

ON SENTENCE FRAGMENTATION

A LECTURE IN PARTS

an essay by
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FOR LEMMY

And what I'm doing, all-important, breathing in and out and say-
ing, with words like smoke, I can't go, I can't stay, let's see what happens next.

—Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*

ATTACHMENT / DEPENDENCE

Sentences fluctuate between two modes: the visual and the aural; those things—compositions, works, forms, sentences as audio-visual configurations—exist simultaneously abstractly and concretely, signifiers and signifieds dancing across the landscape of the page, floating on vibrations carrying through matter diffuse or otherwise. It is things and words relation with each other, a deep imbrication. When word attempts sentence—or thing attempts speech—they fail to coalesce from this deep ether of imbrication, but this is not to evoke the negative, rather that their formless possibilities live within form's moments of appearance in our world. I begin with the problem of the sentence. Something of a beyond, a bond, another social. Things plural; gathering: something of thing's originary etymology always pushing us towards its possibility in this neglected past's constant emergence.

It is precisely the complex cacophony of this first paragraph that I have constructed which speaks to the sentence as a difficult proposition because—if only momentarily—they must operate within realms of facts and its contents in order to enter a recognizable world of forms, and yet their abstract nature can easily obscure just how it is they do it. To put it another way, words always hold the possibility of their own obfuscation through what some might call mastery, but what I would call their poetic potential. It is a useful opacity, to borrow a word from Edouard Glissant, that opens them up to the air, lets out the word and the sentence's promiscuity. This is the case whether one is (seemingly) straightforward in their language or flowery and technical with it. Obfuscation of ideas in language is not limited to academic language, just as understanding doesn't only come when one speaks plainly.

But is this the problem? I wonder if it is possible to consider a sentence making that operates like the best of Minimalist sculpture. (Here I mean that sculpture which would forego or be foregone by the nominal energy this moniker and its adherents carry.) Form and content must not be pulled apart like so much flesh of the fruit.

*But programmatic avant-gardism—which has meant, mostly, experiments with form at the expense of content—is not the only defense against the infestation of art by interpretations. At least, I hope not. For this would be to commit art to being perpetually on the run. (It also perpetuates the very distinction between form and content which is, ultimately, an illusion.)*¹

Or could it be the orchestration of a single line of notes guiding a whole composition? A part standing in for a whole; or an ongoing palimpsestual congregation within the space of one sentence. Content-form setting itself to the ether. Segmentation as part and parcel of the experience of seeing something in an entirety. The general as a condition of the specific's generalizing condition of difference's potency.

When this was originally set to word processor a sentence about sentences came to me, one that I had imagined I'd seen, a sentence real and unreal. I never found it, but as I originally stated in that draft/iteration I found many more for which I wished to build a home. In a student panel discussion I participated in with the artist, writer, performance/black studies scholar Fred Moten, I was given the honor by my teacher Sampada Aranke to ask the first question. One can perhaps imagine the rhythm of my question, but it was probably much simpler. If I remember correctly it truly was as simple as, "How do you construct a sentence?" Anyone who knows the work of Moten would know the artistry of his sentences. The potency of his work comes in the simple fact that some of my favorite sentences of his have never been set in stone, and have either been criticized by him later on, or reworked in later iterations. But to return to the answer, which, in my formulation, is never as simple as an answer, but rather something of a response containing new questions. I tell this story of his answer often for the sheer joy it brought to me. In the course of answering the question he diverted us towards Stevie Wonder's album *Talking Book* and his first encounter with the potency of writing in its liner notes, he also sang a bit of Stevie to us, which I will cherish as long as I live. More recently I have had the privilege to be a student in a class that is a part of the New Arts School Modality run by Romi Crawford, who I can now count as one of my teachers but who is also in some ways a coworker of mine at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In it I have now had the ability to refer to Moten now as Professor Moten. At one point he mentioned that his mind works in puns, and so he couldn't help but make a pun in that moment. I bring this up because of the puns iterative ability in how it melds words in his minds towards their formless possibilities, and to remind myself in the future to speak more on this. That is to say, the sentence is a serious thing to me, as serious as puns are, and as joyfully full. For example, in this piece's original draft (as if anything sits in originality proper) I punned after the original iteration of the first sentence of this paragraph and wrote, "Hear or in its hereafers, as if a kind of hearing." A properly Moten pun. Also a sentence that in its aural reality as a part of my reading at the Porchlight Literary Center which has led to this publication—all thanks to the phenomenal Margaret Yapp—becomes nonsensical and confusing in the ways that it illustrates my point. So I'll say again.

Hear or in its hereafers, as if a kind of hearing. This is the first step towards an open writing. I think, or, perhaps, it may be a stifling so that the sentence can live and flourish; stifling as pruning. I wonder at what finally let pen to paper. Programmatic and processual we keep the open social space of what is to be predicated. The public square, the pamphletier. What then can be said to be born out of punctuations proper misuse and proliferation? A question which adds another dimension. Much like a picture, one which Wittgenstein said held us captive, that Danielle Dutton then riffs on for her own thinking of writings relationship to picture in Ekphrasis in her essay *A Picture Held Us Captive*. Here now a note found through arc.na:

"The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind. The picture dictates the arrangement. The picture dictates whether this will be a sentence with or without clauses, a sentence that ends hard or a dyingfall arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture. Nota bene:

It tells you.

You don't tell it."²

Here now some notes on a sentence's possibilities:

The sentence is an architecture which builds itself like a metropolis, or towards a metropolis.

The sentence is like a drug, which makes manageable that which it purports to give if only fleetingly.

The sentence is a thing that can sit like an object, it is in excess of itself and this is how it does.³

A sentence is a single idea that must come in conversation with other ideas masquerading as sentences.

A sentence is a fool.

The question then arises:

How do you do?

...

This past summer I wrote many a lecture-writing towards the idea they'd be read for a lot of various Midwest cities. I did it with my friend Lemmy, a poet. It led me to that question *How do you do?* but for better and for worse it forced my I into it and so it became *How do I do?* and for me this stays the question alongside *What do things ask me to do?* So then what do my pieces do? How did and do the difficulty of the sentences I yearn for construct what becomes possible in the act of writing and ultimately reading; that beautiful performance that itself can be tedious. As Tan Lin wrote—which I paraphrase to take responsibility for repeating it here—the worst part of poetry readings is hearing the poetry read aloud. Speaking the facts of something, those sentences, which always will occur, bleeds as boring that forces sentence construction into need and not desire. What I need then is to do in friction with what I desire then to do. What are the things I wish to say?

An addendum to this part of our lecture, an exchange between myself and Lemmy:

ROCK AS ARCHIVE. ROCK AS ARCHIVE.

Much is happening in the stone, we keep the stone.

*And the stone keeps us.*⁵

OR WE CONJOIN THIS LAMB ON THE EVE OF THE ECLIPSE'S BIRTH

Writer's Note: A rewriting of a piece—especially one such as this which lived so deeply in its present—necessitates a recognition of time as something non-linear and always speaking itself outside of time's constrictions. I am indebted here to the idea of time as a spiral that comes to me from Giambattista Vico.

There is a belief, a superstition (Stevie Wonder comes back to us here again), that the reason animals bear conjoined twins is that the conception occurred during an eclipse. It is a Mexican custom to tie a red ribbon around the tail of a cow if a pregnancy occurs during an eclipse to prevent this. Its done because there is a tragedy inherent in conjoined animals and their relationship to death. For animals this deep conjoining only hampers them in life. Images of conjoined lambs situated themselves in my mind quite often in my original draft.⁶ It is a deep attachment that can only ever remove the possibility of life.

Questions of what constitutes wholeness then arise. Can stifling occur in the absence of a whole; what is the whole if in excess of what is proper whole; if fragment is the main form of production, does the stifling dissipate, or is this the mode by which stifling appears? Fragment becomes both the whole and its challenge. Sappho is fragment and yet whole, incomplete and yet in excess of what it once was,

*Yet I am not one who takes joy in wounding.
Mine is a quiet mind...*

Moonlight illuminates the field; grasses blowing in the soft wind. Deep in the scene sits a small barn, rickety and red with a tin roof. Underneath a birth takes place. Legs and more legs, connection and bleating, blood and fur, a single heart, death and life simultaneously. A small conjoined lamb limps simply into the world, oddity and sadness. It goes often that when the two headed calf was born there were twice as many stars, but for this lamb there was only what wasn't seen, for it held in its attached dependence the inability to live and a stubbornness to hold life as long as possible. It died and was born simultaneously, an infinite loop continuing in a millisecond.

Sentence is not the most minute and atomic unit of the writing, but neither the most massive, encompassing. Within it the stress and process I'm trying at can take its full effect. I'm reading about the sentences of Elizabeth Hardwick and I'm jealous. Her stultifying, aggressive, complex sentences hold spaces that can not but hold more than they should through their decision of what must be or could be: the complexity of what a sentence can be becomes manifest. Since writing this I have also found my limit of Hardwick in her own perspectives. What do we forgive when given a good sentence? But this is what happens in the shifting of a sentences context and those who speak on it. Divorced from the contexts from which these sentences live, they live again, and in not dying as they are sutured into another's writing I cannot help but wonder at this lively fragmentation of their quotation. Not dissimilar from the way I think of this works rewriting, as if adding additions to a home that you were ok with, but you wish to make more your own. Speak now, you, who in remembering can bring to the fore that which has been removed from the text and lives again in your mind. Reference then is the understanding that sentence can indeed live its life on its own. And yet. Still it can hang to live in new found relationships it finds itself hovering amongst: an airborne dance, an extra dimensional ring to move in.

I'm not so much a fan as an inadvertent adherent to the run on sentence with confused punctuation. If only because I cannot help but go and go and go with no real end to a thought in sight except a forced or arbitrary one. Perhaps it is itself then a tendency to the fragmentation of the complete sentence, an ask that you circle back around. A fragmentation that even punctuation cannot save from the needless bloat of its digestion.

Subject and predicate make up the sentence as we encounter them, but perhaps they are not always so simply extricated from each other. It is more my understanding of the experience of reading sentences and writing sentences, that there appears a plurality of subjects and predicates that populate the sentence towards a cacophony of relation that the sentence can then create in its elasticity as a mode. Ferdinand De Saussure's theory of linguistics posits that meaning in words is built in relation, that is, meaning comes in the negative of this relation, that which comes in the difference, the differential, of the two. That something is not another sets up the possibility for word to mean, and not simply fall into gelatinous amalgam. Jacques Derrida riffs on this idea in his own work with his term *différance*, which understands meaning in signs as always coming from both difference and deferral, playing off of the French word's double meaning. The subject becomes itself in this *différance*, and so in this way of a negative differential deferral the however, it is rather of which everything is borne, no longer desiring for a non-relational difference. Difference intertwines as it sets itself up; there can be no difference outside of relation.

Becoming with the *of*, the relation of the part and the whole. Of holds us, the conjoined lamb is of each other and itself: life of death/Death of life.

AN ASIDE FOR FRASER AND SANDBACK

There is an essay by Andrea Fraser that each time I remember it exists comes to me as if a revelation, and—with the understanding of a possible hyperbole on my part here—I do mean it in the not necessarily divine or supernatural sense, but nevertheless as something of a disclosure about something relating to human existence or the world. I am myself skeptical of art more and more each day, especially as it pertains to its financialization—and according to recent work being done by Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Zam Lee is securitization.⁷ And yet, I still find discussions around art, especially of a critical nature, to be worthwhile. The essay I'm speaking of is titled *Why Does Fred Sandback's Work Make Me Cry* and humbly enough it speaks of him sparingly, or rather as sparingly and potentially as his lines speak of the spaces they demarcate. These string sculpture demarcate space to be considered even as that space disappears. At its conception Fraser nearly put it on hold permanently. The title doubles as a note on the intriguing incident which led to her thinking of the beginnings of the essay on the train ride home from the crying in question. But nearly simultaneously Fred Sandback committed suicide, and due to Fraser's tangential relationship to the artist, felt it would be best to delay it indefinitely. Of course she didn't thanks to the encouragement of Lynn Cooke. For this reason the essay is dedicated not to the man she did not know, but the work she did, which continues to live in all of its stark possibilities.

Fraser's is a practice built out of institutional critique, a way of making art which challenges the core principles of its making. Art for her—and by extension herself as an artist—is an impossibility, and furthermore the violence that it enacts is what art is and does, namely:

There is a kind of violence against art and against culture that art is. It is there in the structure of art, in the structure of our field—just, perhaps, as aggression is there in the structure of our subjectivity. It is the violence of emptying the world of representation and function, communicative and material use, that is done when we insist on the primacy of form; it is the violence of separation we enact in all kinds of aesthetic distancing; it is the violence of splitting off shared culture and competences, cutting up shared language, that we perform in every narrowing dialogue with the history of our own field; it is the violence of the competitive struggles for differentiation, achievement, and recognition that so often drive our practices; and it is the violence of every intention to subvert, transgress, confront, challenge, critique, and negate.⁸

In Fraser we find all of the contradictions, complexities, impossibilities of art as we know it, funneled through the institutions which legitimize art. In this discussion of the work of art's violences, we find its relationship to the work of mourning, the desire for art towards a kind of reparation of itself, towards "reconstructing lost and ruined objects, lost and ruined worlds", much like the ego's attempt to reconcile the love and forsaken object with the self. For Fraser this is particularly in considering the formally purified artwork, the works that came to us in the 20th century which wish to challenge art, and yet are subsumed. There is a link she comes to between the formal purification of art and the affective purification of weeping. This seems to me a generous rethinking of the purity of form that comes in the mid-century artists working in realms of minimalism and post-minimalism, etc. This is only because it steps us away from more sinister and eugenic notions of purification stemming from Greenbergian formalism. Along these lines I want to pull out their trying to make sense of this position against the institution, and yet the tears that come in response to the works they housed⁹:

1. Art, and by extension the artist, is an impossibility that exists within the institution of the art world that builds us up as practitioners, erecting institutions within the self. We are attached and dependent on that space.

2. Following from 1 this institutional self is contained within what Bourdieu called *habitus*: the "social made flesh." "social made flesh." Therein we can arrive at the body/flesh/self as unwaveringly social, but also it opens up the attachment/denial of this previous notion to something akin to a rewriting/reworking.

3. "For Lacan the cry is primarily linguistic." Here Fraser allows us the cry which she notes is a component part of weeping along with tears as something speaking to this attachment/dependence. Quoting Lacan to make this point, "[he] linked the infant's cry with the earliest of demands: a demand of a presence or of an absence" that 'constitutes the Other as already possessing the 'privilege' of satisfying needs, that is to say the power of depriving them of that alone by which they are satisfied.'" The linguistic as always already socially dependent on the other.

That violence from before now understood differently as art's ability to make strange the world, to use language given to us by Victor Shklovsky the Russian Formalist writer; strangeness understood as a violence against those who would view otherness/difference as dangerous to their self. My revelation with this essay as caught up with Fraser's discussion of Stendhal Syndrome, experienced by American visitors to Europe, and tied to the original account by Stendhal of the celestial sensations and physical symptoms which accompanied his visit to Santa Croce Cathedral; revelation another word for having become strange (estranged). Our divorce from the world of the social when engaging in the aesthetic world of the artwork is an impossibility challenged by art's impossibility. Even in the formally reduced works which Fraser evokes in the essay, Sandback especially, we are still ourselves linked up in the world. The weeping comes not from the art, but from what cannot come from it, that lost (and fictional) artifact of transcendent art constantly being recuperated only to fall away again. In Sandback's work, and how he did not a little with a lot, but so little, (a paraphrase of Fraser) we see an example of that retrieval of what he called the "peDESTrian space," the mundane of life, back into the art experience, which, rather than spoiling the art experience, returns us to the beauty of a more secular (to borrow a word from Edward Said) or worldly experience of art in the social made flesh, the linguistic cry, the thing made strange. To bring it back again to Fraser's phrasing:

The extreme reticence of Sandback's work is not something I experience as an act of withholding but rather as an act of extraordinary generosity. By removing himself to the extent that he does, he makes a place for me. It's not a place in front of his work, or next to his work, or inside his work...It makes a place for me inside the institution that the work is inside. It is a place that exists between fact and illusion, between reality and fantasy—what D.W. Winnicott called a transitional space, where loss can be renegotiated in the re-creation and reparation of things.¹⁰

We refuse the solid. It is like the notes of something else ferments in the abstract, the loose, the poetic. I can only think that it is in the very fragment of the lives, and of Sandback's lines, and of the sentences marked by periods, commas, semicolons, that we start to get at truths too big for the grand. As if in the attempts to pump oneself up to the status of saying something, not much gets said at all, or rather a corrupting of the meaning happens: the thing said stays said only insofar as its saying affirms and continues the ability to say it, power begets power. Displeasure is needed to institute the pleasure in others. It's a question of violence, but not the violence defined to decimate peoples, to wield control, for underneath a standard definition of violence, that immediate meaning, encased beyond it, behind it there is the violence that understands itself beyond its weaponization. Violence as an emotional force of energy which when understood in line with Fraser's evocation of the cleansing act of weeping, is rather something which is itself a violence against the violence. It is logically in line with a sense of violence that only comes definitionally as discussed in Black Radical and anticolonialist senses, and while not equatable, the logics are similar. Something demarcated as violent is only so when it is used against structural, engrained violence. When asked how abstract art can be political, the artist Sam Gilliam remarked that "it messes with you, it convinces you that what you think isn't all. It challenges you to understand something that is different." These are differences of degree, not kind, its why abstraction so often has been utilized to get at the violence of imaging. I think of Frank Bowling, or Robert Rauschenberg, or Gilliam. Forgetting the relationship in kind can be what causes the everyday to feel insignificant in the face of the monumental, even as it is in all the pedestrian moments that something else can begin to arise.

Lying within the virtual planes, that which is not said, floating in the sentence's relation whispering something possible.

FRAGMENTATION

There is a ready answer to this question or problem concerning unity and difference in a piece of writing. It is to say that the relations between parts are not simply to do with identity or difference, a pleasing aesthetic and logical integrity versus the fractured style of the fragments, who proceeds without pattern or plan. No—these relations are instead dialectical, the text advancing by the simultaneous struggle and agreement between fragments.

—Brian Dillon, *Essayism*

Composites of compacted sedimentation, fragments composed of one or more substances, conglomerations of the thing. Text filled with fear, kindness, anger, frustration, especially in those instances where the work must be done as a net loss of income. To do it is to fragment the time so thoroughly nothing can be done.

Death and life speaking to each other, "The transit from the grip of death into new life is a death from death, in its sheer metempsychosis a dizzy agony."¹¹ D.H. Lawrence cannot but see the stark if hairy boundary between life and death. Move from spring to winter and forget the dead so as to find that new life. And yet, see the very possibility in his evocation of the fragment, "The first day of change, out whistles an unusual, interrupted par, a fragment that will augment itself imperceptibly."¹² Music, the whistling of birds, themselves these fragments which grow out of the transitory state. Space between subject and predicate, that *of*, dialectical difference, for in the identity of difference there is only ever that exchange. Contrapuntal moves in the linguistic.

Sentence moving in the thrum, of this and that abstraction of one's ideas. This is the sentence as eternally subjective, it can play in the performative far more than anything indicative. For it is that mode wherein the sentence cannot but do—summon the world as it could be in its utterance—not that space must afford the sentence. That is a boundary, that is a marker, a hail, a subject, to be predicated on, the lamb which must bleat for its attached deceased.

Renee Gladman, "These sentences will aww the ethereal in formations of slow, climbing subjectivities; they will match the speed of that which has not occurred and that which is not yet known, and will show the stillness of that speed"¹³ And Jay Butler on the collection this line comes from, "Her renderings turn abstraction substantive as substance becomes abstract."¹⁴

Here, then, sentence subjective, made substantive, can live, no longer claving to simply live in the world as is. Fluid space made where nothing is set down insofar as it can be picked up again, and moved in the space of form's reticence. Not pared down, but propped up; generous abstraction. Time made in the hazy space of transition: life/death, subject/predicate, attachment/dependence. And it will, in so many fragments, be as writing upon a stone, held forever and easily lost. And the thing will be brought back with so many flashes of lightning, sentences as lost in a moment as can be.

¹ Sontag against interpretation 7

² <https://www.arc.na/lock/12648475>

³ "Hartman and Bryant affirm that 'objects are always in excess of their relations'. Two points follow from this thesis: Firstly, qualities are not something an object possesses or is, but rather something an object does." John Cochran - Object Oriented Cookery (2011) 304

⁴ This should be understood to hold much more, your non-answer answers perhaps.

⁵ This occurred through instagram messages, but one of the lessons Lemmy has taught me is how to find moments of poetry in what has become the mundanities of our communicative lives, something to be thought again later.

⁶ Can I ever get away from the time-boundness of this original draft's writing?

⁷ "We would like to offer an invitation to you to join us where we already find ourselves together - in and around an art world that is rapidly undergoing not just financialization but an emerging securitisation. Although we have long experienced the art object as a commodity and an investment, and even come to terms with the artist as, at least in part, commodity labour, what we are experiencing today is something different. We no longer confront what Marx called the formal subsumption of the art world but the real subsumption of the art world, in which the indifference of capital and abstract labour increasingly reigns." Fred Moten and Stefano Harney and Zam Lee, "Fred Moten and Stefano Harney with Zam Lee," 2024 Busan Biennale, Sep 2024, <https://busanbiennale2024.com/en/exhibition/artists/9682d57a-4b2a-4344-b9c1-c4c3e76b3c1b>.

⁸ Andrea Fraser, "Why Does Fred Sandback's Work Make Me Cry?" Grey Room, 22 (2006): 30-47, <https://doi.org/10.1162/15263810675434431>.p43

⁹ She comes to the idea that it is precisely this recognition of the institution and her place in it that made her cry with the Sandback as it makes space for her within that space of the institution and not just with, next to, or inside his own work.

¹⁰ Fraser, "Fred Sandback," p45

¹¹ D.H. Lawrence, "Whistling of Birds," in *The Bad Side of Books: Selected Essays* of D.H. Lawrence, ed. Geoff Dyer (New York: Review of Books: New York, 2019), p76

¹² Ibid. 74

¹³ Renee Gladman, "Fig. 33," Poetry Foundation, March 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/157281/fig-33>.

¹⁴ Jay Butler, "Language as Possibility: Renee Gladman's Plans for Sentences," *The Rumpus*, March 2023, <https://therumpus.net/2023/03/22/language-as-possibility-renee-gladmans-plans-for-sentences/>.