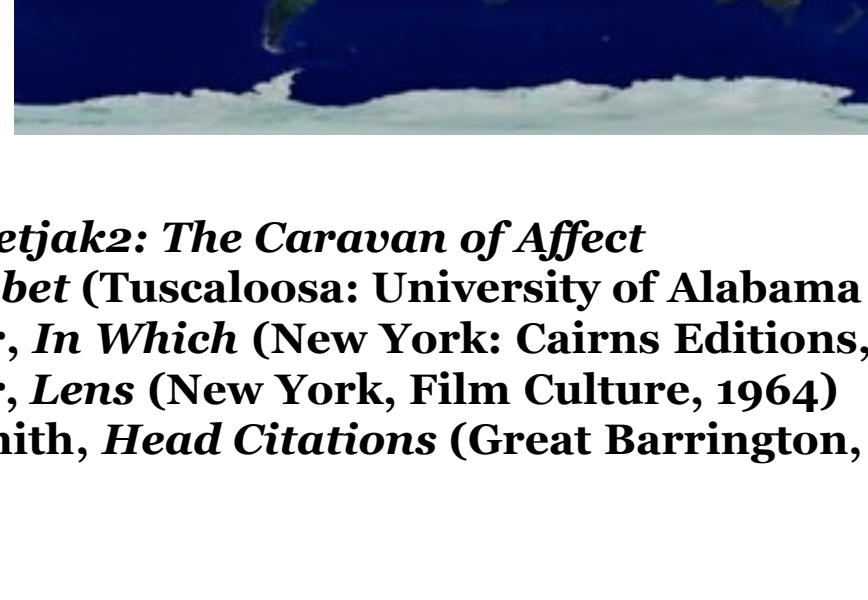


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Monday, November 24, 2008

Punny Poems and The Future of the Wor(l)d



Ron Silliman, *Ketjak2: The Caravan of Affect*
[in *the Alphabet* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008)]
Frank Kuenstler, *In Which* (New York: Cairns Editions, 1994)
Frank Kuenstler, *Lens* (New York, Film Culture, 1964)
Kenneth Goldsmith, *Head Citations* (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 2002)

Introduction

Writing about poems that prominently feature puns is doggone (or is that, er um, "dogberry") dangerous, my fellow prisoners.

First, there's the challenge of definition: what are puns, and how do they differ, if at all, from malapropisms, spoonerisms, portmanteaus, and other related phenomena? Isn't any clever turn of words a pun? Conversely, perhaps word-play shouldn't be labeled as puns, and instead just called yummy twists of linguistic licorice. As evidence of this definitional difficulty, consider how some insist that *Finnegans Wake* has "innumerable puns" while others claim the book doesn't have a single one (see footnote 15 here).

Second, even if we agree -- as I ask that we do here -- that any author-intended play on words is a pun, it's probably not fair to focus on puns alone when, as is the case with *Ketjak2*, *In Which*, and *Lens* (three of the books discussed below), there's much other inventive stuff going on. For this reason, I'll discuss matters about those poems besides the puns themselves, and with regard to *Ketjak2*, a bit about puns in the rest of the bigger poem -- *the Alphabet* -- of which it is a part.

Third, too much analysis of a pun can kill the fun. Plus, I don't want to just give away -- by repeating too many of the poets' puns -- their carefully crafted or spontaneously combusted jokes. Part of the point here, sisters and brothers (cisterns and burdens), is to do no harm to the fun, and get you to read (buy, even) the poems.

So I should just give up and stop right now. But I can't. I must go on. And not just because I enjoy puns so much that I may have some kind of reverse Foerster's Syndrome, or Witzelsucht. I must write about puns, and particularly punny poems, because our language and very survival depend on them. I'm completely serious. As explained below, punny poems will save not only the word, but the world.

Ketjak2: The Caravan of Affect

Ketjak2 is one of twenty-six sections in *the Alphabet* (the lower case "t" is part of the title), Ron Silliman's one thousand fifty-four page poem, written over thirty years and recently published in its entirety. *Ketjak2* is one hugely long -- as in 83 pages long -- paragraph, and given that length I consider it a book. Especially considering it's heritage.

Ketjak2 follows from Silliman's mid-1970s breakthrough stroke o' genius book-length prose poem, *Ketjak* (San Francisco: This Press, 1978). The original *Ketjak* has 12 paragraphs, each successively containing exactly (or almost exactly) double the number of sentences in the previous paragraph, and with each succeeding paragraph containing (more or less) every sentence in the preceding paragraph (although a few sentences vary paragraph to paragraph). Thus, the first paragraph has but a single sentence ("Revolving door"), the second two ("Revolving door" and another), the third four (the preceding two and two others), and so on, until the twelfth and final one has [you do the math, smarty-pants] sentences.

Ketjak has no linear narrative (although the procession of the calendar over a several month period can be mapped), and all is para-positional juxta-taxis. The writing is tight, detailed, smart, and musical. There's a bit of prison lingo and a bit of philosophy. Many of the sentences are very short (two words) but a few are quite long (compounded and run-on). There are sentences of sex and lots about language, with sentences about sentences a particularly charming sub-set of these. The poem's self-referential and otherworldly objective. There's even rhyme, of a kind. With its vibrancy, repetition, variations, quick shifts and constant re-contextualizing of its raw materials ("old sentences heard new carry a different purpose"), *Ketjak* turns the mind into an echo chamber, its sentences yodeling around the imagination's rich-hued gamelan of joy. It's big, odd, disorienting, wild, addictive fun.

Ketjak2 carries on the spirit, skill, and much of the specific method of its namesake. From the length of its single paragraph I'm guessing the number of sentences in *Ketjak2* doubles the number in the final paragraph of the original. It also repeats sentences from that final paragraph; not anywhere near all of them (or so it seems to me), but plenty enough (plus some repeats of its own sentences) to get a strong "hey, haven't I read this before?" mojo working. As with the original, there's no start-to-finish narrative in *Ketjak2*. Instead, Silliman-sharp sentences, mostly unrelated to the those that immediately precede or follow, relentlessly pile up.

Ketjak2 covers a lot more time than the several months of the **original**. An endnote states it was written over a five year period in the late 1980s to the early 1990s. *Ketjak2* also adds elements not found in the original, including a long stretch **written** while riding the Atlanta citywide rail system (a method that exactly mirrors that the method Silliman used for another poem, *BART*, written on the San Francisco area transit system that bears that acronym). Also, about twenty words on every page of *Ketjak2* are printed in **bold**. The words in bold appear to have been selected in a completely random manner, or selected so that they would appear to have been selected at **random**. The effect is to create an minimalist abstract word-poem in bas-relief against the text on the page. By popping out some words, Silliman also emphasizes the thingy-ness of **language**.

Unlike the first *Ketjak*, *Ketjak2* also has -- you'd thought I'd forgot? -- puns, lots of them. The puns of *Ketjak2* mostly take the form of twists on cliches or other oft-heard or well known word combinations. They appear at the rate of about one or two a page, although a some pages have none. Anticipating -- keeping alert for -- the next pun is part of the fun. The puns act as a leavening agent, keeping the poem's huge mass of sentences from becoming too dense. They provide ebullience in the poem's mighty parade of particulars.

Most all the puns in *Ketjak2* are extremely well-made. "I link therefore I am," one sentence reads, and if you know Silliman's blog you'll appreciate the cleverness of that computer-age tweak of Descartes' precept. A few of the puns arise from literature, including a great twist on a Walt Whitman line, another that puns on the opening sentence of *Moby Dick* (and thus also on the title of Charles Olson's first book), and two that put a fresh spin on W.C. Williams' "pure products of America" line.

A few of Silliman's puns have a deliciously subversive edge (e.g., "Jaywalk the line"). Others -- my favorites -- express a biting social critique. Consider this comment on consumerism: "This brand is my brand, this brand is your brand." I think Woody Guthrie would agree: that pun pointedly sums up a truth about our national character's market-driven acquisitive identity.

Ketjak2 ends with a sentence-pun that I will not reveal (buy the book!) but which is undeniably perfect in its placement and message. It'll also bring a smile to yr face if you bleed tie-dye at all. Silliman has written that the pun is not a fan of Grateful Dead music, but with *Ketjak2*'s closing sentence he tips his punster-poet's cap to fellow poet Robert Hunter, the band's primary lyricist, and to that writer's most iconic line. Or so lately it occurs to me. The Doo-Dah man sez check it out!

Pun-lovers should know that puns can be found in about one-half the sections of *the Alphabet*. As with *Ketjak2*, the puns in *the Alphabet*'s other sections don't dominate the texts (Silliman's in-the-moment details always do). Although some sections -- *VOG* and *Zyxt*, for example -- have considerable numbers of puns (a couple dozen and well over 60, respectively), some of the others include only few such sentences or lines.

Silliman offers a bit of pun-theory and methodological advice too, in the other sections of *the Alphabet*. He suggests, I think rightly, that "puns invoke hidden rhymes" (*Nov*, page 320) and that "the violence of the pun / is repressed analogy / unleashed . . ." (*Toner*, page 521). Silliman also indicates his basic techniques when he writes, right after a pun in one of the poems of *VOG* (page 605), "New words / for old," and, in *Ink* (page 102), "play on the cliché." The best comment on theory or method, though, is a pun itself, a tremendous one, found in *Lit* (page 232), "Not the senses, Rimbaud: disorder the sentences" (in the puns about punning category, there's also this fragment, in *Zyxt* (page 1008): "No pun where none distended"). Finally, when in *Lit* (page 272) Silliman avers, "Too weak from punning," he reminds us that word play can be hard work, and when in *Under* (page 555) he declares, "The pun hurts" he also reminds that it can have a cost.

But regardless of the theory or method, when Silliman puns, it's fun. The book has riffs on fellow-poets' names (e.g., "Bruised Andrews," in *VOG*). There are also twists on lines from the Pledge of Allegiance, America the Beautiful, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, the Declaration of Independence, and Duncan, Pound, MacDiarmid and Rimbaud poems, among others. There are plenty of twists on lines or phrases from religious or pop culture too, including for example, "Stations of the cross" in *Lit*, "The pause that represses" in *Oz*, "Tie a yellow ribbon 'round the hot crime scene" in *What*, "Brother, can you paradigm" in *VOG*, "The smell of excess" in *You*, and "Singing in the brain, just singing in the brain" in *Under* (but why aren't the final g's dropped?). Someone should cull out the word-plays in *the Alphabet* and separately print them in a little book called (and I mean this as a high compliment, though I know it's a groaner) *Pun Silliman*. It'd be a hoot.

In Which

In Which is an orgasmatron for those with a fetish for anaphora, a meditation-crystal like no other for contemplating the mysteries wrought when the same preposition is repeatedly paired with the same relative pronoun.

You see, every single one of the approximately five thousand sentences in Kuenstler's 116 page, twenty-four chapter prose-poem begins with the words, "In which". Each sentence then has a few -- sometimes only two or three -- words and then ends, to be followed by another and another and another and another with the same quasi-syntactic structure. Another approximately five thousand times! Here's a taste, taken from the start of Chapter 8:

"In which milk of amnesia. In which I thought my breath was a spider's web. In which a symbolic jester. In which there is no sanity clause. In which uniforms & numbers. In which conceits. In which sloe-eyed Gins. In which acrostics & acoustics. In which opal tock-holes. In which a hypocrisy for every contingency, raised ideals. In which manifests, manifest. In which Abbott & Kostelanz. In which death road. [. . .]"

The words "in which" are commonly used to introduce a relative clause after a noun that refers to a place or to a time. For example, "Ezra has a bedroom in which he keeps his books." The phrase is also used after a noun to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition: "The Cantos is a long poem in which Pound uses allusions" (instead of "The Cantos is a long poem that Pound uses allusions in").

In Kuenstler's poem, "in which" is used differently. The "in which" clauses are not relative to anything, but presented as a kind of sentence themselves, with a capitalizd first word and period at the end. These sentences also mostly don't have a verb. Gloriously, Kuenstler smashes grammatical and syntactic convention. Still, I keep asking while reading each sentence: is there a place, a time, a noun, that these "in which" sentence-clauses refer? Where or to what exactly do all these "in which" things belong? The poet's mind? In yours, as the reader? Or nowhere at all? Probably the "In which's" function as an abstract unifying device, a frame, a generator of rhythm, for the puns and other "stuff" of the poem.

And then there are the puns. The puns in *In Which* come fast (I count at least five in the excerpt above), and they can be deep, as in not immediately apparent or even uncertain. Does "opal tock-holes" in the excerpt above, for example, refer to Empedocles, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher? You have to stop and think. Even "symbolic jester" and "no sanity clause" sort of sneak up on yr head. Such subtlety and goofiness ("Abbott & Kostelanz") is deliciously ridiculous, and "sloe-eyed Gins" a high-proof combinatory madness) is secreted into bits on many, many pages. Part of the poem's genius is that you gotta take it slow, real slow, or you'll speed past many clever or funny lines. The puns are the nectar in the flower of this poem, and the buzz your hear is your eyes and head madly seeking another sweet hit of pun.

Lens

Kuenstler's *Lens*, written over a 12 year period and published in 1964 (available on-line here), is a 92 page poem of paragraphic-blocks that is also loaded with puns. The poem's texts are mostly short phrases or a single word or two, separated or highlighted by odd framing devices such as "f.", "RR," "AAA," or just a period. There are lots (and lots) of puns. Here are a few examples, pulled out of a paragraph-block chosen at random on page 32: "auntie.Climax." . . . "parlay.Voodoo." . . . "auld.Lasagna." . . . "porgie.Bass" . . . "damn.Nation." . . . "sin.Titillate." . . . "ass.Cue." . . . kern.Knell." In terms of the focus on and volume of puns, I'm unaware of any precursor to Kuenstler's *Lens* and *In Which*, except for *Finnegans Wake*. Even if I'm wrong about that, Kuenstler deserves a prominent place in the Poet-Punster Hall of Fame.

Head Citations

Head Citations collects 800 plus mis-heard lines or phrases from song lyrics. Kenneth Goldsmith, also a radio dee-jay, must have had a passion for them. Mis-heard lyrics are sometimes called mondegreens. The resulting "pun" is unintentional, in the sense that the person who mis-hears doesn't mean to engage in wordplay with the actual phrase. But when, as here, a writer purposefully collects and publishes the mis-hearings, it seems to me an intentional act of word-play, and thus should be considered punning, of a kind.

Song lyrics are easy to mis-hear. Lyrics are often buried or blended deep in the music. Singers sometimes deliberately obscure the lyric, knowing that little is as powerful as the attraction between mystery and imagination, especially if the fuse of suggestion is lit. The Kingsmen's "Louie, Louie" is the classic example.

Part of the fun with Goldsmith's *Head Citations* is that neither the "correct" lyric nor song title is given. If the mis-heard twisted lyric isn't grokked -- if the word similarity or phrase rhythm doesn't trip the sonic memory of the tune -- it can be tough going. Other lines seem flat because the mishearing's torque isn't that severe. "Arrows of neon, flashing my keys out on Main Street," for example, isn't that off-line from the actual lyric: "Arrows of neon and flashing marquees out on Main Street" (from the Dead's "Truckin").

The lines that hit are solid gold. I love the mis-heard Christmas lyrics. The only way to chipmunks toasting on an open fire." I love also the mis-takes Goldsmith reports for the first lines of David Bowie's "Space Oddity": "Grant control to make your tongue," or, even more divinely absurd and evocative, "Clown control to Mao-Tse-Tung." The *Head Citations* of the book's title, of course, neatly twists the end of the "she's giving me excitations" line from Brian Wilson's "Good Vibrations" to reflect both the song's sex pulse and the trippy fun of writing down (or reading) these mis-heard lyrics. My favorite here is a paean to noetic dissipation, a mis-hearing of the mid-tempo-chart-topping-1972-reggae-ballad of Johnny Nash: "I can see clearly now my brain is gone." That's exactly what a mind-blowing word-play pun should do!

Puns and The Future of the Wor(l)d

H.L. Mencken put it straight: "Stability in language is synonymous with rigor mortis." *The American Language* (Fourth Edition). (New York,: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), page 607 (quoting Dr. Ernst Weekley). The pun destabilizes words and word combinations. Puns are all about change, the clever turn of phrase. The tired becomes fresh, the tattered sharp, the well-worn fresh. The pun, the twist, the turn, the play on words kept the language alive, the long gauge a leaf.

But then there's the world. Yes, the world: so much of our collective future depends not just on a red wheelbarrow glazed with rain water(etc.), but on puns. I'm serious about this, even if I mostly stole the idea -- and almost every word in the next four paragraphs -- from a mostly Dutch cultural historian whose teachings ought to be better known.

Genuine pure play is one of the main bases of civilization. Among other things, play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of our lives, showing that we are more than merely rational beings. The fun of playing resists all analysis and all logical interpretation.

Real civilization cannot exist in the absence of a certain play-element. Unfortunately, civilization as a whole is becoming more serious. Law and war, commerce, technology, religion, politics and science have all lost or are losing touch with play.

In contrast, all poetry is born of play. To call poetry a playing with words and language is no metaphor: it is the precise and literal truth. It proceeds within the play-ground of the mind, in a world of its own which the mind creates for it. What poetic language does with images is to play with them. In the turning of a poetic phrase there is always a play-element at work

While the more organized forms of poetry become more serious and complicated, the function of the poet still remains fixed in the play-sphere where it was born. Only poetry remains as the stronghold of living and noble play. It lies beyond seriousness, on that more primitive and original level where the child, the animal, the savage, and the seer belong, in the region of drama, enchantment, ecstasy, laughter.

Thus: the poetic pun saves the world. It saves the world because it is play, play in a world mad with work, seriousness, and complications.

So poets, please, I ask you, I beg you: go forth and pun!

Pun, pun, pun till the reaper takes your re-words away!

Pun, pun, pun till you're daffy but keep on with the play!

Further resources:

On play, poetry and play, and related topics, see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1949 (first published in Switzerland in 1944, in the German language)), pages 3-5, 119, 129, 132, 134, 135 (the close connection between poetry and riddles) and 211. Unfortunately, only a few of those pages are available here on the web. However, Huizinga's book can be bought used.

A few excerpts of Ron Silliman's *Ketjak2: Caravan of Affect* are on the web -- one here, and another here (this latter is a pdf). There is also a pdf file of the entire original *Ketjak* on-line.

PennSound has an excellent sound file in which (natch) Frank Kuenstler reads approximately twenty minutes of *In Which*. Incredibly, none of what Kuenstler reads aloud is in the book. He apparently had lots of unpublished *In Which*. In which, in which, whew!

PennSound also has a short but tremendously enjoyable sound file in which Kenneth Goldsmith sings the first twenty or so lines from *Head Citations*. The entire book is on-line too.

Posted by Steven Fama at 10:05 PM

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