

Montaigne ... Silliman. Delany: On Some Lines of “Shadow and Ash”

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Abstract

Theodor Adorno has noted that an essay “obtains its contour from its content.” If one studies Samuel R. Delany’s essay, “Shadow and Ash,” in which, among other things, he considers the work of poet Ron Silliman, it begins to appear that this idiosyncratic essay obtains its contour from its content: Silliman’s work. Just as Silliman’s *Alphabet* is made up of a series of sentences which do not, in any simple way, follow one from another, so Delany’s essay is made up of discrete numbered sections which are not, in any simple way, connected.

To suggest that the form of Delany’s essay was influenced by the form of its subject, Silliman’s *Alphabet*, is only speculation, but that Delany’s essay leaves us speculating about this and about other things is a sign of its success. A good essay is not about coming to an understanding, but about trying to understand, and this trying, this essaying, should not end when the last page is turned.

Those who seem convinced that they reside at the center of things have made much of Samuel R. Delany’s supposed marginality. His race and his exuberant homosexuality are invariably adduced to support this perception of Delany’s life, and his pornography and science fiction are then trotted out to prove that it is not only Delany’s life that is marginal, but also his work.¹ Many of these commentators have missed, however, what might be construed as the most compelling evidence of Delany’s distance from the center. Throughout his career, and, in the last decade or two, almost to the exclusion of the science fiction on which many of his fans wish he would focus, he appears to have devoted a great deal of his energy as a writer to a form which Chris Baldick, in his *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, actually uses the “M” word to define. The form in question is the essay, and Baldick tells us that it is “a marginal form,”² a summation which is a step further—or perhaps a step not as far—as that taken in another literary lexicon, C. Hugh Holman’s *Handbook to Literature*. “No satisfactory definition [of the essay] can be arrived at,” Holman maintains, “nor can a wholly acceptable classification of essay types be made.”³

Still, useful, if less than wholly acceptable, classifications have been suggested. Indeed Holman himself divides essays into those which are formal and those which are informal, and as the latter, according to Holman, are characterized by, among other qualities, “the personal element, humor, ... graceful style, ... freedom from stiffness and affectation,” it is clear that this would be the slot into which most of Delany’s essayistic output would fit.⁴ Another descriptor Holman offers for the informal essay is “unconventional,” though of

course if this really is a defining feature of the informal essay then Holman seems to be suggesting, somewhat oxymoronicly, that it is conventional for informal essays to be unconventional, and indeed, many of Delany's essays can be described in just that way: conventionally unconventional. That is, thanks to the breadth of the ground they cover, their bringing together of disparate ideas and experiences, and, as Delany has put it, their "promiscuously autobiographical" nature⁵, one can see, or at least plausibly imagine, roots stretching back to the work of the great Montaigne, the progenitor of the form. Delany has, however, also published two essays, the early "Shadows" (dated 1973-1974) and the later "Shadow and Ash" (dated 1992) which, while possessing many of the qualities of Holman's informal essays, seem at the same time to have taken a step beyond the conventionally unconventional which characterizes most of the essays Delany has published, and indeed the work of virtually all the many essayists after Montaigne who have adopted Montaigne's strategies.

The first thing one notices about these essays is the form. Each of them is comprised of a series of discrete numbered sections which range in length from a line to a few pages. These sections seem at times loosely connected, but usually entirely unconnected, to adjacent sections. The first section of "Shadows" for example, is one line: "Today's technology is tomorrow's handicraft." The second reads:

Lines I particularly liked from Knotly's poem in the current *Paris Review*: "for every one must run a race/in the body's own running place" and: "Everything I have has an earwig in it/which will make light of sacred things,"

and then the third section:

Nothing we look at is ever seen without some shift and flicker—that constant flaking of vision we take as imperfections of the eye or simply the instability of attention itself; and we ignore this illusory screen for the solid reality behind it. But the solid reality is the illusion; the shift and flicker is all there is. (Where do sf writers get their crazy ideas? From watching all there is *very* carefully.)⁶

Similarly paratactic, the first three sections of "Shadow and Ash" are: the sentence "Rhetoric is the ash of discourse;" a long reflection on some lines of Coleridge—H. G. Wells's *Things to Come* enters into it—and a consideration of poet Ron Silliman's series of books collectively called *The Alphabet*.⁷ These initial sections of the two essays are representative: both essays are comprised of non-consecutive sections throughout.

One can only speculate as to why Delany chose this unconventional form for these essays. Linguistic philosophy is one of the thicker threads weaving through "Shadows," so one imagines that the author may have borrowed the numbered sections from works such as Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Further, linguistic philosophy inevitably entails considering

whether much of what we may, however naively, take to be “out there” is rather created by our active, and in part linguistic, filtering and interpreting of the boom and buzz of our sense impressions. Perhaps considerations such as this made an essay in which the reader must work to create meaning of the words in the same way he or she works to make meaning of the world seem more appropriate than an essay in which all the connections have been neatly signposted and firmly cemented into place. Or more prosaically, perhaps Delany employed the numbers simply to emphasize that the sections are to be read as discrete units.

In “Shadow and Ash” however, there seems to be a more organic reason for his use of this atypical essay form. Just as linguistic philosophy appears to be the driving concern of “Shadows,” Ron Silliman’s *Alphabet* and the thinking which motivates it seem to be the driving concerns of “Shadow and Ash.” As Guy Davenport, a writer who Delany admires, was fond of reminding us, “Every force evolves a form,”⁸ and the form of Delany’s “Shadow and Ash,” appears to have evolved from his sympathetic understanding of Silliman’s project.

Here is how Delany, in “Shadow and Ash,” describes that project:

The alphabet (*sic*) is, above all things, an incrementally, incredibly, dazzlingly inventive exploration of possible sentence forms; questions, exhortations, fragments, run-ons ... [ellipses in the original]

Its first-level pleasure lies in the energy and inventiveness of precisely that array, stitched through the shocks and thrills of its equally interesting juxtapositions—suggesting a Rhetoric (*sic*) of near-all possible sentential collisions. Nor do the collisions really occur between sentences: most of the time, rather, they occur somewhere in the middle of the next sentence, when, no matter how prepared we are, its first few words have already established continuity with the sentence before: thus, because we cannot predict where semantic dislocation will manifest (and when it happens, it is already, as it were, over), these juxtapositions remain fresh and are always and endlessly surprising.⁹

This is an apt description of, to quote Marjorie Perloff, the “collocation[s] of sentences (a never follows b)”¹⁰ that are Silliman’s poems, and it is also an apt description of what Delany is doing in “Shadow and Ash.” That this is the case becomes clear when one shifts one’s gaze from the sentences, which are the basic building blocks of Silliman’s *Alphabet*, to the discrete numbered sections which are the basic building blocks of Delany’s essay. Silliman’s poems are collocations of sentences in which *a* never follows *b*. Delany’s essay is a collocation of sections in which no section follows—at least not according to any simple logic—from any other.

Silliman, describing the “New Sentences” of which he constructs his poems and the poems he makes from them, writes:

- 1) The paragraph organizes the sentences;

- 2) The paragraph is a unit 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.¹¹

It would be excessive to assert that Silliman's method as outlined in this list and Delany's in "Shadow and Ash" are identical, but studying the above list one perceives enough commonalities that, as has been suggested, it is hard not to believe that the fragmented form Silliman employs dictated to some significant extent the form of Delany's essay, an essay which considers (among other things) Silliman's poetry. If one moves up one level of language from the terms Silliman uses to describe the New Sentence one finds that items in the list describe to a surprising degree Delany's method in "Shadow and Ash."

The first item in Silliman's list thus transformed becomes: the essay organizes the sections. This suggests that, as in the work of Silliman, though Delany's essay appears, and indeed is, fragmented, the fragments can be slid around in the mind of an active reader to form a whole—or better, wholes—which are richer than a conventionally organized and therefore less fecund text might have been. Silliman uses Carla Harryman's poem "For She" to illustrate how The New Sentence has been employed in actually existing poetry, and notes that "... what endows Harryman's piece with precisely the intensity or power that makes it worthy of our consideration are the many ways in which individual sentences are not in 'free-standing isolation.'"¹² Neither are the discrete sections in free-standing isolation in Delany's "Shadow and Ash." Indeed there are clear threads—and often more than one—connecting most sections of the essay to other sections. Some of these connections are shared subject matter: the several entries which have to do with poetry in general, and the sections on Silliman's poetry, and Coleridge's in particular; the autobiographical accounts of a talk Delany gave at Swarthmore, of his aging, of his interactions with his life-partner, Dennis; the three compact and suggestive reflections on rhetoric:

1. Rhetoric is the ash of discourse.

25. If rhetoric is ash, discourse is fire ... [ellipses in the original]

41. If rhetoric is ash, discourse is water ... [ellipses in the original]¹³

Other sections are joined in other ways (through style, for example, or voice). Noticing this we come to see that the sections of Delany's "Shadow and Ash" are not "in free-standing isolation," but are, instead, supported by other sections, albeit generally not the ones to

which they are adjacent.

The phrase “freestanding isolation” appears, in Silliman’s essay “The New Sentence,” as part of a “characterization of the postmodern cultural text” by Frederic Jameson. The quotation Silliman uses reads in its entirety:

The isolated Signifier is no longer an enigmatic state of the world or an incomprehensible yet mesmerizing fragment of a language, but rather something closer to a sentence in free-standing isolation.¹⁴

Silliman demonstrates that the sentences which make up Harryman’s poem, rather than being a random jumble, are organized by the larger entity of which they are a part. Her poem is not, therefore, in Jameson’s terms, purely postmodern, and neither is “Shadow and Ash.” The sections of “Shadow and Ash” are organized by the larger entity of which they are a part into a coherence transcending the local coherences each section possesses on its own.

Delany’s essay, then, is less postmodernist than modernist, and, establishing another link between the essay’s form and its content, we find him, in “Shadow and Ash,” writing of the movement of which his essay is, at least to some extent, an example:

The discursive model through which we perceive the characteristic works of High Modernism ... is that of a foreground work of more or less surface incoherence—narrative, rhetorical, and thematic—behind which stands a huge, and hugely unified, background armamentarium of esoteric historical and esthetic knowledge, which the text connects with through a series of allusions and relations that organize that armamentarium as well as give it its unity.¹⁵

“Armamentarium” seems too grand a word for the tendrils of biography, situation, and voice which, twining through Silliman’s *Alphabet* and through Delany’s essay, bind the pieces of each of these works, but it is clear that, in the one case, “the paragraph organizes the sentences,”¹⁶ and in the other, that the essay organizes the sections.

One can continue down Silliman’s list, systematically altering the terms as one goes to make them speak of the essay rather than the paragraph, the section rather than the sentence. Doing so turns the second item in the list into: the essay is a unit of quantity, not logic or argument. That is, the essay is a larger body—a larger quantity—than any of its constituent parts, but it is not a complete and finite collection of those parts. Because there is no logic leading to a final solution (but rather branching logics), no one argument to be made (but rather a sometimes consonant, sometimes dissonant arrangement of arguments), an essay such as “Shadow and Ash” is necessarily open-ended. This is borne out by the fact that several patterns which seem to organize Delany’s fragments emerge—almost. When we note, for example, that the second and the second to last fragments are each about Coleridge, that the third and third to last are each about Silliman we begin to guess that

the essay is somehow palindromic. When we go on to notice that the fourth section recounts Delany's visit to Swarthmore and the fourth to last talks about writing and writer's block we become less certain. There is, to be sure, a suggestion of a pattern—and one can tease out of the essay hints of other shapes as well—but that the pattern is imperfect leaves the essay open, leaves room for author and reader to play, and one is grateful for this. "Truth abandoned by play," as Adorno reminds us in "The Essay as Form," "would be nothing more than tautology."¹⁷

The other items in Silliman's list which, taken to the appropriate linguistic level, seem relevant to "Shadow and Ash" are the last four, each of which deals with the syllogistic aspects of making meaning out of a text. As syllogisms are conventionally made up of sentences—usually three—one understands why they have captured Silliman's attention. The sentence, after all, is at the center of his project, and the syllogism provides a model of how sentences, placed next to each other, can offer up meanings other than, and perhaps larger than, the bare content of those statements. That is, two sentences such as: "All writers were once children," and "Samuel R. Delany is a writer," "logically lead to a third sentence or conclusion, a higher level of meaning."¹⁸ In this example that third sentence, that higher level of meaning, is, of course, "Samuel R. Delany was once a child."

Literature, Silliman suggests, often suppresses the third sentences, the higher levels of meaning, and leaves it to the reader to work them out or to be frustrated in his or her attempts to do so.¹⁹ This is certainly the case with Silliman's poetry, and it is no less true of Delany's essay, though of course, the terms of the incomplete syllogisms Delany offers are not sentences, but sections. Further, like the sentences of Silliman's poems, the sections of Delany's essay—the terms of his syllogisms—seem never to be adjacent to one another, and generally, as is also the case with Silliman's work, the conclusions are entirely suppressed.

The seventh item in Silliman's list of qualities of the New Sentence is: "Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work,"²⁰ and reading Delany's essay much of our attention is inevitably drawn from the pieces of which it is made—the elements of its syllogism—toward the larger unit, the essay as a whole. We endeavor to understand how the parts relate to that whole, and what, exactly, that whole is. This urge to make fragments cohere, whether they are pieces of the world or of a text is, it seems likely, an essential part of what it is to be human: we can't not do it. Reading Silliman, a writer whose poetry, as Delany notes in "Shadow and Ash," "rigorously eschews argument,"²¹ however, and reading the Delany of "Shadow and Ash," we are reminded that as much as we may be impelled, as active readers, to search, as we turn the pages of Delany's essay for some sort of closure, this impulse may be unachievable, and even undesirable.

In the essay [Adorno writes] concepts do not build to a continuum of operations, thought does not

advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture.²²

The carpet which Delany weaves is, thanks to its unconventional form, fruitful indeed, a quality which would only be damaged by arrival at a facile—or even an interesting!—conclusion.

Just as syllogisms—the fracturing thereof—structure Silliman’s *Alphabet* and Delany’s “Shadow and Ash,” so each author employs, to similarly subversive ends, another aspect of formal logic: “If X then Y.” Silliman’s “Albany,” for example, begins “If the function of writing is to ‘express the world,’”²³ and the rest of the poem, if not the entire *Alphabet*, can be read as a working out of this premise. Delany plays with this sort of deduction, too, in his three pregnant statements about rhetoric:

1. Rhetoric is the ash of discourse.

25. If rhetoric is ash, discourse is fire ... [ellipses in the original]

41. If rhetoric is ash, discourse is water ... [ellipses in the original]²⁴

In *Albany* Silliman goes on from his premise to offer his cascade of statements about a life. Among the statements Silliman employs are (to select at random a series of consecutive sentences from near the beginning of the poem):

My turn to cook. It was hard to adjust my sleeping to those hours when the sun was up. The event was nothing like their report of it. How concerned was I over her failure to have orgasms? Mondale’s speech was drowned by jeers.²⁵

There is, as Delany writes in his essay, no argument here or elsewhere in *The Alphabet*, and neither is there conventional narrative, but there is, as he points out, “situation.” “‘Albany,’” he explains, “really *is* about the impressions of the Bay Area as contemplated from that West Coast suburb of Berkeley,”²⁶ and even reading the short snatch of the poem excerpted above one can see that Silliman’s sentences are not random fragments, but are, just as Delany says, an account of “impressions of the Bay Area as contemplated from that West Coast suburb of Berkeley.” One understands, too, things about the person receiving these impressions, a person who is, of course, an inextricable part of the situation which gives rise to them.

We feel certain, for example, that the narrative voice of this non-narrative poem is male. Marjorie Perloff explains:

Even such seemingly neutral statements as “My turn to cook” give *Albany* away as a man’s poem: woman’s “turn to cook,” let’s remember, is not an item of interest since it’s always woman’s turn.²⁷

That this male is working a night shift and that doing so is interfering with his sleep

patterns suggests that he is struggling to make a living. His concern about “her failure to have orgasms” implies that he is sensitive to women, but that this sentence is surrounded by the obliquely political—“The event was nothing like their report of it”—and the explicitly political—“Mondale’s speech was drowned by jeers”—hints that perhaps the speaker is at least as political as he is passionate, or perhaps that politics and passion are inseparable.

The picture which Silliman’s sentences yield, or which our narrative and pattern-addicted minds make them yield, is not sharp-edged. There is room in Silliman’s poem for readerly play, but as Perloff demonstrates, and as Silliman himself makes clear in his *Under Albany*, each sentence of *Albany* is rooted in realities he had, in one way or another, experienced. Indeed one could almost say of Silliman’s *Alphabet*—like Delany’s essays—that it is “promiscuously autobiographical.” The voice that offers this autobiography up—one believes it must be Silliman’s voice—

... is [as Marjorie Perloff notes] matter-of-fact, street-wise, the voice of a largely self-educated working-class man who has slowly and painfully learned the craft of poetry, a man who’s been around and has had to put up with quite a bit, beginning with his father’s withholding of child support,²⁸

and this voice is what saves Silliman’s work from descending into facile abstraction, makes it the fascinating poetry it is.

Language Poets such as Silliman have at times seemed to distance themselves from autobiography, particularly as practiced by the confessional poets popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Delany, on the other hand, has clearly felt no hesitation about giving autobiography a prominent place in his work,²⁹ and this is certainly the case in “Shadow and Ash.” Much as Silliman does, Delany too, uses autobiography to make of his fragments an intricately woven web that is more rewarding than the fragments would be in “free-standing isolation.” Just as Silliman’s voice in *Albany* clearly belongs to the “largely self-educated working-class man”³⁰ who Perloff identifies, so the voice that, in “Shadow and Ash,” tells us about Coleridge, about Mapplethorpe and about Joanna Russ; about “Jabberwocky,” *The Odyssey*, and *The Alphabet*; about aging, about writing, and about Dennis could only, we come to feel, belong to a figure not unlike—though probably not identical with—the essay’s creator. And this presiding consciousness, this autobiographical presence, as with Silliman’s work, makes “surface incoherence” give way to a unity that is more rewarding than a pile of fragments could ever be. This is true even when the individual fragments are as winning as Delany’s certainly are.

Fragmented but unified, carefully composed but leaving room for readers to play, unconventional in ways not conventionally unconventional, autobiography more or less veiled: the similarities between Silliman’s *Alphabet* and Delany’s “Shadow and Ash” are striking. These similarities arose—or to use Davenport’s word, “evolved”—at least in part,

I have suggested, from the force Silliman's *Alphabet* exerted on Delany's essay, for an essay, as Adorno has written, "obtains its contour from its content."³¹

That when Delany is essaying other subjects he has seldom (but not never) employed the discrete numbered sections of "Shadow and Ash" is further evidence that the content of his essay—Silliman's work—was influential in his having selected the form he did. To say so, however, is only to speculate, but that Delany's essay leaves us speculating is a sign of its success. A good essay is not about coming to an understanding, but about trying to understand, and this trying, this essaying, should not end when the last page is turned.

Virginia Woolf noted of Montaigne's essays that they "reach not their end, but their suspension in full career,"³² and Adorno said of the essay in general, "it must be constructed in such a way that it could always, and at any point, break off."³³ In just this manner, "Shadow and Ash" simply breaks off, stops in full career, and thus evades the sort of simple closure that would bring not only the essay, but also the essaying, to a stop.

Silliman ends *Under Albany* (but not the poem *Albany*) with the sentence "It is not possible to 'describe a life,'"³⁴ and one understands: a life is too large a thing to be definitively described. Likewise one doubts that it is possible to definitively describe open works such as Silliman's *Alphabet* and Delany's "Shadow and Ash." The best one can do is to make an attempt, to essay, and thus here, in full career, I break off.

Notes

- 1 The notion that these genres are marginal is apparently not thought to be contradicted by the vast numbers of people who consume them. This alleged marginality must, one supposes, derive from snobbish opprobrium, rather than lack of popularity.
- 2 Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 75.
- 3 C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, based on the original by William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard (Indianapolis: The Odyssey Press-The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1972, Third Edition), 204.
- 4 Holman, 204.
- 5 Walidah Imarisha, "Sex, Race, and Outer Space." *Philadelphia City Paper* 21-28 June 2001: n. pag. Web. 22 Feb 2010. <<http://citypaper.net/articles/062101/cs.bq.delany.shtml>>.
- 6 Samuel R. Delany, "Shadows," in *Longer Views: Extended Essays* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press-University Press of New England, 1996), 253-254.
- 7 Delany, "Shadow and Ash," in *Longer Views: Extended Essays* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press-University Press of New England, 1996), 144-146.
- 8 See, for example, Davenport's essay "Every Force Evolves a Form" in the collection of the same title (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987).
- 9 Delany, "Shadow and Ash," 170-171.
- 10 Marjorie Perloff, "The Language Poet as Autobiographer: Ron Silliman's *Under Albany*," in *Quarry West: Ron Silliman and the A*L*P*H*A*B*E*T Issue*, ed. Thomas A. Vogler, #34 (1998), 171. (Can one assume that Perloff intended to write "b follows a"?)

- 11 Ron Silliman, "The New Sentence," in *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 2003), 91.
- 12 Silliman, "The New Sentence," 92.
- 13 Delany, "Shadow and Ash," 144, 157, 163.
- 14 Frederic Jameson, qtd. in Silliman, "The New Sentence," 92.
- 15 Delany, "Shadow and Ash," 166.
- 16 Silliman, "The New Sentence," 91. For the autobiographical underpinnings of Silliman's work see his *Under Albany* (Cambridge, UK: Salt Publishing, 2004), and the Marjorie Perloff essay cited above (n. 10).
- 17 Theodor Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 108.
- 18 Silliman, "The New Sentence," 77.
- 19 Silliman, "The New Sentence," 77.
- 20 Silliman, "The New Sentence," 91.
- 21 Delany, "Shadow and Ash," 146.
- 22 Adorno, 101.
- 23 Silliman, "Albany," in *The Alphabet*, (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 1.
- 24 Delany, "Shadow and Ash," 144, 157, 163.
- 25 Silliman, "Albany," in *The Alphabet*, (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 1.
- 26 Delany, "Shadow and Ash," 146.
- 27 Perloff, 172.
- 28 Perloff, 172.
- 29 Delany writes, in the introduction to *Starboard Wine* (Pleasantville, NY: Dragon Press, 1984, 11), a collection of essays, that "the autobiography is here to ground the rigor, not to relieve it." This is no less true of "Shadow and Ash" than it is of the pieces gathered in that volume.
- 30 Perloff, 172.
- 31 Adorno, 105.
- 32 Virginia Woolf, "Montaigne," in *The Common Reader: First Series, Annotated Edition*, (1925; reprint, edited and introduced by Andrew McNeillie, San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & Company, Harvest Books, 1984), 66.
- 33 Adorno, 104.
- 34 Silliman, *Under Albany*, 103.

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