

Siltanen, Elina. "Ron Silliman". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. First published 02 October 2023
[<https://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=12782>]

Ron Silliman (1946-)

Ron Silliman is a prolific American poet whose work is characterized by experimentation with language and the possibilities of poetic form. He is an active commentator on poetry and poetics and known as one of the founding members of the language writing community, which originated in the San Francisco and New York areas in the 1970s. Silliman has published many books of poetry, essays and edited collections of essays and poems since his first publication in 1965.

Silliman was born in Pasco, Washington, on August 5, 1946, and grew up in the area of Albany, California. He went to college in the San Francisco area in the 1960s but did not finish his degree. He proceeded to work as a political lobbyist and organizer, for example for the Committee for Prisoner Humanity & Justice and at San Francisco's Hospitality House. Later, he worked in the computer industry for a long time until his retirement in 2011. He lived in the San Francisco Bay area for several decades before moving to Pennsylvania in 1995 with his wife Krishna Evans and sons, Colin and Jesse. He teaches creative writing at the University of Pennsylvania Department of English. Silliman won the Levinson Prize from the Poetry Foundation in 2010. He was a Pew Fellow in the Arts in 1998, a Fellow of the Pennsylvania Arts Council in 2002, a Literary Fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts in 2003, and a Kelly Writers House Fellow in 2012.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Silliman participated in defining the poetics of the language writing community in essays and anthologies together with writers such as Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Carla Harryman, Susan Howe, Bruce Andrews, Bob Perelman, Barrett Watten, Steve Benson, and others. Language writing was, at the time, a marginal, self-grown writing community whose members actively worked to develop their poetics with and against other contemporary poetry, theory, and politics. The language poets worked together in publishing their writing, organizing poetry events, and coauthoring works. The collective is sometimes called L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, after the poetry magazine by that name.

From 1970 to 1981, Silliman edited the poetry magazine *Tottel's*, one of several small poetry magazines that featured writing by poets associated with language writing, such as Rae Armantrout, Robert Grenier, Clark Coolidge, and Larry Eigner. In the 1980s, Silliman edited *In the American Tree*, an anthology of poetry and critical essays by Language poets. Published in 1986, the collection opens with an essay by Silliman in which he discusses the beginnings of language writing, stating that it started with a focus on language and an opposition to the idea that "words should derive from speech and refer to things" (xvi). This rejection of language's referential function, he continues, means that a lot is required from both the poet and the reader (xvi).

The language writing community is known for postmodern experimentation with language and opposition to mainstream poetics, as discussed in essays such as "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry," published in *Social Text* in 1988 and written by Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Watten. These writers situate their work as part of the "experimental or avant-garde tradition" (261) and state that "the self as the central and final term of creative practice is being challenged and exploded in our writing in a number of ways," responding to unnamed critics who had criticized their writing (263). This essay takes a position against what the writers perceive as the mainstream writing style, which, according to them, does make use of a central self (263-65). One of the earliest academic commentators on language

writing, Marjorie Perloff, similarly viewed “the dismissal of ‘voice’ as the foundational principle of lyric poetry” as a central characteristic of language writing (405). As she notes, the criticism toward the singular voice can be connected to the “larger poststructuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject” which Roland Barthes and others propagated starting in the 1960s (407).

Furthermore, as Bob Perelman writes, the Language poets were interested in “foregrounding textuality and formal devices, using or alluding to Marxist and poststructuralist theory in order to open the present to critique and change” (Perelman 13). Left-wing politics was of interest to the group, as is indicated by Perelman. Silliman himself worked as an editor of the *Socialist Review* until 1991. In an essay called “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World,” originally published in 1984, Silliman discusses how capitalism and writing are connected, arguing that “[w]ords not only find themselves attached to commodities, they *become* commodities and, as such, take on the ‘mystical’ and mysterious character’ Marx identified as the commodity fetish” (8, original italics). Criticism of referentiality as capitalist ideology is a part of Silliman’s poetics, and his critical practice extends these considerations to other language poets.

While Silliman and his co-writers of the *Social Text* article note that “[i]n no sense did theory precede the work” (268), and while these poets initially worked outside academic contexts, theory and perceived opposition to mainstream writers have shaped their poetics. William Lavender writes of Silliman’s essay “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World” that it poses a contradiction because it outlines a model for poetry that moves beyond reference while the essay itself is presented in plain prose (188). Nevertheless, Silliman has always been interested in writing both poetry and theory, and his poetry often comments on poetics in ways that invite readers to consider how poetry makes meaning (Siltanen 131).

Silliman’s comments on poetry in his poems are often very simple, as in “Oz”: “Why are you reading this poem? Look out the window (but I didn’t say which one).” (Silliman, *The Alphabet* 383). In “Sunset Debris,” Silliman asks, “At what point does meaning begin to blur?” (*The Age of Huts* 108), a question that is preceded and followed by other questions which are not self-evidently related to each other, so that meaning may indeed blur. Furthermore, his poetry has been discussed as procedural, “generated according to rule-governed procedures,” and such works, according to William Watkin, “remind readers that what we are reading is made, not expressed, and their function is to reveal their madeness, not to communicate truths” (Watkin 499, 507). Such attention to the constructedness of poetry and to the uses to which language may be put is an essential part of Silliman’s writing. Poetics, for Silliman, needs to be considered and discussed actively, both in poetry and in prose essays. An understanding of poetics is not an underlying and hidden construction behind the writing; it is an integral part of all writing.

In the essay “The New Sentence,” which is also the titular text of a collection of essays first published in 1987, Silliman suggests “that there is such a thing as a new sentence and that it occurs thus far more or less exclusively in the prose of the Bay Area” (*The New Sentence* 63). He traces his concept of the “new sentence” through writers like William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and Hannah Weiner to language writing from poets like Bob Perelman and Carla Harryman (63, 84-88, 91). The new sentence, he notes, serves much the same function as a line does in versified poetry, breaking writing into units, an effect that Silliman calls “torquing” (89-90). This disjunctive effect is part and parcel of many of Silliman’s own poems, which frequently consist of sentences in prose format that are not obviously connected, rather than of lineated verse. In his autobiographical work

Under Albany, Silliman reveals that he started thinking about issues with the poetic line already in 1968 as a young writer, which later led him into writing prose poetry (11-12).

An excerpt from the first page of *Tjanting*, a book-length poem originally published by The Figures in 1981 and republished by Salt Publishing in 2002, exemplifies Silliman's style well:

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 sizzled & spat. It's the same, only different. Ammonia's odor hangs in the air. Not not this. (Silliman, *Tjanting* 15; spelling as in the original).

Tjanting operates according to the Fibonacci sequence of numbers, as the sequence defines the number of words in the poem's sentences. The text in the excerpt is characteristically disjunctive, with no obvious connections between all the sentences. The writing circles between comments on the writing process, which might be different if carried out with a different pen, and observations on the environment, like the appearance of poppies, the yellow room and old rotting chairs. The poem comments on its own writing process, in which it is being revised by new beginnings and attempts to cancel what has already been written ("Not this") while also, somewhat contradictorily, proclaiming that "Each sentence accounts for its place." Of course, explicit mentions of erasures and new beginnings do not really erase anything; the poem proceeds for 204 pages.

As a writer, Silliman tends to work programmatically, cultivating large projects and long poems. He has often spoken about wanting to categorize all his work since 1974 as a part of a larger project, a poem that he calls *Ketjak*. As he states in the Preface of *The Age of Huts (compleat)*, the life-work project *Ketjak* consists of *The Age of Huts*, *Tjanting*, *The Alphabet*, & *Universe* (Silliman 2007, n.p.). He keeps charts of his existing and planned poetry works which show how each work is connected to the others, a version of which was published in *Under Albany* (21). In *Under Albany*, he writes that "the size and scope of the next level of the work . . . must roughly equal all that has gone before" (22). In an interview, he has said that "[u]ltimately it's all one poem that is constantly undergoing new construction. Each new piece already is just such a revision" (Silliman, "E-mail Interview" 22). His poetry is thus characterized by expansion and revision, perhaps so much so that revision and procedure take primacy over novelty as essential to poetry.

"Ketjak" is also a long poem Silliman published in 1978 (This Press), and the work was subsequently included in the first part of the larger *Ketjak* project, *The Age of Huts*, a collection of long poems which was first published in 1986 and later as a more complete version entitled *The Age of Huts (compleat)* in 2007 (University of California Press). In addition to "Ketjak," *The Age of Huts* includes "Sunset Debris," "The Chinese Notebook," "2197," and the "satellite texts" "Sitting Up, Standing, Taking Steps," and "BART." Many of these texts operate along certain principles and constraints. "Sunset Debris" is a series of questions, "The Chinese Notebook" is a sequence of 223 numbered statements, and "Ketjak" begins with the simple phrase "Revolving door" (3), which is then expanded in the next paragraphs so that repetition places ideas into new contexts (see e.g., Epstein 374; Siltanen 60). In *Under Albany*, Silliman reveals that the inspiration for the form of "Ketjak" was Steve Reich's *Drumming* (61). Another example of Silliman's constraint-based works, "BART," is based on Silliman's travels on the Bay Area Rapid Transit system during one day in 1976. He recorded all his observations into a single sentence that comprises the poem (*The Age of Huts* 300-311). Andrew Epstein has described the poem as "a 'project of attention' or everyday-life

project,” meaning “a predetermined, rulebound procedure that seeks to compel a new kind of attentiveness to ordinary experience” (229-30).

The third part of *Ketjak, The Alphabet*, is a massive volume of some 1000 pages, and includes work written between 1979 and 2004, with one text for each letter of the alphabet, which together constitute a long poem. It was published in its entirety by The University of Alabama Press in 2008, but many individual texts had been published earlier by smaller presses. This, too, characterizes Silliman’s writing: many of his works originally came out through small presses which were central to the work of the language poets as non-mainstream, avant-garde poets, but later his work has been acquired by university presses and other larger publishers (Siltanen 93). While the language writers built their reputation as a community of poets who challenged the mainstream, and while Silliman has often spoken about the importance of a community of writers and small presses to his work (e.g., *Under Albany* 35; see Siltanen 89), wider integration into established structures has followed.

The Alphabet contains poems such as “Albany,” a short prose poem of less than two pages that has been viewed as autobiographical. This autobiographical project was completed in *Under Albany* (2004), which lifts each sentence from the original poem “Albany” and describes the events in more detail. In 1998, the journal *Quarry West* published a special issue on Silliman and his work on *The Alphabet* project, which at the time was still ongoing. In the issue, Hank Lazer likens Silliman’s work in *The Alphabet*, particularly in *What* (1988) and *Xing* (1996), to ethnographic fieldnotes, as his poetry is based on “approximately fifty years of residency in the Bay Area, as well as a range of political and labor activities” (68-69). For Lazer, this is evident in how Silliman “gathers instances, facts, sentences, analyses and observations,” as well as “nearly relentlessly specific details” (72, 79). Lazer’s analysis is one way of reading the sheer volume of sentences and observations in much of Silliman’s poetry.

The fourth and last installment of Silliman’s life-project is *Universe*, of which *Revelator* (2013) and *Northern Soul* (2014) have been published. *Universe* is projected to include 360 parts and would, as Silliman has suggested, take 360 years to complete (see Rowe). Ultimately, poetry for Silliman is not about individual, short texts that are collected in a “poetry collection” or a “book of poetry”; rather, poetry is an ongoing process and a project that resists completion.

In 2002, Silliman started *Silliman’s Blog*, where he was active in communicating his ideas on contemporary poets, their poetics, and sometimes politics for several years until at least 2019, after which posts have become infrequent. Some of his most-discussed blog posts have considered his division of twentieth and early twenty-first century poetry into what he terms the “School of Quietude” or the “unmarked case” of traditional poetry on the one hand, and “post-avant poetry” on the other, which is the “marked,” more experimental variety of poetry (*Silliman’s Blog* January 5, 2004). According to Silliman, the term “School of Quietude” was borrowed from Edgar Allan Poe, and refers to conservative poets who, in Silliman’s view, control publication outlets and are considered to represent “poetry,” as opposed to experimental or otherwise specifically labeled poetry (January 5, 2004; July 7, 2010). The controversies over this terminology, many of which Silliman has discussed and responded to on his blog, display both Silliman’s commitment to an experimental poetics and the persistence of divisions in poetry which have been evident many times earlier in history, for example in the so-called Anthology Wars of the 1960s and the 1980s (see Rasula 222-23).

The rapid publishing and commenting possibilities of blogs have allowed Silliman to consider poetics as an ongoing process, as something that can be discussed, revised, and updated, in a way

that has a connection to his view of how his poetry is, as noted above, “all one poem that is constantly undergoing new construction” (Silliman, “E-mail Interview” 22). For Silliman, doing poetry is a larger practice and an ongoing process rather than about producing collections of poems for individual reading consumption.

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