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The New Sentence: June Jordan and the Politics of Parataxis

ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to compare and contrast a few select ways in which the poetic use of parataxis can convey a specific political message. Parataxis is understood here broadly, as a certain organizational principle based on a cycle of denarrativization and renarrativization.

The first part of the paper reflects on the role the paratactic technique has played within the language of the reactionary populists, both historically and in the recent years. Then, building on the observation that the denarrativized, seemingly „straightforward" nature of the paratactic speech makes it particularly useful for the purposes of right-wing populism, I ask whether parataxis can be reclaimed as a progressive force. In order to answer this question, I go back to some of the issues discussed by Ron Silliman, Fredric Jameson and Bob Perelman in the context of the Language movement and the so-called New Sentence. Here, the work of de- and renarrativization performed as a consequence of the paratactic loosening of conventional textual links and structures is seen as a direct response to the denarrativized nature of everyday life under late capitalism.

In the final part of the paper, I contrast the New Sentence parataxis with a more practical, more spontaneous (albeit more conventional) approach embodied by June Jordan. The paratactic structures of her writing remain focused on denarrativization in all of its disruptive and provocative potential, allowing for a certain kind of immediate political intervention.

Keywords: parataxis, New Sentence, June Jordan.

The recent rise of right-wing populist politics on both sides of the Atlantic—Brexit, the electoral victory of Donald Trump, the rise of the Front National and the subsequent close electoral shave in France etc.—has caused many journalists and pundits to reevaluate their approach to the language of the far right. Whereas in the time of politics-as-usual those interested in right-wing populism were primarily focused on the ways in which extreme ideologies reproduce themselves ("how does the far right mobilize and radicalize their own followers?"), the rise of Trump has necessarily shifted everyone's attention towards more general questions about the persuasive force of the populist language ("why is the far right able to sway ordinary voters?").

Mark Thompson, the current CEO of The New York Times Company and a former Director-General of the BBC, is among those trying to explain the new wave of far-right populists through the means of what we may call a common sense linguistic analysis. In his widely discussed op-ed piece for *The New York Times* (and, subsequently, in chapter 4 of his book *Enough Said: What's Gone Wrong with the Language of Politics?*), Thompson links Trump's success to his deployment of the so-called "anti-rhetoric": a series a rhetorical techniques and strategies that aim to portray its user as a "common man" oblivious to the complexities of traditional rhetorics, someone who "tells it like it is" and definitely did not take any advice from PR professionals.

Of course, it doesn't take an experienced journalist to notice Trump's various attempts at presenting himself as a "blue-collar billionaire," a political outsider etc. What's interesting about Thompson's piece is that among various tricks and techniques core to the anti-rhetorician's strategy he mentions the extensive use of parataxis:

> Short sentences ("We have to build a wall, folks!") that pummel the listener in a series of sharp jabs. This is the traditional style of the general ("I came, I saw, I conquered") or the chief executive, a million miles from the complex and conditional—and thus intrinsically suspect—talk of the lawyer/politician. Students of rhetoric call it parataxis and it's perfect, not just for the sound bite and the headline, but for the micro-oratorical world of Twitter. . . .

> The super-short sentences emphasize certainty and determination, build up layer upon layer, like bricks in a wall themselves, toward a conclusion and an emotional climax. It's a style that students of rhetoric call parataxis. This is the way generals and dictators have always spoken to distinguish themselves from the caviling civilians they mean to sweep aside. Wikipedia aptly quotes Julius Caesar's famous summary, not of his invasion of Britain, but of his victory in the Battle of Zela—"Veni, vidi,

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vici," "I came, I saw, I conquered"—as a classical example of parataxis. Today listeners are more likely to associate it with the successful entrepreneur or CEO. (Thompson)

For Thompson, parataxis equals brevity, lack of complexity, and straightforwardness. But those interested in the history of twentieth-century literature—poetry in particular—may instinctively associate parataxis with some quite different features and values. And if, as Thompson seems to suggest, it is true that the contemporary populists' language remains rooted in a certain attitude towards syntax, then we should look to poetry to learn why—and how—parataxis could be repurposed as a part of a more progressive politics of language. Because even if Trump, Le Pen or Boris Johnson rely on paratactic structures to radicalize and deceive their voters, there is no reason to assume that all parataxis is inherently and universally reactionary.

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There are two relevant traditions of parataxis in twentieth-century poetry. The first one is derived from Adorno and his "Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry," an interesting and well-argued insight into the work of the great Romantic poet. However, for all its philosophical impact, Adorno's idea of parataxis—a phenomenon or a linguistic force he eventually decided to name "parataxis"—does not really have much to do with any particular use of syntax, any tangible linguistic technique or a mode of speech. Although specific enough when read as a commentary on certain aspects of the post-Heideggerian philosophical discourse, Adorno's vision is ultimately quite abstract when seen from a more literary (and practical) point of view; and, as is too often forgotten, it requires the reader to assume a hard non-intentionalist perspective in order for the whole concept to make any intelligible sense.

However, parataxis was also listed among the core components of the so-called "New Sentence"—a concept coined by Ron Silliman in 1987 in an essay of the same title, which quickly became one of the defining texts of the whole Language movement. The "New Sentence" refers to a certain type or mode of writing (invented, according to Silliman, in the Bay Area in the 1970s/1980s) that focused strongly on the sentence as a basic unit of meaning (rather than a word, a phrase or a whole paragraph) and favoured prose poetry over both "traditional," verse-based poems and more traditionally narrative prose. The structure of New Sentence writing was necessarily paratactic; and Silliman's understanding of the role of parataxis remained firmly rooted in a progressive, anti-capitalist sensibility. His manifesto constituted one of the first comprehensive, philosophically and linguistically informed attempts at finding a common denominator for the work of the Bay Area poets of the 1970s and 1980s; well-received by the poets themselves, its consequences were to prove quite far-reaching.

Let us recap the key points of the original essay. Silliman begins by noting that neither modern linguistics nor literary theory were able to put forward a coherent "theory of the sentence": a systemic definition of what a sentence actually *is*, how it works and what separates it from the other units of meaning. Silliman comments on quite a few existing definitions of the "sentence," rejecting each one as either too abstract or simply impractical from a writer's point of view. He notes that modern linguistics—represented here by de Saussure, Bloomfield and Chomsky—have largely relegated sentence to the realm of *parole.* He then states that the New Critics have tended to "avoid the discussion" about the differences between the "utterance of speech" and the sentence "as a unit of prose." Finally, he gives some credit to structuralism, referencing Barthes as one of those who came relatively close to a "recognition of the need for a theory of the sentence" (Silliman 76). But ultimately the roots of the New Sentence lie somewhere else: in the works of Gertrude Stein and in the tradition of Anglo-American prose poetry—Silliman references in particular Edgar Lee Masters and Fenton Johnson's *The Minister.*

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The New Sentence has no direct connection to the Surrealist prose poems, as the latter "manipulate meaning only at the 'higher' or 'outer' layers, well beyond the horizon of the sentence" (Silliman 87). Meanwhile, the main feature of the New Sentence writing is that it keeps the reader's attention precisely at the level of the sentence; and any particular sentence directs his focus towards another particular sentence rather than a singled out phrase (word, clause etc.) or a whole paragraph. The latter remains, in fact, only a unit of measure rather than meaning—as Silliman explains in the context of Bob Perelman's *a.k.a.*:

> The paragraph organizes the sentences in fundamentally the same way a stanza does lines of verse. There are roughly the same number of sentences in each paragraph and the number is low enough to establish a clear sentence: paragraph ratio. Why is this not simply a matter of the way sentences are normally organized into paragraphs? Because there is no specific referential focus. The paragraph here is a unit of measure—as it was also in "Weathers". . . .
> The sentences are all sentences: the syntax of each resolves up to the level of the sentence. (Silliman 2, 89)

Later, Silliman offers a more comprehensive definition of the New Sentence writing:

l) The paragraph organizes the sentences;
2) The paragraph is a unity 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. (Silliman 91)

"The syntax of each [sentence] resolves up to the level of the sentence" and "syllogistic movement is . . . limited"—those two phrases seem to sum up some of the crucial intuitions behind the concept of the New Sentence: the text does not provide an obvious, grammatically supported narrative for the reader to easily bind its sentences into a larger whole; sentences appear to have their own, separate referents rather than a single shared one; and the meaning is derived from a collection of sentences rather than a larger unit of meaning. In other words, everything that's really important happens at the level of the sentence; the New Sentence is an "ordinary" sentence presented in a particular, *elevated* way. As Silliman himself admits when discussing Clark Coolidge's "Weathers": "In other contexts, any of these could become a new sentence, in the sense that any sentence properly posed and staged could" (88).

It is worth remembering that in his original essay Silliman never used the word "parataxis"; which seems rather surprising, considering that a) all the examples of the New Sentence that he provides are quite self-evidently paratactic, and b) the structural core of the New Sentence, as described by Silliman, necessarily favours the use of parataxis over syntaxis or hypotaxis. In other words, it is no accident that all the examples of New Sentence poetry are so enthusiastically paratactic; the paratactic element is obviously intrinsic and necessary rather than incidental or contingent.

Nonetheless, it was another Language author, Bob Perelman, who, in his response to some of the accusations made against Language poetry by Fredric Jameson, explicitly stated that parataxis was a core element of the New Sentence:

The new sentence is a term coined by Ron Silliman to describe certain prose works by various language writers, including himself, in the late seventies and early eighties. To simplify his wide-ranging discussion, a new sentence is more or less ordinary itself but gains its effect by being placed next to another sentence to which it has tangential relevance. New sentences are not subordinated to a larger narrative frame nor

are they thrown together at random. Parataxis is crucial: the internal, autonomous meaning of a new sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences. (Perelman 313)

Being essentially a response to Jameson, Perelman's essay deals first and foremost with the political aspects of New Sentence-style parataxis. Jameson (who, by the way, also never used the word "parataxis") famously accused the Language writers, Perelman in particular, of adapting a somewhat carelessly enthusiastic approach towards the aesthetics of the postmodern:

> Jameson does not intend an easy moral denunciation of postmodern practices, but in discussing the parataxis in "China" his vocabulary registers significant alarm: when the "relationship [of signifiers to each other] breaks down, when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers." (Perelman 314)

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By aligning themselves with the principles of postmodern aesthetics, the Language writers were allegedly aiding late capitalism in its attempts to further suppress the affects of alienation and anxiety, making them ever more elusive, harder to consciously reflect upon and openly discuss:

> But I mainly wanted to show the way in which what I have been calling schizophrenic disjunction or écriture, when it becomes generalized as a cultural style, ceases to entertain a necessary relationship to the morbid content we associate with terms like schizophrenia and becomes available for more joyous intensities, for precisely that euphoria which we saw displacing the older affects of anxiety and alienation. (Jameson 29)

In other words, Jameson believed that at the end of the day the paratactic mode of Language writing remained essentially a form of mimicry; it reproduced the same mechanisms that had caused the postmodern experience to break down into fragmented, "compartmentalized" parts in the first place. Theirs was neither a self-aware critical project nor an innocent representation: Language poets were complicit in the capital's actions. Therefore, for Perelman, it became of utmost importance to prove that New Sentence-style parataxis went further—or deeper—than a simple affirmation of the dispersive forces of capital:

> By keeping free from fictitious totalization, each new sentence represents an enclave of unalienated social work. Where Jameson sees signifying chains snapping, Silliman sees the cobwebs of the reified narratives of

false consciousness being swept away. But I want to emphasize that continual possibilities of renarrativization are offered alongside such de-narrativization. . . .

By refusing to construct larger narrative wholes beyond the provisional connections made at the time of the reading (or to put it another way, by making the reader renarrativize), Silliman allows air into the sealed chambers Jameson mentions. (Perelman 317)

The key word here seems to be "renarrativization." The abolishing of the superfluous narrative order—made possible by the introduction of parataxis—is required in order for the poem to shed the pretense of a "totality," to deprive the reader of the dangerous comfort of hastily made assumptions and obvious conclusions. But only when forced to reestablish some kind of a narrative does the reader actually pay attention to the hidden orders of meaning and the subtle meta-narratives (the "non-literary," ideologically determined narratives of the capitalist economy, neoliberal politics and so on). The traditional forms, narrative and syntagmatic structures act as a surrogate or a tranquillizer of sorts: they serve to convince the reader that all the information she needs in order to understand a certain "work" is actually contained *within* said work. Meanwhile, the extensive use of parataxis forces her to establish a deeper, more conscious connection between the text and the everyday experience. In other words, the liberating potential of the parataxis lies not in some sort of primitive linguistic anarchism—the abolishing of *all* narrative order—but in exposing, via renarrativization on the reader's part, the continuities and connections that are far more important than the reified forms of a traditional narrative. "Pay attention," the New Sentence seems to say, "there is a certain order there, and this order may well be far more important than the ones you're used to, but I won't help you find it, you have to do it yourself."

For all of Perelman's enthusiasm for paratactic writing, he did realize—in line with Thompson's analysis—that within the realm of everyday life parataxis is often exploited by the forces of capital (or Spectacle) as a tool of ideological manipulation, deception and disinformation. In fact, his essay begins by noting exactly that:

Parataxis is the dominant mode of postindustrial experience. It is difficult to escape from atomized subject areas, projects, and errands into longer, connected stretches of subjectively meaningful narrative—not to mention life. As objects of the media, we are inundated by intense, continual bursts of narrative—twenty seconds of heart-jerk in a life insurance ad, blockbuster mini-series ten nights long—but these are tightly managed miniatures set paratactically against the conglomerate

background that produces them. Some language writers have attempted to use parataxis oppositionally in the form of "the new sentence"; but AT&T ads where fast cuts from all "walks of life" demonstrate the ubiquity and omniscience of AT&T are also examples of parataxis. Clearly, the nature of the units and the precise ways they are placed together need to be considered before useful political judgments can be made. (Perelman 313)

And then, in the last paragraph:

> Let me conclude by reiterating that Jameson and Silliman both make wide theoretical claims; both are trying to fight reified parataxis-commodification—with a more committed, critical parataxis—the finding of hidden categorical similarities. Denarrativization is a necessary part of the construction of these wider paratactic arguments. But in both cases this process needs to be seen for the combined reading and writing practice that it is: renarrativization is also necessary. (Perelman 323)

This vivid contrast between the "reified" parataxis and its "critical" counterpart only stresses the fact that they are *both* politically radical—they just occupy the opposite sides of the political spectrum. The reified parataxis is the pattern by which the whole experience of everyday life under late capitalism is shaped; it is a tool of exaggeration and disinformation, through which the Spectacle presents itself as "ubiquitous" and "omniscient." It encourages the compartmentalization ("breaking down") of the daily life and presents various strands of capitalist ideology as separate, autonomous, self-justified "facts." As an answer to the radicalism of this "reified" parataxis, its "critical" counterpart has similarly grand ambitions: it strives to reshape both the frames of the experience of reading *and* this experience's relation to the everyday life. But even more importantly, it seeks to disenchant the reified capitalist parataxis by proving that it is not, in fact, possible to have a consequence-free denarrativization of experience; that some meta-narratives are always there, that the act of renarrativization can be performed under any circumstances and that the compartmentalization of everyday life under late capitalism is ultimately just an illusion.

In other words, parataxis as a whole (in both its "critical" and "reified" form) is a battleground for two opposing, equally radical forces: the avant-garde of the Spectacle and the (anti)narrative radicalism of the new poetry.

Both *The New Sentence* and "Parataxis and Narrative," although indeed brilliantly argued and certainly influential, are nonetheless likely to leave the reader with a few crucial yet unanswered questions. First, it is not entirely clear whether Perelman actually managed to disprove some of

Jameson's most serious accusations. He tried to defend Language writers by showing that New Sentence-style parataxis is fundamentally different from the parataxis of "the postindustrial experience." At the same time, the only significant difference between the "critical" parataxis and its "reified" counterpart—as described in Perelman's essay—is that while the former forces the reader to eventually discover or establish *some* sort of a narrative order (thus exposing the hidden truths of the capitalist ideology), the latter is embraced by those experiencing it "as is," in a fundamentally unreflective fashion. But does this difference really stem from the structural uniqueness of the New Sentence, or is it rooted in a very traditional vision of the role of the reader? After all, renarrativization takes place only because the reader's learned instincts tell her that there must be *some* order and continuity in any given literary text (particularly in a piece of prose); and those instincts, in turn, are shaped by her memory of various more traditional narratives (perhaps novels she had to read in school etc.) rather than the New Sentence itself. It is true that paratactic writing deprives us of the deceptive comfort of known forms and techniques; but in the end it is our experience of those traditional narratives that pushes us to "renarrativize." Thus, it could be said that the only real difference between the "reified" parataxis and the "critical" one is the context in which they appear—it is always the "reified parataxis" when we're forced to watch an AT&T ad, and it is always (or at least usually) the "critical parataxis" when we read a book of poetry. That is not to say that this is the only logical conclusion to Perelman's essay; it is just worth pointing out that by not elaborating on any specific purposes for which parataxis may be employed (what, specifically, does it say about the neoliberal politics of culture? what does it say about the class structure in the late capitalist society? etc.), both Perelman and Silliman come dangerously close to suggesting that the "critical" aspect of the New Sentence-style parataxis could be in fact reduced to the very traditional notion of "literariness."

 The second issue is arguably much less important; however, it is still worth noting that Perelman's essay focuses entirely on parataxis as it pertains to a relationship between sentences. Although quite understandable—Perelman was, after all, commenting on a certain writing technique as it was developed historically by a specific group of poets, entirely within the context of the New Sentence—it might seem rather surprising that the critic was not at all interested in the relationship between the sentence-level parataxis and various other paratactic or semi-paratactic structures. Take the enumeration, for example: it has the power to force the reader to renarrativize in much the same way as parataxis, but it is usually accompanied by either some kind of gradation or at least a suggestion of a certain "whole" (of which the listed elements are only

parts). Is it possible that enumeration may affect the narrative of a literary work in much the same way as the "proper" parataxis (although without putting the focus on the sentence-level)?

This potential distinction between parataxis as such and more broadly understood *paratactic structures* or *techniques* leads inevitably to yet another question that remains unanswered by Perelman; namely, is there a substantial difference of effect or function between the "pure," "proper" parataxis and its various imperfect instances? The critic seems to imply as much when he maintains that anaphoric sentences cannot be "purely paratactic" (Perelman 321); and then again, when he appears to question the radicalism of Whitman's parataxis: "The parataxis of Whitman's catalogs that seemed bizarre and discontinuous to most of his contemporary readers is much more likely to denote, for this century's readers, connection and a totalizing embrace of society" (Perelman 321–22). According to Perelman, the politically radical potential of paratactic writing may be realized only when, on the superficial level of a traditional narrative, parataxis remains "pure": there is no obvious continuity, no self-evident order, and the "renarrativized" meaning can emerge only *after* the poem has been completely denarrativized. In other words, although denarrativization is not parataxis' ultimate goal, it must always come first and *embrace* the whole text before any renarrativization can even begin. Denarrativization might be superficial and temporary, but it is nonetheless total and complete in its own way; and in this totality it once again reflects—from the opposite side of the political spectrum, if you will—the regressive radicalism of the "reified" capitalist parataxis.

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In classical rhetorics, however, parataxis is understood much more broadly. The examples provided by Thompson in his piece for *The New York Times* are certainly not "purely" paratactic, but they are openly paratactic nonetheless: Caesar's "Veni, vidi, vici" is based on a repetition, but there is no direct grammatical or syntagmatic connection between the three statements. In fact, this is precisely the point: the three facts (he came, he saw, he conquered) are obviously connected, but they all stem directly from Caesar's position of power (or his personal agency) rather than from one another, which reinforces the idea of Caesar being "above" all the ordinary hierarchies and structures. In other words, the order as such is *still there*—it's just been somewhat weakened in order to emphasize the strength and sovereignty of the ruler.

From this point of view, the classical rhetorics and the language of contemporary populist politics are very much alike—some of President Trump's more egregious "word salads" aside, his speeches usually have a clear common theme, subject and message (however obnoxious this message may be); what is rejected is not the narrative or continuity as such,

but the complex requirements, taboos and caveats of a more traditional political debate. And so, for Thompson (who employs the classical approach), parataxis refuses only to directly subjugate one sentence unto another, or to connect them in a grammatically strict fashion; Perelman's parataxis—both in its reified and critical form—opposes *any* traditional narrative order. In other words, while classical parataxis rejects the *hierarchy*, New Sentence-style parataxis rejects the *continuity* as such.

Of course, the New Sentence requires this kind of radicalism in order to oppose the radicalism of the "reified," capitalist parataxis; as we have already pointed out, the denarrativization must be total in order for the renarrativization to be able to focus entirely on the previously hidden, ideological meta-narratives. We could say that the "critical" parataxis needs to go as far as its "reified" counterpart and then *even further*, thus subverting the illusion of fragmentation.

This, however, poses another question: is the radical New Sentence-style parataxis enough to criticize the whole spectrum of the regressive, reactionary paratactic forms? After all, even if the reified parataxis remains a pattern for the whole post-industrial experience, not all of its instances will be taken to their natural extremes; the paratactic structure of a populist speech differs slightly from the paratactic structure of a TV commercial break (which in turn differs slightly from the paratactic organization of space in a gentrified neighbourhood and so on). In other words, even if New Sentence-like parataxis—New Parataxis?—is capable of fighting the whole system *at once,* is it able to participate in more specific and more immediate interventions in an equally efficient manner? Is its radicalism *practical* today?

After all, no matter how often Donald Trump's or Boris Johnson's speeches may resemble a political "word salad"—a collection of soundbites, code words, dog whistles and unintelligible ramblings with no discernible message—they still cannot be criticized in the same way one would criticize, for instance, such broad and relatively abstract constructs as "the Spectacle," "capitalist consumerism" or "the Establishment" (even if those particular politicians clearly belong to the latter). These people are not, whatever one may think of their personal history, Spectacle personified— no one is. Populist politicians are, at the end of the day, specific individuals with a specific (even if terrifyingly unclear or ridiculously flexible) agenda, specific political goals, specific political base etc. This does not mean that their use of parataxis does not require a progressive response—it just means that this response might need to be more direct, more pragmatic and immediate than the systemic response offered by the New Sentence.

Thus, even though the New Parataxis may well be invaluable as a criticism of late capitalism *as such*—a criticism of its most fundamental

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patterns and strategies—there will always be some room left for *other* varieties and subtypes of parataxis: ones that may seem less radical in a formal sense, but that are nonetheless just as necessary whenever a poet seeks to make a more urgent, more immediate political intervention.

At this point I would like to contrast the New Parataxis with the paratactic structures found in the poetry of June Jordan. The reason for this comparison is threefold. Firstly, Jordan's use of parataxis was almost as extensive as that of the New Sentence writers; some of her best-known poems are built around various paratactic structures. Secondly, Jordan was at least as politically radical as the Marxist-inspired left wing of the Language movement: a lifelong activist on the issues of race, gender and (post)colonialism, she also constantly expressed a deep understanding of the class-based inequalities in the West. Thirdly, although politically quite radical, Jordan may be considered by some readers—not least by those with particular interest in post-Language writing—to be quite conservative when it comes to issues of poetic form. Admittedly, formal innovation was rarely at the very top of her list of literary priorities or intellectual responsibilities; and although formally complex, her poems are not very "experimental" in the usual meaning of the word.

In other words, Jordan is a perfect example of a poet who emerged in the U.S. at roughly the same time as the Language writers, who "used" parataxis extensively, but who didn't necessarily see this particular technique as a means of subverting the very foundations of late capitalism.

Let us take a closer look at just a few of Jordan's poems. "Poem about My Rights" is an account of an internal monologue during an evening stroll. We see the poet in a state of frustration or shock; we can only suspect that something is not right, that some important event has just taken place, perhaps some sort of an accident that made her reflect—once more—upon the various ways in which modern America discriminates against a black woman:

> Even tonight and I need to take a walk and clear
> my head about this poem about why I can't
> go out without changing my clothes my shoes
> my body posture my gender identity my age
> my status as a woman alone in the evening/
> alone on the streets/alone not being the point/
> the point being that I can't do what I want
> to do with my own body because I am the wrong
> sex the wrong age the wrong skin and
> suppose it was not here in the city but down on the beach/
> or far into the woods and I wanted to go
> there by myself thinking about God/or thinking

about children or thinking about the world/all of it
disclosed by the stars and the silence:
I could not go and I could not think and I could not
stay there
alone
as I need to be. (Jordan 309)

This feverish meditation on the idea that some identities—particularly female ones—may be considered "wrong" by the society or the state remains so moving not only because of the poem's subject and the deeply personal, almost confessional tone, but also because of its efficient use of the paratactic style and specific paratactic structures (lists/enumerations). The phrases and clauses seem juxtaposed, almost accidentally put together, with no obvious, direct connection between them; the train of thought shifts and veers off, almost as if the poet struggled to keep it on track ("alone in the evening / alone on the streets / alone not being the point / the point being . . ."). The paratactic effect is only strengthened by the use of strokes (slashes), which seem to suggest that certain parts of the poem should be read simultaneously rather than sequentially; different thoughts are "happening" all at once rather than in an orderly, linear fashion.

However, parataxis does not only add to the effect of feverishness or frustration; more importantly, it also stresses the fact that the order the poet struggles to describe—the ideological rationale which determines a certain identity to be "wrong"—is completely arbitrary. There is no coherent narrative; there's just a collection of racist (sexist etc.) prejudices, laws, behaviours. By refusing to narrativize the discrimination, Jordan rejects its pretense to rationality.

In "The Bombing of Baghdad" the paratactic structure plays a similar role:

we bombed Iraq we bombed Baghdad
we bombed Basra/we bombed military
installations we bombed the National Museum
we bombed schools we bombed air raid
shelters we bombed water we bombed
electricity we bombed hospitals we
bombed streets we bombed highways
we bombed everything that moved/we
bombed everything that did not move we
bombed Baghdad
a city of 5.5 million human beings
we bombed radio towers we bombed
telephone poles we bombed mosques
we bombed runways we bombed tanks

> we bombed trucks we bombed cars we bombed bridges
> we bombed the darkness we bombed
> the sunlight we bombed them and we
> bombed them and we cluster bombed the citizens
> of Iraq and we sulfur bombed the citizens of Iraq
> and we napalm bombed the citizens of Iraq and we
> complemented these bombings/these "sorties" with
> Tomahawk cruise missiles which we shot
> repeatedly by the thousands upon thousands. (Jordan 535–36)

Of course, by Perelman's standards, this excerpt is not "purely" paratactic, as it is also clearly anaphoric. However, each consequent simple sentence does not offer a direct grammatical connection to another; and all the sentences are bound together only by the theme (the text as a whole) rather than through any intermediate units of meaning. And if we were to once again refer to Caesar's "Veni, vidi, vici" as a classic example of political parataxis, then "The Bombing of Baghdad" would have a strikingly similar overall structure: "we bombed, we bombed, we bombed."

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In fact, if Caesar's words are the ultimate statement of power and political will, Jordan's poem presents us with a somewhat grotesque version of the same gesture: the military actions undertaken by the U.S. forces in Iraq are presented not as parts of a causal, logical narrative, but as fundamentally separate—and thus stemming directly from the will or might of those who speak (in this case, the United States, its government or the American citizens in general). "[W]e bombed the National Museum / we bombed schools we bombed air raid / shelters we bombed water we bombed / electricity." Such laconic statements provoke an almost naive question—*why?*—which, in turn, can be answered only with the most laconic of responses: we don't know. Or maybe: no one cares. Or maybe: no reason is good enough. The only narrative that binds those linguistic acts together is the one of the U.S. military might: one which simply *asserts* its supremacy rather than seeks to justify or legitimize it.

What Jordan achieves through her paratactic presentation is a "de-rationalization" of the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East; she refuses to acknowledge it not only as an ethical action, but as a coherent, credible narrative. There is no narrative; there is no logic. It is all just a series of absurd missteps bound together by the sheer military capability of the U.S. The image of the United States in "The Bombing of Baghdad" is ultimately one of a grotesquely Nietzschean bully with too many disposable bombs: why did we do it? Because we could.

The third poem I would like to focus on, "Kissing God Goodbye" from 1994, is a long, passionate monologue in which Jordan argues with and against some of the basic doctrinal and cultural tenets of Christianity. The

poem itself is actually composed as a chain of enumerations and paratactic sequences, in which Jordan quotes short pieces from the Bible, lists some of the traditional personal traits of the Christian God, and points out various doctrinal inconsistencies and absurdities. The poem is divided into two parts, the first more critical and the second more performative; seeing as it is far too long to be quoted here extensively, I would like to provide at least a short series of excerpts, so as to invoke its general emotional tone or atmosphere:

> You mean to tell me on the 12th day or the 13th that the Lord
> which is to say some wiseass
> got more muscle than he
> reasonably
> can control or figure out/some
> accidental hard disc
> thunderbolt/some
> big mouth
> woman-hating/super
> heterosexist heterosexual
> kind of guy guy
> he decided who could live and who would die?
>
> . . . .
>
>
> And wasn't no woman in the picture of the Lord?
> He done the whole thing by himself? The oceans and the skies
> the fish that swim and the bird
> that flies?
> You sure he didn't have some serious problems of perspective
> for example
> coming up with mountains/valleys/rivers/rainbows and no
> companionship/no coach/no midwife/boyfriend/girlfriend/
> no help whatsoever for a swollen
> overactive
> brain
> unable to spell
> sex
>
> . . . .
>
>
> And after everything he said and done
> the floods/famines/plagues
> and pestilence

the invention of the slave and the invention of the gun the worship of
war (especially whichever war
he won)
And after everything he thought about and made 2 million
megapronouncements about
(Like)
"Give not your strength to women"
and
"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman" and
"An outsider shall not eat of a holy thing"
and
"If a woman conceives and bears a male child then she shall be unclean
seven days . . . But if she bears
a female child, then she shall be unclean
2 weeks . . ."
and

. . . .

That guy?
The ruler of all earth
and heaven too
The maker of all laws and all taboo
The absolute supremacist of power
the origin of the destiny
of molecules and Mars
The father and the son
The king and the prince
The prophet and the prophecy The singer and the song
The man from whom in whom
with whom
of whom
by whom
comes everything without the womb without that unclean feminine
connection/
that guy? (Jordan 565–70)

Here, too, the extensive use of parataxis (once again, stressed and
strengthened by the use of mid-verse strokes) serves primarily to underline
the arbitrariness of various ideological categories and concepts: the
conservative, patriarchal religious mentality becomes denarrativized and
thus prone to subversion; it is no longer able to imply its own rationality
and its "natural" character through linguistic means. And once again there
is no renarrativization: Jordan is not interested in reclaiming Christianity

for herself, she is not trying to find a version of it that could be embraced by a black feminist; her goal is simply to emphasize the absurdities and the doubtful logic of this particular ideological narrative. There's no "positive vision," no suggestion of a "right" narrative to replace the "wrong" one. (There *might* be, in the final part of the poem, but it stands in a stark and open opposition to the whole Christian mindset.)

That is not to say that Jordan explicitly rules out the possibility of reclaiming some elements of Christian spirituality for progressive politics. In "Kissing God Goodbye" she simply chooses not to reflect on this possibility at all—such an idea never seems to appear within the poem's general framework.

We can now see quite clearly various aesthetic and political similarities and differences between New Parataxis and the paratactic technique as deployed by Jordan. They both serve as a critical tool; their immediate goal is to denarrativize a certain ideological narrative. Both New Sentence-style parataxis and Jordan's parataxis allow for a stripping away of the obvious, superficial narratives and languages. However, what the former is actually trying to do, in political and performative terms, is to force the reader to find a hidden order beneath the now-denarrativized surface of the text; its indirect, but ultimately more important goal is to "kickstart" the work of renarrativization. Meanwhile, Jordan's parataxis stops at emphasizing the very fact of denarrativization. New Parataxis reveals the hidden logic of various narratives and discourses, while Jordan's parataxis points out their sheer absurdity and arbitrariness.

This is not to say that Jordan's use of parataxis does not have a performative aspect or does not provoke any specific reactions on the part of the reader; it is actually just as provocative as the parataxis of the Language poems. Whereas a traditional non-paratactic text imposes a certain narrative order on the reader, and the radical New Sentence parataxis forces the reader to look for this order on her own (and outside the text), Jordan's parataxis—let us call it a *practical* or *pragmatic* parataxis—provides just enough self-evident, clearly intentional order to emphasize how deficient, how lacking in reason or rationality this very order is: "we bombed schools, so we could just as well bomb hospitals, who cares." By introducing an obviously rudimentary, insufficient narrative, Jordan points the reader towards this narrative's frustrating, even unbearable, status as something both complete and obviously unfinished or faulty, almost as if asking: what are you going to do about it?

As such, unlike the traditional non-paratactic narrative—and in line with Silliman's concept of radical parataxis—Jordan's *practical* parataxis does not expect the process of narrativization to end when the last word of the poem is uttered. Very much like a slam poet, her paratactic structures

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strive to provoke a reaction in their audience, they *want* to initiate some sort of a resistance to the obviously deficient narrative: "do you think there's anything left to be said? You do? Well, go on then." Yes, this type of parataxis tends to emphasize a certain narrative lack or break, a certain feeling of finitude or definiteness—"that's it, there's nothing else to be said"—but it does so in an act of provocation, for the sole purpose of taunting an initially passive reader. In other words, Jordan's parataxis is a syntactic equivalent of a mic drop. (Which might partially explain why Jordan's poems so often sound or *feel* like spoken word pieces.)

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