

Marjorie Perloff on *Sunset Debris*

"*Sunset Debris*" [is] a thirty-page text made up entirely of questions. In a 1985 interview with Tom Beckett, Silliman explains:

My idea with *Sunset Debris* was to explore the social contract between writer and reader. As sender and receiver do not exist in vacuums, any communication involves a relationship, an important dimension of which is always power. 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. As advertisers have known for decades, the process of consuming information is an act of submission. To have read these words is to have had these thoughts, which were not your own.

... It was this aspect of intersubjectivity which caused me to introduce so much explicitly sexual language....Every sentence is supposed to remind the reader of her or his inability to respond.

Every poem is, of course, a "social contract between writer and reader," but what makes "*Sunset Debris*" distinctive is that, in Wittgensteinian terms, the "psychological I" is replaced by the "metaphysical subject, the limit--not a part of the world" (T #5.641), the limits of the poet's language becoming the limits of his constructed world. In Wittgenstein's words, "solipsism strictly carried out coincides with pure realism" (T #5.64). Consider the prose poem's first forty-four questions:

Can you feel it? Does it hurt? Is this too soft? Do you like it? Is this how you like it? Is it alright? Is he there? Is he breathing? Is it him? Is it near? Is it hard? Is it cold? Does it weigh much? Is it heavy? Do you have to carry it far? Are those hills? Is this where we get off? Which one are you? Are we there yet? Do we need to bring sweaters? Where is the border between blue and green? Has the mail come? Have you come yet? Is it perfect bound? Do you prefer ballpoints? Do you know which insect you most resemble? Is it the red one? Is that your hand? Want to go out? What about dinner? What does it cost? Do you speak English? Has he found his voice yet? Is this anise or is it fennel? Are you high yet? Is your throat sore? Can't you tell dill weed when you see it? Do you smell something burning? Do you hear a ringing sound? Do you hear something whimpering, mewling, crying? Do we get there from here? (AH 11)

"In the language of everyday life," says Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, "it very often happens that the same word signifies in two different ways ... or that two words, which signify in different ways, are apparently applied in the same way in the proposition" (T #3.373). "*Sunset*

Debris" seems to carry this process to its furthest possible limit. The first question--"Can you feel it?"--normally refers to a sensation: can you feel the cold? the pain? the touch of something? The second question, "Does it hurt?" would seem to support that view. But we have no way of knowing what "it" is or whom the poet is addressing as "you," and so, when "it" changes to "this" and we have the sequence:

Do you like it? Do you like this? Is this how you like it?

the simple shift from "what" to "how" and the predication relating "this" to "it" produces an erotically charged sexual reference, reinforced by "Is it alright?"

One of the central subjects of the Tractatus is the question of identity, the verb "to be" being endlessly ambiguous. "The word 'is,'" writes Wittgenstein, "appears as the copula, as the sign of equality, and as the sign of existence" (T #3.323). And in the later writings, Wittgenstein poses again and again the question of how it is we know that the "is" in "The rose is red" is different from the "is" in "twice two is four" (see PI #558-561). This conundrum is expressed in the opening passage of "Sunset Debris," in the triad

Is he there? Is he breathing? Is it him?

where the seemingly similar constructions signify quite differently: the first demands simple information, the second requires judgment on someone's part, while the third is one of identification--who is "he"?

Throughout the passage, indeed throughout the poem, such syntactic indeterminacy plays with the reader's expectations and forces him/her into submission. Consider the pairs "Has the mail come? Have you come yet?" or "Do you prefer ballpoints? Do you know which insect you most resemble?," where a neutral question suddenly gives way to a very personal and, in the second case, nasty one. Or again, the triad

Do you smell something burning? Do you hear a ringing sound? Do you hear something whimpering, mewling, crying?

where the questions are deceptively parallel: the first doesn't necessarily implicate the "you" at all, the second implies that there's something wrong with "you" (i.e., "you hear things!"), and the third implies that someone--you?--is failing to show concern for a lost cat, or a cat in distress.

So far as I can tell, not one of the approximately three thousand questions of "Sunset Debris" is repeated, except for the penultimate one "Can you feel it?"--which takes us back to the beginning. Silliman's prose poem is an extraordinary tour de force: it takes ordinary language and everyday events--eating, working, talking, making love--and, by means of the seemingly simple rhetorical device of turning statement into question, creates a verbal vortex that becomes increasingly explosive as the reader becomes increasingly disoriented:

Is it time to think time? Do the words time? How many times? Is it locatable? Has it a space? Does it have a secret? When will you tell it? Are you anxious? Are you ready? Is it simply because you do it? (AH 38)

Since the questions remain entirely uncontextualized, the "you" continually shifting from self to lover to friend to reader--a reader who cannot know what language game is being played. "How is it," asks the poet on the last page, "[that) with all this language there is still this thing so vast that we have no name for it, even if we sense it as a thing we have seen?" (AH 40). And neither he nor the reader can formulate an answer. There are, it seems, no more romantic sunsets, only "sunset debris." As for the poem's readers, "Is not communication an act of violence? Is not writing an act of privacy?" (AH 34).

By Marjorie Perloff. from *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*. Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1996. Copyright © 1996 by the University of Chicago Press.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Criticism Target:

Ron Silliman [2]

Author:

Marjorie Perloff [3]

Poem:

Sunset Debris [4]

Tags:

questions [5]

social contract [6]

Relationship [7]

asymmetrical [8]

intersubjectivity [9]

Wittgensteinian [10]

metaphysical subject [11]

solipsism [12]

tractatus [13]

sequence [14]

parallel [15]

tour de force [16]

rhetorical device [17]

uncontextualized [18]

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Links

[1] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/ron-silliman>

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/marjorie-perloff>

[4] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/sunset-debris>

[5] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/questions>

[6] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/social-contract>

[7] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/relationship>

[8] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/asymmetrical>

- [9] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/intersubjectivity>
- [10] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/wittgensteinian>
- [11] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/metaphysical-subject>
- [12] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/solipsism>
- [13] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/tractatus>
- [14] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/sequence>
- [15] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/parallel>
- [16] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/tour-de-force>
- [17] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/rhetorical-device>
- [18] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/uncontextualized>