

The Poetry of Susan Howe

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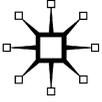
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History, Theology, Authority
William Montgomery

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Introduction

This book gives an account of the unstable, proliferating sets of associative connection that are, for Susan Howe, mobilized in the act of reading. It makes an argument about poetry that embraces lyric representations of war, occluded femininity, Renaissance theatre, the American landscape, religious nonconformism, and visual poetics. Over the course of three and a half decades, Howe has built a body of work that is attentive to the political and ethical infoldings of the minutest utterance and is, in the full range of the word, enthusiastic. The current study aims to pick out a pathway—one among many possible—through this endlessly surprising “word Forest” (*Thorow*, 49).

Howe began publishing poetry with *Hinge Picture* in 1974 and was initially received as part of the amorphous grouping of experimental writers known as the language poets—writers such as Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian, Carla Harryman, Barrett Watten, and Ron Silliman. These authors, now very well known, drew on the classical avant-garde of the early twentieth century, Russian formalism, Marxism, and continental critical theory. They wrote against the expressionist lyric, the illusory coherence of narrative, and the narrow ambitions of confessional and academic verse.¹ The “language” label, like most such tags, is unsatisfactory, as it masks an extremely diverse range of writing. Even given such reservations, however, it was clear from the start that Howe’s poetry was out of step with certain general tendencies within language writing. Although Howe was friendly with some of the protagonists of this grouping and was included in their defining early anthology *In the American Tree*, she has never fitted easily under the language banner.² Howe shares with many language writers interests in the material text, the political ramifications of radical formal experimentation, and the vexed issue of voice, but her work from the outset contains countervailing investments in mystical thought, American Romanticism, and a reappraisal of lyric.

Howe undeniably valued the radicalism and intellectual commitment of some among the language writers, forming close relationships with two of the protagonists, Lyn Hejinian, on the West Coast, and Charles Bernstein, on the East. Howe's correspondence with Hejinian was one of her most substantial letter-writing relationships of the 1980s. However, she was also closely involved in a correspondence with John Taggart, a poet aligned with Robert Duncan, and one, like Duncan, explicitly in the anti-language camp. Early correspondence with Ian Hamilton Finlay and, a little later, with Norman O. Brown further testifies to the scope of her poetic and intellectual affinities.³

Since the late 1980s, her work has been widely anthologized and has drawn a great deal of critical commentary: books by Rachel Tzvia Back and Stephen Collis, and articles or chapters in books by such prominent commentators on American poetry as Michael Davidson, Peter Middleton, Peter Nicholls, Marjorie Perloff, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Lynn Keller, Susan Schultz and Brian Reed. Howe is typically read as a major voice within the American late modernist tradition—an inheritor of the legacy of Pound, HD, Olson, and others. In the *Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, for example, Nicholls observes that the work bears “eloquent testimony to the continuing role of poet-as-historian.”⁴ Though her work differs in numerous important ways from that of Pound—not least in its attachment to principles of instability and uncertainty—they share a commitment to an intellectually ambitious mode of poetry that is rooted in close attention to history. Nicholls, one of Howe's most perceptive critical commentators, also notes that Howe's work implies a “fundamental reformulation of Poundian principle” because of its emphasis on the “unreadable” in history.⁵ The various implications of that unreadability—whether literal or in the sense of incomprehensible—provide some of the core themes of this book.

Feminist scholars were among the first to respond to Howe's writing. Critics including DuPlessis, Keller, Back, Kathleen Fraser, and Elisabeth Frost have produced valuable discussions of the treatment in Howe's poetry of women as sidelined nonparticipants in history's unfolding. Many have paid particular attention to the issue of silence and to the ways in which Howe's experiments with page space and with an ethics of marginality have led to a poetry in which the effacement of the feminine is rendered. Some have drawn on the poems of *Singularities* and the criticism of *The Birthmark* to situate Howe as a specifically antinomian voice—a development of a stuttering and marginalized strand of American speech that has its origins in theological disputes among the early settlers of New England. This study is informed by this work but seeks to lead the conversation down new pathways, deriving a sense of permission both from the Nietzschean

daring of Howe's portrait of Emily Dickinson in her early critical work *My Emily Dickinson* and from Howe's interest in male writers such as Melville, Edwards, Peirce, and Stevens. Issues of gender and power are, clearly, crucial to Howe's writing, but in this study they are subsumed beneath the overall question of poetic speech.

In recent years, it has become clear that there are numerous contexts in which Howe can be read. Her background as a visual artist with affiliations to American minimalism and to artists such as Agnes Martin and Marcia Hafif, for example, is extremely significant. Marcel Duchamp is a repeated touchstone. She has often acknowledged a debt to Charles Olson, particularly his use of page space (an area discussed by Kathleen Fraser and others). A rarely heard but no less plausible approach would be to point to Howe's Anglo-Irish ancestry and to look to poems such as *The Liberties* and *The Midnight* for motifs of non-belonging, Swiftian wordplay, Yeatsian enchantment, and Gothic unease. Howe's recent work, from *Pierce-Arrow* on, displays an interest in pragmatist thought and makes explicit a genealogy of American letters—Edwards, Emerson, Henry James, William James, Stevens—that is inflected by pragmatist criticism.⁶ Although it is clear from the correspondence that Stevens has long been a central interest for Howe, it is only recently, in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* and a 2009 article for *Chicago Review*, that she has explicitly addressed his writing.⁷ It is clear that there are multiple vectors of influence and association at work in this writing.

One oblique early marker of Howe's affection for Stevens, however, can be found at the head of her 1990 collection *The Europe of Trusts*. This is in the form of a manifesto-like sequence entitled "THERE ARE NOT LEAVES ENOUGH TO CROWN TO COVER TO CROWN TO COVER."⁸ The title is taken from Wallace Stevens' characteristically evasive meditation on the public role of the poet, "United Dames of America." Although no direct reference to Stevens is made in the piece, it advances arguments about the responsibilities of poetry that have affinities with Stevens's famous discussion of sound and the "pressure of reality" in his wartime essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words."

"Leaves" is a textual collage that sketches the considerable extent of Howe's poetic ambition at the time and incorporates many of the formal and thematic elements that define her poems: biblical and literary citation; folk material; autobiography; the censorship or suppression of speech; a pursuit of primeval origins that acknowledges its own impossibility; and, above all, the desire to formulate a poetic response to war and colonial violence. From it, we learn that Howe was born just before the outbreak of the Second World War and that she had an Irish mother and an American father. Howe indicates that her father left home to fight in the war and that his letters

home were subject to the editorial attentions of the army censor. She mentions news photographs of the war alongside references to the Bible: Herod's slaughter of the innocents and Rachel, "weeping for her children" ("Leaves," 11). She cites a nursery rhyme ("The hawk with his long claws/ Pulled down the stones./ The dove with her rough bill/ Brought me them home" [Ibid., 12]) and the Greek tragedy *Antigone* (Creon's injunction to Antigone: "Go to the dead and love them" [Ibid., 13]). Interleaved with the prose, which is often catachrestic ("I had so many dead Innocents distance was abolished" [Ibid., 12]), are three sequences of dense and discontinuous poetry. Howe also makes several statements about the nature of her work. She writes, for example, "In my poetry, time and again, questions of assigning *the cause* of history dictate the sound of what is thought" (Ibid., 13). And, "I write to break out into perfect primeval Consent" (Ibid., 14).

The relationship between poetic language and the past is at the heart of her various assertions. "History is the record of winners," she writes ("Leaves," 11), following this *topos* with a stranger formulation: "Poetry brings similitude and representation to configurations waiting from forever to be spoken" (Ibid., 14). Poetry, we might conclude, is a means of following Creon's injunction—a way of recovering some of the experience that history's "winners" might have effaced. Howe's concluding statement to "Leaves" is perhaps her best known pronouncement on her poetry: "I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate" (14).⁹

How might a poetry rooted in historical particulars incorporate the "perfect" and the "primeval"? How is it possible to illuminate the "dark side of history," to give voice to the "inarticulate," to represent that which has been "forever" unspoken? These are the tasks that Howe sets herself. The difficulty of her poetry of this period is a necessary difficulty that has its origins in the problems that confront a poetry of witness when what it seeks to memorialize has vanished.¹⁰

There is in "Leaves," moreover, an unresolved tension between a poetry of redress and a poetry of grace—the demands of the temporal order and the spiritual. This tension is a fundamental characteristic of Howe's work. The growing body of critical writing on Howe's poetry has had much to say about its ethical imperatives, tending to find in its formal freedoms the poetic realization of an anticanonical and antiauthoritarian literary and political radicalism. This book is skeptical about some of these claims, although they can, indeed, be found in Howe's poetry and literary criticism. Accounts of Howe's work have often tended to elide the presence of a theological impulse in her poetry. The poetry's frequent use of language of spiritual immediacy sits uneasily with late-twentieth-century

and early twenty-first-century progressive politics. The mystical current in the writing, present from its beginnings in the 1970s to the present day, is not always compatible with the elements of Marxian, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist thought that provide the intellectual context for those who write on her.¹¹ The theory boom of the 1980s and 1990s is, of course, the context in which Howe herself was writing some of her best known works. Yet the poems are not quite as amenable to contemporary theoretical toolkits as some have implied.

When Howe writes, as she has recently, that “poetry flows into prayer” (“Choir Answers to Choir: Notes on Jonathan Edwards and Wallace Stevens,” 61), she seems explicitly to be problematizing the status of the poetic and its relation to the critical discourses that surround it, insisting on some sort of special status for poetic speech but at the same time perceiving the poetic in genres other than poetry. This study is secular in nature and has no investment in religious belief. However, it seeks to explore the significance of this provocative feature of Howe’s writing, which, I argue, extends through considerations of political authority and unconscious experience into a theory of reading. Although I often refer to writers and philosophers whose work can be read in productive parallel with Howe’s, I suppress neither the poetry’s engagement with older, metaphysical vocabularies nor the uncomfortable fit between this aspect of the work and a broadly progressive politics.

Howe writes in *My Emily Dickinson* (a book that often reads as a thinking-through of Howe’s own poetics; hereafter, *MED*) that Dickinson “explored the implications of breaking the law just short of breaking off communication with a reader” (*MED*, 11). A quasi-religious enthusiasm is, for Howe, a way of returning poetic language to its founding and incoercible strangeness. A quality of outsideness—telepathy, the enigmatic message, citation, the violence of the linebreak—allows the poetry, like Mr. Dick’s kite in *Eikon*, to drift beyond the control of either writer or reader. The figure of the itinerant—Hope Atherton in *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*; the “scout” of *Thorow*, Mangan/Bartleby or Peirce—exemplifies the intellectual nonconformism of this outsideness.

The contract between temporal and atemporal registers—history and grace—in the work is unstable, and it puts the poetry’s competing ambitions under enormous pressure. The intractable problems that Howe sets herself in “Leaves” are discernible throughout a complex body of work that makes the resistance of interpretative endeavor almost a condition of its existence. The writing’s greatest resource is its ability to tap into an “understory” (*Thorow*, 50)—a form of linguistic unconscious that permits literary communication of the kind that Howe calls telepathy.

In Howe's poetry, religious experience and the experience of poetic language continually fold into one another. The peculiarly volatile pact between sound and history that her poetry proposes causes her work to be shot through with uncertainty and indeterminacy. Yet, at the same time, it aspires to a degree of purchase on the workings of worldly injustice. The generative paradox at the center of the work lies in the poetry's capacity to retain a quality of uncoercible otherness while at the same time articulating narratives of usurpation and exclusion. As Howe recognizes in *Birth-mark*, such narratives tread a fine line between illumination and obscurity: "The Lord is the Word. He scatters short fragments. Jonah cried out to the Word when floods encompassed him. A Sound Believer hears old Chaos as in a deep sea. A narrative refuses to conform to its project" (*Birth-mark*, 61). This question of a specifically poetic mode of utterance is central to my account of Howe. There has been a tendency among critics to read Howe's poems as the realization of their prefaces, as if they performed a number of intellectual tasks that might just as easily have been carried out in other discursive modes. But these narratives do not conform to their projects. Although I pay attention—sometimes, as in this introduction, a good deal of attention—to these prefaces, the focus of my book is on the obdurate strangeness of the language in the body of the poems, a form of poetry that is refractory to critical discussion (as "Chaos cast cold intellect back" ["Leaves," 14] suggests). Lines such as the following present enormous problems to the critic:

Summary of fleeting summary
Pseudonym cast across empty
Peak proud heart
Majestic caparisoned cloud cumuli
East sweeps hewn flank ("Leaves," 13)

It is impossible to put such sequences through the mills of conventional prosody or exegesis. The three words "Peak proud heart," for example, appear to stand in isolation, making a unit neither of sense nor of syntax. Nor does the line appear to communicate with the lines that precede or follow it. Yet, even in an excerpt of less than 20 words, the diction (Howe's poetry draws on carefully delimited lexical fields) and the handling of sound lend the lines a vestigial coherence. A description of the interplay between such patterns of lyric coherence and the poetry's more broken qualities forms part of the argument of this book.

Although this book contributes to the work of sketching in Howe's sources, makes frequent reference to her own statements about her poetry, and finds various critical theorists and philosophers to be helpful when

describing her poems, it also seeks to articulate—or be articulate about—the poetry’s impenetrability. It is notable, for example, that the poem *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* is usually discussed with reference to the wandering protagonist of the first section, Hope Atherton; the poem’s longest section, however, “Taking the Forest,” ranges far beyond the physical and temporal environment that dominates the earlier sections of the poem. The poetry in such passages is immensely accomplished and suggestive, but its resistant quality poses problems for the exegete, as if, by default, he or she is assimilated to the censorious band of “scholars, lawyers, investigators, judges” that troubles the speaker of “Leaves” (10).

Those who write on Howe have often, with good reason, noted her poetry’s allegiance to silenced social groupings: women, the marginalized, and nonconformists of various sorts. This aspect of the poetry has frequently been aligned with arguments about the revision of the canon that point to Howe’s intervention in disputes about the editing of Emily Dickinson, for example, or her important research on early American captivity narratives. However, although much of this critical work is valuable, I do not want to lose sight of Howe’s commitment to texts that are central to the canon—Shakespeare, Milton, the Bible, Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens. Howe’s writing does not have a straightforwardly agonistic relation to either social or literary authority (although her prose sometimes encourages such a view). Her positions are more complex; the powerful anti-authoritarian currents in the work are accompanied by an ambivalent investment in notions such as voice, literary tradition, autobiography, and lyric.¹² This interpretation of her work certainly does not come from the perspective of a conservative recuperation of Howe’s unsettling voice. On the contrary, I argue that Howe’s revisionary approach to such features of the literary allow her to speak, as it were, both from the inside and the outside. This is a poetry in which the lure of sanctified authority and its political descendants is not simply negated; it is shown to be a part of the wider culture, imbricated within social experience and inescapable. The puzzle of authority animates this writing. I read the work as productive of combustible antinomies rather than as antinomian *per se*.

There are, in my view, two basic configurations of authority in Howe’s writing. One is monolithic, vengeful, and overbearing. This can be found in such statements as “Behind the facade of Harvard University is a scaffold and a regicide” (Foster interview, 176); in the discussion of patriarchy, colonialism, and grammar that precedes *Thorow*; and in some of Howe’s comments on the editing of Emily Dickinson’s texts. Another is presented more ambivalently, in a way that acknowledges the pervasive reach and subtle workings of power. This is a power that is productive as well as coercive. It is

the version of authority we find in Howe's discussions of Emily Dickinson's Master Letters, in her feminized representations of Charles I in *Eikon*, Melville in *Melville's Marginalia* (and elsewhere), and the Christ of John's gospel in *The Nonconformist's Memorial*. The latter is the version of authority that I find most persuasive and challenging.

* * *

A key point of departure for this book, less often discussed than "Leaves," is Howe's substantial preface to her *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974–1979* (hereafter cited as *FS*), which was published in 1996. In this text, the idea of relations, both familial and lexical, is explored at length. The preface is clearly—and revealingly—an attempt to impose retrospectively the coherence of Howe's mature poetics on the earlier work. It also touches on the prominence of Howe's American ancestors—the DeWolfe Howes, the Quincys, and the Adams—in New England history. The ways in which past and present interfere with one other through the medium of language—as they certainly do in the preface to *Frame Structures*—is a theme to which my book will often return.

The preface both describes and embodies a process of "lexical drift" (*FS*, 22). It functions as a kind of framing device, by means of which a poet much concerned with the movement between past and present considers her own past as a writer and chooses to sketch in certain autobiographical details that inform the early poems. The privileged site for the play of reciprocal determination between past and present is linguistic. In asserting the embeddedness of her family history in New England history, Howe uses a succession of puns to draw speculative links between discrete narratives. It soon becomes clear that these links verge on the arbitrary: they are sustained by the claims Howe makes for a mode of cognition that is proper to poetry, one that follows linguistic trails to offer an associative counter to more linear literary and political histories. This identifies language as the driving force of history and its repressed aspects—puns, sounding, visual appearance, materialization in the book—as the vessel through which history can in some sense be re-encountered.

Poetic thought, then, is given an enormous burden: to trace lines of energy through linguistic similitudes—coincidences that might appear to be mere epiphenomena of expression. As she formulates it in "Leaves," "Poetry brings similitude and representation to configurations waiting from forever to be spoken" (14).¹³ This form of response to the past pursues threads of inquiry that are so deeply woven into the narrative texture of personal and collective history as to be almost imperceptible: "Historical

imagination gathers in the missing,” writes Howe on the first page of the 1996 preface (*FS*, 3).

The place of the poet, for Howe, is at a point intersected by such strands. The poetic voice engaged in this lexical drift is felt to be private but knows itself to be public. This conception of poetic composition has both passive and active faces: the poet can appear as a medium through whom the past speaks or as a figure performing ambitious acts of historical imagination through language. “The struggles of dead wills *do* speak through survivors,” Howe says in an early interview. “How can we approach the dead ones deep in time’s silence?”¹⁴

The answer to her question may come through the unexpected conjunctions and unsettling disjunctions that characterize her understanding of poetic language. One might object, of course, that her similitudes—in the preface to *Frame Structures*, for example, the links between such words as *daughter* and *slaughter*, or *Niagara* and *Nigeria*—are arbitrary alignments whose claim to facilitate a form of historical knowledge is tendentious. One might also object that statements such as “Telepsychology. We have always been in contact with one another” (*FS*, 25) offer the poet the hieratic privilege of access to a form of mystical knowledge. The earlier assertion, in “Leaves,” that poetry can bring “representation and similitude to configurations waiting from for ever to be spoken” is not only unequivocal but untestable. An evaluation of Howe’s arguments around poetic form and its relation to history will be a central preoccupation of parts of this book.

Similitude for Howe is a means of gaining access to material that lies outside the written record. An extreme example of this method of imposing a counter-rational grid on an incident is the anecdote at the opening of the preface to *Frame Structures*. This event, which assured Howe’s vocation as a poet, is also central to “Leaves,” and to the “Pearl Harbor” section of *Pythagorean Silence*. In syntactically stretched prose, Howe tells of a visit to the zoo at Buffalo with her father in 1941, when she was four. The animals are acting strangely, and she and her father later learn that the Japanese had just attacked Pearl Harbor, provoking the entry of the United States into the Second World War and the prolonged absence of Howe’s father, who immediately joined up.

Daddy held on tightly to my hand because animals do communicate in a state resembling dissociation so a prepared people will rid the settlement of ice deities identified with rivers they cause animism. Everyone talking of war in those days. Enough to weigh against love. Animals sense something about ruin I think he said our human spirits being partly immaterial

at that prefigured time though we didn't know then how free will carries us past to be distance waiting for another meeting a true relation. (*FS*, 3)

In an interview with Charles Bernstein, Howe is explicit about this incident: the polar bears “knew” something had happened, she says, adding “I am a poet of war but I am a woman.”¹⁵ Howe, then, not only links a major world-historical event to her own vocation as a poet, but she imputes a telepathic sensitivity to the bears, who become an emblem of an otherness hemmed in and abused by modernity: “Three bears running around rocks as if to show how modern rationalism springs from barbarism and with such noise to show how boldly ventured is half won” (*FS*, 3).¹⁶ Howe’s poetry counters, or perhaps complements, history with “historical imagination,” which is the setting for the transaction between the “immaterial” and everyday experience. Moreover, there is, at the dense and syntactically broken end of the paragraph, a speculation on prophecy, predestination (“prefigured”), and “free will,” which proceeds to the wordplay of “true relation” (i.e., her father).¹⁷ Here, “we didn’t know then” wryly undoes the logic of predestination by suggesting that one could know better and so move outside its embrace.

Howe’s ostensible assertion, which plugs the polar bears into a kind of Reuters network of the animal world, filters the decisive pairing of public (war) and private (paternal abandonment) calamities through the sensibility of a child: “I was a deep and nervous child with the north wind of the fairy story ringing in my ears as well as direct perception” (*FS*, 3). The apparent absurdity of her—or her father’s—speculation about the bears dissolves when it is considered as a motif for the associative logic that Howe considers proper to poetic language.

Howe’s poetry works, at various levels, through a questioning of sequence. The multidirectional logic of collage replaces that of narrative. At their most fundamental level, the sequences of letters that spell words are subject to the torsion of history. In her preface to *Frame Structures*, Howe offers a form of writing that is dense with secondary associations and finely tuned to the precarious dependence of sound and sense on the basic unit of the letter. Describing the movements of herself and her sister Fanny as children, taking shortcuts between home and school across public and private land, Howe writes,

Between Berkeley Street and Brattle some meticulous gardens still remained among lawns abandoned to children some even wilder patches of weed and brush. . . . Boundaries interlinking public and private are very well, precaution and policy, thought is arranged over this, the property

of *h* (breath without sound) comes between *g* and *t* (sound without breath) in daughter slaughter laughter. Letters launched into space rush one child to the next, more or less at large, acting wolves and tigers, colliding with landowners (by subterfuge). (*FS*, 10)

Poetic speech is impelled by the apparent happenstance of linguistic similitudes. The movements of Howe and her sister are reconceived as lexical wandering: changing a letter within a word directs thought—and the child’s mind—down avenues as distinct as “daughter” and “slaughter.” For Howe, who as a girl played Astyanax in *Trojan Women*, the conjunction is not random.¹⁸ Howe’s method in this preface is to use punning as a kind of forced coincidence, an intervention in the arrangement of accidentals. Punning is a moment that allows language to get the upper hand, but it is also something that Howe forces through her exploitation of such contiguities.

The wandering attention of Howe’s prose in her *Frame Structures* preface draws “lines of association” between her childhood and the lives of relatives and ancestors and literary and political history (in this I am adapting a phrase used by Marjorie Perloff in her discussion of *Frame Structures*: “the text’s war space is crisscrossed by ‘life-lines,’ lines of descent, connection, and association”).¹⁹ Howe’s polemical forcing of circumstances verges on a literary fantasy of omnipotence, as if she were ascribing to her linguistic resources magical powers to force the world to do her bidding. Yet for Howe inside and outside, private and public interpenetrate. Her omnipotence, a childhood delusion recalled in a memoir of childhood, continually flips into its opposite—determination by the public medium of language—as “Letters launched into space rush one child to the next” (*FS*, 10).

An exemplary forced coincidence colors the account given of Howe’s American family history. Her paternal grandfather’s “immediate family constellation” was based in a large farmhouse named Weetamoe by the sea in Bristol, Massachusetts. When Howe was researching her essay on Mary Rowlandson, who was taken captive by Native Americans during King Philip’s War (1675–77), she “ran across” the figure of Weetamoo, Queen of Pocasset and sister-in-law to King Philip (or Metacomet).²⁰ Weetamoo was eventually drowned while escaping the “Christian soldiers,” and her body was washed up on land that became part of the DeWolfe Howe farm (*FS*, 21–22). The family’s background is thus linked, in a near admission of guilt by association, by the word Weetamoe to the near destruction of the Native Americans in early American history.

What do these similitudes amount to? How can Howe, at the end of the twentieth century, not the nineteenth, write, “Telepsychology. We have

always been in contact with one another" (*FS*, 25)? She does not make it clear whether such assertions are merely part of a polemical expression of the force of poetic language, or whether they amount to a genuine conviction that, for example, Weetamoo's death, mediated by Weetamoe, implicates Howe by linguistic and actual genealogy in America's colonial past. Is her method, in other words, a self-aware arrogation of magical powers to the poet (who knows this to be a device) or the expression of a belief in an unconscious of language from which word-constellations—Weetamoo/ Weetamoe, daughter/ slaughter—erupt as symptoms indicative of trauma? Once again, the flow of determination appears to run in both directions.

Howe's opening account of the polar bears in Delaware Park, entitled "Flanders," is answered by the closing section of the preface, "Flinders": "The brute force is Buffalo because of its position as a way station whose primary function is the movement of goods from east to west and vice versa in dark reaches before soldiers come foraging. Close by lies a great forest approaching Modernism my early poems project aggression" (*FS*, 29).

The departure of Howe's father to war is a personal loss that marked the intrusion of what Howe calls the "geopolitical chain of violence" on Howe's early life.²¹ Buffalo (where Howe taught for many years at SUNY) comes to represent a brutalized and exploited nature, encircled, like the early New England settlements, by 'wilderness'. It is this wilderness, under the sign of "Modernism," that Howe claims her poems begin to explore. The preface to *Frame Structures*, although intended to serve as an introduction to her 1970s poems, might serve as an introduction to the major long poems surveyed in this book. Punning, telepathy, and the question of a writer's relation to her words and those of others are themes that occur throughout the work. "Lexical drift" as a means of accommodating history within poetry is a fundamental characteristic of Howe's ambitions. The poems of the 1980s and 1990s are inhabited by the voices of the dead and by ghostly representations of authority such as Joseph Ellicott, the founder of Buffalo, whom she compares in her preface to *Frame Structures* to Hamlet's father (*FS*, 29). Howe's allusion to the dead Weetamoo and, toward the end of the preface, to Ophelia, form part of a meditation on the relation between gender and literary form that extends throughout her writing career.

In "Leaves," as we have seen, Howe cites Creon's words to Antigone before he orders her to be buried alive: "Go to the dead and love them." In her writing, Howe often implicitly assumes a destiny akin to that of Antigone (who explicitly features in the late 1990s poem "Rückenfigur"), consigned to a place from which speech is impossible. The corpse of Antigone's brother

Polynices is torn apart by wild dogs. Howe seeks to achieve through the presentation of such brokenness a kind of coherence. The image in “Leaves” of “Rachel weeping for her children” (“Leaves,” 11) communicates a distress at violence which fills the poetry with death, mourning and dispossession. Nonetheless, Howe remains committed to the transformative estrangements of the reading experience.

* * *

This book aims to be a comprehensive survey of Howe’s poetry. However, given the breadth of the oeuvre and the need for extended discussion of core texts, the book necessarily brings its own exclusions. I have reluctantly decided not to give close attention to the early poems collected in *Frame Structures: Hinge Picture, Chanting at the Crystal Sea, Cabbage Gardens, and Secret History of the Dividing Line*.²² I exclude three brief poems from detailed discussion: “Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk,” “Silence Wager Stories,” and “Kidnapped” (collected in *Singularities, The Nonconformist’s Memorial* and *The Midnight* respectively).²³ Although these poems are significant works in their own right, my book is oriented toward the larger historical and formal ambitions evident in the longer poems. Of Howe’s recent collection *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, I discuss at length only its longest and most substantial poem, the title poem. Another exclusion is a very early work, an ‘Irish’ poem that Howe has chosen not to republish: *The Western Borders* (1976).²⁴ In this case, detailed discussion of the poem would not have added to the treatment of Ireland I give elsewhere.

My argument proceeds thematically. These themes only sometimes (as in chapters 3 and 4) coincide with the organization of poems in Howe’s books. I begin with chapter-long discussions of the poetry’s maternal and paternal axes, which structure the writing’s relationship to tropes of displacement and authority in numerous ways. I then discuss the mechanisms of metamorphosis that Howe explores in the 1980s work that anchors itself in the Renaissance imagination. My fourth chapter examines the meeting of Europe and America in her *Singularities* poems, particularly as registered in issues of language and landscape. I then discuss the linked themes of telepathy and enthusiasm, particularly as these affect the relationship between print and manuscripts. My final chapter discusses the category of lyric in Howe’s recent work.

This book is often informed, explicitly and implicitly, by Howe’s extraordinary critical writing, though it sometimes takes issue with some of her positions. *My Emily Dickinson* and *Birth-mark*, following in the wake of Williams’s *In the American Grain* and Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael*, are unusual

and provocative books, deliberately placing themselves to one side of conventional academic prose. Indeed, many of the texts gathered in *Birth-mark* can be read as provocative cross-genre collages that embrace poetry, historical enquiry, polemical literary criticism, and textual scholarship. However, my book is specifically oriented toward a discussion of poetic speech. Howe's critical writing, even where it questions the nature and status of such writing, makes itself felt as a background presence, rather than as the focus of a particular chapter. Howe's use of prose in her poems is discussed in my accounts of *Therow*, *Melville's Marginalia*, and *The Midnight*. For extended treatment of Howe's critical work, the reader is referred to Stephen Collis's *Through Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism*, in which a useful discussion of power and freedom is conducted.

I cite from the extant editions of Howe's work. For example, I discuss *Pythagorean Silence*, *Defenestration of Prague*, and *The Liberties*, first published in small press editions in 1982, 1983, and 1980 respectively, in the versions in which they appear in the current reprint of 1990's *The Europe of Trusts*, rather than the original small-press editions in which they appeared. Similarly, I discuss *The Midnight*, rather than the earlier book versions of the texts published by Granary Books and the Coracle Press. Although in some cases—the visual material in the Kulchur Foundation edition of *The Liberties*, for example—there is much to be gained in discussion of the small-press editions, I have sought to discuss works that are available to a wide readership. It seems likely that future editions (and related critical discussion) will follow the versions of the texts in the current New Directions and Wesleyan editions.

It is worth noting, however, that in some cases early, small-press editions of the poems are superior in one way or another. The Awede edition of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, for example, gives much more page space to the poetry (although it lacks most of the later version's prefatory prose section, "The Falls Fight"). Howe is extremely interested in the book as physical artifact, and this dimension of the work is often better appreciated in the less condensed small press versions. However, although the material dimensions of Howe's work has received useful discussion in the writing of Michael Davidson and others, my book is principally concerned with the conceptual arena of Howe's poetry and poetics.

A Note on Referencing

I have italicized both the titles of books by Susan Howe and the titles of individual long poems (as many of these have seen separate publication in book form).

When giving references to works by Howe I have either shortened titles to one or two significant words (*Articulation* for *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, for example) or used the following abbreviations:

FS—“Preface: Frame Structures”

PS—Pythagorean Silence

MED—My Emily Dickinson

NCM—*The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (i.e., the poem, not the collection of the same title)

MM—Melville’s *Marginalia*

P-A—*Pierce-Arrow*

TM—*The Midnight*

SLT—*Souls of the Labadie Tract*

For purposes of referencing, I have treated the books up to and including *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* as collections of discrete poems, each referenced by title (*Defenestration*, 12, for example). References to *Pierce-Arrow*, *The Midnight* and *Souls of the Labadie Tract* point the reader to the book rather than to the particular poem (*TM*, 12, for example). References to texts by Howe are given parenthetically in the main text, as are many of my references to key interviews. I have, as indicated in my introduction, used the editions published by New Directions and Wesleyan.

When citing Howe’s interviews and dialogues with other writers, rather than reproduce the titles under which they were published, I have generally used the name of the interlocutor: “Keller interview,” for example.

Unless otherwise stated, all italicized emphases within quotations derive from the source citation.

I have referred to the Alexander text of Shakespeare and the Authorized Version of the Bible.

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