermal to speak and soar to you from  
Over Lanyon Quoit and the circling stones standing  
High on the moor over Gurnard's Head where some

Time three foxglove summers ago, you came.  
The days are shortening over Little Parc Owles.  
The poet or painter steers his life to maim

Himself somehow for the job. His job is Love  
Imagined into words or paint to make  
An object that will stand and will not move.

Peter, I called and you were away, speaking  
Only through what you made and at your best.  
Look, there above Botallack, the buzzard riding

The salt updraught slides off the broken air  
And out of sight to quarter a new place.  
The Celtic sea, the Methodist sea is there.

You said once in the Engine  
House below Morvah  
That words make their world