

Resurrecting Absence

*Susan Howe's A Bibliography of the
King's Book Or, Eikon Basilike and the
Historically Unspoken*

JESSICA WILKINSON

Perception of an object means loosing and losing it. Quests end in failure, no victory and sham questor. One answer undoes another and fiction is real. Trust absence, allegory, mystery. The setting not the rising sun is Beauty.

Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*¹

The author of the *Eikon Basilike* believed that it was 'far better to hold to primitive and uniform Antiquity, than to comply with divided novelty'.² Whilst such a statement was aimed towards persuading its readers to remain faithful servants to the crown during a moment of serious monarchical review, it is nevertheless an interesting contention to reconsider in the current moment, when writers across the genres are promoting innovative studies of literary history. Susan Howe is one such writer and, as we shall see in this essay, she proves such opinions contained within the *Eikon Basilike* to be decidedly unfashionable. Those acquainted with Howe's work will recognise not only her evocative visual and verbal landscapes composed on the canvas of her page, but furthermore, her enthusiasm for leading the reader by a thread through the forgotten, marginalised or controversial spaces where dissenting voices linger. Howe's apparent reverence for what is 'not present'—absence, allegory, mystery—is important to her historical mindset as she probes the blanks, gaps and obscurities of textual and historical representation for new mechanisms through which to construct a literary history pertaining to the contemporary moment.

This essay has been inspired not only by my ongoing fascination with Howe's writings, but also by the obvious and enduring interest in, and curiosity towards, the circumstances of King Charles the First's strange 'tyrannical martyrdom' and his evocative posthumous

publication. In 2006, whilst browsing the shelves of a small Toronto bookstore, I stumbled across a newly published Broadview edition of the *Eikon Basilike*. This new text demonstrates that these centuries-old meditations, which so profoundly affected their readers in the wake of the King's execution, continue to arouse the interests of the modern reader. The list of 'contemporary responses' to the King's Book that this edition includes is, not surprisingly, void of a mention of Susan Howe's radical poetic response, composed almost two decades ago. In this particular work, Howe appropriates the 'bibliography' as a device through which to explore the conflicts between fiction and fact, image and text, presence and absence, which permeate contemporary theoretical conceptions of historical writing. However, departing from traditional bibliographical practices (which privilege chronology, objectivity and accuracy of documentation), Howe's radical work challenges the limits of convention both structurally and thematically, and lays the foundations for new historical methodologies. Through such experimental procedures as physically overlapping or rotating words and phrases, or combining 'borrowed' text with her own expressions, Howe's textual 'voices' compete for authority and the reader's attention as they unsettle the reader's understanding of authentic and objective writing. Through close textual and ideological analysis of Howe's work, this essay contemplates innovative methods for conceiving literary history *beyond* the confines of canonical narratives.

— WHAT IS THE ΕΙΚΩΝ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΚΗ?

Subtitled *The Pourtraicture of His Sacred Majestie in his Solitude and Sufferings*, the 'King's Book' was published shortly after Charles the First's public execution for treason in 1649. It was supposedly written by Charles as he awaited his fate in prison and contains the King's prayers and meditations, along with his justification of Royalism in the wake of the Civil War that led to his downfall. The popularity of the text reflected badly on the government that had condemned the King, and although there were attempts to quash its publication, at least thirty-five editions were produced in its first year. Printers churned out new editions under the threat of prosecution, fragments were appended or unpopular sections were subtracted, and the text was also translated into several different languages. Such changes added fuel to the debates that soon ensued, for at the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, John Gauden—Bishop of Worcester—claimed authorship, thus giving rise to the 'Authorship Controversy' and the question of textual origins.³

It is not surprising that several bibliographies have been produced over the years in order to contain and catalogue such an impressive and extensive number of texts. Early compilations by Samuel Keble (1693) and William Ames (1756) were succeeded by Edward Almack's 1896 text, described by Francis Madan as 'a tribute to the memory of the King, whose sole authorship of the *Eikon* [Almack] regards as established beyond a doubt'.⁴ Madan

concedes that it should be valued as a pioneer in the field rather than by the standards of a modern bibliography, of which it falls short.⁵ He writes this in his own version (*A New Bibliography of the Eikon Basilike*, 1950) which is less inclined to support the King's sole authorship of the *Eikon Basilike*. Susan Howe tells us that, whilst *A New Bibliography* is still on the shelves of the Stirling Memorial Library, her son found a copy of Almack's text for sale on that same library's 'useless book' pile.⁶

In 1989, Howe published her own antiquarian project, lifting the title directly from that of Almack's bibliography.⁷ In the first edition of Howe's poetic text, she literally *crosses out* Almack's name on his original title page, and prints her own beneath it, re-claiming, reviving and appropriating her primary source text (see figure 1). It is interesting that Howe's attention is focused on this earlier and now redundant work—with the outdated 'record of a record', in which the 'vexed question of authorship [keeps] intruding itself' (NCM, 50). Howe is also preoccupied with authorship, textual 'purity' and original intent, and yet the composite features of her poetic landscapes interrogate the authority of historical documents, including the bibliography and its deceptively objective stance. The search for authenticity (the authentic king; the original text) is compounded by the fact that the King (whose penchant for performance generated a complex and image-full character in itself) is now dead and his 'voice' cannot be recovered. The many different versions of his *Eikon Basilike* have moreover dispersed this voice, and attempts to recover the 'Royal Image' through bibliographical documenting and recording has only further complicated the search. Howe recognises that the King (a ghost) has not only been shaped by his own text, but by many texts across the ages: each act of remembrance (historical, literary, illustrative or poetic) creates a new and exclusive image. It is at this point that Howe intervenes: she asks 'Is [the bibliographer] supposed to compile a set of authoritative texts that can withstand the charge of forgery, the test of time, the timeliness of libraries?' (NCM, 49). Exploiting the idea of the bibliography as a 'history of a text', Howe's antiquarian composition variously explores the history of the 'King as a text'—a text so multifaceted and problematic that Charles himself seems to have been lost in time. Howe interrupts the bibliographer's project, reasserting the central position of the *absent King*, and exploring this predicament through word and image, the act of reading, and performance. Whilst Howe's *Bibliography* has been variously explored as a radical visual work, resisting the authority of Western literary traditions; as a feminist project addressing the instability of patriarchal narratives; and also in terms of its manifestation as an example of appropriative writing, this essay addresses some of the challenges that Howe sets forth for 'Contemporary History'.⁸ I will specifically contemplate the multi-faceted phenomenon of the *performance* in this work, and how this concept both collaborates with and interrogates the tensions at the core of the *Eikon Basilike's* authorship controversy, and thus investigates the mystery of the King's image.

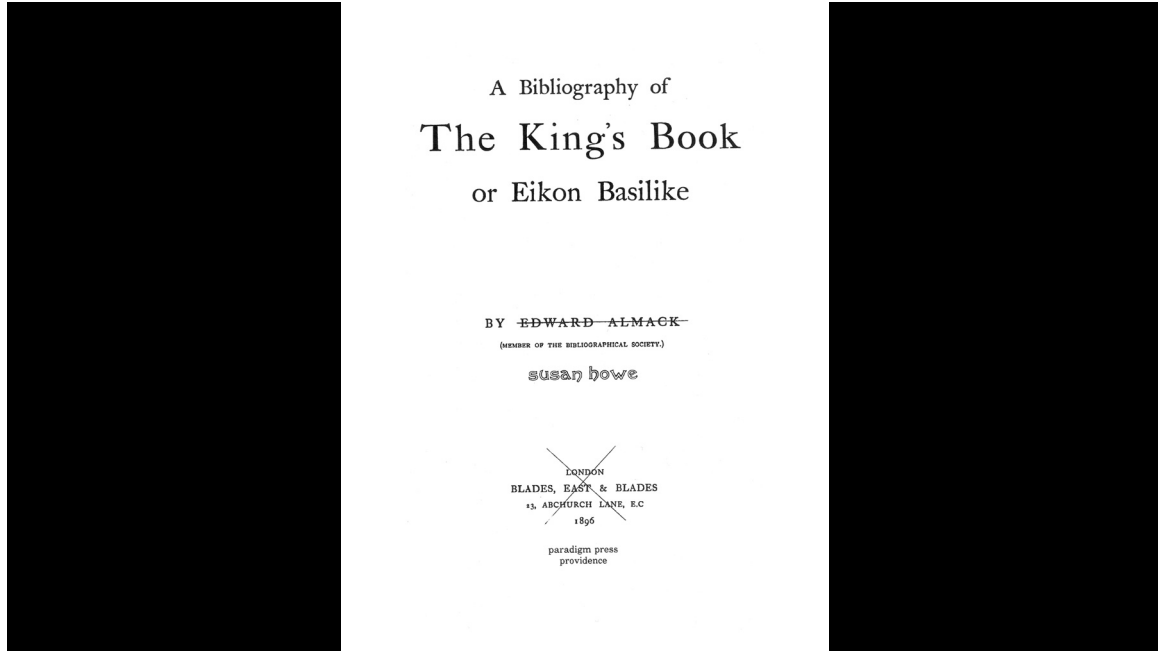


Figure 1: Title page of *A Bibliography of The King's Book Or, Eikon Basilike* by Susan Howe, Paradigm Press, Providence, 1989, copyright © 1989 by Susan Howe. Reprinted by permission of Paradigm Press and Susan Howe.

Arguably one of Howe's most interesting and significant works, *A Bibliography of the King's Book, Or Eikon Basilike* continues to stimulate all cravings for visual, textual, historical and poetic substance. Her willful poetic 'misreading' of Edward Almack's bibliographical project consistently disrupts conventional narrative techniques,

drawing attention to the presence of the words on the page, to the absences that are intrinsic to both visual and verbal representation, and to the paradoxes of Howe's poetic-historical mindset. A significant proportion of her *Bibliography* is constituted by fragments borrowed from a broad range of historical, literary and fictional sources: sections relating to the authorship controversy of the *Eikon Basilike*, literary excerpts from Thomas More, Milton and Dickens, portions of King Charles's tribunal, allusions to the myth of Theseus, Ariadne and the Labyrinth, and an account of the King's last words on the scaffold prior to his beheading. Megan Simpson contends that Howe's fascination with these historical and literary documents demonstrates her 'positivist belief that historical "voices" are somehow really there to be recovered' through material fragments.⁹

However, true to her paradoxical style, Howe also contributes her own unique poetic voice and visual stratagems to the authorship controversy, often scattering evocative words and phrases across the pages, or ‘cross-hatching’ appropriated documents with unconventionally arranged fragments. As Linda Hutcheon points out in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, ‘postmodern’ conflates two enunciative systems: historical and discursive.¹⁰ Correspondingly, Howe destabilises hierarchies of historical authority, illuminating ‘history’ not only as a negotiation between the events of the past and the documents that record them, but also as a product of social and discursive context. Thus, her combination of what we might term factual, historical records with literary fiction and creative composition shows her understanding of the ‘postmodern’ temperament—her work is a pastiche of styles and genres that appoints no specific epistemological or formal hierarchies for telling or recording history. In accordance with historiographic metafiction, Howe might agree with Hutcheon that ‘both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity’.¹¹ As she deconstructs historical and fictive boundaries, Howe’s simultaneous amalgamation of visual and verbal artworks collapses the boundaries separating artistic disciplines and genres, and enacts an innovative and multiperspectival investigation of the controversy of the *Eikon Basilike*.¹² In the following section I begin to address the intriguing manner in which Howe draws parallels between the performance of her texts and the multiple ‘images’ of the King which, manifested and regarded in his absence, are textual performances in themselves.

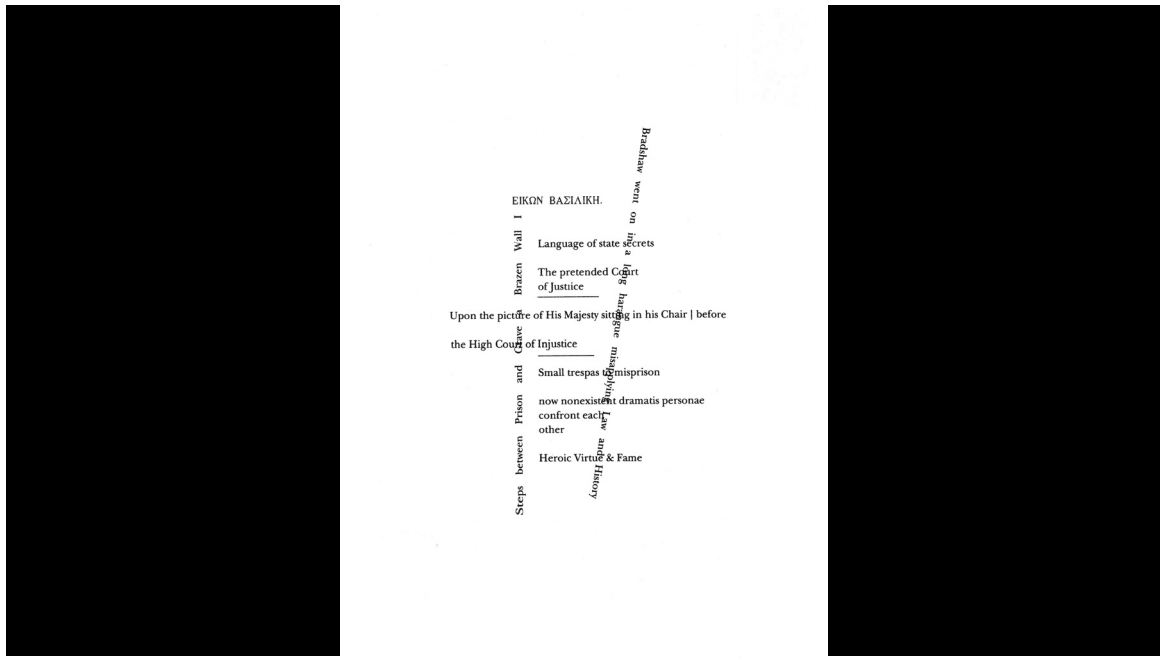
— GRAPHIC IMAGES/GRAPHIC VERBS: RECONFIGURING LITERARY HISTORY

A fortuitous circumstance for Howe’s poetic performance here is the fact that King Charles was known for his ‘acting’. Andrew Lacey states that the principles enacted by Charles *theatrically* were considered to be ‘at one’ with his true character and personality—he lived his life through the image.¹³ The ‘reality’ of Charles, for example, is ridiculed and questioned when he is noted by Milton, in *Eikonoklastes*, as having recited a prayer, similar to that uttered by Princess Pamela in Sidney’s fictional *Arcadia*, on the scaffold prior to his beheading. Charles was also a keen thespian and fan of Shakespeare, and is recorded as ‘performing’ his execution like the Ghost in *Hamlet*; his final word ‘Remember’ is compared by Howe to ‘the fictive Ghost-king’s admonition to his son’ (NCM, 48). The King was a connoisseur of visual art and commissioned the shaping of his own image in many painted portraits. Furthermore, Charles’s execution, martyrdom and passive suffering have often been compared to the Passion of Christ.¹⁴ With this proliferation of simulations—‘in those copies are copies’ (NCM, 80)—the inseparability of reality from fiction, especially in the wake of an irrecoverable dead king, renders his ‘presence’ problematic, and his predicament summons the notion that his cause (and by extension, ours) is acted out on the theatrical stage of life.

Influenced by her experience as an assistant to the stage designer at the Gate Theatre in Dublin during the 1950s, Susan Howe picks up on Charles's thespian leanings by utilising the space of the page as a performance field. 'To me the stage was the page itself', she said in a recent interview with Jon Thompson. 'When revising and arranging I judge and shift and move lines in the same way a director might plan actors' moves on stage during rehearsal.'¹⁵ The positioning of actors as they move and speak on a stage conveys an important message to the audience, whether it be in terms of the verbal and bodily interaction between different characters, or the poignance of a particular scene and how this is conveyed by the director. Howe transposes these concepts to the page, and assigns her material fragments a symbolic and performative purpose.

The full-page excerpt from Howe's *Bibliography* below (figure 2) is remarkable in terms of its visual iconography and the ideas that are cleverly performed through the material/textual image.¹⁶ This page—perhaps confusing the boundaries between the King's Book and Milton's response in *Eikonoklastes*—is at once iconic and iconoclastic: it shapes an image (perhaps even of the Crucifixion) that allegorically aligns itself with verbal and visual representations of Charles, whilst simultaneously underscoring the incommensurable rift between image and text and, furthermore, questioning the relationship between the real King and his many images.

The crossed phrases here establish a rift at the most basic level—that between the physical 'line' and the abstract concept of the 'letter'. This is a matter discussed at length by Lyotard, who ascertains an opposition between letter and line, reading (textual) and seeing (figural). He then deconstructs the schism in order to promote 'the figurality at work in representation'.¹⁷ The line is purely *seen*, not read, functioning by 'an appeal to corporeal resonance rather than to the code'; the letter is 'transparently decodable, existing purely in the virtual space of the code or system'.¹⁸ Howe's work demonstrates both the friction between, and the coexistence of, line and letter in the way that she physically and metaphorically uses techniques of illegibility. The cross-over of 'Bradshaw went on in a long harangue misapplying Law and History' with several 'upright' phrases draws attention not only to the physicality of the sentence, 'slicing' through the others, but also to the individual letters, which black each other out. The 'a' and 'n' of *harangue* cross the 'i' and 'n' of *sitting*, and were it not for our knowledge of the English language it would be difficult to discern the correct spelling of either. Similarly with 'Court' and 'Grave' to the left,¹⁹ this junction performs the 'unreadability' of the figural, whilst our discerning of the letters performs the role of the signifier in discourse. Where prosodic narrative histories designate chronological order and distinct dialogue, Howe 'lie[s] outside the house' of convention (NCM, 61) in order to raise a sense of the overlapping voices, versions and corruptions of the texts surrounding the *Eikon* controversy.²⁰ These intersecting lines also suggest the way in which discourse articulates



body, and vice versa. Like actors on a stage, the physical trajectories of the material phrases, which move and shift as we skim our eyes across the page, draws the verbal elements into a peculiar relationship with their spatial and visual counterparts.

Note also the misspelling of 'Justice'—'Justice'.²¹ The extra 'j', without the dot, is a decapitated 'i'—and by extension, a decapitated *self* or *I*. Charles was executed before his supposedly final writings (*Eikon Basilike*) were published, and it was never established whether or not the text was his work alone (or indeed, written by Charles at all). Also, the King's authorial intentions and thoughts—not to forget his head!—are separated from (and therefore in irreconcilable tension with) the physical, material body of the King at his execution and his inscription in history and the *Eikon Basilike*. The 'j' is a material signifier—a visual marker—of an absent 'head' or organising centre. The King, and the supposedly resistant order he signifies as a representative of God, is killed. The centre is thus a fiction—the 'j' is a disfigured remnant that visually articulates a textual and literal absence which stands in close and deceptive proximity to the fully present 'i'. Howe alerts us to the fact that Charles's presence is irrelevant to the bibliography of the King's Book. She takes the proliferation of material, tangible texts surrounding the King as her subject, whilst Charles remains merely the absent 'pivot' around which these narratives spin. He is a 'now nonexistent dramatis personae'. Thus, when Howe succinctly suggests that '[t]he *Eikon Basilike* is a forgery' (NCM, 47), she may be suggesting

Figure 2: Susan Howe, 'A Bibliography of the King's Book or, Eikon Basilike' (1989) in *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, New Directions, New York, 1993, p. 54. Copyright © 1993 by Susan Howe. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

that there is no king to resurrect: the 'king's image' is based on an absence, and subsequent shapings merely articulate a displaced centre that gives authoritative power to the text, but yet remains perpetually elusive.

Howe's *Bibliography* uses the material presence of the written word—its malleable properties on the page/canvas—to rearticulate the connections between figure and discourse, word and image, seeable and sayable, body and mind. The metaphorical implications of her works are thus performed through visual gestures as she encourages us to consider the intersection, or point of division, between the 'real' King and his many representations in visual and verbal texts, history and fiction. The necessary rift between textual and visual aspects—interminably coexistent but never co-present—means that the visual elements gesture towards consequences that are lost to language, and vice versa. Howe appreciates the 'bibliography' as a container for these many shapings of the King, and one which must necessarily move with time as new representations are forged and created. This complement to the traditionally 'transparent' textual narratives of history-writing brings Howe's bibliography into the contemporary moment, where political and social shifts demand a re-imagining of historiographical landscapes—a new language that enacts a break from the prosodic, chronological methods of the past, and the authoritative ideologies they conveyed. As Peter Nicholls suggests, Howe uses the poetic medium as 'a means by which to reactivate a "history" long since atrophied under the dead hand of the academy'.²² In 'resist[ing] successful assimilation to the order of discourse', Howe rejects the confines of a unified, singular history.²³ Working against the grain of identifying 'facts' and 'accuracies', Howe enacts a process of resurrecting the violence of the events of the past which prose and chronology have struggled to capture. In a beautiful summation of this work, Howe states that

In the 'Eikon Basilike', the sections that are all vertically jagged are based around the violence of the execution of Charles I, the violence of history, the violence of that particular event, and also then the stage drama of it. It was a trial, but the scene of his execution was also a performance; he acted his own death. There's no way to express that in just words in ordinary fashion on the page. So I would try to match that chaos and violence visually with words.²⁴

Words are used by the poet as tools, material devices, props, actors. They perform as the King performed, promoting ocular movement and activity from the reader. It is interesting that the conventionally 'upright' phrases of figure 2 are (almost) enclosed by two deviant margins on either side. In this way, we see yet another iconic image—a coffin or grave that attempts to confine Charles's physical body. The upright text is immediately severed and confined within verbalised margins, creating an awareness of the processes of exclusion and forgetting involved in the writing of history. Howe states that 'the execution of Charles was a primal sin in the eyes of the Puritans who killed him. They tried to bury their guilt.'²⁵

However, rather than ‘closing the lid’ on this regicide, Howe in effect re-stages the burial, and simultaneously splits the coffin open, resurrecting the King’s image as a composite of ‘dramatis personae’ that trickle outside of the boundaries designated by traditional histories.

On this note, it is interesting to examine the simple juxtaposition of the ‘I’ with the ‘ΕΙΚΩΝ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΚΗ’. The iconographic and semiotic metaphors here consider the point of collision between Charles and the image or ‘translation’ of the King. The phrase ‘Steps between Prison and Grave a Brazen Wall I’ running vertically from the bottom of the page to the top halts at ‘ΕΙΚΩΝ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΚΗ’. The abrupt meeting of the ‘I’ with the homophonically similar ‘EI’ suggests that the ‘I’ stops short of the icon, or ‘image’, hitting the ‘Brazen Wall’, and insinuating that Charles the First (also represented by the roman numeral ‘I’) stops at the point where the *Eikon* begins: the King disappears at the instance of his decapitation, and his consequent representation in history as a martyr, an icon, a text of questionable authenticity. The *I* dissolves into the image brazenly, shamelessly, boldly, at which point the *Eikon* takes over, more real than real. The projected images of the King tend to take precedence over the real Charles.

Lacey believes that, in the seventeenth century,

platonian virtues could be made real in the kingdom by their recreation in the masque; thus ‘image’ and ‘reality’ are fused together and made real through the ritual of the masque and the dance.²⁶

Perhaps, then, Howe is not so concerned with locating the original *voice* of the King, but rather, with the way in which ‘reality’ is now fictionally or textually constituted. Where Lacey suggests that the seventeenth-century audience believed in the equation of image and reality, Howe writes from a twentieth-century perspective, acknowledging that universal ‘truths’ are ultimately inaccessible, but that any attempt to approach them necessarily involves textual mechanisms. In what appears to be at first a contradictory remark, Howe states

I think there is a truth, even if it’s not fashionable to say so anymore ... I believe there are stories that need to be told again differently ... whatever that story is, whether you call it fact or fiction, or an original version, it’s something real.²⁷

In this statement, this ‘real’ body is both *actual* and *textual* (story, fact, fiction, original version). In drawing attention to the textuality of historical accounts (and the interconnectedness of truth and fiction) Howe demystifies the grounds which give stability to authoritative narratives, and attempts to reconcile the many spaces that give ‘body’ to the King’s image. In the contemporary moment, the seemingly conservative message of the *Eikon Basilike* is displaced by its multi-vocality, and the King’s image as a manifold composition of voices, visuals and histories. Blanchot aptly states that ‘[t]he mind wants to fulfill itself in a single work,

instead of realizing itself in an infinity of works and in history's ongoing movement'.²⁸ The King can be re-read through this lens—he not only shaped his own visual and textual images for public consumption, but his body is also undergoing a continual reinscription within fiction, history and poetic discourse. In deconstructing the boundaries that designate the content of an authoritative text, Howe provides a space in and through which the ghost may wander without restraint—he may 'walk about again and again' (NCM, 47).

In so positioning her 'characters' on this page/stage, Howe enacts a rehearsed performance in which the body of the text (the arrangement of words, the physical trajectories of lines) silently interacts with, and challenges, the discursive and vocal aspects of the text. In so doing, her visual, verbal and performative gestures generate spaces for individual interpretation and recognition, and are able to communicate, *without* overt representation, the violence of this moment in history. What we must also consider, however, is the importance of the reader as the *catalyst* for these graphic verbal relations. It might further be suggested that, as the visual and verbal aspects are read, decoded and evaluated, the reader-interpreter necessarily sits at the inarticulated 'pivot' between mind and body, signifier and signified, sign and referent, bringing the *materiality of the text* into a complicated relationship with *meaning as embodiment*. As a liminal figure, existing on the outskirts of 'presence', the reader is analogous to the King, but his/her relationship with the text involves a more active engagement with the negotiation between presence and absence as the text unravels. (These ideas are accentuated in figure 3, explored below).

— THE ACT OF READING

It's about the impossibility of putting in print what the mind really sees.

Susan Howe²⁹

Linda Hutcheon contends that

[h]istorical statements, be they in historiography or realist fiction, tend to suppress grammatical reference to the discursive situation of the utterance (producer, receiver, context, intent) in their attempt to narrate past events in such a way that the events seem to narrate themselves.³⁰

Howe reacts against this tendency. It is her unique use of the page—her spatial dynamics, foregrounding of grammatical divergences, and revivification of antiquated language and discourse—that accentuates the instabilities of the text, and summons the *performative* aspect of this work as an event in space and time. Inverting the old semiotic, epistemological and hierarchical values, Howe's radical compositions are an attempt to 'break open' old documents so that new and multiple understandings of historical events and characters may be

revealed. In this section I look further at Howe's manipulation of the *act of reading*, and the way in which the text is dependent upon the reader's 'absent presence' (or 'present absence') for it to attain significance. This role, though similar to the King's character in appellation, and to Howe's position as bibliographer, entails a more active responsibility.

In figure 3 below, Howe dissects and displaces fragments from canonical accounts of King Charles' trial and execution and litters them across the page/stage in a denaturalised environment. These poetic fragments also become 'free-floating' in this context, and do not necessarily point to a specific, solitary meaning. The reading process is therefore confounded both visually and verbally, and refutes complete and unified intelligibility. Howe's smashing of canonical, 'factual' accounts of the King's imprisonment and execution into fragments enacts a textual 'regicide' of its own, refuting the notion that truth appears as, or can be organised in relation to, a single point of view. In this way, Howe not only encourages multiple perspectives and voices, but also asserts the importance of the reading process to the dissemination of historical texts.³¹ In physically layering these texts, she also proposes the destabilisation of the singular, authoritative historical narrative, and accentuates the difficulties encountered by the historian/antiquarian as she tries to locate the 'pure text' representing the King. But what I find to be most interesting with these particular pages is the way in which Howe's artistic methods conflate writing and reading practices, and furthermore, encourage the reader to participate in the 'activity of the search' presented by the page:

I write the way I read. I wouldn't want the reader to be just a passive consumer. I would want my readers to play, to enter the mystery of language, and to follow words where they lead, to let language lead them.³²

Howe promotes an active audience, who—particularly on these iconoclastic pages—must necessarily reciprocate these selfsame methods of reading (and therefore creating) the performance of the text. Like the King's images, her works are therefore not static and contained, but rather shifting, elusive and multiple, and they encourage us to rethink the *systems* that create and contain our assumed historical 'facts'. It is important, however, to remember that these characteristics are enabled by the *reader* who, in entering 'the mystery of language', will negotiate between image and text, figure and discourse, corporeal and incorporeal, body and mind; thus 'mobilising' this bibliographical account in innovative ways.

The importance of the reader's contribution to the production of Howe's texts is noted by James McCorkle, who suggests that 'part of her work's significance (its signifying value) is the need for the reader to participate in the signifying process'.³³ This is exemplified with the entanglement of phrases in figure 3—two pages that are identical, rotated versions of one another. These mirrored creations of scattered, shattered and criss-crossed words disrupt traditional reading practices, slowing down the reader's perceptions of the text and

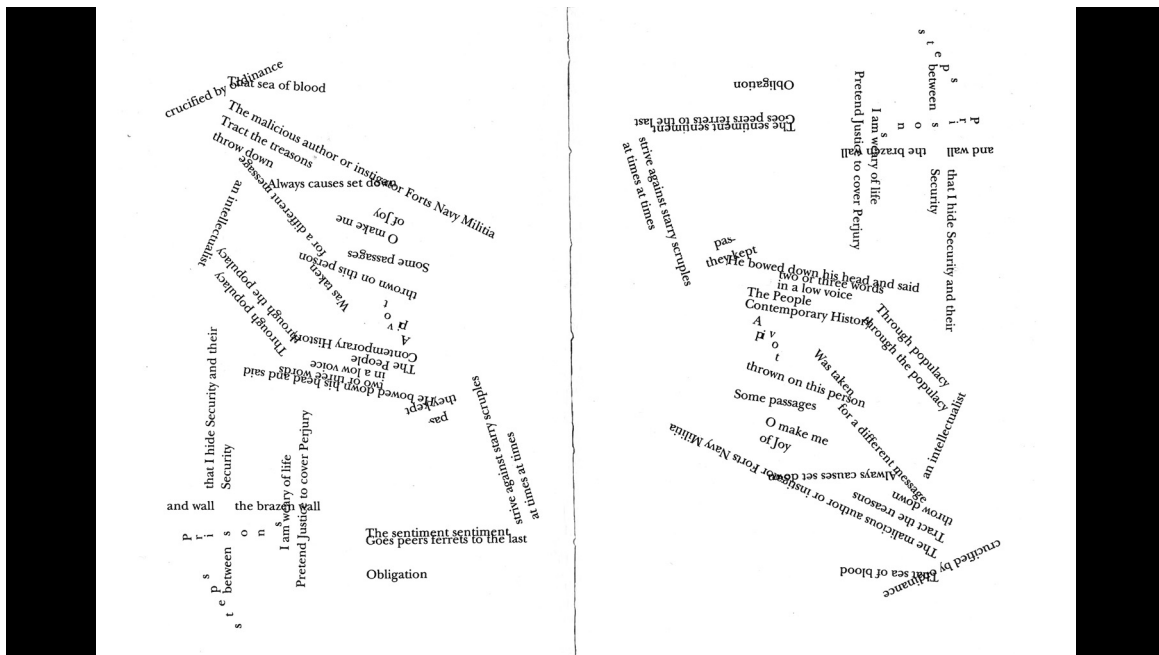


Figure 3: Susan Howe, 'A Bibliography of the King's Book or, Eikon Basilike' (1989) in *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, New Directions, New York, 1993, pp. 56–7. Copyright © 1993 by Susan Howe. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

encouraging him/her to perform (act out, negotiate) the chronology of events/words through the act of reading. It is true that an author's particular arrangement of, or emphasis upon, certain events will influence interpretation to a significant degree, and Howe exemplifies this: for example, on the left hand page

we may begin reading 'crucified by ordinance'—promoting an image of the King as Christ-like (martyr)—whereas the right hand page (depicting the same set of 'events') may draw our attention towards the deviant 'Obligation' on the top left-hand side of the page (printed upside down), which may allude to the King's treasonous behaviour. This mere rotation demonstrates that different perspectives produce 'similar but not identical' narrative emphases. However, on pages such as these, where phrases are printed at all angles and subvert predictable reading patterns, Howe tips the balance of responsibility from the context of the writing towards the context of the reading, implicating the reader in the process of signification. Beyond the first few fragments, the reader cannot proceed according to conventional reading strategies—down the page from top left to bottom right—but must select one unit at a time.³⁴ Figure 3 foregrounds that it is neither the King nor the author who wholly

controls the navigation of our voyage, but the *reader* who is put in charge of 'directing' the possibilities of Howe's work, and who necessarily brings to the text his/her own context of reading.

In reference to the work of Lyotard, Bill Readings suggests that reading is 'neither on the inside (interpretation) nor the outside (theory) of a text as a body: it disrupts the stable boundaries that might establish the text as body'.³⁵ The above section from Howe's *Bibliography* accentuates this idea—the 'reading' is situated between perception (looking at the image) and conception (comprehending the words and the ideas they convey). The reader must negotiate and navigate between the materiality of the text (which is structurally complicated) and meaning as embodiment (which is ideologically complicated), between the 'body of the text' and the 'text as body'. As the reader sorts through this material, his/her pivotal role in organising the events on the page is necessary for the propagation of the ideas within the text. The reader, as an integral yet textually absent component in the dissemination of poetry and history, is analogous (although very different) to Howe (who must 'erase' herself as bibliographer) and the King (whose absent-presence haunts the authorship controversy).³⁶ They are all '[d]isembodied beyond language' (NCM, 80) as they take up their roles at their respective points of *liminality*. Similar to the King, who 'bowed down his head and said | two or three words | in a low voice' the reader enacts his/her own silent 'performance' in ordering the text, supplementing the pivotal role. But the similarities between the reader and Howe are perhaps more prominent, for both poet and reader here enact their own textual responses, which are in themselves 'a *performance*, a *work*', rather than a paraphrased regurgitation seeking accuracy.³⁷

On this note, Howe's insertion of the word 'pivot' on these pages is particularly unusual. With words printed at all angles and also upside down, our assumed 'natural' patterns of reading are questioned as we turn the book around this central (and physically ruptured) 'pivot', just as the *Eikon* revolves around the physically and figuratively ruptured King. This motion, which enables us to read each phrase more easily, draws attention to the act of reading, and the reader's physical engagement with the material text. However—and this illustrates the common theme of paradox in Howe's work—reading does not necessarily require the 'pivot', for the *repetition* of the page means that one can skip back and forth from verso to recto, discerning on one page what was upside down on the other. The simultaneous possibilities of the *use* and *redundancy* of the pivotal centre in many ways presents the paradox of a postmodern history, which to some extent *relies* on the 'central' histories of the past as a launch-pad from which to 'enact' and *intensify* its decentred perspectives.³⁸ The unsettled pivot here demonstrates its diminished function, as it is revealed to be 'a construct, a fiction, not a fixed and unchangeable reality'.³⁹

As with our various readings of this Royal history, the repetition of the image/s of King Charles the First (both textual and visual) means that we may read and comprehend segments from here and there, left and right, top and bottom, creating a heterogeneous montage of the events surrounding the King. It may be deduced, then, that the canonical 'pivot' (the original text, the original author, the 'real' King) around which this historical account spins, literally and metaphorically confronts redundancy in the face of simulation. In reference to the distinction between a map and a territory, Jean Baudrillard suggests that

it is the difference [between the two] which forms the poetry of the map and the charm of the territory, the magic of the concept and the charm of the real. This representational imaginary [...] disappears with simulation.⁴⁰

In Howe's poetic landscape, the singular 'real' is abandoned for the multiple 'text'. She recognises that the authority of the King's voice, dramatised (and perhaps stifled) in life through image and performance, is further scattered by the endless reproduction of the *Eikon Basilike* and the ensuing controversy. Whilst Howe once suggested that the 'scattering effect' was stronger if the image was reflected on facing pages,⁴¹ this theme of repetition is perhaps more efficient as a heuristic device, promoting the idea of the many 'similar but not identical' images of the King, not to mention the countless printings and reprintings of the *Eikon Basilike*, each offering something slightly different for the enthusiast. The *copy* asserts its importance, challenging 'narrative singularity and unity in the name of multiplicity and disparity'.⁴² Thus, the physical redundancy of the repeated 'pivot' (mentioned above) means that the coexistent figure/s of the King's image interpenetrate as the reader chooses words from left or right pages. The word 'pivot' intensifies our response to Howe's revolution in language, because its unification breaks down. This enables a subsequent proliferation of 'surfaces' as meanings/images present themselves and escape as do whispers, rumours, histories—elements that characterise the elusiveness of the King's text.

This is interesting when considering the differences between 'martyr' and 'tyrant' Charles. Rachel Back draws attention to these mirrored pages as representing these opposing characteristics of the King, with one side being the negative form of the other—martyr versus tyrant.⁴³ This recalls Gilbert Burnet's statement that the King's

serious and Christian deportment [on the scaffold] made all his former errors be quite forgot, and raised a compassionate regard to him, that drew a lasting hatred on the actors [Parliament], and was the true cause of the great turn of the nation in the year 1660.⁴⁴

The audience, suggests Burnet, were persuaded towards compassion for the King at the moment of his execution. We may therefore deduce that the tyrant Charles is thus separated from the martyr Charles by the transitional trough or 'cut' in the middle of the page—

a metaphorical representation of his decapitation and death. This transformation from *tyrant* to *martyr* at the moment of his death—at the point of mind-body separation, when the icon is simultaneously destroyed and created—is instructive in appreciating the way that images can be forged at and by a moment of absence. The binding trough in the middle of the material text, usually ignored by the readers of books, is perhaps where the King has figuratively fallen: ‘King on the binding | 1 blank leaf | The lip of truth’ (NCM, 68). The many ‘performances’ that contain and articulate the King can only be traced to a centre in which the real King has become a mere ghost—an essence held at a distance by representation. I would go further to suggest that these two facing images are inextricably linked and collapsed into the one character, and require that the audience merely regards the king/image from different perspectives. The attempt to produce a coherent, complete reading of the text (and by extension, the King) eventuates in an ironically incoherent, illogical, and multiple reading.

Discussing her *Bibliography*, Howe says that ‘[t]he ghost (the entrance point of a singularity) is the only thing we have’.⁴⁵ Daems and Nelson further suggest that, faced with this ‘kingly absence’, the *Eikon Basilike* ‘served as an incarnational text, for it provided a revered, material textual body for Charles I ... The fusion of the verbal and the visual rendered his word flesh, and provided Charles, like Christ, a resurrected body.’⁴⁶ No longer ‘real’, this body is not only reflected by, but *becomes* the material text. This may explain to a certain extent Howe’s reappropriation of *Almack’s* title, which ambiguously equates the *bibliography* of the King’s Book with the King’s Image. Howe’s bibliographical documenting explores not just the ‘King’s Text’, but the *text of the King*, in which material and abstract substance interact in a tensile but productive environment.

Howe stages her textual histories in varied but calculated ways. She demonstrates the frustrations of the historian or antiquarian in locating the original event, subject or text, and in so doing, she exposes the limits of a dominant, definitive history. ‘Perception of an object means loosing and losing it...’ says Howe, ‘[o]ne answer undoes another and fiction is real’ (MED, 23). With her complex exploration of the King’s image, which weaves us through countless material documents, Howe’s intervention into bibliography studies is precisely her reassertion of the unknowable *body as text*. We might read Howe’s *Bibliography*, then, as a distinctive way of rethinking the past, in which the textualisation of the subject is centralised and explored. Quoting Pierre Macherey, Howe describes the mystery of the King’s Book as ‘sealed and interminably completed or endlessly beginning again, diffuse and dense, coiled about an absent centre which it can neither conceal nor reveal’ (NCM, 50). The alluring force of this work is that, while investigating the landscape of the King’s embodiment, the reader comes to recognise that all traces of the *real* King have in fact disappeared. Howe’s use of the bibliography to compile (but not contain) the complex *King as text* reveals the composite, fragmented, and contradictory body of King Charles I.

As with many of her works, Susan Howe uses the literal and metaphorical *materials* of words and spaces as creative tools for new historical discoveries, and activates the role of the *reader*, who necessarily initiates the search for meaning amidst image and text, mind and body, past and present. The aim of this search—this textual dissemination—is not to locate, but to *gesture towards*, a ‘Contemporary History’ which, in reaction against ‘uniform Antiquity’ champions the spirit of ‘divided novelty’. In *A Bibliography of the King’s Book Or, Eikon Basilike*, Howe fashions new perspectives on historical writing that revere and celebrate this notion of the performative, interactive text as the cornerstone for a literary and historical ‘real’.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Susan Howe, <i>My Emily Dickinson</i>, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, 1985, p. 23. Further references to this text will appear as MED in parentheses. 2. King Charles I, <i>Eikon Basilike: The Portraiture of His Sacred Majesty in his Solitudes and Sufferings</i>, Jim Daems and Holly Faith Nelson (eds), Broadview Editions, Toronto, 2006, p. 145. 3. Daems and Nelson suggest that ‘[a]s there is substantial historical and stylistic evidence to support both the authorship of Charles I and John Gauden, we are best served to read the King’s Book as a heteroglossic, collaborative royalist effort’ (p. 21). Nevertheless, the King—lone writer, collaborator or absent author—both possessed and provided the authority and social standing to add strength and credence to the <i>Eikon Basilike</i>. 4. Francis F. Madan, <i>A New Bibliography of the Eikon Basilike of King Charles the First: With a Note on the Authorship</i>, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1950, p. 124. The text referred to by Madan is Edward Almack’s <i>A Bibliography of the King’s Book,</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Or Eikon Basilike</i>, Blades, East & Blades, London, 1896. 5. Madan, p. 124. 6. Susan Howe, ‘A Bibliography of the King’s Book or, Eikon Basilike’ (1989) in <i>The Nonconformist’s Memorial</i>, New Directions, New York, 1993, p. 49. 7. I will henceforth refer to Susan Howe’s text as <i>Bibliography</i> in order to focus attention on Howe’s project as a study in the history of the King as text. I will source quotations from the work as NCM, in parentheses. 8. See, for example, Rachel Tviza Back’s <i>Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe</i>, University of Alabama Press, Alabama, 2002. This text analyses the ‘gendered antinomian’, print culture, and myth in Howe’s <i>Bibliography</i>. See also Paul B. Conner’s thesis on women’s voices in Susan Howe’s writing, <i>Foregrounding Women’s Writing: Susan Howe’s Re-visioning of Western Literary History</i>, MA thesis, University of Louisville, 2002. |
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9. Megan Simpson, *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Oriented Writing*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2000, p. 164.
10. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Routledge, London, 1988, p. 91.
11. Hutcheon, p. 93.
12. The radical, avant-garde manner in which Howe utilises the space of the page reflects her experience as a visual artist, and the influence of the artistic environment in which she was immersed during the 1960s. Howe graduated from the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts in 1961, where the dominant attitude amongst artistic circles called for the relegation of art disciplines to their separate fields: 'you were a painter, a sculptor, a poet...' (Free Verse Interview). In contrast to this, and what soon became significant to Howe's artistic mindset, was the stance of the New York avant-garde during the 1960s and 1970s, where 'the barriers between disciplines were porous' (Susan Howe, 'Interview with Susan Howe' conducted by Jon Thompson, *Free Verse*, vol. 9, Winter 2005, <<http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/freeverse/>>, accessed 28 February 2007). Howe lived in New York during this experimental moment and her artworks were clearly influenced by these radical perspectives.
13. Andrew Lacey, *The Cult of King Charles the Martyr*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2003, p. 7.
14. In Part 9 of the *Eikon Basilike*, Charles utters the words Christ spoke on the cross 'forgive them! O my Father, for they know not what they do.' Furthermore, handkerchiefs dipped in Charles's blood were rumoured to have brought miracle cures to the sick, which compares to the healing powers of Jesus.
15. Howe, interview with Thompson.
16. Due to the complex visual nature of much of Howe's work, it is often difficult to 'quote' fragments without taking the verbal signifiers out of context. This circumstance not only draws attention to the intersection of word and image, but also gestures towards the ways in which we often 'misread' texts.
17. Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 5.
18. Readings, p. 18.
19. This changes in different editions of the text. Marjorie Perloff suggests that the page layout in Howe's *Eikon Basilike* changes in different publications due to different page sizes ('After Free Verse: The New NonLinear Poetries', in Charles Bernstein (ed.), *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, p. 109n).
20. Howe writes 'Must lie outside the house | Side of space I must cross | To write against the Ghost'—three lines surrounded by the white space of the page. While there is not room enough here to address the issue, it is also interesting to consider such passages as these, which demonstrate Howe's unique lyrical voice. It is in these moments that she often reflects or comments upon her more radical pages.
21. This appears in the version of Howe's *Bibliography* printed in *The Nonconformist's Memorial* but not in the first edition of the text, which reads 'Justice'. Whether a misprint or an intentional revision, this extra 'i' is a perfect demonstration of the transformation and metamorphosis of texts and meanings over time.
22. Peter Nicholls, 'Beyond *The Cantos*: Pound and American Poetry', in Ira B. Nadel (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 155. Megan Williams similarly suggests that Howe's work 'attempts to revitalize poetry in America by suggesting that poetry has the ability to remake literature, history, and literary criticism' ('Howe Not to Erase(Her): A Poetics of Posterity in Susan Howe's *Melville's Marginalia*', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 38, no. 1, Spring 1997, p. 127).
23. Nicholls, p. 155.
24. Susan Howe, 'An Interview with Susan Howe', conducted by Lynn Keller, *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 36, no. 1, Spring 1995, p. 8.
25. Susan Howe, 'Talisman Interview', conducted by Edward Foster, in Susan Howe, *The Birthmark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*, Wesleyan University Press, Connecticut, 1993, p. 175.
26. Lacey, p. 8.
27. Howe, interview with Keller, pp. 30–1.
28. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock, University of Nebraska Press, London, 1982, p. 22.
29. Howe, interview with Foster, p. 175.
30. Hutcheon, pp. 91–2.
31. It should be noted that while here I am only concentrating on some of the most visually attractive and extreme pages, the lyricism of her less radical pages continues this bibliographical documenting and questioning of the 'original text'. Howe's authorial voice is more conspicuous in those pages.
32. Howe, interview with Lynn Keller, p. 31.
33. James McCorkle, 'Prophecy and the Figure of the Reader in Susan Howe's *Articulation of Sound*

- Forms in Time*, *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1999, p. 13.
34. While I produce these readings using conventional reading practices, beginning at the top left corner of each page and reading downwards, the difficulties in proceeding in this manner demonstrates Howe's wish to 'de-condition' our reading practices.
 35. *Readings*, p. xix.
 36. Susan Howe stated that the bibliographer must erase him or herself in order to undertake such bibliographical work (interview with Foster, p. 174).
 37. *Readings*, p. xxv.
 38. This concept is discussed by Linda Hutcheon, who suggests that '[t]he decentering of our categories of thought always relies on the centers it contests for its very definition (and often its verbal form)', p. 59.
 39. Hutcheon, p. 62.
 40. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman, Semiotext[e], New York, 1983, pp. 2–3.
 41. Howe, interview with Keller, p. 9.
 42. Hutcheon, p. 90.
 43. Rachel Tviza Back, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe*, University of Alabama Press, Alabama, 2002, pp. 143–4.
 44. Gilbert Burnet, quoted in Lois Potter, *Secret Rites and Secret Writing: Royalist Literature, 1641–1660*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 167.
 45. Howe, interview with Foster, p. 177.
 46. Daems and Nelson, p. 16.