

'Pilings of Thought Under Spoken': The Poetry of Susan Howe, 1974-1993.

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**'Pilings of Thought Under
Spoken': The Poetry of
Susan Howe, 1974-1993**

PhD Thesis

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**Queen Mary
University of London**

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Abstract of thesis

‘Pilings of Thought Under Spoken’: The Poetry of Susan Howe, 1974-1993

This thesis discusses the poetry published by contemporary American poet Susan Howe over a period of almost two decades. The dissertation is chiefly concerned with articulating the relationship between poetic form, history, and authority in this body of work. Howe’s poetry dredges the past for the linguistic effects of patriarchy, colonialism and war. My reading of the work is an exploration of the ways in which a disjunctive poetics can address such historical trauma. The poems, rather than attempting to reinstate voices lifted from what Howe has called “the dark side of history”, are a means of reflecting the resistance that the past offers to contemporary investigation. It is the effacement, and not the recovery, of history’s victims, that is discernible in the contours of these highly opaque texts. Notions of authority are most often addressed in the poetry through the figure of paternal absence, which has a threefold function in the work, serving to represent social authority, an aporetic conception of divinity and an autobiographical narrative. Alongside the anti-authoritarian currents in the writing – critiques, for example, of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny or of scapegoating versions of femininity – my thesis stresses Howe’s engagement with negative theology and with a strain of American Protestant enthusiasm that has its roots in 17th century New England. The dissertation explores the dissonance caused by the co-existence in the poetry of elements of political dissent and religious mysticism. Finally, I consider Howe’s engagement with literary history and authors such as Shakespeare, Swift, Thoreau and Melville. The manner in which Howe deploys the words of others in her work, I argue, allows for a mixture of textual polyphony and a more conventional notion of authorial ‘voice’.

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I would like to thank Harry Montgomery, Tessa Montgomery, Dollan Cannell, Frank Blood and Angela Kreeger for the understanding and support they have offered during the writing of this dissertation.

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INTRODUCTION

At the head of Susan Howe's 1990 collection *The Europe of Trusts* is a brief, manifesto-like sequence entitled *There are not Leaves Enough to Crown to Cover to Crown to Cover*.¹ *Leaves* is a textual montage that sketches the extent of Howe's poetic ambition 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; and, above all, a desire to formulate a poetic response to the violence of history. 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" [*Leaves*, 12]) and the Greek tragedy *Antigone* (Creon's injunction to Antigone: "Go to the dead and love them" [*Leaves*, 13]). Interleaved with the prose, which is often catachrestic ("I had so many dead Innocents distance was abolished" [*Leaves*, 12]), are three sequences of poetry, which is of a dense and discontinuous nature. Howe also makes several statements about the nature of her poetry. She writes, for example: "In my poetry, time and again, questions of assigning *the cause* of history dictate the sound of what is thought" (*Leaves*, 13). And, "I write to break out into perfect primeval Consent" (*Leaves*, 14).

The relationship between poetic language and the past is at the heart of her various assertions. "History is the record of winners" (*Leaves*, 11), she writes, following this topos with a stranger formulation: "Poetry brings similitude and representation to configurations waiting from forever to be spoken" (*Leaves*, 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" (*Leaves*, 14).²

¹ Originally published in 1985. The title is taken from Wallace Stevens' characteristically evasive meditation on the public role of the poet, "United Dames of America".

² This is a version of version of William Carlos Williams' "The land! don't you feel it? Doesn't it make you want to go out and lift dead Indians tenderly from their graves, to steal from them – as if it must be clinging even to their corpses – some authenticity [...]" (Williams, 89).

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? In *Leaves*, Howe sets herself the task of speaking the unspoken. The difficulty of her poetry is a necessary difficulty that has its origins in the problems that confront a poetry of witness when what it seeks to memorialise has vanished. There are further perplexities to Howe’s assertions in *Leaves*: how might a poetry rooted in historical particulars incorporate the “perfect” and the “primeval”? There is in *Leaves* an unresolved tension between a poetry of redress and a poetry of grace, the exigencies 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 realisation of an anti-canonical and anti-authoritarian literary and political radicalism. Such impulses are indeed to be found in Howe’s poetry and they are prominent in her critical writing. However, critics have often tended to elide the presence of a theological impulse to her poetry. The poetry’s frequent use of a language of spiritual immediacy sits uneasily with a late 20th-century progressive politics. The language of grace in the poetry, moreover, is not simply a code for poetic “inspiration” (although the two categories have a close relationship in Howe’s poems). The mystical current in the writing, present from its beginnings in the 1970s to the present day, is not always easily compatible with the elements of Marxian, psychoanalytic and poststructuralist thought that provide the intellectual context for those who write on her.¹ The theory boom of the 1980s and 1990s is, of course, the context in which Howe herself was writing. Yet the poems are not quite so amenable to contemporary theoretical toolkits as some have implied. While I often refer to thinkers whose work can be read in productive parallel with Howe’s, I neither suppress the poetry’s engagement with older, metaphysical vocabularies nor the uncomfortable fit between this aspect of the work and a broadly liberatory politics.

There has been a tendency to read Howe’s poems as the realisation of their prefaces. While I pay attention – sometimes a good deal of attention – to these prefaces, I also discuss the obdurate strangeness of the language in the body of the poems, a form of poetry which 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:

¹ Examples of the diverse thinkers that critics have aligned with Howe’s poetry include: Kristeva and Wittgenstein (see Middleton); Lacan and Derrida (Nicholls, 1996); Heidegger (McCorkle, Taggart); Serres (Adamson); and Adorno (Reinfeld).

Summary of fleeting summary

Pseudonym cast across empty

Peak proud heart

Majestic caparisoned cloud cumuli

East sweeps hewn flank

Leaves, 13

It is difficult to put such sequences through the conventional prosodic mill. The three words “Peak proud heart”, for example, appear to stand in isolation, making neither a unit 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 my thesis.

While this dissertation contributes to the work of sketching in Howe’s sources, makes full and frequent reference to her own statements about her poetry, and finds certain critical theorists 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 often, with good reason, observe the poetry’s allegiance to silenced social groupings: women, the marginalised, and nonconformists of various sorts. This aspect of the poetry is often 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, while much of this critical work is important, 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 investment in notions such as voice, literary tradition, autobiography and lyric.¹

My thesis discusses the poetry from Howe's first published poem sequence, *Hinge Picture*, to her 1993 collection *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, which was followed by a six-year hiatus. Her next book, *Pierce-Arrow*, demonstrated the biggest single shift of orientation in her work to date. This might broadly be characterised as a lessening of emphasis on spiritual immediacy and a corresponding muting of the more disjunctive elements of her style. While this later work is extremely valuable, it is valuable in different ways and I have found the poetry of the period 1974-1993 to present a discrete field of study.

I have organised my thesis in accordance with the *extant editions* of Howe's work. For example, I discuss the poems in 1990's *Europe of Trusts* collection as a group and in the order in which they appear in that book, rather than in the order in which the original small-press editions appeared (*Pythagorean Silence*, *Defenestration of Prague* and *The Liberties* were published in 1982, 1983 and 1980 respectively). Howe endorsed the collection of her poems in these groups and it seems likely that future editions (and future critical discussion) will follow this ordering of the poetry. (*The Europe of Trusts* collection, for example, was last year reprinted by New Directions.) Each of the collections functions, I argue, as a coherent unit.

In some cases early 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 has expressed interest in the book as physical artefact and this dimension of the work is better appreciated in the less condensed small press versions or in such editions as the extremely costly 'fine art' rendering of *The Nonconformist's Memorial*. However, although the 'materiality' of Howe's work has received useful discussion in the writing of Jerome McGann, Michael Davidson and others, my thesis is principally concerned with the conceptual arena of Howe's poetry and poetics.

¹ All concepts that have come under attack from many of Howe's peers among the late 20th century American poetic avant garde.

I analyse in detail the major long poems of the period under discussion. I exclude two brief poems from such treatment, *Scattering as Behaviour Toward Risk* and *Silence Wager Stories* (collected in *Singularities* and *The Nonconformist's Memorial* respectively), because there was considerably more to be gained from concentrating on poems that would be appropriate to substantial and sustained argument. Another exclusion is an early work, an 'Irish' poem that Howe has chosen not to republish: *The Western Borders* (1976). In this case detailed discussion of the poem would not have added to the extended treatment of Ireland I give in my accounts of *Cabbage Gardens*, *Defenestration of Prague*, *The Liberties* and *Melville's Marginalia*.

My dissertation, therefore, follows the order established in four books: *Frame Structures*, *The Europe of Trusts*, *Singularities* and *The Nonconformist's Memorial*. My treatment of the early poetry collected in *Frame Structures* takes its 1996 preface – a cogent expression of Howe's mature poetics – as a starting point and goes on to read the poems in relation to perspectives Howe would establish more firmly in later work. My discussion of these early poems tracks the emergence of a distinctive investment in lines of affiliation between words – whether of sound, meaning, autobiography, or context.

With *The Europe of Trusts* I begin a discussion of the 'metaphysical' strand in the poetry. All three of the *Europe of Trusts* poems involve the concept of metamorphosis and I take the Ovidian allusion at the opening of *Pythagorean Silence* as my point of departure. I also discuss Howe's interest in modes of representation and dissimulation, finding in the Jonsonian masque an analogue of the ephemeral linguistic environment of *Defenestration*. With *Defenestration* and *The Liberties* I explore the poetry's ambivalent relation to authority and to Ireland. In my discussion of *The Liberties* I describe the ways in which the underside of history – or "understory" – assumes an affect-laden presence in her poetry.

The poems of *Singularities* concern America. In my treatment of these poems I discuss Howe's reinterpretation of the antinomian controversy of 17th century New England in the context of contemporary poetics and 'feminine speech'. With *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* I look in particular at Howe in the context of a 20th century poetics of history, reading her as a sceptical successor of Pound and Olson. My discussion of *Thorow* places Howe in relation to another genealogy, that of 19th century American romanticism. I assess in both poems the intersection of the American landscape, colonial violence and poetic language.

My treatment of *The Nonconformist's Memorial* begins with an investigation of motifs of negative theology and deconstruction in the poetry. I also consider the role that sound plays in Howe's poetics. I approach the notion of divine authority from a different perspective in my discussion of *Eikon*, which revolves around the figure of Charles I and the nature of authorship. Finally, I discuss *Melville's Marginalia* as an exemplification of the strangeness of the act of reading. I formulate this in the context of Howe's notion of "poetry telepathy" and of religious enthusiasm.

In Howe's poetry religious experience and the experience of poetic language continually fold into one another. Her poetry, whether conceived in terms of "primeval Consent" or of "Chaos", can be understood as a means of claiming the sacred as the domain of the strangeness of poetic language. The peculiarly volatile pact between sound and history that her poetry proposes causes her work to be surrounded with a penumbra of uncertainty. Yet at the same time it aspires to a degree of purchase on the workings of worldly injustice. The generative paradox at the centre 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 recognises 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

A note on style

I have italicised 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 citing page references I have either shortened titles to a single significant word (*Articulation* for *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, for example) or used the following abbreviations:

FS – *Frame Structures*

HP – *Hinge Picture*

CG – *Cabbage Gardens*

SH – *Secret History of the Dividing Line*

PS – *Pythagorean Silence*

DP – *Defenestration of Prague*

MED – My Emily Dickinson

NCM – The Nonconformist's Memorial [ie the poem, not the collection of the same title]

SWS – Silence Wager Stories

MM – Melville's Marginalia

When citing Howe's interviews, rather than reproduce the titles under which they were published I have used the name of the interviewer: "Keller interview", for example.

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

1: FRAME STRUCTURES: “A PURE PAST IS IT SPEAKABLE?”

i) Preface: gathering in the missing

Susan Howe's *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974-1979* was published in 1996, along with a substantial preface. While the later preface is, to an extent, a means of imposing the coherence of Howe's mature poetics on the earlier work, it is nonetheless an invaluable entry point into the entire body of poetry considered in this thesis – not least because it considers the work from the perspective of the mid-1990s, *after* all the work considered in this study was published. This retrospective summary, therefore, will be my starting point, although the 1970s poems do not fully enact the processes it describes. The highly visual approach of *Hinge Picture*, for example, is not moored to the subtle contextual play that Howe's later use of citation would deploy; and the whimsy of parts of *Chanting at the Crystal Sea* works against the relative homogeneity of register that Howe would achieve, citation notwithstanding, in later work. However, the ways in which past and present interfere with each other – as they certainly do in the preface to *Frame Structures* and the poems that follow it – will be a theme to which my thesis will often return.

The preface both describes and enacts 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 to and fro between past and present considers her own past writing and chooses to sketch in certain autobiographical details that inform these early poems. The past exerts a pressure on the present and this, in turn, is engaged in revising the past.¹ The privileged site for this play of reciprocal determination 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 which follows linguistic trails to offer an associative narrative counter to received literary and political histories. This identifies language as the driving force of history and its repressed – puns, sounding, its visual appearance, its materialisation in the book – as the vessel through which history's victims can be approached. 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. This form of

¹ The relation between past and present can be compared to the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, discussed in detail in my final chapter.

response to the past pursues threads of enquiry 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,” she writes on the first page of the 1996 preface (*FS*, 3).

The place of the poet, for Howe, is to be 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. It is a conception of poetic composition that has both passive and active faces: the poet can appear to be a medium by vocation, or as a figure of heroic will 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?”¹

The answer to her question might be through the unexpected connections and unsettling disjunctions that characterise her understanding of poetic language. One might object that her similitudes – in the preface the links between the words ‘daughter’ and ‘slaughter’ or ‘Niagara’ and ‘Nigeria’, for example – are arbitrary alignments whose claim to 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 kind of mystical knowledge. The assertion “Poetry brings representation and similitude to configurations waiting from for ever to be spoken” (*Leaves*, 14) is not only unequivocal but untestable. The implicit claim is vatic in nature and, indeed, rather traditional in its assertion that the poet can make available material that is simply not accessible to those relying on the resources of ordinary language. An evaluation of Howe’s arguments around poetic form and its ethical relation to history will be a central preoccupation of this thesis.

Similitude for Howe is a means of accessing 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*, in which the event that assured Howe’s vocation as a poet is narrated.² In unsettled, syntactically stretched prose she 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

¹ Beckett interview. 26.

² The incident opens her *Frame Structures* preface and is central to *Leaves* and to the “Pearl Harbor” section of *Pythagorean Silence*.

Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbour, provoking the entry of the US 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."¹ Howe, then, not only links a historical event – a turning point in 20th century history – 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).² Howe's poetry counters, or perhaps complements, 'history' with "historical imagination", which is the setting for the transaction between the "immaterial" and everyday experience.³ Moreover, there is, in a passage whose syntax defies comprehension, a speculation on prophecy, predestination ("prefigured"), and "free will", which proceeds to the wordplay of "true relation" (ie her father).⁴ 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

¹ Bernstein interview, n.p.

² Howe's allusion is to Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the growth of rationalism in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

³ Motifs drawn from the 19th century fad for spiritualism – telepathy, ghosts, communicating with the dead – hover in the background of Howe's poetry. I discuss 'impenetrable' phenomena and the 'everyday' with relation to Benjamin's thought in my chapter on *Melville's Marginalia*.

⁴ Howe is linking contemporary events with early American history, when predestination was a given of the intellectual environment.

perception" (ibid). The apparent absurdity of her – or her father's – speculation about the bears dissolves when it is considered as a motif for the hidden associative logic that Howe considers proper to poetic language.

Howe's manner of representing this logic often amounts to staging a failure of representation: a traumatised utterance that collapses into silence and, by analogy, makes the white space of the blank page an agent in the production of meaning. Susan Schultz has discussed silence in relation to the shuttling between divine and earthly orders in Howe's poetry: "Silence is at once a negative social fact for women and a positive religious state; silence, like so much in Howe's work, straddles the line between history and transcendence, thereby calling both of them into question."¹

Straddling this particular line has, not without good reason, brought comparison of her work to that of a writer she admires: Walter Benjamin.² There are indeed parallels to be drawn between her poetics and the more theological aspects of the thought of Benjamin, particularly in his last datable writing, the "Theses on the Philosophy".³ However, while Benjamin's "Theses" have great explanatory force in this context and while Howe herself has said the work was vital to her, Howe's critics are sometimes dependent on a politically neutered version of Benjamin that stresses the mystical 'track' of his thought at the expense of making revolution seem as remote as the Second Coming.⁴

The events in Delaware Park, Buffalo, that Howe refers to took place in 1941, the year after Benjamin had written his "Theses". In the "Theses", composed in the shadow of the Nazi-Soviet pact, there is a combination of "historical materialism" and a Messianic reading of history. This "two-track aspect of Benjamin's thinking", in the words of Gershom Scholem, proceeds from an "intimate interweaving of mystical-

¹ Schultz (1994), n.p.

² This comparison is now a commonplace in Howe criticism. See Ziarek, Back, Naylor.

³ See the interview with Keller, 29, 31. Howe spoke of the particular importance of Benjamin's "Theses" to her in her interview with the author. The 2002 French edition of *Thorow* cites, in translation, the following passage from the "Theses" on its back cover: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. [...] Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (Benjamin [1950], 247).

⁴ Back's elision of the radical political content of Benjamin's "historical materialism" is an example of an uneasy reframing of the terms of Benjamin's argument (Back, 59-61). It is not my position that Howe herself engages with the 'Marxian' rather than the 'theological' Benjamin, but that, with her use of revelatory montage as a means of elaborating an against-the-grain counter-history, there are clear formal and thematic parallels to be drawn.

cosmic and Marxist insights, which penetrate each other or appear one alongside the other".¹

Benjamin writes, in Thesis VII, that it is the task of the historical materialist to "brush history against the grain", a phrase which might serve as a description of Howe's historical method, as she seeks to find speech and shelter for the 'other voices' belonging to history's victims.² And, in Thesis XVIII, he criticises the linear approach of "historicism", which would at the same time as privileging history, be enslaved by rigid narratives. The 'materialist' historian on the other hand:

[...] stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as 'the time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.³

Again there is a parallel with Howe's work, in which the past is reconstellated through the prism of a late-20th-century poetics. The notion of the "time of the now" that is imbued with "Messianic time" further recalls the immediacy Howe locates in poetic insight, bearing a close relation with the spiritual immediacy she finds so important in her reading of the antinomian controversy of 1630s New England.⁴

Instead of the sequential progress of the beads of the rosary, Howe's poetry works, at various levels, through a questioning of sequence. The logic of montage replaces that of narrative. At its deepest level, the letters that spell words are subject to the torsion of history. In her preface to *Frame Structures*, and against the linear exposition that Benjamin inveighs against, Howe offers a form of writing that bristles with secondary associations and which is finely tuned to the precarious dependence of sound and sense on the fundamental element 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

¹ Scholem, 54.

² Benjamin (1950), 248.

³ Ibid, 255.

⁴ This aspect of Howe's thought is discussed in my account of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*.

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 language 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.¹ 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 get the upper hand but it is also something that Howe forces through her exploitation of such contiguities.²

An example of her method lies in her account of how, when her father was at war, she, her sister and her mother would accompany her aunt Muriel to visit Charles and Helen Hopkinson, descendants of Longfellow, in Longfellow’s former house in Boston. From these 1940s visits Howe allows a curious web of associations to develop which soon reaches back across the sea to Ireland. She describes Longfellow’s “Evangeline” as the “first long poem in North American literature inspired by New World themes, stories and history to live beyond the frame of its composition” (FS, 10-11). Noting that Longfellow has been widely derided since I.A. Richards’ attacks in his *Practical Criticism*, Howe’s attention is drawn to Longfellow’s treatment of Arcadie, exile, loss, wandering and feminine faithfulness. Howe makes a link to her mother, but not a direct one: she goes by means of literary associations, drawing a connection between Longfellow’s Evangeline and Joyce’s Eveline, in *Dubliners*, who finds herself unable to leave home with her lover for a life of exile in Argentina. Howe links these literary figures, whose names echo one another, to her own mother’s experience of exile and abandonment: “When she was a child her father was almost always living in another country and his father before him” (FS, 11).

¹ Interview with author, June 2001. Howe remarked: “Sacrificial daughter, that’s a big sacrifice. I played Astyanax [in *Trojan Women* – see the cover of *Pierce-Arrow*]. That’s the first part I had in a big people’s play, in Buckingham. Astyanax is sacrificed after the Trojan War. Then I was Iphigenia, who was sacrificed. I’ve played a lot of sacrificed people!” See my discussion of *Liberties* and *Eikon* for treatment of the figure of the sacrificial victim in Howe’s work.

² Howe’s interest in Heidegger and puns is discussed in my account of *Pythagorean Silence*.

So the wandering attention of Howe's prose draws "lines of association" between her childhood and that of her mother, American myth, the absent lover/father, and exile.¹ Howe notes that Joyce's "Eveline" was written after he met Nora Barnacle in 1904, and points out that her mother was born in Dublin only a year later. Such polemical forcing of circumstances is devised to offer a scrutiny of the past that exploits the divagations of poetic language. Howe's investigation has an almost fanatical edge: the audaciousness of her Evangeline/Eveline manoeuvre 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).

This shuttling between determining and being determined, active and passive, marks the preface at several points. Some of the passages in the preface leave the reader caught between an awareness of her daring in reading family history through sound associations, and a sense that the sound associations themselves force the reading. To take an example, Howe writes that her maternal grandfather was a doctor who worked in colonial Nigeria, "one of those members of the Colonial Service assigned 'to open the country for civilised occupation'" (*FS*, 12). Howe links the river Niger to the river Niagara, and Buffalo, where she spent her early years. "Nigeria", she writes, "is named for the Royal Niger Company, a private organisation established to meet the requirements of British trade along Africa's largest river during the European 'scramble for Africa' of the 1880s" (*FS*, 11). On the following pages she cites an out-of-date *Encyclopedia Britannica's* entries for 'Nigeria', 'Niger' and 'Niagara', putting her familial parallel alongside lexical similarity (*FS*, 12-13).

The trajectory of Buffalo in New England history is, like that of Nigeria, read as a cipher for trade: Joseph Ellicott, the "father of Buffalo" was an employee of the Holland Land Company who, through astute commercial self-advancement, came to wield "immense political influence" in New York State. Property and the power to confer names on places are intimately linked. Even the Lackawanna suburb of Buffalo is "named for a company". The city's strategic positioning leads it to thrive as a

¹ I am adapting a phrase used by Perloff in her discussion of the preface to *Frame Structures* and the poems that follow: "the text's war space is crisscrossed by 'life-lines', lines of descent, connection, and association". See Perloff (1999), n.p.

crossroads for goods in transit; “wars have also been good for the city” notes Howe drily (*FS*, 13). Niger and Niagara, then, link the Irish and American experience of the Howe family. Naming, in this analysis, binds this experience to the appropriative linguistic logic of capitalism; Howe’s prose draws attention to these links and, through its refusal to be fixed by these exigencies, allows the words a freeing, associative play.¹

A further forced coincidence occurs in relation to Howe’s American family history. Her 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).² Weetamoo was eventually drowned while escaping the “Christian soldiers” and her body was washed up on land that became part of the De Wolfe Howe farm (*FS*, 22). The family’s background is thus linked by the word *Weetamoe* to the destruction of the Native Americans in early American history. Howe’s researches into Mary Rowlandson and her radical readings of early captivity narratives are caught up in this chain of linguistic association.

What do all these similitudes amount to? Howe is suggesting that apparent coincidences can be mined by the poet in pursuit of the hidden analogies that comprise a partial and fragmentary counter-history. Or as she formulates it in “Leaves”, “Poetry brings similitude and representation to configurations waiting from forever to be spoken” (14). These connections are not only a way of picking apart the narratives that underpin, for example, such currents in American thought as the 19th century ideology of Manifest Destiny (and its present-day afterlife), they are a way of communicating with the dead.³ The thought behind these speculative links is most directly expressed when Howe writes: “Telepsychology. We have always been in contact with one another, keeping on never letting go, no distance as to time, nothing such as liberty because we are in the field of history” (*FS*, 25).

Howe does not make it clear whether her use of the term ‘telepsychology’ is merely part of a polemical expression of the force of poetic language, or whether it amounts to a genuine conviction that, for example, Weetamoo’s death, mediated by *Weetamoe*, implicates Howe 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

¹ The conjunction between naming and capitalism/colonialism is central to *Thorow*.

² “The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs Mary Rowlandson”, collected in *Birth-Mark*.

³ I discuss Manifest Destiny in my accounts of *Articulation* and *Melville’s Marginalia*.

expression of a belief in an unconscious of language from which word-constellations – Weetamoo/*Weetamoe*, Nigeria/Niagara – erupt as symptoms indicative of trauma? Once again, the flow of determination runs in both directions, with the poet as both magus and medium.

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 loss of innocence and the intrusion of what Howe calls the "geopolitical chain of violence" on Howe's life.¹ Buffalo comes to represent a brutalised and exploited nature, encircled, like the early New England settlements, by a 'wilderness'. It is this wilderness, under the sign of "Modernism", that Howe claims her early poems begin to explore.

The preface, intended to serve as an introduction to her 1970s poems, might serve as an introduction to all of the work surveyed in this dissertation. 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 poetic form is a fundamental characteristic of Howe's ethical ambitions. Later poems are haunted 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, towards the end of the preface, to Ophelia's mode of speech, form part of a meditation on the relation between gender and literary form that extends throughout her writing career.

The underlying concerns in Howe's work are remarkably consistent. What changes is the sophistication of the technique. The integration of citation and her own words, for example, is better executed in the later work. The visual aspect of the work, important

¹ Cf the "precapitalist Utopia" of the Niagara River, 28. The phrase "geopolitical chain of violence" comes from Howe's essay on the work of documentary film-maker Chris Marker, "Sorting Facts" (318). This was published in 1996, the same year as the preface to *Frame Structures*.

from the beginning, is particularly well developed by the time of the 'scattered' pages of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time, Thorow* and *Eikon Basilike*. Sound becomes more important in the later work. However, as we shall see, the most important transition is from a work that functions on the 'horizontal' plane of juxtaposition (and which might be rooted in Howe's training in visual art) to one which also accommodates a vertical axis: the meshing of language and history that the preface to *Frame Structures* announces but which the poems themselves, with the possible exception of *Secret History*, do not realise.

ii) Hinge Picture: Dreaming of archipelagos

Susan Howe studied Fine Art and in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a visual artist, working with installations that combined text and photographs. Her first book of poetry, *Hinge Picture*, published in 1974 by Maureen Owen's Telephone Books imprint, has as its epigraph the following from Marcel Duchamp:

Perhaps makes a HINGE PICTURE. (folding yardstick, book...)
develop in space the PRINCIPLE OF THE HINGE in the displacements
1st in the plane 2nd in space.¹

The notion of the hinge is characteristic of a taste for figures of duality that is discernible in many later texts. Borders, margins and dividing lines are, in various ways, crucial to the poetry. The visual aspect of the work – the look of the words on the page – is clearly important. But displacements and spatial relations are important in other ways too. Howe's texts suspend narrative in favour of webs of thematic concern. History and language are imagined spatially, with lines of association being drawn that may depend on a word's proximity to others on the signifying chain or to historical or literary echoes.

The first page of *Hinge Picture* announces intelligibility as a concern and binds it to divine speech: "[...] receiv/ ing the mute vocables/ of God that rained" (*HP*, 33). Legibility and the hazards of utterance are stressed in "h/ ieroglyph and stuttering." Yet the hieroglyph, pictorial representation, is of particular importance to this early work.² From her earliest books Howe writes poems in series. Although *Hinge Picture* is,

¹ From Duchamp's "Note for the Green Box." It may be that Duchamp's taste for Roussellian homophones ("Rose Sélavy"; "LHOOQ"; "Fresh Widow". etcetera) had an impact on Howe's developing notions of 'lexical drift'.

² The hieroglyph and its relation to the writings of the American Renaissance are discussed in my account of *Thorow*.

in the *Frame Structures* version, a 25-page poem, it is also a series composed of units that can be read alone. The complete work thus has the effect of a kind of polyphony, as different poems communicate with one another. While Howe often arranges poems in numbered sequences, she avoids a clear narrative, allowing the poems to work in a cumulative manner and entirely leaving out any private connections that might govern sequence.¹ Many of the page-poems in *Hinge Picture* are visually conceived, extending the aspect of Charles Olson's work that sought to use typography as the notation of poetic speech.² Several poems are presented as blocks of words, justified right and left; line-breaks frequently slice words in two (one poem's last line is simply the 'e' of the word 'fortune'); many are centred on the page; some seem designed to experiment with abstract shapes:

in com
 plete armor
 oriflamme wav
 ing be
 fore him
 Louis leap
 ed onto the b
 each

FS, 47

The lines draw attention to the work of the line-break, splitting words and disrupting the flow of a sentence that, in spite of everything, manages to remain intact. The arrangement of the words in a pattern on the page appears to govern the line-breaks and the reader's internal sounding of the poem is halted by the problem of how to sound words such as "wav/ing" or "b/each". The technique works against the making of sense, with the part-words standing as linguistic rubble rather than setting up meanings that might complicate the poem.

In her flight from the "sadism" of recent history and the "fiery impossibility" of Vietnam (*FS, 28*), Howe seeks refuge in a language imbued with myth and religion. Howe's two main sources for the exotic vocabulary of *Hinge Picture* are Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and the Old Testament. The poem is a work of citation,

¹ See her comment following a 1988 reading of *Eikon*: "The basic format is page to page. These pages not connected by any narrative strain. In *my* head it has a logic." (Audio cassette L945.)

² See Olson, in his essay "Projective Verse", 57: "For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had." Although Howe is clearly not a Projectivist, Olson's use of typography did influence her. (See Keller interview, 20; Swenson interview, 381.) See also Fraser. I discuss Howe's relation to Olson in my account of *Articulation*.

seeking to disturb present meanings through the reconfiguration of fragments from the past. Thus, words such as 'praetrap', 'zealot', 'anitiophon', 'eunuch', 'salamander', 'hellebore', 'Ark' and 'Obeisance' litter the poem.

Formally speaking, the poem could not have been written before the late 20th century, but nothing of technological modernity obtrudes. At the very outset of her poetic career Howe is rejecting the words of the present in favour of the words of the past. It is not, however, a passive refuge from the present decorated with archaisms: it achieves an indirect purchase on the present through its disjunctive formal characteristics and, negatively, through its very refusal of a late 20th century vernacular. In other words, Howe is using the words of the past as a way of confronting the present with its forgetfulness. Despite her belief that utterances are imbued with the political and cultural conflicts of their time, Howe's glance is directed backwards, at the pre-history of late 20th century culture. Unlike many of the poets associated with language poetry, she is not putting present language use under the microscope so much as directing her readers towards words and usages that fall outside the contemporary lexicon and which work to unsettle the discursive certainties that underpin the colonial impulse. Language is an instrument of domination for Howe and stuttering, errancy, and, above all, neglected histories of the kind she sketches in her preface to *Frame Structures* are her means of resisting this domination.

Howe shreds *Decline and Fall* when she incorporates it into her work. *Hinge Picture* is an act of destructive scholarship and, even at this point in her poetic development, she inaugurates a method of fragmented citation that she will continue to use in later work. In *Decline and Fall*, for example, Howe cites the passage:

The Romans wandered several days in the country to the eastward of Baghdad; the Persian deserter, who had artfully led them into the snare, escaped from their resentment; and his followers, as soon as they were put to the torture, confessed the secret of the conspiracy.¹

¹ Gibbon, 2: 496.

In *Hinge Picture* this becomes:

ver wandered several days in th
e country to the eastward of Ba
ghdad a persian deserter led in
to a snare [...]

Hinge Picture, 45

The original is not merely cited as prose (as often in the work of antecedents such as the Williams of *Paterson* or the Olson of *Maximus*), it is broken up and deformed. It would be futile to see her as in 'dialogue' with the explicit argument of Gibbon's text: the work seeks rather to treat it as a rich language resource. Howe's principal engagement with Gibbon is formal. *Hinge Picture's* appropriations are, however, free-floating and removed from the present – the glimpses of population movements, conquest and bloodshed in Gibbon seem far removed from the 'sadism' of the 20th century. Later work will be more successful in implying the relation between such key Howe themes and 20th century configurations of power.

In her rearrangement of the lines the motifs of wandering and deception prevail over the narrative of Roman mastery in the excerpt from Gibbon. When 'torture' appears further down the page it is no longer an instrument of the Romans. What remains of Gibbon's exploded prose are obscure actions with obscure subjects and objects. Howe begins her long series of attempts to dismantle prose texts in order to replace the expressive goal of the original with a multiplicity of suggestion. The use of the source material provides a hidden coherence of register but the works' putative attitude to these sources is always a matter of conjecture.

By using Gibbon, Howe is not seeking to apply an example of imperial decadence to the present. Her use of the book's hoard of rich archaisms is almost fetishistic in the delight it takes in the exoticism of the archaic. Howe uses citation in her early work to counter modern language uses with a history that absorbs into itself the predictive archetypes of mythical utterance. However, this early work can be distinguished from the later work in that the webs of association it constructs do not achieve the many-layered communicative density of the later work. While Howe seeks to engage with word histories the words of poems such as *Hinge Picture* retain a rootless quality, abstracted from their contexts and fed into highly visual arrangements. The prime value of the poems is as feats of juxtaposition, visual impact and literary resonance as she seeks to make a contemporary poem from language that draws attention to its historical condition. In her poems of the 1980s and 1990s Howe's words combine with

the source texts in ways that allows juxtaposition to work alongside word-histories and to develop a comprehensive long poem that combines stanzaic forms, highly visual elements and a strong emphasis on sound associations. While the preface to *Frame Structures* is an extremely useful introduction to the early poems it elaborates a more thorough poetic than that contained in the poems. In particular, the emphasis on sound that resonates throughout the introduction is not embedded in the poetry until the poems of *The Europe of Trusts*, *The Liberties*, *Pythagorean Silence* and *Defenestration of Prague* (initially published in 1980, 1982 and 1983 respectively).

Gibbon is not invoked as historical truth but as a source of tales. Language is used in ways that draw attention to its opacity, whereas in later work, from the poems collected in *The Europe of Trusts* onwards, its communicative aspects – both direct and indirect – are given parallel attention. As her work progresses, its investment in both historical truth and determinate meaning becomes greater. In *Hinge Picture* history is a fiction, viewed through the lens of a sceptic; in later work a different engagement with the past emerges, which continues to challenge factual historical narratives but which seeks to communicate a more elusive form of historical truth in its faithfulness to those who fall outside such narratives.

The second of the poem's two main sections contains verse which is less dependent on citation:

Swiftness divination these false gods
their commerce is the clouds
so they can learn what is preparing in the sky
Artificer of the universe
Magician who controls the storm
to see you in one spot
I count the clouds others count the seasons
Dreaming of archipelagos and the desert
I have lived through weeks of years
I have raked up fallen leaves for winter
after winter across an empire of icy light

HP, 53

The first lines turn on divinity and divination. The identity of the 'you' in the sixth line is unclear, as is the 'I' of the subsequent lines. "Dreaming of archipelagos" alludes

to *Moby-Dick* and “artificer of the universe”, a masonic phrase, may relate to the book’s use of masonic language.¹ While the first lines speak of predicting the future, the ‘I’ of the later lines, speaking in the present perfect tense, has witnessed and endured the passing of time. The poem, in other words, suggests cosmic and local perspectives, mediated through dream, endurance and suffering. But the loose ends cannot be tied up: the lines refuse to offer coherence of meaning or even sequence in argumentation.

Another passage has the ring of a children’s rhyme:

Oarsman, oarsman,
Where have you been?
I’ve been to Leafy,
I’ve dismembered the Queen.

Oarsman, oarsman
What did you there?
I hid in a cleft,
I braided the air.

HP, 52

This poem combines nursery rhyme diction with myth and religion. The oarsman is negotiating Lethe/Leafy. The words “hid in a cleft” allude to God’s appearance before Moses: “I will put thee in a clift of rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: and I will take away mine hand and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen” (Exodus 34, 22-23).² There is a common type of hose known as the ‘braided air hose’, which Howe turns into a metaphysical figure with an almost Joycean ring. Yet none of these elements sits harmoniously, least of all the dismembered queen – it is Orpheus, the poet, after all, who is dismembered by the Thracian women after his backward glance. Howe does not allow the poem to be unlocked by the explanatory key of allusion.

The ‘I’, the answering voice of the oarsman, suggests an infinitely pliable poetic voice, capable in this compact lyric of adopting a position within determinate moments of cultural history. It is as if, on the one hand it is Orpheus who is the artist, and that he

¹ See Melville (1851), chapter 111, 593, 594: “all that we call lives and souls lie dreaming, dreaming”: “all between lie float milky ways of coral isles, and low-lying, endless unknown Archipelagoes”.

² This passage prefigures Howe’s use of negative theology, which has its origins in the belief that God’s face could not be seen. See my discussion of *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*.

can probe the depths of forgetfulness and the past, and, on the other hand, that this rather grandiose trope is self-ironising, as the lyric twist of “I braided the air” is undermined by its bathetic origins in the sphere of modern commodities.

Decline and Fall is history with the texture of myth. Howe’s first book of poems is, in its first section, a response to this texture, an exotic, sensuous and violent parsing of tales into grids and abstract shapes. The second section has fairy-tale-like qualities: the first epigraph to the second part of the poem comes from *Hansel and Gretel*: “Crawl in,’ said the witch, ‘and see if it’s hot enough to put the bread in” (HP, 51). The poem ends with “the blessed Paul/ shut the door which had/ been open and bolted it” (HP, 56) – it is as if, New Testament allusion notwithstanding, the reader had succumbed to the lure of the witch’s invitation. The poem’s two sections – the more visually oriented and Gibbon-derived first part and the looser forms of the second part – display a concern with the fantastic. Yet the poems remain cut off from contemporary experience, dazzled by the sheen of archaisms. Later poems achieve a powerful but precarious rapprochement between the fabulous and the quotidian – understood in the sense of the everyday political reality that stands silently at the fringes of Howe’s poems.

iii) Chanting at the Crystal Sea: the girl I had been before

The title of this poem sequence, published in 1975, is taken from a 19th century hymn.¹ “The Sea of Crystal,” writes Howe in a letter to Lyn Hejinian, “is that sea one has to cross before reaching the throne of God.”² The poem is a series of 23 numbered poems (28 in the original version, published by *Fire Exit* magazine and printed on a single folded sheet of paper). In its *New Directions* version it is preceded by a picture of four of her ancestors from the Quincy family. The picture caption indicates their prominence in New England society: “Four Josiah Quincys (1772-1919) Three mayors of Boston Two hosts of Lafayette One Harvard President”. Both picture and caption are taken from Howe’s aunt Helen’s book *The Gentle Americans 1864-1960: Biography of a Breed*.

Howe begins her long poetic engagement with American history in *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*. While her own affiliations, as the photograph acknowledges, are with a wealthy and influential family, the poem seeks to go a little further back into New England history: throughout the sequence there are passages that read as though they

¹ “Hark the sound of holy voices”, which begins “Hark the sound of holy voices/ Chanting at the crystal sea”.

² Undated mid-1970s letter.

have been abstracted from the narratives of early settlers. Although the language is occasionally archaic there are many references to the precarious situation of the early arrivals, their experience of 'wilderness' and the mixture of piety and violence in their lives: "Monday, massacre, burning, and pillage/ On Tuesday, gifts, and visits among friends" (*Chanting*, 70).

Most of the poem is written in the past simple, the tense of narrative, but there is no sense of narrative progression. Although the poem is often syntactically conventional, it is frequently unclear who is speaking and what is being spoken of. The mode of expression is dream-like: "The Judge's cave concealed a regicide/ hairy, meagre and deformed/ he exulted in the prospect of Thorough/ and ate sea mews raw// his feet were singed with lightning" (*Chanting*, 70). The poem at times – "'Ear.' Barked the moon" (*Chanting*, 62) – experiments with a surrealism that would find no place in later Howe work. Yet it is also in parts curiously similar to the preoccupations of the American poems of the 1980s, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* and *Thorow*.¹ There are episodes that suggest narratives of regression in psychoanalysis, as if seen from the point of view of a child ("A man and a woman/ so old their united ages/ made twenty centuries"); what appear to be childhood memories are combined with miniature accounts of motherhood; sometimes Howe seems to be voicing the experiences of female settlers in particular; and there are many fragments of embattled first-person narratives: "I bit off and burned my fingers to keep from freezing" (*Chanting*, 71).

The guiding motif of the sequence is hardship. The opulence and exoticism of *Hinge Picture* is replaced by ice, fog and snow. Murder haunts the poems' speakers, who are lost, frightened and deracinated. The New World is a place of darkness and terror, and religious belief is under threat: "O sullen silence/ Nail two sticks together/ and tell resurrection stories" (*Chanting*, 62). Any deity is first absent and second cruel. If *Hinge Pictures* has a sense of language as something to be chopped up and arranged in space, *Chanting at the Crystal Sea* works with more reduced means: there is less syntactical wreckage and the poems cohere as sentences of non sequiturs – "I thought we were in the right country/ but the mountains were gone" (*Chanting*, 63). The text seems mostly to be Howe's, appearing to make little use of citation. The diction is simple and sometimes seems poised between recent past and present. Sometimes Howe combines a snatch of contemporary speech, perhaps clichéd, with language that seems to belong to early American history: "We saw five or six people coming toward us// who were

¹ Howe talks of the burden of guilt brought by the regicides who fled to New England in her interview with Foster, 175.

savages.” *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*, then, has a very different texture to that of *Hinge Picture*. Its effects of defamiliarisation are achieved by means of content rather than form. The sense of a location in the past is inferred by context rather than through archaism. While the material qualities of the single folded sheet of the first edition make it a striking visual object, the poems themselves exhibit none of the arresting play with layout in *Hinge Picture*.

Some of the lines read as the testimony of survivors, though who is speaking and when is unclear: “I squeezed my baby flat as a pancake/ and turned white as chalk or lime” (*Chanting*, 70). Looking more closely at the text, the lines cited below indicate Howe’s concern to link these precarious narratives with a voice situated in the present. The effect is close to what Howe sought to describe 20 years later when she wrote “nothing such as liberty because we are in the field of history” in her preface to these poems (*FS*, 25). Here, in other words, is a strong sense of being subject to the obscure determinations of the past, enmeshed in a vast network of sound and sense. In *Chanting at the Crystal Sea* the reader is not so much picking a way through the system by means of the “lexical drift” enjoined by the later preface. Rather the “drift” occurs through such unpredictable detours in the narrative as the introduction of the “Dauphin” in the poem below:

There on the deck, child in her arms
was the girl I had been before

She waved

then threw her child to me

and jumped

But she missed the edge and swirled away.

I left you in a group of grownup children and went in search
wandered sandhills snowy nights
calling “Mother, Father”

A Dauphin sat down to dine on dust
alone in his field of wheat

One war-whoop toppled a State.

Chanting, 62-63

In these lines from the beginning of the eighth section of the poem Howe balances the motifs of dream, history and autobiography, at times seeming to collapse these registers, at times letting them pursue independent lines. The child on the deck is “the girl I had been before”, suggesting a dream recollection. This ghost waves but then commits the violent act of throwing her child at the speaker, in a gesture which suggests a communication between past and present. Is the girl on a sinking ship? Does the speaker want the child to be thrown? Or is it a violent transgression of the cultural associations of motherhood? This mother-self throws herself across the divide but cannot reach the other side, the here and now, and perishes, irrecoverable. In seeming continuity, the speaker leaves the child among other children and searches for ‘Mother, Father’ through snowy nights. The address to the parents becomes an address to the speaker’s parents, in a third collapsing of characters.¹ Catastrophe, lostness and abandonment combine in this sequence of lines. The dauphin comes from nowhere, an aristocratic presence greatly reduced. The eating of dust, an image of death and utter dereliction, resurfaces several times in section 14. The next line, “One war-whoop toppled a State”,² completely transforms the poem, sending it back into the Indian Wars of the 17th century. Now the emergency of the first few lines can be read as an event from the violent early years of the settlement of New England. Personal and historical come into contact as the speaker’s (or rather speakers’) dream narratives communicate a connection with distant trauma. The possibly autobiographical “I left you in a group of grown-up children/ wandered sandhills snowy nights/ calling ‘Mother, Father’” collapses a local incident of abandonment into the broader dispossession of exile. The line “wandered sandhills snowy night” suggests simultaneous white-out and blackout.

In *Chanting at the Crystal Sea* history is both more and less knowable than in *Hinge Picture*. Violence has left its mark on the language but Howe does not deploy the abrupt shifts that characterise later poems. *Chanting at the Crystal Sea* communicates twisted and dissociated dream states that appear never to shear off from real trauma. The poetry’s reliance on non sequiturs makes it harder to fathom – oddly it is more

¹ For an inversion of this image, see Howe’s description of the beginning of her journey by sea to America at the age of 16 months just before the outbreak of the Second World War: “Mummy says when we boarded the *Transylvania* that October at Cobh pronounced Cove, ocean liners couldn’t enter the harbour so they anchored beyond the Quay pronounced Key, somewhere in sea-fog. Boarding passengers were rowed out and climbed a rope-ladder to get on deck. I was hardly talking and had only learned to walk so I suppose a stranger took me up” (“Ether Either”, 119).

² Cf *Secret History*’s “I know the war-whoop in each dusty narrative” (SH, 99).

difficult to read than works such as *Defenestration of Prague*, where syntactical units rarely extend beyond a line or two. Such later work builds up its own meanings through the accumulation of small fragments from determinate lexical fields, such as theology, philosophy or Shakespearean drama. In *Chanting at the Crystal Sea* Howe is beginning to track the relation between determinate and indeterminate configurations that animates the later work but runs into a dead end with such lines as “Tickle yourself with my stroke’/ ticked the wiseacre clock” (*Chanting*, 64). Later work will avoid such whimsy and draw much of its energy from its handling of small grammatical units.

At the end of the poem the theme of paternity is prominent, and, once again, the personal and the historical immediately interpenetrate:

I see my father approaching
from the narrow corner of some lost empire
where the name of some great king still survives.
He has explored other lost sites of great cities
but that vital condition –
the glorious success of his grand enterprise
still eludes him.

Chanting, 72

The lines probe the confused legacy of imperialism, finding only uncertainty and amnesia instead of the clear mapping of territory: “some lost empire [...] some great king [...] other lost sites of great cities”. The father, like Gibbon, is spellbound by the past, but now he finds it increasingly unintelligible. “Greatness” and glory are no longer to be found – the 20th century, the poem suggests, has shown the bankruptcy of such rhetoric. The poem ends elusively, the certainties of the father’s archaeological project dissolving into vagueness and conjecture. From now on the failings of conquest will be an increasingly important concern for Howe and the sheer difficulty of recovering voices from those “lost sites” will exert pressure on the syntax of her poems. The voices of those who speak in *Chanting at the Crystal Sea* are rendered intact but we do not understand what they have to say. As her work develops Howe begins to efface such speakers and to search for ways to register that effacement.

Cabbage Gardens – signals of distress

Cabbage Gardens, published in 1979, though written before *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1978), has two epigraphs: one from Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson*, and

one, surprisingly perhaps, from Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit*. The Johnson quotation announces a key Howe theme, as Johnson muses on whether one might be able to write "The Cabbage-garden, a Poem":

The poem might begin with the advantages of civilised society over a rude state, exemplified by the Scotch, who had no cabbages till Oliver Cromwell's soldiers introduced them; and one might thus shew how arts are propagated by conquest, as they were by the Roman arms.

CG, 74

Howe returns again and again to the mutual implication of culture and conquest. In later work, especially that of *Singularities*, she is concerned with the settling of New England but here she is particularly interested in Ireland.¹ *Cabbage Gardens* is, she writes in a 1979 letter to Lyn Hejinian, "a gut reaction to a summer wandering around Ireland with husband and children".² Howe has said that she finds the split in her between American and Irish to be the respective pulls of father and mother – a "civil war of the soul".³ Having begun an exploration of the paternal, American aspect of her divided literary identity in *Chanting at the Crystal Sea* – an exploration that will achieve far greater focus in *Secret History of the Dividing Line* – she turns to her maternal, Irish side with *Cabbage Gardens*. Howe's future treatments of Ireland will involve major literary figures who had a relationship with the country – Spenser in *The Defenestration of Prague*, Swift in *The Liberties*, and James Clarence Mangan in *Melville's Marginalia*.

Cabbage Gardens, with its hybrid form, is closer in style to *Hinge Picture* than to *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*. There is no historical narrative at all: the poem series is a combination of myth, citation and Howe's own poetic 'voice'. Her later stylistic signature is most clearly approximated in the following lines:

Blind black night
strain of a web

of spears

¹ The work improves on *The Western Borders* (1976).

² Letter dated 20 September, 1979.

³ Falon interview, 37. Howe's mother was an Anglo-Irish actress and playwright who, before she moved to America, was prominent on the Dublin theatrical scene. In Boston, while Howe's father taught Law at Harvard, her mother directed with the Poet's Theatre and the Brattle Theatre.

I plough the earth
till ruts are ramparts

havoc of every host

Comic on a tragic stage

ambiguous chants
and gestures

CG, 78

Here the distinctive combinations of single lines and couplets that are common in the later work are deployed. In music and content too the lines have much in common with the poems of *The Europe of Trusts*. Darkness and ambiguity are core concerns, as is theatre.¹ It is unclear, as so often in Howe's couplets, why the two lines "Blind black night/ strain of a web" are grouped together. There is a rootless 'I' and "till ruts are ramparts" is an impossibility held together with alliteration, as if sound were enough to bind discrete thoughts. The line "havoc of every host" similarly depends on sound to hold the line together beneath the various possible readings of 'host'. The juxtaposition of opposites – comic/tragic – in the following line is also a characteristic of the later work. "Ambiguous chants/ and gestures", which might come from an anthropological treatise, seems to announce the opacity of the mythical world she seeks to engage with, and perhaps of even poetry itself.²

However, although it is hard to ignore the poem's occasional but troubling romanticisation of Ireland's fertile store of Celtic myth, there is a level of political allusion too: the reference to Cromwell at the head of the poem cannot but place these tales in the context of Johnson's words on the conquest of the "rude" by the "civilised":

The enemy coming on roads
and clouds
aeons.
Cashel has fallen
trees are turf

CG, 75

¹ The combination of a vatic register with this arrangement of lines recalls the poetry of HD.

² The line recalls the ambiguous "chants" of the orgiastic penultimate stanza of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" by Stevens, the 20th century poet whom Howe most admires (Keller interview, 23).

These lines refer to the capture of Cashel by Cromwell's troops, which was the occasion of a massacre of the townsfolk. The line "trees are turf" allude to the deforestation that was carried out under Cromwell.¹ However, it is perhaps the Rock of Cashel's pre-Christian history as a place of enchantment as much as the later political and religious disputes that interest Howe. These are linked on the same page to early American history, with the mention of Captain Barefoot, a name taken from late-17th century New England which might also stand for the unarmed people killed by Cromwell's troops.² Abstracted from this history, the purpose of this figure might be to knit together the conquest of Ireland and America:

and there is Captain Barefoot again and again
on a cliff
in a cave
burning blue lights
signals of distress

CG, 75

Howe on this first page weaves together metaphors of distress that depend on themes of water, violence, and religion – the crusaders, disaster and shipwreck. However obliquely she addresses Johnson's *Cabbage Gardens* "fancy", her own art is traversed by conquest. When, in the preface to *The Europe of Trusts*, Howe writes that "history is the record of winners" (*Leaves*, 11), she is close to Johnson's "arts are propagated by conquest". The indirectness and difficulty of *Cabbage Gardens* suggests an acknowledgement that it, too, is party to the culture of conquest but that it is seeking to disrupt that culture's modes of representation. While the poem does not problematise utterance to the degree of her more disjunctive later work, Howe is feeling her way towards a style of expression that is formally cognisant of this double bind – whether to write in a form of language that is complicit with that of a barbaric culture or to attempt a silent resistance.³

Two of the poems in *Cabbage Gardens* immerse the poem in the language of folklore:

¹ Cf the 17th century lyric "Kilcash", which begins "What shall we do for timber?"

² There may also be a reference to a passage from chapter 10 of Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* which closely parallels Howe's epigraph and recalls Gibbon's narratives of conquest: "Yet what the Romans did to other nations, was in a great degree done by Cromwell to the Scots; he civilized them by conquest, and introduced by useful violence the arts of peace. I was told at Aberdeen that the people learned from Cromwell's soldiers to make shoes and to plant kail. [...] The numbers that go barefoot are still sufficient to shew that shoes may be spared" (51).

³ Best expressed, perhaps, in *Articulation's* "collision or collusion with history" (33).

Island of the Fierce Beast
Island of the Giant Horse
Island of the Stone Door
Island of the Wondrous Beast
Island of the Brazen Door
Island of the Biting Horse
Island of the Glass Bridge

A man
whose only clothing was his hair

flung a clew of twine

from a little ledge
where the waves washed.

CG, 79

All of these lines are taken directly from a summary of the medieval “Voyage of Maeldun”.¹ In the story the hero visits each of the above-mentioned islands (the phrases Howe cites are the titles of distinct episodes). The man clothed in hair comes from the section entitled The Island of the Anchorite. He is in self-imposed exile and, like some figures in Howe’s later work, an outsider driven by spiritual exigencies.² The words “flung a clew of twine” comes from The Island of the Women. The twine is flung by the island’s queen as Maeldun attempts to escape in his bark: it sticks to his hand and she winds him and his ship back to the island, where Maeldun and his men are obliged to remain. This motif recalls Ariadne’s thread (the entire tale is thought to derive from *The Odyssey*), a key element in *Eikon*.³

Howe concertinas the lines from different episodes in *The Voyage of Maeldun* together and, in the context of her poem, the lines work to express a concern with land, exile, wandering and spirituality. Although I have suggested certain thematic concerns

¹ *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race* by Thomas Rolleston. Tennyson based his “Voyage of Maeldune” on the same story, in which the protagonist sets out on a quest to find the murderer of his father.

² See, for example, Howe’s treatment of Anne Hutchinson in “Incloser” and Mary Magdalene in *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*.

³ The archaism ‘clew’ appears in translations of the story of Theseus and the Minotaur, where it describes the ball of thread given Theseus by Ariadne to help him get out of the labyrinth. Ariadne is a figure in *Eikon*.

that Howe's source text shares with her own work, its principal function is, like Gibbon, as a linguistic resource. At this stage in her writing Howe is particularly interested in the ranges of associations suggested by the texture of the language itself. The anaphoric list of island titles is similar to the list of Gates in *Hinge Picture*: it uses words to define a territory or lexical field, in this case myth.¹ And, just as important in this list is the look of the words on the page, with "Island of the [...]" falling seven successive times. When Howe uses the myth her aims are more textural than textual. It may be that Howe hoped that some of the alienness of medieval Irish Christianity would stick to the underside of her text, much as the clew of twine sticks to the hand of Maeldun, but the essential function of the dislocated words is to allow a logic of 'lexical drift' to set up a relationship with the past.

At another point in the poem, Howe cites a passage of Dickens, from chapter 35 of *Bleak House*.² On this occasion she does nothing to alter the citation:

Dare I hint at that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which I was one of the beads! And when my only prayer was to be taken off from the rest, and when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing?

CG, 81

The passage comes from Esther's narrative of her illness. Immediately following the passage in the original is the sentence: "Perhaps the less I say of these sick experiences, the less tedious and the more intelligible I shall be."³ Howe is perhaps suggesting a point at which identity is at risk and intelligibility at issue, as if Esther's framing of her despair condenses some of Howe's own concerns with the narration of trauma. The 'great black space' echoes the 'Blind black night', cited above, and anticipates her use of darkness in her later poetry as an emblem of mystical unknowing.

Cabbage Gardens is also notable for the way it addresses the natural world. There are many references to landscape in the poem: trees, rivers, stones, wind and ice. Nature,

¹ HP, 37: "The Gate of Reuben/ The Gate of Judah/ The Gate of Levi/ The Gate of Joseph/ The Gate of Benjamin/" etc.

² Passages in *The Secret History of the Dividing Line* are, as Fiona Green notes, derived from *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. In *Eikon*, a poem of the late 1980s, Howe cites a passage from *David Copperfield*.

³ Dickens, 489.

in this poem, is always unapproachable and appears in the poem as a literary residue, removed from its Romantic function as locus of the sublime or screen upon which the drama of human perception is played out. The natural world is an unfriendly place in *Cabbage Gardens*, as it had been in *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*, often simply a brute presence that does not stand for anything other than its resistance to human modification.

The forest, however, is a space to which Howe will return again and again in her writing – *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Comus*, for example, are important to *The Defenestration of Prague*, and the forest is vital to the American poems as a representation of wilderness. It appears in *Cabbage Gardens* in the following passages: “John-a-dreams/ counterclockwise/ in a wood again/ addressing a crowd [...]”; “pushing aside the branches”; “Her// hair as dark/ as the trees in the forest// against white snow”; and “explorer /in a forest/ of myself”. Nature, when metaphorical, has two modes in Howe: it is sometimes invoked as a means of describing human mental processes (“a forest/ of myself”) and sometimes as a figure for an external dread: the frightening territory, full of ‘savage people’, that lay beyond the Puritan settlements, to take one example.¹

In contrast to the depiction of nature *Cabbage Gardens* has many buildings – a fort, watchtowers, a house, a lighthouse, a cottage. It is hard to separate tourism from history, autobiography from brochure prose, in these references. The key lines in this meeting of nature and artifice are: “I plough the earth/ till ruts are ramparts”. The process of working on the unformed world, tilling the soil, leads of necessity to the building of castles. Human collectivities and the cultures that bind them together, Howe appears to be saying, are founded on exclusion and violence. Her *Cabbage Garden*, like Dr Johnson’s “fancy”, is an artwork that is struggling to become conscious of the conditions of its own existence. The formal consequences of this struggle will be felt throughout *The Europe of Trusts* and *Singularities*, books in which the lexical fields she draws on and her formal exploration of the poetics of opacity become both more tightly focused and more broadly expressive.

¹ Kibbey, 99, shows how in the 1630s similar language was used to describe the suppression of the supposed ‘antinomians’ within the colony and the crushing of the Pequod Indians without. See my account of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*.

iv) Secret History of the Dividing Line: a boundary model

With 1978's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* Howe reached her mature style: it is again a hybrid series, combining word-grids, prose, upside-down writing and direct quotation. Most importantly there are many instances of the page-long sequences of short single lines and couplets that dominate several of her later poems. The title comes from William Byrd's *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, his 'private', initially suppressed, version of his book *The Dividing Line*, which narrated the establishment of the boundary between North Carolina and Virginia in 1728.¹ Byrd and a party of surveyors travelled westward through the 'wilderness', marking the dividing line.² The 'secret' version abounds in puns, and also contains many accounts of the sexual exploits of the surveyors as they 'hunted' women "wherever they went – white, black and red".³ The marking out of the territory is accompanied by rapacious sexual behaviour, both towards the indigenous population and other settlers: The authoritative text, then, conceals an illicit parallel account of the line-drawing exercise in which violence, aggressive male desire and linguistic play are present.⁴

Fiona Green's recent account of this poem draws on Howe's journals to link her text's sources – Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr, Dickens, Beckett, Webster's dictionary – with a 'working through' of the process of mourning for her dead father. While her rejection of attempts to seek "political correlatives" for what some writers see as Howe's avoidance of linguistic "closure" is a refreshing turn in Howe studies, her reading of *Secret History* as a therapeutic narrative of mourning that "works towards a point of rest" and "makes the subject who speaks it whole" is insufficiently alive to the energies in the poem that point towards violence and dispersal.⁵ Moreover, while Green is absolutely right to link the motif of the absent father in Howe's poetry with the episode at Buffalo zoo and his sudden death in 1967, a more productive critical reading can be made *outwards* from these events in Howe's life to her rich explorations of the idea of

¹ The *History* and *Secret History* were not published until 1841 and 1929 respectively.

² See the lines "westward and still westward/ matches coughing like live things" (*SH*, 95). These lines, as Green notes, come from a passage in Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, but change 'eastward' to 'westward'.

³ See introduction to the Dover edition, xix. See also passages such as: "My landlord had unluckily sold our Men some brandy, which produced much disorder, making some too Cholerick, and others too loving. (So that a damsel who came to assist in the kitchen would have been ravish't, if her timely consent had not prevented the Violence.) [...] Firebrand and his servant were the most suspected, having been engag'd in those kinds of Assaults before" (149).

⁴ Howe continues this interest in textual variants and suppressed manuscripts in her writing on Emily Dickinson, Shelley, and the *Eikon Basilike*. She also commonly makes links between patriarchal, colonial and editorial imperatives.

⁵ See Green, 82, 83, 99.

an aporetic authority in her writing than *inwards* towards Howe's personal experience of pain.¹

One of the poem's acknowledged sources is *Touched with Fire: Civil War Letters and Diary of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr, 1861-64*, edited by Howe's father, Mark DeWolfe Howe. Mark is also Howe's son's name, and the name of her paternal grandfather and great-grandfather.² However, the word 'Mark' has two other fields of resonance within the poem: the physical act of making marks on a page; and the notion of the mark as something that delineates a border or dividing line. Both ideas come together on page 94, which contains the title phrase twice, the second time upside-down (but not mirrored) immediately below the first:

SECRET HISTORY OF THE DIVIDING LINE
SECRET HISTORY OF THE DIVIDING LINE

SH, 94

The idea of the mark is discussed by Howe in her interview with Charles Bernstein: "I am very concerned with space, with the white space of a page and even the look of a letter and the font; every single mark on a page seems to me to carry a kind of significance and importance." It is this treatment of the mark that I wish to guide my discussion of the poem.

The mark is a basic index of difference and a way of construing the 'dividing line' of the title. Howe's work characteristically sets up oppositions between the formed and the formless: known from unknown, colony from wilderness, centre from margins, meaning from non-meaning, and conscious thought from intuition or telepathy. The poems from her *Singularities* collection explicitly meditate on these themes. In this earlier poem is a clue, however, to the focus of Howe's interest, which is the *boundary* across which the transaction between these opposed entities occurs.³ With most of the occurrences of the term 'boundary' or 'border' in *Secret History* the word 'mark' is not far away. The poem's first page of text comprises two word grids. The word 'boundary' occurs in both, twice in the second:

¹ Although, as Green notes, Howe herself in a journal entry writes that she somehow laid her father "to rest" in the poem. *Secret History* shares formal attributes and a preoccupation with father-figures that will be apparent in many of her later poems. See Green, 95.

² Another Mark, who died at the age of two, was the half-brother of Howe's grandfather.

³ In a work which falls outside the ambit of this dissertation, 2002's *Kidnapped*, Howe describes this region as the "relational space" and images it in the semi-transparent interleaf that used to be inserted after the frontispiece of books (17-18).

mark mar ha forest 1 a boundary manic a land a
tract indicate position 2 record bunting interval
free also event starting the slightly position of
O about both or don't something INDICATION Americ

made or also symbol sachem maimed as on her for
ar in teacher duct excellent figure MARK lead be
knife knows his hogs dogs a boundary model nucle
hearted land land land district boundary times un

SH, 89

The first of these grids, as Green and Back have observed, is a selective arrangement of words from the definition of 'mark' in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. The poem begins with 'mark', which is then abbreviated. The term 'mark' is amplified in several ways: 'indication', 'indicated', 'symbol', 'record' and 'figure'. The truncated 'Americ' and 'sachem' (an Algonquin chief) help place the boundary within American frontier mythology. The abrupt line-endings send the eye tracking backwards through the grids: 'Americ' looks back to the 'a' that ends the first line; 'nucle' looks back to the 'ar' that begins the preceding line and the concluding 'un' might be prefixed to the grid's first word, 'made'. The grid thus trips up the forward movement of reading by suggesting backward glances, much as the 'Mark' (Howe's son) is set against the line of earlier 'Marks' in the DeWolfe Howe family that Howe would later write of in her preface to the 1970s poems. This focus of attention on the disposition of poetic space is also a concern with the marking and division of land: the grids seem to revolve around the words 'land' and 'boundary', repeated four and three times respectively. This overmapping of discrete registers – territory and the space of the page, in this instance – is a fundamental characteristic of Howe's poetry. It is also, as I will later discuss, one that is at times highly questionable since, as the dualisms stack up – wilderness and settlement; antinomian and the law; manuscript and print edition – the specific subtleties of the oppositions collapse beneath the burden of overdetermination.¹

Near the top of the next page Howe's meditation on the line is developed:

¹ See my account of *Thorow*.

When next I looked he was gone
Frame of our Universe
Our intellectual wilderness
no longer boundless
west
when next I looked he was gone.

SH, 90

The passage is framed by a phrase, “when next I looked he was gone”, from Oliver Wendell Holmes’s “Memorial Day Address”, delivered in 1884. In Holmes’s speech, he describes a “youthful lieutenant” seen by Wendell Holmes just before his death.¹ Between this framing but inexplicit death are lines which first imagine the divine limit of the universe, and second the idea of a bounding of “our intellectual wilderness”. Further down the page, there are several more quotations from Holmes’s speech.² While the page may be thick with language drawn from Mark DeWolfe Howe’s edition of Wendell Holmes’s civil war diaries, the poem itself links these passages with the mixture of wilderness and boundary in the colonisation of the new land: the push westward and the cartographic imperative of excursions such as that of William Byrd and his party of rough-housing surveyors.

The poem continues:

Close at hand the ocean
until before
hidden from our vision
MARK
border
bulwark. an object set up to indicate a boundary or position
hence a sign or token
impression or trace

The Horizon

SH, 90

¹ This part of Holmes’s speech is cited in Howe’s father’s edition of Holmes’s Civil War letters and diaries, *Touched with Fire*. The book takes its title from a phrase in the address (56n).

² “One may fall/ at the beginning of a charge/ or at the top of earthworks// For an instant your heart stops/ and you say to yourself/ the skirmishers are at it// wearing their wounds like stars the armies of the dead sweep over” – these lines rearrange three different passages from Holmes’s speech. See Holmes (10. 11. 14).

Now the lines restate the idea of the border, in which 'MARK' is implicated. The word 'bulwark' is introduced – this brings with it the idea of a defence. The word 'hence' establishes the bridge between the indication of position and significance: "a sign or token/ impression or trace". Although marks signify, their meaning may be unclear and they may be wiped out or rendered unintelligible by the wars, colonialism and Johnson's arts "propagated by conquest".¹ Howe is condensing in these pages a link between land and page, the colonial history of the United States and the act of writing. Howe's methods – the drawing of linguistically impelled lines of connection such as Nigeria/Niagara; the deflection of meaning in 'impressions' and 'traces'; the interruption of the left-to-right, top-to-bottom passage of the reading eye – are ways of attempting to write against the dominant expansionist narrative of America. Such writing instead offers against-the-grain linguistic detours that communicate an ethic of wandering.

Her writing serves to place the poetic line itself in quotation marks and query its legislative aspect. This is not to make a general point about the ethics of post-Olsonian open-form poetics: I do not want to suggest that non-stanzaic poetry has a necessary affiliation with, say, a broader interrogation of authority. However, in Howe's poetry of this period a quite specific method emerges which depends on analogies that are transposed from the field of language – in its dynamic arrangements on the space of the page – to the public and private unfolding of history. The cultivated indirection of the thought in the poetry is, at one level, rendered in the *mise en page* and, at another level offered as a way of apprehending the past.

Towards the end of the poem some of the same words as those used on page 90 recur:

trackless
timeless
in time
MARK
border
bulwark
detail
from vague
infinity of
background

¹ See my discussion of naming in *Thorow*.

that haunts
or hunts
an object
sign
or token
impression
or trace
THE HORIZON

SH, 119

Now the words have been reordered. The phrase “[...] vague/ infinity of/ background [...]” suggests that Howe is thinking of figuration itself.¹ The sense-making process is announced as mysterious, since the ground on which marks are to be made is itself vague and limitless. “Sign”, “impression”, “token”, “trace”: all are different variations on a theme, with separate connotations – from the fetishistic ring of ‘token’, through the magical ‘sign’, to the ghostly residue of ‘trace’.² What happens in this mysterious transaction is guided by sound patterns as much as anything else: the “background/ that haunts/ or hunts/ an object”. The background line, the horizon, is a limit that can never be approached. As well as looking ‘back’ into the ‘vague’ perspectival depth, the words look back to the poem on the preceding page:

Our law
vocables
of shape or sound

SH, 118

Legislation and language, on the page or spoken, imply one another, Howe seems to suggest. Whether the ‘Our’ pertains to all of us or to poets, she might be saying that the physicality of ‘shape or sound’ counters the abstract and arbitrary ‘law’ of signification. The lines also look further back to “In its dumb first form// language was gesture” (SH, 95), a phrase borrowed from Beckett’s essay “Dante Bruno Vico Joyce”.³ The poem wishes not somehow to evade referentiality but to recover through

¹ Pictorial representation will be discussed with reference to *Pythagorean Silence*. See also Nicholls’s account of “Rückenfigur”, from *Pierce-Arrow*, for examination of Howe’s treatment of foreground and background (Nicholls, 2002). The front cover of the original edition of *Secret History* and the title page of the *Frame Structures* reprint contain 18th century diagrams of the workings of perspective.

² As the first American edition of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* was published in 1976, it is possible that Howe’s choice of the term is informed by an engagement with deconstructive thought.

³ I am indebted to Green’s essay for this observation.

typography and sound a repressed level of gesturality to language.¹ Sense is “hidden”, she continues (*SH*, 118), but her “law” involves “ceremonial evolutions in the dark” (*ibid*). The lines suggest a similar fascination with myth and ritual to that discernible in *Hinge Picture* and *Cabbage Gardens*.

The key mythical site in *Secret History* is that of the forest, a word caught, in the poem’s first line, between “mark” and “boundary”. Much of *Secret History*’s wandering takes place in this environment, a space that has developed in its metaphorical range since it appeared in *Cabbage Gardens* and one which frequently appears in later poems. On page 100, she writes: “marks and signs/ I followed the track”. One of the tracks through the poem is to follow this wandering: “no pocket compass/ or notched tree” she writes on the same page. Then, a couple of pages later, comes the self-silencing of: “I cut out my tongue in the forest” (*SH*, 102). A few pages further on there are the lines: “thread of the story scented with flowers” and “That afternoon/ went out to mark some trees” (*SH*, 105). On page 109 we have: “bed of leaves/ mirage into deep sleep// forest command/ may be a lie”. Page 119 describes a party of adults and children moving on horseback during (presumably) the civil war: “wounded trees in slivers from peppering of bullets”. There is a quotation from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* V (i) – “I kiss the wall’s hole/ not your lips at all” – and one from Chaucer’s *Friar’s Tale*: “for though this Somnour wood/ were as an hare”.² (The latter teasingly uses a word which suits the pastoral texture of the poem – “wood” – but which for Chaucer meant something different: ‘mad’.) This strand of associations in the work prefigures not only her treatment of Puritan representations of the ‘wilderness’, and of Thoreau’s idea of nature, but her discussion of the importance of the Leatherstocking tales to Dickinson’s work. In a letter to the poet, John Taggart, written a few years later, Howe would explain the importance of the forest to her poetry:

The Forest is language, yes – but it’s also quite specifically the Forest – the American Forest. Now we can’t take it – but we try like hell to take it – and if you were in the Adirondacks you would see we mostly did take it and still may. But I always think of Heidegger too – and *clearings* – Rilke. We can’t conquer language – that wilderness in us – but for Americans I think this metaphor and *myth* of a primeval forest that we

¹ I discuss the complex relations of speech and signification in Howe’s poetry in relation to the thought of Derrida in my account of *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*.

² “For thogh this somonour wood were as an hare” [“Somonour” – ie ‘summoner’ – was a server of summons for an ecclesiastical court.]

violated is a primal *guilt*. I have it and must keep repeating it – I can't help myself.¹

Her poetics is here explicitly tied to an American setting: the uncoercibility of language is held to be analogous to the resistance of the American wilderness to colonisation. For Howe, there is a fundamental guilt to the American experience of landscape – once it became American it could no longer be a 'wilderness'.² (Howe's allusion to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in *Secret History* emphasises her view that English literary representations were vital to the construction of the American forest.) In linguistic terms the strange ungovernability of poetic language offers a metaphorical means of returning to a time before that "violation" of the landscape occurred. However, it is also clear that Howe's poetry does not believe that this is possible: the wilderness, whether linguistic or otherwise, is never attainable in a pure state – that too is a myth.

The pattern of return and repetition in the poem is closed with the poem's final word grid:

sh dispel iris sh snow sward wide ha
forest l a boundary manic a land sh
whit thing : target cadence marked on
O about both or don't INDICATION Americ
sh woof subdued toward foliage free sh

FS, 122

The second and fourth lines are revoicings of lines which appear on the grids of the opening page. The last line appears in similar form on page 116. Howe is offering re-combinations of her own grids, as if haunted by the effect of words arranged in patterns. Like the grid on page 116, the lines are punctuated by her own initials and the initials of *Secret History*, which allow the poem to close on a conspiratorial injunction to keep silence.

¹ Letter dated 29 May, 1987. Howe's emphases. (Howe is discussing the 'Taking the Forest' section of *Articulation*). As Back, 176, notes, the idea of the "language forest" is indebted to Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator": "Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the centre of the language forest, but on the outside facing the ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one" (77).

² Howe is clearly exploring an understanding of 'wilderness' as it functions in the colonial imagination – the state prior to *European* settlement.

The use of variant grids with the same elements suggests an endless process of recombination. Marks may or may not signify but their dynamism is better understood in terms of multi-directional montage than a forward “linear” trajectory. In pursuing these line of unreasoning Howe suggests that her poetry’s task – and that of the readers who would follow her – is to pick a way through a forest of uncertain signification. Her lines of association are threads which guide the process of ‘lexical drift’. Howe’s flexible forms are capable of assimilating personal narrative, myth, scraps abstracted from literary sources, and sequences of her own broken language. It is a polyphony that is rooted in historical particulars, far removed from either the unitary ‘I’ of the confessional lyric or the rootless, dispersed and diachronic subjectivities of the language poetry grouping.

The mode developed in the early poems, which reaches maturity in *Secret History*, allows Howe to trace motifs such as the forest or kingship in many different contexts, bringing together and overmapping discrete occurrences in a tensile language that both requests and forbids resolution. Howe is concerned with both the fact and the circumstance of enunciation: her verse as it unfolds in *Secret History* fuses local utterance with its wider public contexts. Her mode of citation is elastic in form and, through elision and close attention to sound, she channels the various voices into a form of poetic speech that is neither a single voice nor a mere agglomeration of diverse significant utterances. The brevity and conciseness of her lines, the sharp editing, and consistent concerns such as darkness, power, speech and violence lend her work a marked stylistic signature. A highly distinctive ‘voice’ emerges, paradoxically, from a poetic practice that appears to suggest that a truly private utterance is an impossibility. The *Frame Structures* poems already evince a desire to balance fragmentation with consistency and seriousness of register. With *Secret History*, Howe’s lines carefully bring incoherence, obscurity and the gestural aspects of language within the frame of a coherent poetics.

Conclusion: *Frame Structures*

The poems collected in *Frame Structures* show Howe to be pre-eminently concerned with the cultural and aesthetic ironies that attend the ‘civilising’ phenomenon of colonial violence. With her references to the Roman Empire, the settlement of New England, Irish history, and the cartographic energies expended on marking out the American ‘wilderness’, these earlier poems are preoccupied with formulating an aesthetic response to aggression. They know themselves to be of the ‘civilising’ culture, so they must find means to turn against themselves in order to loosen their own inevitable affiliations to barbarism.

Howe's early poetry contains many voices but does not relinquish its claim to be able, through juxtaposition, to confront a history composed of documents "written by the Masters" (*Leaves*, 11). This it does with a composite form mixing such disparate elements as folk narratives, biblical allusions and material with strong autobiographical resonances. Howe offers a historical memory that is attuned, at the level of form, to trauma. It is writing that refuses to surrender itself to narratives with formal methods which embody a certitude complicit with the repression of the marginal. Her early writing encompasses the "pieces of childhood" that form personal history but combines them, in a way that is highly attentive to linguistic connections, with numerous other threads of suffering linking private and public experience. Just as the speculation attributing a heightened awareness to the polar bears at Buffalo Zoo allows an untenable hypothesis to take on the shape of a prediction in the mind of a child, so her poetry can assert modes of connectedness that are neither hostage to absolutist ideals of historical truth – such as the Puritans' certainty of being God's chosen people – nor to flights of irrationalist fancy.

Howe's experience at Buffalo Zoo is inextricably linked to the subsequent absence of her father. It is invested with vocation-giving significance by Howe, forming her as a "poet of war". Yet this formation is inflected by her assertion that "Women and children experience war and its nightmare. Their war-dreams share with dreams of other kinds that they are occurrences full of blown sand seaward foam in which disappearance fields expression" (*FS*, 7). The unconscious experience of the dispossessed becomes a field of expression that is organised around a figure of absence, "disappearance". If the arts are, in Johnson's terms, "propagated by conquest", Howe's early writing asks what kind of poetry can be adequate to the experience – the "war dreams" – of those swept away by that process of conquest.

In the "Pearl Harbor" section that opens *Pythagorean Silence* Howe writes, "a chain of parks encircles the city" (*PS*, 27; also *Leaves*, 12). This liminal space – neither settlement nor wilderness – might be described as an emblem of her poetry's space of operation. "Language surrounds Chaos" (*Leaves*, 13) just as the onlookers at Buffalo Zoo huddle round the iron railings "designed to keep the brute force fenced off" (*FS*, 3). In these complementary models – the civilisation hemmed in by the wild and its inversion in the zoo – Howe is concerned with the child's gaze that passes through the railings. Her poetry from the outset seeks to find means of capturing the transaction between "barbarism" and "modern rationalism" that is described in this vignette.

The consequence is a poetry that, in staging an encounter between language and "Chaos" opens itself to powerful destructuring energies. While writing fully adequate

to this transactional space would not emerge until *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, the earlier poems demonstrate an immense poetic and prosodic ambition and a great capacity to find means of representing and resisting “brute force”.

2: THE EUROPE OF TRUSTS: METAMORPHOSES AND REPRESENTATION

i) *Pythagorean Silence*: moving in solitary symbols through shadowy surmises

[...] Nature knows
No steadfast station, but, or ebbs, or flows:
Ever in motion; she destroys her old,
And casts new figures in another mold.

Metamorphoses (trs Dryden) XV, 176-177

Pythagorean Silence is a long, meditative poem-sequence strewn with allusions to pre-Socratic philosophy. First published in 1982, it appears in Howe's 1990 collection *The Europe of Trusts* immediately after the "There are not leaves enough to crown to cover to crown to cover" preface, with its much-cited desire to "tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate" (*Leaves*, 14). The poem comprises three sections: "Pearl Harbour", "Pythagorean Silence" and an untitled third section. "Pearl Harbour" reprises some of the material in "Leaves" in poetic form. This first section and the final one are relatively short and are formally mixed, while "Pythagorean Silence" runs to 17 parts of similar length, all using the combination of single lines and couplets that Howe had used in *Secret History* but not in *The Liberties* (first published in 1980 and a text in which the visual component is extremely important).

Drawing on Ovid and Shakespeare, the poem explores the notion of metamorphosis. Howe's interest in borders and boundaries narrows on that between life and death. Developing some of the questions broached in "Leaves" the poem uses the symbol of the laurel tree in Ovid to explore the public role of poetry and offer itself as a particular kind of poetry of witness – one that communicates the gaps in the historical record. Representation itself is an anxiety of the poem and, with whiteness and silence as persistent motifs, it often threatens to fade into the blankness of the empty page. *Hamlet* is the poem's chief Shakespearean resource and Howe devotes particular attention to the death of Ophelia, which comes to represent a moment of embattled lyric potential. Howe probes a distinctly metaphysical vocabulary throughout the poem and, with Nietzsche's reading of the pre-Socratics in the background, begins to pick apart the battery of gendered dualisms that sustain the metaphorical separation of body and spirit in Western thought.



In a letter to Ron Silliman, the poet and editor of the influential *In the American Tree* anthology of language poetry, Howe notes that the tripartite structure corresponds to the three stages of creation in the Pythagorean tradition: “1) undifferentiated unity. 2) the separation out of two opposites to form the world order. 3) the reunion of opposites to generate life”.¹ Howe links her poem to the event at Buffalo that is described in her prefaces to both *The Europe of Trusts* and *Frame Structures*, speculating that “maybe those polar bears and my father became Pythagoras”.² She expands:

That applies to P SILENCE. 1) the real. Buffalo Pearl Harbor being the day of the vanishing of my father. 2) Father now mythical father Pythagoras separation of us all endlessly chattering as if just the sound of voices explaining or of writing being written can ward off the terror of Silence or the idea of emptiness. 3) Out of both of these former (and in a Freudian sense I guess – out of both parents [opposites]) how do I as a woman pulling words and influences attempts at answers from a largely male tradition how do I marry these ideas and influences to make something new and something that is my own voice that will go on talking.³

While Howe immediately inserts the caveat “that’s only the shadow of a shadow in the piece” her gloss of *Pythagorean Silence* is both helpful and confusing. Putting her various thoughts together, we might say that *Pythagorean Silence* is a poem predicated on public and private catastrophe: Pearl Harbor and the disappearance of Howe’s father for four years. Her father is partly identified with Pythagoras and the poem as a whole grapples with the problem of the woman poet making something new for herself within a largely male tradition.⁴ It is also a poem of Pythagorean dualisms that seeks to ward off a silence that represents a frightening absence.

However, as with the early poems collected in *Frame Structures*, silence, or an approximation of silence, can also function as an expressive goal of the poetry. Absence and silence are crucial to the conceptual terrain of the poem, which juxtaposes the preoccupation with mark-making of *Secret History* with the idea of a lyric poetry that is intimately concerned with death. However, the network of

¹ Letter to Ron Silliman, 4 August 1982. Howe makes this point with reference to a passage from Alastair Fowler’s book *Spenser and the Numbers of Time*.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See her comments in her Foster interview, 168-169.

associations in the poem is large. Against a background of silence, or blankness, Howe's poem is above all a poem of metamorphoses, with roots in Ovid and Shakespeare. Such metamorphoses, I will argue, link Ovid's Daphne to Shakespeare's Ophelia as an image of a gendered lyric born in adversity. The pun is the basic level at which these transformations work, both as a means of deforming her citations to suit her own concerns and as part of an investment in a Heideggerean conception of language.

Chief among the Pythagorean motifs of *Pythagorean Silence* is its exploration of a complex of ideas around metempsychosis, death and metamorphosis.¹ In using Pythagoras as a point of departure, Howe is touching on a network of associations that spans many centuries and incorporates numerous reformulations. Indeed it might be argued that the very elusiveness of the name under which the poem develops is another aspect of the weakening of authorial purchase that Howe's poetry, with its extensive use of montage, enacts. Nonetheless, notwithstanding the amorphousness of the mass of ideas associated with Pythagoras, Howe's poem can be said to be 'Pythagorean' in three particular ways: because of its attribution, via Emerson, of a positive moral value to silence; because of its desire to engage with (and destabilise) the theory of opposites; and, above all, because of the manner in which it addresses the concept of the transmigration of souls. The key 'dividing line' in this poem is that between Being and Non-being and, filtered through Renaissance readings of Ovidian metamorphosis, this transitional point becomes for Howe the point at which lyric poetry takes shape. Crossing this line is, moreover, a preoccupation that extends beyond this poem: at several points in her work – the human-bird shifts in *The Liberties*, for example, or her treatment of Bartleby in *Melville's Marginalia* – poetry is located in just such a transitional space.

The idea of a Pythagorean 'silence' is an allusion to the injunction against idle chatter among the initiates of the Pythagorean cult.² It is also linked to Howe's concern to respond to American literary history: in section 15 of the central part of the poem, entitled "Pythagorean Silence", the line "Long Pythagorean lustrum" occurs (*PS*, 63). The phrase is drawn from one of Emerson's addresses, entitled "Literary Ethics":

¹ The teachings of Pythagoras are virtually impossible to disentangle from those of his followers. Such attributes of Pythagoreanism as asceticism; dietary regulations; a theory of number; a related musical theory that extends to the doctrine of the harmony of the spheres; geometry; the theory of opposites and the doctrine of the transmigration of souls can be grouped around his name but Pythagoras remains an elusive presence (see Guthrie, *KS*, Guthrie, *WKC* or Cornford).

² See Guthrie, *WKC*, 167: "Silence and secrecy were prominent features of [the Pythagoreans'] behaviour." According to Iamblichus, in Guthrie, *KC*, 74. Pythagorean initiates were required to be silent for five years.

Come now, let us go and be dumb. Let us sit with our hands on our mouths, a long, austere, Pythagorean lustrum. Let us live in corners, and do chores, and suffer, and weep, and drudge, with eyes and hearts that love the Lord. Silence, seclusion, austerity, may pierce deep into the grandeur and secret of our being, and so diving, bring up out of secular darkness, the sublimities of the moral constitution.¹

Emerson, drawing on the high moral tone of American Puritanism, attributes an ethical weight to silence and asceticism. A certain austerity, he argues, allows access to otherwise hidden and privileged aspects of morality. Howe finds common cause with the Calvinism of the American north-east, which has marked her writing from the outset.² Howe's ethics, however, are intimately concerned with negative theology and mystic speech, and her 'silence', while it shares Emerson's moral fervour, is unwilling to bring to light comprehensible objects retrieved from the "secular darkness" it 'dives' into. Darkness is an aspect of the divine for Howe, and revelation in her work is a fleeting and inscrutable occurrence. Howe's work seeks to perform, through an encounter with the obdurate obscurity of language itself, the shadows at the fringes of philosophical language and the resistance of eschatological questions to rational enquiry.³ Furthermore, the cultural meanings which accrete around the opposition of 'dark' and 'light' are an important part of the poem's meditation. It is when Howe's language finds itself confronted with the vacuum of the blank page or restlessly turning away from reference, that it pursues the "sublimities of the moral constitution". However, rather than seeking, with Emerson, to bring something hidden into the light, *Pythagorean Silence* questions the very metaphorical underpinning of the term 'Enlightenment'.

In interview she comments on her interest in the theory of oppositions that has been assigned to the Pythagoreans. In this system the world was held to ten fundamental oppositions: limited/unlimited; odd/even; one/many; right/left; male/female; rest/motion; straight/crooked; light/darkness; good/bad; square/oblong. Howe remarks that she is interested in the equation of femininity with darkness: yet her "Promethean aspiration [is] to be a Pythagorean and a woman".⁴ Howe is asserting

¹ Emerson (1855), 145.

² "I can't get away from New England. It's in my heart and practice. The older I get the more Calvinist I grow. [...] I am at home with them." Beckett interview, 21.

³ The Heideggerean readings of Howe's poetry offered by Taggart and McCorkle have much to offer in this regard. See also Bruns, 11: "I understand the later Heidegger as opening us up to the ancient and discredited tradition that figures poetry in terms of the darkness of speech, that is, the *ainigma* or dark saying that reduces us to bewilderment and wonder and exposes us to the uncontrollable."

⁴ Beckett interview, 18.

that her work recognises the generative power of such antinomies in our culture while at the same time working to overturn them.

Howe's work in the poem and elsewhere – much as she identifies with and distances herself from Melville's Pythagoreanism – is to follow an explicitly metaphysical trajectory while at the same time subjecting it to a sceptical unpicking. An investment, in other words, in examining the illimitable space to which Western culture assigns the feminine, darkness, spirit and the unsayable is accompanied by a desire to overturn the concrete instances of oppression that are sustained by such categories.¹ Schultz's description of silence in Howe's work as both a "negative social fact for women and a positive religious state" can be modified to include an ambivalence about the gendered mysticism of that "religious state".²

My reading of *Pythagorean Silence* is organised around the dominant 'Pythagorean' strand in the poem-sequence: the transformative metaphysical motif of metempsychosis. *Pythagorean Silence* opens with an allusion to Daphne, turned into a tree as she seeks to escape the amorous attentions of Apollo (*PS*, 17):

we that were wood
when what a wide wood was

In a physical Universe playing with

words

Bark be my limbs my hair be leaf

Bride be my bow my lyre my quiver

In using 'wood' as an adjective, Howe is following on from the allusion to Chaucer discussed in my account of *Secret History*. 'The etymology of 'wood' takes us to 'possessed by a devil'; and, via Latin and Old Irish, 'seer, poet'; or 'going beyond all reasonable bounds'.³ "When what a wide wood was" rehearses the scene-setting stage directions at the beginning of Milton's *Comus*, which specify a "wild wood". However,

¹ See my discussion of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*.

² See Schultz (1994). n.p.

³ *OED*.

the key to this sequence is Daphne's metamorphosis from human to plant form. Pursued by Apollo, she is converted into a tree – an imprisonment that opens on to the role of the poet, as Howe notes in a letter to Taggart:

The image of turning into a tree I took from a lovely and utterly haunting small painting by Pollaiuolo of Daphne turning into a laurel. [...]

[...] bark (dog bark loud noise) is in the word bark of a tree. Transformation – and I think of Daphne becoming a laurel (the poet's tree) as a beautiful thing (unlike Dante and Shakespeare, who put people trapped in trees in hell). So I am bride with my bark, married to the danger and turning and singing it, playing it. With the play on bow (violent) and musical and on quiver – trees make arrows, arrows go in quivers, a string quivers when playing music and of course the rapture in quiver on and on [...]¹

I read this transition in the context of later metamorphoses in the poem series, as a Pythagorean transition, a metempsychosis as a soul passes from one physical host to another. The conclusion to Arthur Golding's influential 1597 translation of Ovid contains an account of the beliefs of Pythagoras that retrospectively casts the long foregoing series of metamorphoses in a Pythagorean light:

And even as supple wax with ease receyveth fygures straunge,
And keepes not ay one shape, ne bydes assured ay from chaunge,
And yit continueth always wax in substance: so I say
The soule is ay the selfsame thing it was and yit astray
It fleeteth into sundry shapes.²

Howe's version of the metamorphosis is a passing-into-stasis that retains spirit within a "physical Universe". Her account of Daphne's transformation cannot be disentangled from the theme of violence: the role of the poet being to praise the exploits of the heroes of war. In "Bark be my limbs my hair be leaf" the speaker is both Daphne and Howe. Yet there is a shift in the following line, "Bride be my bow my lyre my

¹ Letter to Taggart, 13th November, 1981.

² XV, 188-192. I cite the Golding version because of its textural affinities with Howe's poem. The extent of Ovid's Pythagoreanism is a matter of some dispute.

quiver".¹ In Golding's translation, these are close to the words spoken by the amorous Apollo to Daphne, as he explains how she will adorn his hair, his "harpe" and his quiver – and those of all victors, since the laurel crown will mimic his own "seemly bushe of youthfull haire".² Leaf, moreover, can be read as the leaf of a book. It is a complex, half-ironic appropriation of the Ovid text which helps the reader understand Howe's simultaneous inhabitation and questioning of the "dark" and "crooked" side of the Pythagorean dualisms, at once "married to the danger and turning and singing it, playing it".

Howe, then, is commemorating a Pythagorean movement of spirit but she is also asking what happens to women during time of war. Femininity, she suggests, becomes an adornment – even an endorsement – of the martial ethos. In aligning herself with Daphne and the laurel tree, Howe arrives at a more nuanced version of Dr Johnson's question, in *Cabbage Gardens*, about how the arts are "propagated by conquest" (CG, 74). Howe's mutation of Ovid is a reorientation of an earlier text – a central text for Western poetry – that she causes both to hymn and query the role of the poet. Developing the positions outlined in the preface to *Europe of Trusts*, Howe seeks in this passage to disentangle the lyric poet from the wreckage of war and to find through poetry a language which will neither be consigned to silence nor be co-opted into incipiently bellicose discourses.³

Mimic Representation: death, Shakespeare, and lyric poetry

The poem-sequence contains many references to pre-Socratic thought, which appear as a set of decontextualised motifs that straddle our world, the Renaissance and the ancient world.⁴ Chief among these, however, is the rift between body and soul. Howe's

¹ According to Guthrie, WKC, 439-440, the bow and the lyre represented, for Heraclitus, "the belief that everything is made of opposites, and therefore subject to internal tension." The word 'bow' occurs in neither Golding nor Dryden's versions of the Daphne story, the nearest rendering being Golding's 'harpe'.

² Ovid (trs. Golding), I, 692.

³ In Dryden's translation (I, 561) of the same passage, there is the couplet: "Be thou the prize of honour, and renown;/ The deathless poet, and the poem, crown." Poets are mentioned before victors. This formulation recalls Howe's title *There are not leaves enough to crown to cover to crown to cover*. See below for discussion of Ophelia's "crownet".

⁴ There is mention, for example, of air and water (PS, 30); body and soul (PS, 32, 44, 71); "cataclysmic Pythagoras" (a phrase derived from Nietzsche's book on the pre-Socratics) (PS, 38); "abstractions of the world's abstraction/ warm my icy feet" (PS, 28) a revoicing of the "icy tremor of abstraction" that Nietzsche ascribes to Parmenides (Nietzsche, 1962, 70); the Parmenidian principle that "nothing new can come into being" (PS, 63); heavenly systems (PS, 63); and Thales, Anaximander and Ocellus of Luciana (PS, 67). (Anaximander was the pupil of Thales. Both are thought to have influenced Pythagorus's ideas. See Gorman, 32; Guthrie, KS, 59. Ocellus was an early Pythagorean.) Nietzsche's *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (1872), was a key work for Howe, according to her letters to Hejinian (12 February 1978) and Taggart (7 March 1982). In this early work Nietzsche attacked the foundations of dualistic thought.

oblique engagement with Pythagoreanism in her poem-sequence is organised around the separation of body and soul, in particular the borderline – death – which authenticates and permits the presence of spirit in such systems of belief. If spirit is momentarily free of its carnal burden at this moment, it also inhabits the violent, tensile space between contraries. Howe's poem explores this indeterminate no-man's land that both confirms and suspends dualisms.¹ Metempsychosis, mediated by Christian ideas of the afterlife, is translated in her poetry into a preoccupation with the ways in which the present can harbour the voices of the dead: "In my poetry, time and again, questions of assigning *the cause* of history dictate the sound of what is thought" (*Leaves*, 9).

In *Pythagorean Silence* the line "mimic presentation stained with mortality" (*PS*, 45) encapsulates the poem's various treatments of the link between death and representation. Spirit is always shadowed by the impermanence of the tangible carnal world, in "mortality". At one level, the reference may be to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as earlier lines on the same page suggest: "bottom is there" and "[...] Dream/ remembering a dream". This follows "Dreams/ wheel their pale course", an allusion to Milton's "Moon [...] wheels her pale course" (in *Paradise Lost*) which changes the subject of the action to an interior event.² The evanescence of dream-life is imagined in the next line in "We write in sand", which recalls Freud's mystic writing pad. Howe is setting the "pale course" of dream-life alongside its bodily vessel. Moreover, 'mimesis' is, for Aristotle, a "Pythagorean term".³ With "mimic presentation stained with mortality" Howe is writing of embodied consciousness, binding the multiple representations of dream-life and the insubstantiality of soul to the mortal body and the material world.

Especially prominent among the cited material in *Pythagorean Silence* are passages drawn from Shakespeare, notably *Hamlet*. Of particular importance among these are two references to Ophelia – like Daphne a virgin who undergoes a metamorphosis that is hedged around with poetic language. The first occurrence runs:

¹ Speaking in her Foster interview of the work of the mathematician René Thom, Howe has said: "The singularity [...] is the point where there is a sudden change to something completely else. It's a chaotic point. It's the point where chaos enters cosmos, the instant articulation. [...] it seemed to be a way of describing these poems of mine. They are singular works on pages, and, grouped together, they fracture language: they are charged" (173).

² Milton (1674). 1.786.

³ See Guthrie, *WKC*, 229ff for a discussion of whether things are, in the Pythagorean view, numbers or *imitations* of numbers. The Pythagoreans combined their interest in numbers and similarities with ecstatic Orphic beliefs, impersonating the gods through Dionysiac ritual.

Their words are weeds wrapped around my head

Roses are withered – it grows rigidly dark

Body and Soul

PS, 32

The first of these lines adapts Gertrude's speech describing Ophelia's death (*Hamlet*, IV, vii, cited below) and brings about an identification of Ophelia with the poem's speaker. The weeds around her head are a development of Daphne and the "my hair be leaf" of the poem's epigraph. The meeting of martial and lyric duties symbolised by Daphne's laurels becomes Ophelia's "crownnet" of "weeds" and her "weedy trophies", silent in death. The two women follow similar routes as they pass out of humanity and into silence. The 'weeds', echoing 'words', represent a deathly counterpart to the laurels of the victors. However, out of that silence comes another poetry that bears witness to the experience of the vanquished. The linked images in Howe's poem suggest a poetry which is at once aligned with the dark, feminine aspect of the Pythagorean contraries and starkly critical of boundaries that safeguard dualisms in this way. In this sense the Pythagorean 'silence' that Howe is writing about is not an ascetic discipline of the 'brotherhood', but an attempt to speak from the place of Ophelia or Daphne, a place which is not "rigidly dark".

"Withered" may allude to the violets (held to represent faithfulness) that withered, in Ophelia's words, when "my father died" (*Hamlet* IV, v, 182). But "Roses are withered" initiates another set of associations (besides the children's rhyme): Laertes describes Ophelia as the "Rose of may" (*Hamlet*, IV, v, 157) and Ophelia, in turn, offers him rosemary, "for remembrance" (*Hamlet*, IV, v, 173). *Ros marinus* is the rose of the sea and so Ophelia's drowning can be interpreted as a passing of the insubstantial phenomenon of memory into the primal element of water.¹ 'Rosemary' brings together 'rose' and 'may/Mary' and, as Berry notes, Ophelia's flowers bring, though their May day associations, a quality of pagan fecundity to her death – when "it grows rigidly dark".² Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death is worth citing here:

There on the pendent boughs her crownnet weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself

¹ Berry, 71. makes the *Ros marinus* suggestion.

² Berry, 27. 71.

Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
 And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
 Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
 As one incapable of her own distress,
 Or like a creature native and indued
 Unto that element. But long it could not be
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
 Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
 To muddy death.

Hamlet, IV, vii, 173-184

For a transitory moment, as she passes into death, Ophelia almost metamorphoses into a siren or a creature “native” to the water.¹ In the moment of transition there is a redemptive transformation, but she inevitably subsides into the mud. Ophelia’s loss of her “crownet”, for Berry a “metaphorical defloration”, and the clothes that are “spread wide” strengthen the force of the fertility associations and allow the motif of childbirth to run against that of the passage from life to death. Ophelia sings old songs as she drowns – in alluding to this speech Howe may here be drawing an implicit parallel with her own selection from older texts.² Moreover, as her ‘lays’ are also lauds (and hence religious), there is a mingling of the Christian and the secular that corresponds to the Mary/May combination suggested by the “weeds”. Ophelia’s ‘fantastic garlands’, however, offer a momentary recovery of Daphne’s laurels: the poet enters a revised civic role. In the figure of Ophelia, then, Howe is imagining the glancing effect of words exhumed from silence. She is identifying with a moribund mermaid caught at the point of metamorphosis who offers a brief opportunity to recover the lyric potential of poetry.

This metaphysical ambition of Howe’s allusion, moreover, is heavily underlined in her text with the words “Body and Soul”. In *Hamlet* Ophelia is only buried in sanctified ground after the intervention of the king: it is thought that her soul will be damned, as her death is “doubtful” (*Hamlet*, V, I, 221). In this instance, the concept of ethical behaviour initiated for the Ancient Greeks by the motif of the transmigration of souls is read through a Christian filter: the soul’s passage from life to death is the prelude to a final judgement. Later in the poem “I lay down and conceived” (*PS*, 44), resonates with the associations of fertility around Ophelia’s death but Howe is also suggesting

¹ Berry, 27. notes the sexual connotations of ‘mermaid’, a term applied to a prostitutes in Shakespeare’s time.

² Cf the “proverbs and songs” discussed above.

that the “lay” that precedes “muddy death” is a resurrection-before-the fact: a metamorphosis in which ‘spirit’ issues in song. In Ophelia’s death Howe focuses on this transitional moment of metamorphosis itself, the bridge between living and inert matter. In both Ophelia and Daphne she associates this bridging point between Being and non-Being with the potential for poetic speech. When she asserts her wish to “tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate” (*Leaves*, 14) she is organising a lyric poetry of history around this transaction between the dead and the living.

At the end of the final section of *Pythagorean Silence*, 50 pages on, Ophelia makes another appearance: “weeds shiver and my clothes spread wide” are the last words of the poem (*PS*, 84). Again the identification is direct, with Gertrude’s “her” becoming “my”. The weeds which she wished to hang on the “pendent boughs” are placed alongside “shiver”, a pun on the “envious sliver” that broke beneath her weight. With the shift of a letter, ‘sliver’ becomes ‘shiver’: the poem’s cold weather is finally linked to the coldness of the grave, a point at which the words/weeds (*PS*, 32) break apart as the clothes whose weight causes Ophelia to drown fan out around her. Just as, in her letter to Taggart, Howe believes that Daphne can divert herself from the ambitions that Apollo has for her, she finds a redemptive moment in Ophelia’s death.

The broken mode of utterance that “shiver” implies also shatters the narcissistic suspension offered by Shakespeare’s “glassy stream”. Narcissus’s perception of a singular self is destroyed as he metamorphoses into a flower while Ophelia’s flower-strewn lay both beckons the fantastic, imaged in the mermaid, and shivers her siren song into the polyphony of Howe’s poetry.

There are many other allusions to *Hamlet* in the poem.¹ However, a passage on page 42 is especially pertinent to the present argument:

[...] Lost

to grief How lust
(these were the ghost’s words) crawls

between heaven and earth

¹ See especially page 23, in which *Hamlet* I. iv is mined and in which, with “scatters flowers”, Howe links an early speech by Polonius to Ophelia’s flowers. See McHale for a detailed discussion of Howe’s method in her citation of Shakespeare in *Pythagorean Silence* and Spenser in the *The Defenestration of Prague*.

Dust is birth
of earth we make loam substance

and strange shadows

But I am reaching the end Sky
melts away into sand

sand into Sound

PS, 42-43

The key phrase here is “crawls// between heaven and earth”, which derives from Hamlet’s words to Ophelia: “What do such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all, believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. Where’s your father?” (*Hamlet* III, i, 128). The “arrant knaves” do the crawling for Hamlet but Howe conflates these with “lust”, drawing on the ghost’s “won to his shameful lust” (*Hamlet* I, v, 45). Again Howe is focusing on the passage between life and after-life and linking poetry’s annexation of religious experience to the productive moment in death. The poem continues – “[...] Sky/ melts away into sand// sand into Sound” – by linking the sounding of poetry to “Dust is birth”, an adaptation of Hamlet’s “Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, and dust is earth, of earth we make loam” (*Hamlet*, V, i, 201-203).

The words “substance// and strange shadows” come from Sonnet 53’s “What is your substance, wherof are you made/ That billions of strange shadows on you tend?” Here the allusion is a clipped citation that plays the material against the shadow-world. Both are elements of the earthly side of the Pythagorean dualisms but in the lines cited they appear in apposition, as if Howe is setting the materiality that Hamlet stresses with his “dust is earth” against the insubstantial ghost that plays on his mind. Howe echoes Hamlet’s words with her Sky-sand metamorphosis and further suggests – “But I am reaching the end” – that the sounding of poetic language, haunted by the shadows of past injustice, is found in her condensation of death and rebirth. If there were no paternal ghost, after all, there would be no *Hamlet*.

Howe, then, twists her Shakespearean material to suits her poem’s concern with poetic voice and metamorphosis. Her re-editing of *Hamlet* – “lust” now crawls, not “knaves”; “earth” becomes “birth”; the sonnet’s question on substance is abruptly elided – bring the poem to its fundamental concerns of desire and death, matter and the immaterial.

Pythagorean Silence returns insistently in this way to fragmentary “texts torn out of context” (PS, 67) that hover around these themes. It is a process, first of all, of distillation that demonstrates Howe’s methods in refined form: the texts are removed from position and reoriented to take part in another, ostensibly narrower, meditation. The words in this case communicate to each other as a reverie on death. However, these citations trail their contexts behind them and wider reference to the source texts cannot be discounted – the elliptical treatment of Ophelia’s death, for example, forms part of a rich parallel with Daphne’s metamorphosis. Finally, their new configuration opens them to entirely new meanings: the wheeling dreams that derive from *Paradise Lost* form part of a larger treatment of dream, that is partly the forest dream-space of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and partly the “pale course” of the poem’s own dream logic.

Howe uses methods of sifting, compression and reduction on her sources. Abstracting material from *Hamlet*, one of the most familiar literary texts in the language, she constructs an open-ended and thematically coherent sequence from a collision of fragments. She is also playing a game with the itch of cultural memory, as few readers will consult the sources and notice the degree to which she twists them. Her *détournement* of *Hamlet* in *Pythagorean Silence* seeks to explore the subtle pressure that past texts exert on the present cultural imagination. The implicit theories of presence, absence, death and transformation that she brings into her poem series are deeply implicated in our collective history. By citing such lines she inevitably places them within quotation marks, rendering them subject to interrogation and exposing canonical material to the ‘crooked’ and ‘dark’ side of the Pythagorean set of dualisms. The positive interpretation of Daphne’s metamorphosis that she writes of to Taggart and its association with Ophelia’s siren song allow her simultaneously to work within an explicitly metaphysical frame and to establish a critical distance from it.

Crucial to Howe’s refashioning of the borrowed lines in the passage cited is the question of sound: in Howe’s estranging version, the lines are held together by stronger sound patterns even than the sources with the movement of “sand into Sound” (PS, 43). Her “words are weeds” (PS, 32). “Lost” becomes “lust” and then “dust” (PS, 42). The word “earth” is doubly echoed and in the first instance it is replaced by a rhyming word, “birth” (PS, 42). Howe’s condensation of the sonnet material emphasises the alliterative sequence of ‘substance’ and ‘strange shadows’. The words are defamiliarised, then, but also mined for a very concentrated music that via another Ovidian motif – Echo – places a version of rhyme at the heart of her technique.¹

¹ I discuss the temporality of rhyme in my account of *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*.

Moreover, the parenthesis in the lines cited above – “(these were the ghost’s words)” (PS, 42) – posits a vestigial narrator, a puppet-like creature who is possessed by the texts she cites.¹ Howe’s mode of citation is a partial abdication of control that is similar to her qualified abandonment to the accidentals of spelling in her preface to *Frame Structures*. Howe’s response to these issues asks questions about agency – and her writing tends to live on the boundary of such questions.

Letters – a dome to hive

The preceding discussion has cited passages from *Pythagorean Silence* that have made striking use of punning, a technique that brings the question of agency to the fore. Shifts such as that between ‘sliver’ and ‘shiver’ and ‘lost’ and ‘lust’, which depend (like ‘daughter’/‘slaughter’ in the later *Frame Structures* preface), on the substitution of a single letter, are integral to her play with the echoes and half-echoes of earlier texts. Magpies, which are conventionally thought to “chatter”, are said, for example, to “clatter” (PS, 23). (The Pythagorean injunction to silence was thought by some to include a warning against ‘chatter’.)² Howe bends the word away from “chatter” in search of a harsher and less casual musicality. The phrase “not a house stirring” (PS, 47) puns on the “not a mouse stirring” of the first scene in *Hamlet*, uttered in the suspended silence before the arrival of the ghost and the disclosure of the secret that sets the play’s action in motion. The line is part of a strand of references to house or home that has strong Heideggerean echoes.³ The combination reference to ‘home’ is also pursued in another pun “(a dome to hive)” (PS, 60), which plays on the cliché ‘a home to live [in]’.

The use of punning in *Pythagorean Silence* mimics the passage of soul from body to body: punning is a version of the preoccupation with metempsychosis and metamorphoses that characterises the poem. A pun contains both death and new life, as one meaning passes into another and new meaning is produced. The burden of the past life is also present, as the absent word – ‘home’, in the example above – lives behind the word on the page. If the soul carries a weight of guilt and responsibility

¹ Cf PS, 39. “(seventy lines about fields in the dark)”, where the ‘voice’ of the composing writer again intervenes in the composition.

² See Guthrie, WKC, 184.

³ Cf Heidegger’s famous “house of language”. Compare also Howe’s “Hear earth born old/ hush” to Heidegger’s description in his essay “The Nature of Language” of ‘Saying’ as “the sound of language, its earthiness” (101). In a May 1982 letter to Taggart Howe lists certain of the books that were important to her at the time she was writing *Pythagorean Silence*: Shakespeare’s sonnets, *Antony and Cleopatra*; *Hamlet*; Zukofsky’s *Bottom: on Shakespeare*; the section on death from Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Idea*; and Heidegger’s *Poetry Language Thought*, especially “What are Poets For?”, “Language” and “Poetically Man Dwells”.

with it to its next vessel, words too are freighted with historical and political significances. But the ghostly penumbra of associations that collects around words is the territory of *Pythagorean Silence*. For Howe the recovery of this space is in opposition to the “linear logic” of political domination – the rhetorical facility that can lead to the mobilisation of violent collectives.¹ It might be objected that it is exactly the mythical resonance that accumulates around a word such as ‘home’ that has had a dangerous political potential that requires lucid demystification. Howe, however, continually links a language dense in visual, aural, semantic and historical associations with a broadly liberatory political agenda.²

Howe is on the side of the siren, and concerned with the moment of productive transformation before Ophelia sinks into the mud. The calling card of the siren is deception but Howe revels in the opportunity to wrest a coherent poetics from a model of ‘feminine’ language that would conventionally be styled as a deceiving, sticky medium riddled with entrapments.

Taking an almost mystical pleasure in obscurity, her punning gives language back to itself, allowing words to sound in their own complexity. Yet it does not altogether relinquish control. The close relation to the past and the carefully delimited linguistic fields that characterise Howe’s poetry situate it firmly at a distance from the kind of indeterminacy that her techniques might invite: puns such as ‘sliver’/‘shiver’ are set up to work with the content of the poem, rather than to gesture towards endless unfettered wordplay. Howe’s ‘freedom’, once again, is double-edged, a ‘freedom from’ and a ‘freedom to’ that both surrenders to the generative capacities of language at the same time as it reserves to itself the exercise of control in the choice of her words.

The opening of *Pythagorean Silence*, “we that were wood/ when what a wide wood was”, (17) echoes in the wordplay around ‘wide’, ‘wood’, ‘word’ and ‘weed’ in the poem. The first mention of Ophelia’s death, “words are weeds wrapped around my head” (32), becomes “weeds shiver and my clothes spread wide” (84). The splintering weeds/words allow a beatific density to the image of the dead Ophelia. The clothing is important: Howe celebrates Daphne’s sounding shelter of ‘bark’ at the beginning of the poem and ends the poem as Ophelia’s clothes give a her a star-like aspect. “Spread” returns us to the earlier lines “and star/ As if light spreading// from some sounding center” (*PS*, 44).

¹ See “Sorting Facts”, 332: “A letter is naked matter breaking from form from meaning. An anagram defies linear logic. Any letter of the alphabet may contain its particular indwelling spirit.” See also my discussion of punning in *Frame Structures*, above.

² This is a complex area in Howe’s poetics (even without the political difficulties brought by Heideggerean etymologies) and one to which I return at several points in this dissertation.

The image of Ophelia in the water becomes a motif of an inaugurating source that is both light and sound. The 'weeds/words' take on a new significance in retrospect through the shivering force of punning: language in its mobility and transformability offers a radiant and corrosive counter to the order of unequivocal figuration.

The presence of vocabulary drawn from the later Heidegger – particularly the tropes of snowfall and home – suggest that Howe's thinking on punning at this period was influenced by Heidegger's theories of poetic language, which accord enunciative agency to language itself, not 'man'. "In its essence," he writes, "language is neither expression nor an activity of man. Language speaks."¹ Heidegger saw in punning the uncanniness of language, or the moment when language discloses some of what is unspoken in a given utterance. Gerard Bruns glosses the later Heidegger's approach to 'Saying' thus: "If we always end up saying something more, or different, from what we intend, it is because language itself is always speaking, always sounding, always going on in its way, independently of us, heterogeneous and wild, even as we speak."² Puns, then, open language to what Bruns terms its "infinite sounding."³ "Sounding" is another Heideggerean term glanced at in the "sounding center" cited above (*PS*, 44, 84). Much as Howe's montages replace a single voice with polyphony, punning removes language from its speaker and cedes a primary agency to a kind of kinetic associative movement. Yet, at the same time, the adroit single-letter shifts of such puns as "between rupture and rapture" (*PS*, 36), where both primary and secondary terms in the punning substitution are preserved, reassert the role of the poet in framing such occurrences.

The English poet Denise Riley, a very different poet to Howe, deftly formulates the writer's assertion of a degree of autonomy in the face of a Heideggerean loss of agency:

Heidegger writes that speakers inhabit the house of language. Yes – but when the landlord calls round to collect the rent, isn't there likely to be some backchat? Agreed, the sensation that one's being made, like a nervous secretary, to 'take a letter' by the old-fashioned boss, Poetic Language, must be common enough. Still, I'd rather revive some notion of the dialectic as a quite modest mutuality between the great dictator

¹ Heidegger (1959) ["Language"], 196.

² Bruns, 143.

³ *Ibid.*, 142.

Language and the writer, even if the boss inevitably retains the upper hand. If kneaded by language, then needed by language.¹

Riley's "modest mutuality" makes a bid for a portion of writerly control that captures Howe's situation – part stenographer, part author. And, as Riley's 'kneaded'/ 'needed' pun suggests, punning is a partial recovery of rhyme that announces identity and non-identity at the same time. Howe's "mimic presentation stained with mortality" poses a dilemma around mimesis, the same and the similar, setting aural similitude against visual and semantic difference to establish a transformative poetics that places itself exactly "between rupture and rapture".

Catch and sketch the chilly evening – whiteness in *Pythagorean Silence*

Snow is the white page, the background weather, of *Pythagorean Silence*.² Like *Chanting at the Crystal Sea* and *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, it is a poem of cold. Among the first lines of the Pearl Harbor section of the poem, after establishing the place and date (Buffalo, 7 December 1941), is "going to meet him in snow" (PS, 21).³ In the 1982 letter to Ron Silliman cited earlier Howe links this crucial scene to an image cluster that uses whiteness as its organising principle:

This is just about my first memory. And it involves those white and savage bears, the white of 'polar', the snow, the immense space of that Park, the name Buffalo (echo of extinct and murdered creature), the whiteness of 'Pearl', the violence of bombs. Mainly a child's first and massive awareness that the world was a savage place and violence and abandoned children might be a constant.⁴

Pythagoras is thought to have ordered his disciples to wear white and to have recommended that the dead be dressed in white.⁵ Howe, moreover, sees Pythagoras

¹ Riley, 68. See my related discussion of Howe's negotiation of the theory of the 'death of the author' in my account of *Eikon Basilike*.

² There is, it might be argued, a pun behind Howe's choice of one of the poem's most common words: snow, or s(usa)n(h)ow(e). The placing by Howe of her own initials in the text, already seen in *Secret History*, can be found in a sequence of 'sh' words which occur close together at the end of the poem's first section, just before the explicit identification with Ophelia: "shade or shine" (29); "shared" (30); "shrugged", "shade" and "shoal" (31); and "shadows" and "shadow" (32).

³ Further down the page is "the floor is ice", followed by lines which allude to the concentration camps, to the massacre of the innocents and to the mourning of the biblical Rachel. The entire page is cited in *Leaves*.

⁴ Letter dated 4 August 1982.

⁵ See Iamblichus, in Guthrie, KS, 82. See also Sandler, 144-5.

himself dressed in white.¹ If the pun offers one kind of freedom, partially uncoupling language from its speaker, whiteness offers another: the promise of silence and a notional retreat into a liberatory non-signification.² Asked in an interview how her poetry would appear if it were painting, Howe replied: “Blank. It would be blank. It would be a white canvas. White.”³ In a later interview, Charles Bernstein asked her what blank space meant to her. “Freedom, ultimately,” she replied. “The possibility of anything might happen. Every mark on that paper is an interruption, an insertion into a kind of peace.”⁴ Blankness’s aural analogue, silence, then, is positively conceived as a kind of transcendent freedom for Howe, at the same time as, in negative terms, being the condition of those whose voices have been effaced from the historical record. It can, on one hand, be linked to the sphere of mystical experience that is a recurrent point of reference for her poetry, but it can also express the experience of abandonment – the “terror of Silence”. The placing of words, or ‘marks’ on the page can be understood as an “interruption” that preserves the memory of the silence or blank space prior to inscription.⁵

The blankness of ‘snow’ situates it on a chain of associations that runs through *Hamlet* and the poem’s many references to ice and snow, to the whiteness of the pearl in Pearl Harbour. Snow, then, is a point of departure. It is a spreading whiteness that originates from the central point of the pearl of Pearl Harbour – another example of the “light spreading// from some sounding center” (*PS*, 44) or, in a different formulation, “snow spread on sound” (*PS*, 25).⁶

The linking of an inaugurating whiteness with a father – or Howe’s father – appears again further into the poem:

Dream of wandering in woods with

¹ See Beckett interview, 19, in which Howe discusses Melville: “The first nameless avatar of *The Confidence Man* possibly comes from the East. Like Pythagorus he dresses in white and remains apart.” The *Life of Pythagoras* of Diogenes Laertius describes him as dressed in white; see Guthrie, KS, 146.

² See my comments on Heidegger below for discussion of the relation between speaker and language.

³ Falon interview, 42.

⁴ *Linebreak* interview.

⁵ See my section on *Melville’s Marginalia* for a discussion of the latent energies of Bartleby’s intransigence.

⁶ A related set of associations is joined by the recurrence of the word ‘pale’ in the poem. The “Pale// she said” of page 76, suggests that this is part of the poem’s relation to *Hamlet*, an allusion to Ophelia’s description of Hamlet as “pale as his shirt” (*Hamlet*, II. i. 81). It may also be a reference to the phrase “beyond the Pale” – a term applied in the 14th century to the “uncivilised” area of Ireland outside English rule and an important concept for *Defenestration of Prague*.

my father
Leaves are white his dress

is white
(considered as white)

cut as if carved in marble Pure
outline of form

fading from color and from frame

PS, 61

Here again, there is a crisis of mark-making: death is associated with whiteness, as the etiolated form fades from the image. White exerts a pressure that leads to the effacement of marks, a counter to the bold demarcations of letters that allow words to mean. And, in another sense, whiteness serves as a cloak, like Daphne's bark when she is transformed into a tree or Ophelia's spreading clothes as she drowns in the brook. The image of Howe's father/Pythagoras presents a figure that is almost a blank, featureless silhouette, as if he'd been snipped out of the canvas of a painting.¹ Here is another, more distressing, version of silence, which might derive from the blank space represented by the Howe's father's long absence during her childhood.

With snowfall, there is also an allusion to Heidegger. As Taggart has pointed out, snowfall is an important element of the Georg Trakl poem which is discussed at length in Heidegger's "Language" essay.² For Heidegger, reading the Trakl poem through the conceptual system of his 'fourfold' of sky and earth, mortals and divinities, "The calling calls into itself and therefore always here and there – here into presence, there into absence. Snowfall and the tolling of the vesper bell are spoken to us here and now in the poem. They are present in the call."³ The line "Ever tolling absence homeward" (*PS, 54*) in Howe's poem overtly echoes Heidegger's reading of Trakl.

Snow, ice and cold air also function in a more literal way in the poem-sequence. They sometimes represent a natural environment that offers nothing but hardship to the displaced, whether they are 17th century colonialists or 20th century refugees: "Or as snow fallen/ could be cold snow/ falling/ Lie down in snow" (*PS, 30*). Such references

¹ See "The End of Art", 2 and Howe's Keller interview, 7, for discussion of minimalism and the use of white and black in the painting of Malevich and Reinhardt.

² See Taggart, 119.

³ Heidegger (1959) ["Language"], 199.

as “cold clay on my coat” (*PS*, 66) reinforce the choice of death as part of snow’s set of associations. Sometimes, as in the “sneaping wind” (*PS*, 53), the reference is embedded in literary texts, here *The Winter’s Tale* (I, ii, 13). Elsewhere the snow seems to fit into a network of romanticised beauty: “snow coming and the beauty of long shadows tumbling down” (*PS*, 27) or “invisible and peace come spilling softly/ like snow” (*PS*, 28).

Snow and silence, then, are highly mobile terms in the poem, blank spaces upon which many different associations may be projected. The words “outline of form// fading from color and from frame” suggests a struggle over vanishing representations. Howe’s poem locates itself at such a vanishing point and uses the concept of metamorphosis to express the productive coming-together of opposites that she describes to Silliman. In the “fading” is a moment of transition that is generative.

If the harsh conditions seem to demand a shelter it is perhaps poetry itself that can offer that shelter: the wish to “tenderly lift voices from the dark side of history” is a desire to offer refuge. The images of concentration camps, bombs and Rachel weeping in the wilderness that occur in “Leaves” and the first section of *Pythagorean Silence* seem to establish a starting point of tragic exposure that requires some form of protection. Howe’s ambition in the poem seems to be to write a language that is attuned to dispossession and one that can confront the scapegoating “repudiation of alterity” that defines violent conflict.¹

¹ *Birth-mark*, 89.

ii) *Defenestration of Prague*: the “Woodiest Theatre”:

“The masks were often most impressive, and while the wearer could see out easily enough, his identity remained a complete mystery.”¹

Defenestration of Prague has a similar formal pattern to *Pythagorean Silence*: a long central section comprising poems written in single lines and couplets is framed by shorter opening and closing sections employing mixed forms.² The reader moves from pages of great typographical diversity which are chiefly concerned with Ireland to a sequence of over 40 pages that contains repeated reference to Shakespearean comedy, the Jacobean masque and Spenserian allegory, and then back to textual disarrangement for the final section, “Bride’s Day”, which has a theme of renewal.

The poem does not address contemporary Ireland directly. Rather it approaches it in oblique fashion, through Spenser’s involvement in the country. *Defenestration of Prague* is a dense reflection on ideas of representation in the Renaissance imagination that seeks to explore, through the lens of the 20th century, the link between word and image that fascinated artists of the 16th and 17th centuries. Although the English colonial presence in Ireland is a backdrop, the poem chiefly addresses the borderline between real and ideal, the nature of fictiveness, and the political implications of theatrical staging. The courtly masque of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones is at the heart of the poem, which mimics the masque’s three-part structure. Masks, too, are important to the poem, which alludes to the mumming play, a popular form in which the participants wear masks and which carried an anti-English political charge in Ireland.

The poem is ambivalent about the courtly masque: enthralled by its capacity to stage the fabulous (which becomes an analogy for a hallucinatory understanding of the act of reading) but troubled by the spectacle’s endorsement of the ideology of Divine Right. Howe’s poem has two main anti-authoritarian counter-currents: it embraces demotic forms such as the mumming play and the ballad; and it substitutes a multiperspectival model of viewpoint for the single monarchical sight-line encouraged, as we will see, by the masque.

¹ Gailey, 74, describing Irish mumming costumes.

² See my discussion of *The Liberties* for Howe’s characterisation of this pattern as one of freedom, capture and breaking free again.

However, in this analysis of the treatment of authority, I dissent from Lynn Keller's argument that, in Howe's poems, an oppressed "feminine' figure (or entity such as Ireland)" is set against the "repressive operation of the hegemonic/colonising system, which is both manifest and reinforced through conventional language use".¹ First, Howe has too ambivalent a relation to the 'colonising system' – knowing herself unable to speak from 'outside' it; secondly because "conventional language use" cannot so easily be aligned with the "repressive" function of such systems; and thirdly because the alignment of a "feminine' figure" with a national "entity" is an unhelpful conflation of distinct modes of oppression.² While there are elements of Howe's thought that invite such a reading (and certain of her statements in interview certainly encourage this), the poetry is less easy to parse into such neat oppositions. *Defenestration of Prague* attempts to ask large questions about literary form and political oppression but it is too drawn to the mystical texture of Renaissance thought to present itself as an unequivocal challenge to a "hegemonic" system such as the English monarchy, itself dependent on the mystification of divine sanction. So, rather than reading Howe's poem as an encounter between hegemonic (patriarchy, colonialism, 'conventional' language) and counter-hegemonic (feminism, the marginalised, poetic language) forces, I read it as a poem about the staging of identities. Masks and masques represent a fragile fantasy environment and the poem allows reality and fiction to interpenetrate.³ This gives it the potential to consider the ritual element in politics as well as the politics of ritual.

Howe and Spenser – "wilde and mere Irishe"

In interview Howe acknowledges Spenser to be the seed for *Defenestration of Prague*: "Edmund Spenser led me by a very long and crooked route to the actual defenestration in Prague [...]".⁴ The defenestration was an incident in 1618, when Bohemian Protestants tossed two Catholic councillors and their secretary out of a window. The event precipitated the Thirty Years' War, in which most of the nations of Europe, Protestant and Catholic, became embroiled.⁵ Howe's poem contains no direct reference to this defenestration, although religious intolerance and war are common currency

¹ Keller, 198.

² I discuss these issues in detail in my accounts of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* and *Thorow*. Alan Golding draws attention to the complexity of the identification of Ireland with the feminine, which incorporates Mangan's "Roisin Dubh" as well as negative portrayals of the Irish used by the English (n.p).

³ See my comments on the impenetrable and the everyday in my account of *Melville's Marginalia*.

⁴ Beckett interview, 24.

⁵ The defenestration had an antecedent: two centuries earlier a Prague mob threw members of a group of German councillors out of a window and on to spikes held by the crowd below. In a letter to Charles Bernstein, cited below, Howe makes it clear that she had the 17th century defenestration in mind.

in her work. Just as the prefaces to her *Frame Structures* and *Europe of Trusts* collections circle around the entry of the US into the Second World War, the title to this poem recalls a local event that was the prelude to an international catastrophe. The archaism 'defenestration', moreover, suggests ideas of sight, light, perspective and the breaching of boundaries, all of which are among the poem's main concerns.

England was one of the few European countries to be untouched by the Thirty Years' War. However, during the same period it was involved in a colonial project closer to home, consolidating and extending the 'plantation' of Ireland with English Protestants. A prominent agent of English colonial policy was the poet Edmund Spenser, who, in 1580, was appointed secretary to Lord Grey of Wilton, the Lord Deputy of Ireland, and given a grant of land in the province of Munster. There was considerable resistance to the renewed English presence in Ireland. This resistance, however, met with forceful repression. In 1580, with attacks on the English breaking out all over Ireland, a surrendered garrison of 600 Spanish mercenaries in Smerwick, Kerry, was put to the sword on Grey's orders.

Spenser supported Grey's strategy and the Lord Deputy is memorialised in *The Faerie Queene* in the figure of Sir Artegall, who represents justice. Spenser's tract *A Veue of the Present State of Ireland*, begun in 1596, three years before his death, argues that a strong hand should be used against those in this "most barbarous Nation in Christendome" who opposed English rule.¹ Sir Walter Raleigh, a friend of Spenser's to whom one of *The Faerie Queene's* dedicatory sonnets is addressed, was also involved in military action in Ireland and was one of the captains overseeing the massacre at Smerwick. In a 1980s interview Susan Howe says of the relationship:

This plan [ie the suppression of the Irish] was later used by Spenser's associates against Native Americans in the colonies of North America. It was Sir Walter Raleigh who encouraged Spenser to write *The Faerie Queene*. It was Sir Walter Raleigh who colonised Virginia [...] *The Faerie Queene's* creator is one of the conquerors. But often Spenser appeals to an image of female power, and so did Queen Elizabeth. The poem is dedicated to another poet-invader. 'To the right noble, and valorous, Sir Walter Raleigh, Knight.' Raleigh brings poetry to America when he names Virginia. These poets write about Chastitie

¹ Spenser (1633), 172 (in the MS but omitted, like some other stridently anti-Irish passages, from the first printed edition). The massacre at Smerwick is described in the tract as "a great touch to [Grey] in honour".

and Holinnesse, God and Justice. They are writing during the reign of Elizabeth. Raleigh was beheaded during the reign of James I. What is the connection between allegory, iconoclasm, colonization, punning and the idea of the feminine?¹

Howe's strange question is answered, perhaps, by 'poetry'. Rather than simply exposing the "hegemonic/colonising system" to its poetic antidote, her comments suggest the complexity of the encounter between literature and politics. Through the associative movement sketched in her preface to *Frame Structures* such diverse registers as iconoclasm and punning can be brought together. Yet this exploration is rarely a means of making manifest, as the material it seeks to communicate is inaccessible to direct representation: "Why is land always said to be feminine? Why is wilderness called 'Virgin'?" she asks elsewhere in the same interview. "The answer must be deep in the structure of Language. And the mystery of that structure is a secret of poetry unsettled by history."² The term 'mystery' is an important one in Howe's correspondence and interviews of this period. Through it the workings of 'poetry' are removed to a sphere that is both as inaccessible and as productive as the psychoanalytic construction of the unconscious. This sphere of "poetry unsettled by history" is, like the unconscious, a sounding board from which past trauma and present fantasy can leave a mark on the workings of language. So, in this formulation, despite the mystical tenor of her vocabulary, her poetry is not somehow acultural: it is embedded in the temporal unfolding of history.³ In *Defenestration of Prague* the poetry's movements are never forgetful of Ireland and neither are they free of the pursuit of ideality. Howe's remarks suggest that she addresses this through her awareness of the compromised nature of her "poet-invaders" (another phrase that recalls Dr Johnson's arts propagated by conquest). For the reader of the poem this background is played out through the interpenetration of ideal and real. The fantastic world of the courtly masque is set against popular mumming traditions. The background of Irish dispossession coexists with an impulse to pursue an object of unattainable beauty – the character Florimell in *The Faerie Queene*. Howe's poems display classical attributes of both epic and lyric ambition, in the way public and private concerns are woven together.

¹ Beckett interview, 25-26.

² Ibid, 26.

³ See, however, *My Emily Dickinson*, 13, for a view which places "poetic vision" "outside" history: "There is a mystic separation between poetic vision and ordinary living. The conditions for poetry rest outside each life at a miraculous reach indifferent to worldly chronology." It is not clear whether Howe is positing a prior state of visionary awareness that is then "unsettled" by history.

Howe's familial investment in the contradictions of Anglo-Irish identity, and the respective pulls of her American and her Irish parent, open onto a broader interest in hybrid states in which linguistic identity is at issue. In the American context this manifests itself in her interest in "speaking New Englandly" :¹

I see in 19th century American literature, which is what I love, a tremendous anxiety about origins that's an anxiety about whether they are any good compared to European literature. I see it too in the 17th century, where I did a lot of work. Again it's traumatic and grief-stricken. There's a blockage between the speech of where they've left and what do they say now? When did American English become American English and not English English? Who are the first people who didn't speak with an English accent? How does that occur when there's no accent there (there was the Indian language, but they didn't speak it). How many generations did it take for it to fall into place, to settle? It's most interesting when it's unsettled and I think even in the 19th century it's still unsettled to a certain degree.²

In *Defenestration of Prague*, as with *Pythagorean Silence*, her concern is also with the traffic between different ways of speaking. Spenser's discussants in *A Present Veue*, on the other hand, are notably intolerant of linguistic contamination. They find those English settlers – the residue of the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland – who had 'gone native' to be quite beyond the pale: "they are more sharpely to be chastised and reformed then the rude Irish, which, beinge very wilde at the first, are nowe become somewhat more civill, when as these [ie the English], from civility are growne to be wilde and meere Irishe".³

This is not the only point at which Spenser's text opposes English law and Irish 'wildness'. His argument extends to the function of poetry itself. *The Veue's* interlocutors value a poetry of moral uplift: "to steale into the young spirits a desire of honour and vertue".⁴ The Irish "bardes", on the other hand, propagate insurrection: "whomesoever they finde to bee most lycentious of life, most bolde and lawlesse in his doings, most daungerous and desperate in all parts of disobedience and rebellious

¹ See *Birth-mark*, ix, and my discussion of *Articulation*.

² Interview with author.

³ Spenser (1633), 143.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

disposition, him they set up and glorifie in their rithmes, him they praise to the people, and to yong men make an example to follow.”¹

At the fringes of Howe’s text, then, is a similar questioning of the role of the poet to that which is explored through Daphne’s metamorphosis into a laurel tree at the beginning of *Pythagorean Silence*. While *Pythagorean Silence* addressed questions of poetic speech and death, *Defenestration* develops *Pythagorean Silence*’s investigation of representation. Howe’s engagement with her sources – a few fragments from *A Veue* find their way into *Defenestration* – asks questions of the implication for Spenser’s poetry of his involvement in Ireland.² Behind the text lurks a preoccupation with the doubled identity of the landowning class that was to become known as the ‘Anglo-Irish’ and that would preside over the period of ‘Protestant Ascendancy’. Spenser’s Florimell has a double in *The Faerie Queene* and the play with masks, masques, doubling and deceptive appearances resonates throughout *Defenestration of Prague*.

Howe refuses to subject Spenser’s poem to a reading that would simply brandish evidence of a latent barbarism, finding instead a kind of freedom in its ability to construct an imaginary pastoral world:

In Spenser’s allegory, symbolic things become real and reality melts into sound outsensing distance. This poem of the Mind is a pastoral *free* place. In Book II, Canto VIII, the author, who is also an invader, asks: “And is there care in heaven? And is there love?”³

Her reading of *The Faerie Queene* is responsive to the role of artifice in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture. The blurring of the line between real and ideal orders is a central theme of *Defenestration*. Questions of authority and of moral probity coded as English are everywhere in Spenser, but the degree to which the rhetoric of colonial adventure denudes Spenser’s poem of its poetic integrity remains a subsidiary concern for Howe. Instead, *Defenestration* revolves around figures of insubstantiality and elusiveness and makes a question of what might happen when an event and its representation are indistinguishable.⁴ The most prominent representative of the evasive “mystery” of Howe’s conception of poetry is Florimell, a beauty whose chastity is continually threatened in Spenser’s poem. Florimell’s story is indissociable from that of Marinell, whom she loves. Even in the narration of this tale of amorous

¹ Ibid.

² See *Defenestration*, 93-94.

³ Beckett interview, 25.

⁴ See also her treatment in *Eikon* of the execution of Charles I as a theatrical event.

tribulations, though, Ireland is in the background: Florimell and Marinell are eventually united in a passage which is prepared by an extraordinary series of stanzas detailing the symbolic confluence of the rivers of England and Ireland.¹

There are several parallels to be drawn between the presence of Florimell in *Defenestration* and the treatment of Daphne and Ophelia in *Pythagorean Silence*. All of the women are pursued by amorous males. As with the two virginal women of *Pythagorean Silence*, Florimell's chastity is central to her literary identity. Like Ophelia and Daphne (daughter of the river god Peneus), Florimell is associated with water: she is held in an undersea dungeon by Proteus and she is linked to "Venus of the fomy sea".²

Florimell's flight is, moreover, compared to that of Daphne:

Not halfe so fast the wicked Myrrha fled
From dread of her reuinging fathers hond:
Nor halfe so fast to saue her maidenhed,
Fled Fearfull Daphne on th' Aegean strong,
As Florimell fled from that Monster yond,
To reach the sea, ere she of him were raught:
For in the sea to drown her selfe she fond,
Rather than of the tyrant to be caught³

Spenser (1596), III, vii, 26

Like Ophelia, Florimell undergoes a mermaid transformation, when in III, viii, 26, 9 she is assaulted by a fisherman and thrown to the bottom of his boat: "Beastly he threw her downe, ne car'd to spill/ Her garments gay with scales of fish, that all did fill."⁴ Howe is exploring a conventionally gendered mode of poetic address in order to ask what happens when a woman becomes the speaker and not the addressee of lyric poetry. If past "poet invaders" mapped "virgin" land how might a "poetry unsettled by history" both preserve and interrogate that tradition? This is the task of *Defenestration of Prague*, in its fusion of "allegory, iconoclasm, colonization, punning and the idea of the feminine".

¹ Spenser (1596), IV, xi, 24-47.

² Spenser (1596), IV, xii.

³ The unattainable object of Petrarch's affections, Laura, was often compared to Daphne, who was turned into a laurel tree. Another parallel, linking poetry to fugitive feminine beauty would be the poetry of Rilke, who used the Petrarchan sonnet form in his *Sonnets to Orpheus*.

⁴ Spenser (1596), III, viii, 26.

In Spenser's poem a witch creates a false double of Florimell. Howe appears to find a resistance to translation in the character of Florimell that is analogous to her poem's pursuit of meaning – a pursuit that is both playful and troubled. On each of the three occasions that the elusive Florimell appears in Howe's poem, it is in the context of the difficulties of mimesis: "Florimell flees away into the forest/ Hide her there/ an illusion (fiction)" (*DP*, 107); "Florimell embarks blindly/ (being lost)// to interpret the world" (*DP*, 109-110); and "myth Marinell foam night/ sea-treasure husband// Florimell and her false double// True and false beauty" (*DP*, 135).

In these lines Spenser's character is both lost herself and lost to her pursuers. At one level Howe is dramatising the figure of femininity in lyric poetry, with its Petrarchan narrative of pursuit and endlessly deferred possession. At another, she is communicating a broader difficulty about separating world and representation. Can Florimell and her "false double" be distinguished? Through the allegorical figure Howe allows the poem to dissolve into a play of fictive worlds. The aspiration to distinguish between "True and false beauty" gives way under the weight of expectations as "Words and meaning meet in// feigning" (*DP*, 107). Howe's poem understands falsehood to be a condition of mimesis but its response to this is to revel in the dream-like forest scenes it establishes. Yet despite the lightness of the text's meditation on appearances there is an accompanying anxiety, present in the use of Spenser's *Veue*, about the points at which Spenser's appreciation of the natural beauty of Ireland meets his stylised pastoral, that Grey meets Artegall, and that the assertion of colonial power meets its literary apotheosis. While the accent is on fantasy, beneath the play of fictive worlds the text knows itself to repress a violent Real.

Masques and masks

Howe's poem is highly aware of historical shifts in conventions of representation. Yet her own interest in visual poetry and the politics of spectatorship finds an earlier analogue in the Renaissance. In *Defenestration* a complex of ideas concerning words and pictorial representation is approached, albeit in a very oblique manner, through the Jacobean masque. In a 1983 letter Howe wrote, somewhat elliptically, to Charles Bernstein on this theme:

Defenestration of Prague is very much involved with Masque tradition –
and perspective of such – Inigo Jones vs Ben Jonson –

artificer/architext vs writer. The eyepoint centred on Royalty etc. The political implications.¹

The front and back cover of the original edition of *Defenestration of Prague* are devoted to a sketch by Inigo Jones entitled “Cloud Containing Divine Poesy”, part of his design for *Temple of Love: The Queene’s Shrovetide Masque*, performed on February 10, 1635.² In the masque, the visual spectacle, the words, and the music and song were of roughly equal importance. As with Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, the ‘characters’ of masques were typically allegorical personifications – ‘Virtue’, ‘Pleasure’ and so on. Moreover, in the Jonsonian form, the masques incorporated grotesque or comic ‘antimasques’, designed to contrast the behaviour of the lower orders with that of the aristocrats whose virtues were hymned in the texts. The masques, then, were victory celebrations in which nobility and order invariably triumphed over baseness and wildness.³

Inigo Jones discovered perspective sets in Italy and he brought the innovation to the extraordinarily lavish spectacles he staged for James’s court.⁴ These made use of complicated ‘machinery’, scenery and lighting effects.⁵ However, to the Renaissance eye, the idea of conveying spatial depth through flat pieces of board and converging lines was new. The effect of perspective, moreover, would be most apparent to those in the best seats, and most of all to the king, who would be placed in the seat which offered the best view of the new sets. Howe’s reference to “eyepoint” in her letter to Bernstein suggests that she follows Renaissance scholar Stephen Orgel’s argument that representation in the art of the masque is designed to reflect back to those in power a world in which their dominance is entire and, indeed, part of the order of things. Orgel writes:

They [ie the sets] were employed only at court or when royalty was present; they were not used in the public or private playhouses. [...] Jones’s stage subtly changed the character of both plays and masques by transforming *audiences* into *spectators*, fixing the viewer and directing the theatrical experience toward the single point in the hall

¹ Letter dated 17 March 1983.

² This, of course, makes this particular masque a post-Jacobean one. However, the discussion below predominantly concerns the issues that crystallised a few years earlier when the masque came into its own in the hands of Jonson and Jones.

³ See Adams, 315. Jonson’s *The Masque of Queenes*, for example, opens with a group of 11 witches casting spells; the ‘hags’ end up bound as captives and led before the resplendent chariots of the courtly masquers. See Jonson’s copious notes to the masque in Adams, ed.

⁴ The cover of Howe’s *The Secret History of the Dividing Line* contains an illustration from an 18th century book on perspective.

⁵ The one-off ritual was followed by the destruction of the entire apparatus, lending each event the character of potlatch.

from which the perspective achieved its fullest effect, the royal throne. [...] Through the use of perspective, the monarch, always the ethical centre of court productions, became in a physical and emblematic way the centre as well. Jones's theatre transformed its audience into a living and visible emblem of the aristocratic hierarchy: the closer one sat to the King, the 'better' one's place was, and only the King's seat was perfect. It is no accident that perspective stages flourished at court and only at court, and that their appearance there coincided with the reappearance in England of the Divine Right of Kings as a serious political philosophy.¹

The new spectatorship was both a huge advance in terms of stagecraft and, at the same time, it was in the service of a single, privileged viewpoint. Just as *The Faerie Queene* is a highly aestheticised celebration of order, virtue and Elizabethan Protestantism, so the Jonsonian masque seeks to effect the material staging of the miraculous.² Howe's poem sets out, on the one hand to unpick the organisation of space that constructs the official viewpoint and, on the other, to exploit the mystificatory manoeuvres that endow the king with divine authority. At the level of the artwork, Howe posits a convergence between the iconoclastic "wild interiority" of language and the sense of wonder that pervades the Jonson-Jones aesthetic.³ Howe explores similar tensions more explicitly elsewhere in her work: a mixture of questioning of the treatment of 'Stella' and Cordelia and admiration for the Swift-Lear hybrid in *The Liberties*; the suspicion of earthly authority and the parallel investment in grace in Howe's reading of antinomianism; the combination of criticism of institutional Christianity's marginalisation of Mary Magdalene and fascination with the resurrection in *The Nonconformist's Memorial*; or, most pointedly, the ambivalence towards the execution of Charles I in *Eikon Basilike*. In *Defenestration* the uneasy coalition between these impulses is deeply buried in the text.

¹ Orgel (1973), 7. At the end of this essay Orgel comments on the frontispiece to the Royalist pamphlet *Eikon Basilike*, which shows Charles I holding a crown of thorns and looking at a crown in the heavens marked 'glory'. The image (also discussed by Back in relation to *Eikon*) shows the king to be at the centre of a fantastical movement that ascribes near-divine status to him. Orgel cites Milton's critique of the image in his *Eikonoklastes*: the king is "before his book, drawn out to the full measure of a masking scene, and set there to catch fools and silly gazers" (Milton, 1649, 342). Milton is attacking the mystifying image-making of the masque, the use of elaborate forms of representation – "quaint emblems and devices" (ibid) – to endorse Divine Right. Such questions returns with renewed force for Howe's work in her own *Eikon Basilike*.

² *The Midsummer Night's Dream* idealises Elizabeth I in its depiction of Titania and in Oberon's vision of the "imperial votress" (II, i, 165).

³ Despite the antagonism that developed between Jonson and Jones, the two shared a neo-Platonic attachment to the marvellous. See Orgel (1973), 11. For Howe's "wild interiority" phrase see Beckett interview, 24.

The stage for Howe's investigations – as in much of *Pythagorean Silence* – is the forest. While numerous literary antecedents of the woods of Howe's "sylvan/ imagery" (DP, 89) in *Defenestration* might be adduced, Howe mainly draws on *The Faerie Queene*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the "wild wood" of Milton's *Comus: A Masque*.

As a girl Howe took part in stagings organised by her mother of Milton's *Comus: A Masque* (as a wood-nymph, or hamadryad, aged four) and of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, both of which left a powerful linguistic imprint.¹ Another point of reference for *Defenestration* might be the Edenic "sylvan scene" in book four of *Paradise Lost*, which offers a "woody theatre" of 'stately' weight:

[...] and overhead up grew
Insuperable highth of loftiest shade,
Cedar, and pine, and fir, and branching palm,
A sylvan scene, and as the ranks ascend
Shade above shade, a woody theatre
Of stateliest view.²

The receding vistas of Milton's "sylvan scene" suggest a similarly dizzying theatrical space to the *mise-en-scène* of *Defenestration*. There is, moreover, an allusion to Milton's scene in *The Waste Land*.³ In Eliot's poem the passage is immediately followed by reference to Ovid's account of the rape of Philomela, who becomes a nightingale – singing 'jug, jug' in an ironic refusal of lyric decorum. Indeed, there are several parallels between *The Waste Land* and Howe's writing in *Defenestration* and *Pythagorean Silence*. Eliot's poem also contains reference to Ophelia's farewell (II, 170-171) and overhanging boughs (III, 172-3), to Hamlet and dust (I, 30; II, 128), to Psalm 137 (III, 182) [cf *Pythagorean Silence*'s "I lay down and conceived", (PS, 44)] to Tristan and Isolde (I, 31), and to a lyric metamorphosis (II, 99) – all figures in Howe's writing of the early 1980s.

In *Defenestration* – as with Daphne's flight into the woods in *Pythagorean Silence* – the obscurities of the forest prepare a consideration of the functions of lyric:

¹ See Swenson interview, 376. Howe has also said: "Being back with *The Midsummer Night's Dream* and the forest is being back with my mother. I was the fairy in *The Midsummer Night's Dream* when I was far too young to understand what the words meant. But they were incredibly beautiful. The musicality of the words and the mystery of that imaginary forest was the beginning of everything for me." And: "in *Comus* [...] they're lost in the woods. It's the old mythology and the new, and it's an *incredible* use of words with *total* control" (interview with author).

² Milton (1674). IV, 137-142.

³ Eliot (1922). II, 98.

[...]

Benevolent woods and glades
hamadryads

plots and old-plays

A fictive realm
Words and meaning meet in

feigning

without a text and running from
true-seeming

Florimell flees away into the forest

Hide her there
an illusion (fiction)

Beauty of the world
becoming part of the forest
[...]

Defenestration, 107

The forest is a place where a drama of representation is staged. The work of mimesis – here at once “feigning” but evading “true-seeming” – is made complicated with the ceaseless flight of Florimell into the forest. The forest becomes a space for the continual creation and unmaking of fictions. Yet verisimilitude – “true-seeming” – is not the goal. The fictive Florimell, hidden in the forest, is as much of a fake as her false double. The original object of representation is simply not accessible. Mimesis, in this sequence, is a process of staging – or coming into being – that is never fully achieved. Instead, like the radically curtailed portions of language in Howe’s poetry, it is a venture that is aware of its own artifice and that can only communicate through the gradual, processual accumulation of small utterances. When Florimell becomes “part of the forest” it is as if she is almost lost to representation and only accessible to a form of expression that could rival the insubstantial shadowplay of the forest.

Yet, in a setting of “benevolent” pastoral, poetic language is given an evanescent, sportive quality that is quite different from the more threatening American forests of

Thorow or *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*. It is as if the movement from Irish history and Elizabethan and Jacobean literary allusions to the settlement of New England and the French Indian War places the poet in more immediate contact with the landscape, removed from literary tradition.¹

Milton's phrase "woody theatre" is an apt description of the scene for *Defenestration* because Howe's poem gives so much weight to the visual and performative aspects of representation. *Defenestration* is written for the spectator as much as it is for the reader. This is not only to emphasise the visual, typographical elements of the work but to suggest that the poetic object for Howe invites various sight-lines, as if it were dedicated to undoing the monarchical viewpoint as an image of the unspoken contract between reader and writer. While Howe's work is often read in terms of historical 'depth', it also has a spatial depth that supplants the privileged royal perspective of the masque tradition with multiple vantage points. In other words, Howe's text combines referential obscurity with a use of syntactical, sonic and visual resources that offers the reader numerous points of entry.

If Inigo Jones' importation of perspective is on one hand seen as a device through which depth of field was put in the service of a self-confirming quasi-religious ritual of sovereignty, Howe's shifts in the poem reaffirm a subsequent democratisation of perspective in theatrical representation. When Howe writes, for example, such opaque lines as: "Fable over the mountain// abash negation/ gnashing pattern of alliteration" (*DP*, 122), she renounces, with forceful lyrical diction, any singleness of viewpoint – neither writer or reader can lay any definitive interpretative claim to such sequences.

Howe dissolves both sides of the representational contract in reading by exploding the figures of both king and reader. Her text reorients Orgel's observations on kingship and perspective, directing all lines of sight towards absence. Her technique, moreover, recalls the thought of Michel Foucault, one of the wave of French theorists who were highly influential in American intellectual life in the 1980s, and one whom Howe certainly read.² Foucault's comments on Velazquez's painting "Las Meninas" (see fig 1) in the opening chapter of his *The Order of Things* are pertinent here.

¹ See my discussion of Thoreau's writing in my account of *Thorow*.

² See my discussion of *Eikon Basilike* for a treatment of Howe's response to Foucault's essay "What is an Author?"



Fig 1, Velázquez's *Las Meninas*

The painting, in Foucault's view, places the viewer in the position of its absent subject, the king, who is seen only in a reflection in a mirror on the back wall of the room depicted. Foucault remarks:

The lines that run through the depth of the picture are not complete; they all lack a segment of their trajectories. This gap is caused by the absence of the king – an absence that is an artifice on the part of the painter. But this artifice both conceals and indicates another vacancy which is, on the contrary, immediate: that of the painter and the spectator when they are looking at or composing the picture. It may be that, in this picture, as in all representations of which it is, as it were, the manifest essence, the profound invisibility of what one sees is inseparable from the invisibility of the person seeing, despite all mirrors, reflections, imitations, portraits.¹

Foucault suggests that both subject and object of representation can be thought of as invisible: the former because it is necessarily external to that which is represented and the latter because it is not identical with that which is represented. The play of suspended trajectories in Velazquez's image serves, through a paradoxical turn, to mark the absence stubbornly at play within the artwork's movement of making present.

Foucault's discussion of the painting imagines the directions of the sight-lines in the scene depicted in the painting and those of the spectator and the painter. Howe's poems work in a similar manner: although they are spread across the pages of a book, the vectors of association they project give them a comparable perspectival complexity. They are predicated on a foundational absence which prevents artwork, reader or author assuming a position of authority with regard to the act of representation.

In the masque the king was ideal spectator and his pre-eminence was, ultimately, the subject matter of the performance. Yet, following Foucault's scheme, both spectator and object represented are inevitably absent from the artwork. The masque, then, depends in a highly formalised manner on a pattern of showing and concealing that is built upon "invisibility". It is an extremely condensed ritual of representation that seeks – and fails – to concretise a structure of dominance. Howe borrows the texture of masque, the fascination with mimesis, but allows the fabric of her poem to be

¹ Foucault (1970). 16.

permeated by principles of absence and invisibility from the outset. It is an immanent response to a defunct art form that adopts some of its conceptual contours at the same time as subjecting it to criticism. In this way the reader encounters both the fascinating quality and the fragility of the paraphernalia of political sovereignty.

Such concerns are vital to the hallucinatory masque space Howe sketches in *Defenestration*, an environment in which the traffic between ideal and real is sufficient to blur the distinction between the two. The attention given to the question of presence finds an analogue in the vestigial nature of the actors. This nexus of ideas around insubstantiality and unstable identity in the poem issues in the lines “evanishing of the actors into// one another” (*DP*, 108). These words allude to the aftermath of the masque scene in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*:

Our revels are now ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air

IV, I, 148-150¹

This quality of being on the point of dissolution is characteristic, too, of *Defenestration*. The fairy-like actors and “sylvan” setting of *Defenestration* are means of invoking a nexus of ideas around a notion of Renaissance pastoral: the forest as a magical space in which the rules of court and city are suspended.² Standing as a figure for contemporary poetry, this environment makes of the page a site of refuge from more transparent language-use, a place in which meanings appear and disappear in much the same manner as the “evanishing actors” of the masque. At numerous points the poem deploys language that resists any interpretation other than a staging of this ephemerality: “equivocal shapes quasi magical// Mirror king of names cascading// stratagems tumbling// not forgotten [...]” (*DP*, 121). Howe appropriates the masque’s capacity for staging the fantastic but allows the highly associative dream-logic she instantiates to dismantle the sovereignty of perspective that would be the prerogative of the king – or his proxies, author and reader.

¹ In these lines, as both the Orgel and the Kermode editions of the play note, Shakespeare is extending a figure that derives from the classics. Both editors draw on TW Baldwin’s monumental Shakespeare’s *Little Latine and Lesse Greeke* to show that Shakespeare was using the Latin poets Palingenius and Chrysostom, and also Job 20 6-8 (“He shall fly away as a dream [...]”). See Baldwin, vol 1, 674-677. Orgel notes that Prospero’s phrase “insubstantial pageant” is comparable to Jonson’s statements on the ephemerality the masque and, furthermore, that the “towers” and “gorgeous palaces” recall the fabulous settings of the courtly masques themselves. (See Orgel, 1987, 180-181.)

² Cf *As you Like It*’s “Are not these woods/ More free from peril than the envious court?” (II, i, 3-4).

Returning to the figure of Florimell in *The Faerie Queene*, if Spenser's allegorical character is always in flight in his "dark conceit", in Howe's poem she becomes a figure for a principle of instability – a "wild interiority" once again – around which poetry is written.¹ As with her treatment of Daphne and Ophelia in *Pythagorean Silence*, Howe begins to install the feminine as the subject instead of (or, in this case, as well as) the object of the lyric poem. The drama of making-present, conceived as flight and pursuit, suggests a notion of sense-making that is dynamic to the point of volatility. The reader-poet is engaged in a hunt at the borders of intelligibility in sequences such as: "Transgression links remembering/ Dark spell// terror Ideal/ (spangs like stars)" (*DP*, 109). If in *Pythagorean Silence* the moment of death was seen as a dividing line at which poetry could speak, in *Defenestration of Prague* it is this process of meaning-making that is examined, as fictive worlds appear and disappear and "Words and meaning meet in// feigning" (*DP*, 107).

Howe's use of typographical disarrangement and of perspectival shifts in her language achieves a staging of semiosis that depends on a strong visual component. In this respect, once again, *Defenestration* shows her work to be in dialogue with Renaissance aesthetics, in this case the "direct and unquestioned" bond between word and image.² For Jonson, "the conceits of the Mind are Pictures of things, and the tongue is the Interpreter of those pictures."³ Jonson gave words an explanatory role: images communicate directly and poetic language is dedicated to this essentially pictorial conception of expression. Howe is writing, of course, in the context of an anti-representational modernist concern with the word as word. Yet, for all the obdurate textuality of the words on her pages, her work returns, via the multiple perspectives of montage, to an implicit reliance on the interdependence of verbal and visual.

One of Howe's earliest published prose works was an essay on Ad Reinhardt and concrete poetry written for the journal *Archives of American Art* (1974). It contains the following, provoked by Ernest Gombrich's writing on word and image: "The joining together of a picture with a poem or title (emblem), or with a short motto (impresa), produced, during the 16th and 17th centuries, a mass of books on the subject. Now it is a lost art. Far from being an empty intellectual exercise, Gombrich feels that this matching of image to picture led back to such basic concerns as mystery, metaphor, and metamorphosis."⁴

¹ For Howe's "dark conceit" remark see Beckett interview, 25.

² Orgel (1973), 3.

³ Cited in Orgel (1973), 3.

⁴ Howe (1974), 3.

While the fusing of word and image in 17th century thought is a long way removed from late 20th century poetics, it is plausible to argue that Howe's writing is, on one level, an attempt to re-encounter this "lost art" through a mode of writing for which the visual is indispensable. This, at least, is her argument about concrete poetry (the referential density, of course, of her own work places it at a remove from that tradition). Despite its rejection of classical representation the pages function as both stage and canvas, and the lines of association that proceed from her word-conjunctions suggest an idea of language that is continually striving to transcend itself and represent through the 'visual' means of analogy.¹

Defenestration's "peerless poesie" (DP, 108) echoes Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesie*, in which Sidney suggests that the "peerlesse poet" "yeeldeth to the powers of the minde an image of that whereof the Philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neyther strike, pierce, nor possesse, the sight of the soule so much".² Howe's writing lies at the antipodes of Sidney's characterisation of philosophical prose. Developing from her investment in mystical immediacy, her poetry is built on a notion of a language which might, in Sidney's terms, "strike" or "pearce" or "possesse" the "sight of the soul". The attention to mediatedness in her allusions to falsehood and masking ultimately give way to a kind of mystical-pictorial directness of expression that is also present in Jonson and Jones's aspirations to stage the miraculous. The animus against representation in her fragmented texts turns back on itself and, through visual poetics and the stage, pursues Jonson's counter-rational combinations of image and text with the same vigour that Marinell pursues Florimell.

"Words jig and double catch": revelry

The representational mobility of *Defenestration* is discernible in another aspect of the staging of pastoral tradition that Howe draws on in her depictions of the forest, that of revelry: "nimble phantasma capering on a page// with antic gesture" (DP, 110). The forest, through this lens, is a "Hide-and seek border region" (DP, 111). It is an inversion of the "drear wood" of *Comus*, in which The Lady appears, lost and hoping she doesn't attend the bacchanal presided over by Circe's son: "I should be loth/ To meet the rudeness and swilled insolence/ Of such late wassailers; yet O where else/ Shall I

¹ See my account of *The Nonconformist's Memorial* for discussion of the relation between motifs of negative transcendence and the critical and philosophical context in which Howe was writing.

² Sidney, 95.

inform my unacquainted feet/ In the blind mazes of this tangled wood?"¹ In Howe's case, the wassailers, like the rambunctious straw boys of Irish tradition, are welcomed into the poem.

Defenestration draws on the "moonlight revels" of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, (II, i, 141), with its aura of temporal suspension, masquerade and stylised amorous misrecognition. The first section of *Defenestration*, "Tuning the Sky", for example, refers to Shakespeare's 'Mechanicals' (*DP*, 96), and is followed by the words "casement(*open* of great moone", an adaptation of lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (III, i, 53-54). The "tatterdemailon [correctly 'tatterdemalion', meaning 'ragamuffin'] revel" or "wassail" of Howe's text (*DP*, 103) would mean a scruffy or tattered celebration – the opposite of the courtly masque. There are several allusions to popular oral forms: the long "Speeches at the Barriers" section opens with the lines "Say that a ballad/ wrapped in a ballad" (*DP*, 99) and there are references to "oldest chronicle" (*DP*, 131), "fable" (eg *DP*, 133), and "nursery tale" (*DP*, 125). Howe is sometimes thinking of an open-air event – "Revels under open sky" (*DP*, 129) – and sometimes of a shamanic disclosure – "Wild man of pageant and poem/ wild man in a dream" (*DP*, 135). The latter recalls Spenser's injunction against the "wilde" Irish "bardes", who celebrate "lycentious" and "most bolde and lawlesse" behaviour. "Mock reign of a mock king" (*DP*, 136) brings a carnivalesque pathos to the temporary inversion of the existing order. It is clear, too, that the modes of popular celebration invoked by Howe are linked to something that occurs within the linguistic order, a "Stanzaic glade" (*DP*, 131) in which "Nimble and subtle/ words jig and double catch" (*DP*, 127).

Moreover, the idea of mimesis in these moments, rehearsing again the "evanishing of the actors into// one another", recurs with a collapsing of the 'true' and 'false' selves of performance. The "Players melt into one another", and "Layer after layer/ Mirror characters pursue each other" (*DP*, 127). These 'characters' may be the characters in a fiction or the typographical characters that exist on the surface of Howe's pages. Howe pursues this mirroring further with: "Worlds pass mirror-worlds in shelter" (*DP*, 118). Spenser's moralising aesthetic falls apart in the "Hide-and seek border region" (*DP*, 111) of the forest. Howe is working with reversal and inversions, urging oppositions to "melt into one another". Player and person, and dream and reality collide in a

¹ Milton (1645). ll 177-181.

“chemical wedding” of “Self and Anti-self” (*DP*, 142) – an allusion to Yeats’s opposition of Self to the liberatory imaginative mask of Anti-Self.¹

The theme of popular celebration, a poetical anti-masque to the theme of masquing, is evident at points in the poem such as “Fairs held on hilltops/ (mummer and strawboy)” (*DP*, 145) and “Straw dress/ straw mask” (*DP*, 142). The word “mumming” has its origins in the French, “Momer”, to mask oneself but mumming was an English form, thought to have been adapted by the Irish with the arrival of the colonisers of the 17th century.² Strawboys were straw-masked revellers, usually uninvited, who participated in wakes or wedding celebrations – it was considered bad luck to turn them away.

In his discussion of the links between Irish folk drama and its English precedents Alan Gailey notes that Irish mumming plays and Jacobean masques share a tripartite structure.³ (Masques themselves grew out of a combination of the courtly ceremonies of tournament, pageant and triumph.)⁴ Also, the mumming plays typically involved what Gailey describes as a ‘Hero-Combat’ model – they revolved around a battle between two figures which ended in the death and subsequent revival of the vanquished character. This stark struggle might be compared to the contrast between masque and antimasque in the Jonsonian masque. In the masque a ritualised aristocratic triumph was memorialised; in the Irish mummer’s plays more or less coded versions of the English presence in Ireland were defeated. *Defenestration* is divided into three parts and culminates in a section entitled *Bride’s Day* – a reference to the festival of Ibolg or Candlemass, which is a celebration of the arrival of spring. So, as with the mumming plays, the figure of returning life is a key strand of the conclusion of Howe’s poem.

The Bride’s Day festival was a fertility festival, marking the marriage of Bride to the Sun God. Gailey notes that it was unique among ritualised folk celebrations in that

¹ See *The Vision* and the conclusion to “Ego Dominus Tuus”: “[...] I call to the mysterious one who yet/ Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream/ And look most like me, being indeed my double./ And prove of all imaginable things/ The most unlike, being my anti-self./ And standing by these characters disclose/ All that I seek [...]” (Yeats, 1994, 212). Daniel Albright, the editor of the Everyman edition comments, 584n: “From his earliest poems Yeats was preoccupied with the concept of an anti-world, a faeryland in which every desire was gratified, an artificial domain related to the ordinary world as presence is to absence.”

² The first account of Irish mumming dates from 1685 and features Cromwell as a character. However the tradition is thought to date back at least to the previous century. See Gailey, 8. Cromwell, St George and St Patrick were common characters in the plays’ comic enactment of political conflict.

³ Gailey, 66.

⁴ See Adams, 315.

women were allowed to take part.¹ The performer typically carried a female effigy made of straw, dressed in white but with a featureless face.² One might suggest a homology between this straw effigy and, at the other end of the social and aesthetic spectrum, the white-clad figure of Florimell, whose union with Marinell affirms the theme of renewal in *The Faerie Queene*. Both are variants of a topos involving virginal femininity.³

One of the associative conjunctions in *Defenestration*, then – and one that’s none too apparent – is that between English masque and Irish mask. Both explore the ritual dimensions of politics and each involves a play of dissolving identities. Howe’s engagement with Irish tradition culminates in an assertion of renewal that revolves around a female figure. A three-part structure, along with themes of fictiveness and magic, are shared by Howe’s poem and both masques and mumming plays.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that in opposing aristocratic forms to popular ones Howe is simply investing the latter with a transgressive potential. Jonson and Jones, for all their differences, argues Orgel, had a similar attachment to producing a state of wonder. In this way the masque was a kind of staging or realisation of fantasy, its fabulous metamorphoses conjoining real and ideal. So, in Orgel’s words, “the realistic and the marvellous – that which produced wonder, the end of drama – were neither antithetical nor, on the whole, even distinguishable. What was marvellous about the spectacular machinery was precisely the realism of its illusions.”⁴ Howe’s evocation of a hallucinatory forest seems an attempt to stage the fabulous through the formal means available to the late 20th century poet. A poetry of fragments, it represents the discontinuities of the linguistic realisation of fantasy. While the multiple viewpoints of Howe’s poetics suggest a critique of the way that the masque served to authenticate divinely ordained kingship through the exercise of monarchical perspective, the desire to produce a state of irrational transport colludes with that very mystification of authority.

Wonder at the miraculous artifice of the courtly masque is combined, then, with an insurgent populism that incorporates the aesthetic manoeuvres of the Irish peasantry under colonial rule. The masks that mummers and strawboys wear are another

¹ Gailey, 84.

² Ibid. 85.

³ See Howe’s interview with Bernstein for discussion of the way women have been marginalised in religion. *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* discusses Mary Magdalene’s meeting with the risen Christ.

⁴ Gailey, 5.

version of the mobile identity that Howe accords her “evanishing actors”. There is repeated “flight from true-seeming” in the poem, as figures such as the strawboys echo the elusiveness of Florimell. While performers and spectators melted into one another during the courtly revels that concluded the Jacobean masque, these figures are jostled, in Howe’s poem, by the unruly entrance of the strawboys and the tatterdemalion revellers. Sovereignty, a mystifying form of authority, is pitted against an unruly popular iconoclasm, but neither term of the conflict is cancelled in the encounter.¹

The political oppositions of Howe’s work, in other words, can never be understood in terms of a straightforward endorsement of alterity (Keller’s amalgamation of the ‘feminine’ and Ireland, for example). Howe’s interest in the mechanics of exclusion, whether ritualised through scapegoating or as bloody as the extermination of native American tribes, runs alongside a concomitant fascination with the figure of the centre that guarantees or authorises representation, whether the (absent) king, in Foucault’s scheme, or the elusive “center around which Poetry gravitates”.² The fairy-land of Shakespearean pastoral comedy is the scene of these tense conceptual cross-currents in *Defenestration*, with the forest imagined as a space of self-renewing fictiveness that is available to both hieratic and demotic forms.

¹ See my discussion below of Howe’s treatment of antinomianism and Anne Hutchinson’s trial.

² Beckett interview, 25. I discuss the notion of an aporetic authority in my account of *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*.

iii) *The Liberties: Wild Geese in a Stammered Place*

Howe's mother, Mary Manning Howe, was Anglo-Irish and, Howe writes, "her three daughters became aware of Ireland and New England either concurrently or as the obverse and reverse of the same thing at once".¹ This motif of doubled identity is central to *The Liberties*, a poem of exile and estrangement that is built around the relationship between Jonathan Swift and Esther Johnson, the principle addressee of Swift's *Journal to Stella*.² *The Liberties*, initially published in 1980, predates both *Pythagorean Silence* and *Defenestration of Prague*, but is placed at the end of the collection *The Europe of Trusts*. Howe weaves into the poem strands of *King Lear* (notably the disinherited Cordelia), Ibsen's *Wild Duck*, fairy tales and myth. On the title page is a picture of an Irish airmail stamp displaying the figure of the Angel Victor (Saint Patrick's messenger) carrying the voice of the Irish (*Vox Hiberniae*) out across Lough Derg. The stamp has personal significance for Howe: it was attached to the last letter sent to the family by the poem's dedicatee, her Irish maternal grandmother, Susan Manning.³ The image is an emblem of the problem of the transmissibility of speech across temporal and geographical borders.

For Howe, there is clearly a partial identification with Swift:

It was interesting to find that Swift was constantly wrenched between England and Ireland when he was a small child. It helps to explain the fracturing of language in his writing.

Foster interview, 166

The relation between exile and 'fracturing' of language is developed throughout the poem. Temporal displacement causes it to be haunted by literary and personal ghosts. Around these develops a consideration of the pressure exerted by history on cultural identity. Displacement and the distance of time render aspects of the past unintelligible and Howe's poem is an attempt to allow these heterogeneous elements to find a means of expression, however indirect and fleeting. While this is true of all her poetry, my discussion of *The Liberties*, a poem populated with vestigial figures, will

¹ "Ether/Either", 119.

² These letters gained their title posthumously. They were ostensibly sent to both Johnson and her friend Rebecca Dingley but the frequent use of a private language of intimacy – "Stellakins" and so on – makes it hard to not see them as pertaining to Swift's relationship with 'Stella'.

³ Email correspondence with Susan Howe, 12 April 2003.

pay particular attention to the ways in which the opacity of the past is rendered through the motif of haunting.

The Angel Victor stamp represents a bridge between Howe's two worlds. Variations on the themes of flight and the crossing of water appear throughout the poem, often in the shape of birds, a motif that again stretches across familial and historical borders. Howe situates herself at the crux of a 'horizontal' geographical disjunction and a 'vertical', historical one.¹ Surrounded by the desirable and undesirable burden of cultural and familial inheritance, the "homeward rush of exile" in *The Liberties* works as a paradoxical twinning of refuge and displacement at the level of the personal (the relation of Howe's poetic vocation to her father and her mother), of populations (the Irish diaspora), and of lyric (the formal consequences of seeking to address absence in poetic language).

The poem's title both suggests the freedom-captivity dyad at the heart of Howe's writing and refers to the area to the west of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin – so named in the medieval period because it was one of several districts not subject to either royal or town jurisdiction. Part of the middle section of *The Liberties*, the dramatised "God's Spies", is explicitly 'set' in St Patrick's Cathedral. Elsewhere there are several references to Viking Dublin (The Liberties district was built on the site of an earlier Viking settlement) and the poem sequence ends with an old map of "Ireland's Eye", an islet at the mouth of Howth harbour, near Dublin. The geography of Dublin appears early in the poem, where page 159's second word-grid contains the words "poddle" and "Thingmount".² Howe is attempting, through the accumulation of small details, to build a historically layered picture of this part of the city:

[...] when I began writing this time, I was really trying to paint that part of the landscape of Dublin in words. I was trying to get the place, a foreign place that was home to my mother, on paper. I thought I could understand my mother that way – I might go back to my grandmother, who I am named after and who I loved though I never saw her that often, separated as we were by first war and always the ocean.

Foster interview, 166

¹ I discuss below the role of crosses themselves in the poem.

² The city of Dublin was founded at the confluence of two rivers, the Liffey and the Poddle (which now runs underground). The references in the same word-grid to "wattled dwellings" and "Thingmount" come from an early 20th century history of Dublin, *Dublin: A Historical and Topographical Account of the City* by Samuel A Ossory Fitzpatrick. (Thingmount was a circular mound upon which wattled huts were built by the Vikings in the mid-9th century).

Although the analogy is with painting, the mode of depiction is neither directly representational nor abstract. Once again, using a method akin to montage, Howe brings together fragments that, taken together, do not amount to a whole. Dublin's Scandinavian beginnings remain as visible as the subterranean River Poddle and the city's past is recoverable only in piecemeal, indirect ways.

As in Joyce's *The Dead*, there is a preoccupation in the poem sequence with the weight of the past, with exile figured in the image of wild geese and with a movement "west-the-sea".¹ This westward trajectory is that pursued, when 16 months old, by Howe herself just before the outbreak of the second world war, when she and her mother crossed from Ireland to the United States. "Wild geese" have a particular cultural resonance: this was the name given to the Earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell, who fled the country in 1607, when the English were consolidating their presence in Ireland; the term 'wild geese' then became a more generalised metaphor for the exiled among subsequent generations.

Ireland's Eye is also "Ireland's I". *The Liberties* explores the problems of interlocking depictions of private and public history. History books are, so the persuasive cliché runs, written by history's victors. Memory, on the other hand, is evanescent, the only consolation for history's losers. Howe is seeking to fix the unrecorded and she depends on an understanding of language as the bearer of unannounced affect. In other words, the juxtapositions of words in her work can allow an 'underside' of language – what she calls in *Therow* "understory of another word" – to make itself heard. She directs her gaze towards the points at which the experience of historical trauma forms and is formed by language use, aspiring to unlock some of what has been excluded from the historical record. Stella's liminal existence in Ireland, for example, is linked through Ibsen's *Wild Duck* to problems of identification and paternity that intimately concern Howe herself. Ireland's Eye, moreover, recalls Donalbain's phrase in *Macbeth* when opting for exile: "to Ireland, I".² The heading to page 204, "Formation of a Separatist, I" both cements the Shakespearean echo and prepares us for the lines "Across the Atlantic, I/ inherit myself" on page 213. Howe draws on both Irish and Anglo-Irish motifs. Her own movement was in the opposite direction to that of Donalbain – she is one of the wild geese, even if the geese represent the dispossession of the Catholics. And, while she is not claiming direct experience of the immense traumas of the

Other phrases that Howe takes from this text include "Loe a blaze" (*Liberties*, 165) and "John the mad fought like a true beserker" (*Liberties*, 167).

¹ Gabriel Conroy is "ready to carve a flock of geese if necessary" (153). To go 'west', in Ireland, encompasses meanings both of exile and of death.

² *Macbeth* II, iii, 137. See Paul Muldoon's *To Ireland, I* for a rococco abecedary of embedded echoes in Irish literature, culminating in Joyce's *The Dead*.

displacement of populations in the 20th century, she, like the Anglo-Irish, is not at home in her own country. Despite this doubled removal, she at the same time “inherits” herself (*Liberties*, 213). Separation and disinheritance in the poem tend to collapse into their opposites in a paradoxical movement that, as we shall see, is central to her understanding of the border territory inhabited by lyric poetry.

In structure, *The Liberties* repeats the tripartite form of the other poems collected in *The Europe of Trusts*. In this case, however, the sequence contains several subdivisions: section I has three parts; section II is a drama in seven parts unfolding over the days of the week;¹ section III uses various subheadings. The middle section includes lines from St Patrick’s hymn: “I bind unto myself today/ The strong Name of the Trinity,/ By invocation of the same,/ The Three in One and One in Three” (*Liberties*, 189). The Swift/Stella/Vanessa trio is converted to a Swift/Stella/Cordelia trio. The form is mixed and nowhere does the poem-sequence utilise the succession of single lines and couplets ranged left that dominate the central sections of the other *Europe of Trusts* poems. The visual concerns so prominent in *Hinge Picture* are an important element of the work, with many poems organised in bird shapes, and much use of word-grids. As with *Pythagorean Silence* and *Defenestration of Prague*, a relatively disarranged first section is followed by the appearance of greater order and then again by more typographically unconventional work. The third section displays the attraction to word games and lists that had been apparent in earlier work.

Discussing *The Liberties*, Howe has linked its formal arrangement to the captivity/freedom pairing mentioned above. Her comments might apply, however, to any of her three-part poems:

So I start in a place with fragments, lines and marks, stops and gaps, and then I have more ordered sections, and then things break up again. That’s how I begin most of my books. I think it’s what we were talking about in history as well, that the outsidersness – these sounds, these pieces of words – comes in to the chaos of life and then you try to order them and to explain something, and the explanation breaks free of itself. I think a lot of my work is about breaking free: starting free and being captured and breaking free again and being captured again.

Foster interview, 166

¹ Early drafts of *Pythagorean Silence*, preserved at the San Diego archive, contained a dramatised section: Howe also dramatised aspects of Anne Hutchinson’s speech in her Birthmark essay “Incloser”.

Howe's description of her method has three stages: an 'ordering' that leads to an 'explanation' that, in turn, "breaks free of itself". It is a way of reading and assimilating documentary material that generates new matter along lines of association that cannot be contained within the initial frame of reference. This is not to say that, for example, the more ordered middle sections of some of her poems correspond to ordered argumentation. Rather, the poem as a whole represents what I earlier designated as 'memory' – a 'breaking-free' that can be defined against the 'ordered', explanatory mode of historical narrative.

With *The Liberties* Howe for the first time accentuates the moment of 'capture' in her work by means of an explanatory preface, an important innovation in her work, which will become a common feature of later poems.¹ In this case it is written in an ironically sober expository style, sketching the historical background to Swift and Stella's relationship. The introduction is interspersed with fragments of poetry and correspondence, although it does not approximate the hybrid verse/prose form of some later prefaces.² Howe writes only of the Swift/Stella relationship, not developing other key themes in the work. The preface, then, provides a frame that does not compromise the desire for freedom which resonates throughout the work. Moreover the accumulation of documentary detail in the preface suggests that Howe views historical narratives as a kind of intermediate stage in the pursuit of what falls outside them; her own work might be said to complement such writing, offering the voice of what she terms: "Iwho/ crawl/ between thwarts" (*Liberties*, 177; 179).

The Liberties is the first of Howe's works to explicitly link her "Irish I" with the Anglo-Irish literary line. Swift is invoked as the point of departure for an already displaced tradition that still sounds a note of not-belonging in Howe's own work. The other main literary point of connection in this line is to Yeats, particularly with his interest in folk tales. Howe's Anglo-Irishness touches on the lyrical mysticism of the once unofficial Celtic/Catholic version of Irish history, but only as that version is excavated by the very Anglo-Irish tradition that had done so much to suppress it. Her interest in fairies and folk tales is filtered through the sensibility of writers such as Yeats and Lady Wilde, who sought in differing ways to link an Irishness untainted by imperialism with their cultural and political stances. Seamus Deane pinpoints this curious conjunction of expropriated origins:

¹ During the Q&A session following a 1988 reading Howe remarked on how she came to feel the necessity of providing a basic level of prefatory information for the reader: "Some things reader *has* to know." (Audio cassette L945.)

² See, eg. *Eikon*.

As the Catholic population became politically conscious under O'Connell's leadership in the 19th century, they became more devoted to English as the language through the use of which they could win reform and improvement. Thus it is with some sense of initial surprise but final understanding that we must recognise that the fortunes of the Gaelic civilisation passed out of Catholic hands in the 18th century and into the possession of predominantly Protestant intellectuals and antiquarians. For them the old language and culture was valuable because through its recovery they could realign themselves with the past of the country they lived in and (decreasingly) governed; because through it they could more effectively proselytise the Catholic Irish of the West and, finally, they could find in its revival a powerful counter to the egalitarian mass democracy which it was in the interest of Irish Catholics to realise. The fear of anglicisation became an obsession among some of the most influential Protestant intellectuals and writers in the 19th century, Thomas Davis and WB Yeats among them.¹

This attachment to the Gaelic past then, can be seen as an especially Anglo-Irish phenomenon, although it would be misleading to align Howe with the anti-democratic tendencies that Deane imputes to Yeats. Howe is feeding on aspects of Anglo-Irishness, approaching fairy tales as a means of gaining access to a mythic element in Irish culture that can be mobilised, as part of her radically disjointed artwork, against sentimentalising attempts to recover a lost cultural and national unity. Howe's poem explores the fragility of Anglo-Irish literary identity and treats the "fracturing of language" she imputes to Swift's split allegiances as a phenomenon that runs counter to any synthesising of 'tradition'.

In one recent work, *The Midnight*, Howe explicitly links her Anglo-Irishness to an array of marginal social groupings. There, Howe invokes a long list of minority religious sects, outsiders and misfits, concluding, "I cling to you with all my divided attention. Itinerantly. It's the maternal Anglo-Irish disinheritance."² Howe is here offering a matrilineal genealogy of expression that is predicated on absence – "*disinheritance*". Howe seems to be setting up Anglo-Irishness as a marker of resistance to fully conceived social identities. Moreover, an inheritance that is coded as patrilineal will always place women in a peripheral position. Howe's relation to her literary inheritance is similarly troubled by differing allegiances and by a paucity of female

¹ Deane, 28.

² Swenson interview, 376. The phrase also appears in *The Midnight* (forthcoming).

antecedents. Swift's divided cultural loyalties and his interest in punning form a bridge between her writing and his. And wordplay takes her, via her mother, to another interrogator of Irish identity, Joyce. Joyce, of course, was not Anglo-Irish, but so important was he to Mary Manning Howe that she adapted *Finnegans Wake* for the stage in the 1950s.¹ Howe has described reading from Joyce's book to her mother on her deathbed:

The last words she heard were the end of *Finnegans Wake*. To me the last two or three pages are up there with "The Lord is my shepherd and I shall not want". There's no difference to me. The beauty of those last two pages is the way words relate to each other, the way they become almost abstract and then one word kicks another word off and you're not quite sure what it's punning on. How many different things is that saying? I think that that ability – or whatever you call it – came to me from my mother.²

Howe's words are close to her description of punning in her introduction to *Frame Structures*: she is absorbing aspects of the texture of Joycean language through her mother's example. Wordplay links Swift to Joyce and her maternal "disinheritance". The figure of Cordelia in *The Liberties* develops this exploration of disinheritance. In Stella, Howe finds another figure for an elided femininity that is in the shadow of a ghostly or absent paternity.³ *The Liberties*, then, is about complex allegiances and ironies of identity. Rather than indicting a fully constituted colonial or patriarchal force, *The Liberties*, like *Defenestration*, is a poem of ambivalences. Swift, for example, can both represent the overbearing paternal presence that silences Stella, and liberatory punning; and the disinheritance of Cordelia and Stella is also the conduit, through the image of the wild geese in flight, to a kind of freedom.

¹ The adaptation was published by Faber in 1958. See also the Falon interview, where Howe describes her mother's relation to *Finnegans Wake*: "my mother just reads it and knows it because she *thinks* like that" (40).

² Interview with author.

³ A letter, dated 28 April 1978, to Lyn Hejinian suggests the genesis of *The Liberties*: "Recently I have been reading lots about Jonathan Swift. Not so much *Gulliver*, but shorter works and his *Journal to Stella*. [...] They had a code – the whole thing is fascinating. [...] Also his essay *A Modest Defense of Punning* and *A Discourse to Prove the Antiquity of the English Tongue*. Oh, words, words, words, how he loved and believed in the life of words [...] I am beginning to work around with some ideas on that score and will see where they take me".

Haunting – so much strangeness from God

The issues of exile and place that inform much of *The Liberties*, are filtered through a particular kind of relation to the past. *The Liberties* is also a poem of remembrance that is ambivalent about the dead: “Let those who are gone rest” (*Liberties*, 198) says Cordelia, in a speech that also contains the redemptive aspiration of: “Come to the surface again, true love” (*Liberties*, 197). Howe, as we have seen, has expressed a desire to “tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate” (*Europe*, 14). This can be read as an urge to voice the unspoken as part of a broadly psychoanalytic project – an archaeological approach to the psychic history of language-communities.¹ What is voiced, however, is not rendered ‘articulate’. The poetry rather shows the language we speak to be bruised and haunted by events that cannot quite be restored to the historical record.

Howe’s poetics needs a notion of a linguistic unconscious – however resistant to theorisation such a concept must necessarily be – if it is to prise memory out of the realm of subjective interiority. By ‘linguistic unconscious’ I mean the contention that sound, the slow historical accretion of meaning, the voices of others and the distribution of the text on the page are all meaning-bearing elements of writing that extend beyond the control of the writer.

Freud compared his endeavours to those of the archaeologist, interpreting the forms of ruins and relics, and it does not seem misplaced to attribute to Howe’s writing a similar investment in speculative reconstruction which looks towards an unconscious of language.² Howe is similarly concerned with history’s prehistory – not the events that antedate the written record but the historical experience that is not written down.

To continue with this psychoanalytic analogy, Howe’s poetics of recovery has strong points of connection to the notion of ‘transgenerational haunting’, as advanced by the French psychoanalytic thinkers Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok. In their work on haunting the analyst’s attention is shifted from the return of repressed in the psychic

¹ In their *Conjunctions* dialogue, 375, Swenson asks Howe “What do we want from ghosts?” Howe replies: “It’s the threshold between exterior and interior. What do *they* want is the question. Are the dead inside me in my voice, in my thought, or are they outside, in the landscape? The threshold is the border, the margin. [...] In *The Turn of the Screw* [...] the governess is a threshold figure. [...] Ghosts and governesses are liminal figures par excellence, so are mediums. So are immigrants and their children.”

² See Freud (1937), 259: “His [ie the analyst’s] work of construction, or, it if is preferred, of reconstruction, resembles to a great extent an archaeologist’s excavation of some dwelling place that has been destroyed and buried or some ancient edifice.”

life of the patient to the 'phantom'. This latter is a mute presence denoting "the unconscious or the rejected psychic matter of a *parental object*".¹

Abraham and Torok contend that, in some cases, an analysand's symptoms may not have anything to do with a neurosis with roots in personal experience but be due instead to phantoms which derive from the unconscious conflicts of a parent. A person may be haunted by the unspoken secrets of an ancestor: "what haunts us," writes Abraham, "are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others."² No amount of investigation can render this encrypted information fully intelligible. The phantom moves in silence and cannot be 'abreacted': it is a foreign body, ventriloquising its host. Crucial to Abraham and Torok's hypothesis is the idea that a parent can transmit "secret pain" intact to descendants. The circumstances are unavailable to the person inhabited by the foreign body, who must recognise the "radically heterogeneous" nature of the phantom if it is to perform its work of exorcism.³ Abraham describes the effect that the phantom produces in the speech of the analysand: "the phantom is sustained by secreted words, invisible gnomes whose aim is to wreak havoc, from within the unconscious, in the coherence of logical progression [...] it gives rise to endless repetition and, more often than not, eludes rationalisation."⁴

Although Abraham's carefully sketched account of symptom formation is designed for the consulting room, it is possible, proceeding with similar care, to draw a parallel with Howe's notion of language. She undoubtedly has an investment in the stutters, gaps and ellipses that interrupt literary texts.⁵ Her texts are almost a staging of silence. It might be said that she performs an analysis that allows certain symptoms – knowable only as interruptions – to be 'spoken', although in a negative sense. To clarify, in her essay "Incloser", writing on Dickinson, Melville and place, Howe notes that the beaver dams over which bridges were built by 19th century road builders often collapsed, revealing rich agricultural soil. This Howe compares to the histories she uncovers in her poetry:

During the 1850s, when the Republic was breaking apart, newly exposed soil from abandoned narratives was as rich and fresh as a natural meadow.

¹ Torok, 181.

² Abraham, 171.

³ Ibid, 174.

⁴ Ibid, 175.

⁵ Her critical work on 17th and 19th century texts shows her not to be simply responding to the strategies of fragmentation in modernism.

Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville are bridge builders. Their writing vaults the streams. They lead me in nomad spaces. They sieve cipherings, hesitations, watchings, survival of sound-meaning associations: the hound and cry, track and call. So much strangeness from God. What is saved to be said.

Once dams, narratives are bridges.

Birth-mark, 51

Howe is describing a kind of writing that can bring to the surface the secrets of history as effects in language. However, this only uncovers “nomad spaces”: a textual field strewn with enigmatic gaps that, in Abraham’s words, “eludes rationalisation”. Howe has no illusions about the ability of lyric poetry to heal a damaged present – the phantom in Abraham and Torok’s terms cannot be abreacted – but the notion of transgenerational haunting offers a productive way of thinking about the after-effects of a traumatised past on literary language. The shameful secrets of collective experience – of which there are no shortage in Irish history – may perhaps be approached obliquely by poetry such as Howe’s. *The Liberties* offers no redress and no new knowledge, but it does offer a counter-narrative that might lead to something analogous to “the psychoanalysis *in absentia* of several generations (parents, grandparents, uncles, et al) through the symptoms of a descendant.”¹

On page 209 of *The Liberties* there is a sequence that dramatises some of these obscurities:

e n i g m a s t i f e m i a t e d c r y p t o a t h
a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y
z o r z e d
g r a p h y
r e l a n d
I

The wordplay of the first line cited preserves both the terms “crypt” and “enigma(s)”. Taken along with the second line, the parodic puzzle is an uncrackable code. Abraham writes that “to stage a word – whether metaphorically, as an alloseme, or as a cryptonym – constitutes an exorcism, an attempt that is to relieve the unconscious by

¹ Rand’s editorial commentary on Abraham and Torok. 168.

placing the effects of the phantom in the social realm.”¹ The word ‘Swift’ for example, to which Howe’s poem often returns and which combines name, noun and adjective, is so densely packed that its effects echo throughout the poem. Howe’s poetry, in its very insolubility, has such a relation to history that its attempts to “stage” words offer a way of voicing the gap that points to an “unspeakable” secret. Her “HALLUCINATION OF THE MIRROR” (*Liberties*, 169) describes the inevitable insubstantiality and evanescence of representations that seek to address an inaccessible history. To dig into the beaver dam is, for Howe, to produce a poetry that is a “ciphering” of this “strangeness”.

In the cited lines the “z or zed” separates Ireland from America.² Howe’s “graphy” implies “geography”, writing and place. The “I” at the head of the word “Ireland” is separated from the body of the word, just as Howe herself shares Donalbain’s exile. Yet she is present, in encrypted fashion, in the text nonetheless. On the same page is a riddling word game whose answers spell the name ‘Susan Howe’: “I am composed of nine letters/ 1 is the subject of a proposition in logic/ 2 is a female sheep or tree [...] ” etc. With the insertion of this puzzle page, Howe seems to be suggesting that her texts are marked both with her own psychic history and a wider public history. The page, in other words, treats words as the building blocks of both private and public worlds. The Kulchur foundation edition of *The Liberties*, moreover, includes an illustration by Howe’s husband, the artist David von Schlegel, entitled “Crossing the Ninth Wave”. The reference, which extends Howe’s nine-letters word game, is to Tennyson’s “Holy Grail”: “[...] And then the two/ Dropt to the cove, and watcht the great sea fall,/ Wave after wave, each mightier than the last,/ Till last, a ninth one, gathering half the deep/ And full of voices slowly rose and plunged/ Roaring, and all the wave was in a flame.” In this oblique pictorial allusion, she aligns herself with the strongest wave, which, like her poetry, is “full of voices”. Memory and history intersect, for Howe, at the level of the word. The reorganisation of letters and syllables offers not a freedom from determinate meaning, but a qualified, determinate freedom that opens on to something akin to the “nomad spaces” she finds in Melville and Dickinson.

In the bottom right-hand corner of the page discussed above is a list, much like those that appeared in *Hinge Picture*: “Tension/ Torsion/ Traction/ Uinction/ Vection/ Version/ Vision”. The words, which follow the questions “*What are eyes for?/ What are*

¹ Abraham, 176. An ‘alloseme’ is a word with a meaning that varies from the word initially under discussion; a ‘cryptonym’ is a secret name.

²See “Ether/Either” for the weight given to the different pronunciations of “either” in the Howe family when Howe was a child. There is an echo, too, of Shakespeare’s “whoreson zed”, which combines with the placing of “I”, suggesting that each is almost a superogatory afterthought.

ears for?”, are examples of the “sound-meaning associations” she has described and, once again, they resemble a word-game. Yet meaning asserts itself through the severe parataxis: there are four words (including the obsolete ‘vection’) that refer to the application of force; the alphabetical movement of the word associations leads via the last rites (“unction”) to “vision”. It is as though, through the extreme “torsion” applied in poetry to words, a quasi-mystical insight is afforded reader and writer. The passage is one of many in Howe’s work which appears dedicated to the paradoxical desire, not uncommon in discourses of the ineffable, to use language to transcend itself.¹

Colour is another way of compacting meaning in the poem. As with *Pythagorean Silence*, white is the dominant colour in *The Liberties*. The poem’s enchanted geese and swans are white and Stella talks of “snowy flesh” (*Liberties*, 187). The polar bears and ‘pearl’ of Howe’s childhood experience at Buffalo Zoo appear in “God’s Spies” (*Liberties*, 198) and the ghost scene takes place in moonlight: “all is white” (*Liberties*, 189). The whiteness in the poem is often associated with haunting. Howe writes:

table spread flesh and milk
 in mystery
 in the room
 in the sunlight
 about the dead
 who come from west-the-sea
 raiment
 shirt-clad and light-clad

Liberties, 161²

These light-clad ghosts recur a few pages further into the poem: “phantom forms/ finn gall/ white strangers” (*Liberties*, 165). Yet the ghostly strangers are also the fading Irish population: “If there be in the/ land Famine” (*Liberties*, 159), from Kings, 8, lends a transhistorical, biblical resonance to that suffering. Ireland is depicted as a country haunted by past violence – an extinguished Celtic culture and a population

¹ See my discussion of *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*. See also Howe, in *Birth-mark*, 45: “By choosing to install certain narratives somewhere between history, mystic speech, and poetry, I have enclosed them in an organization, although I know there are places no classificatory procedure can reach, where connections between words and things we thought existed break off”.

² The words “table spread” may contain an allusion to another meditation on Anglo-Irish identity: Elizabeth Bowen’s story “Her Table Spread”.

starved, subdued and often eventually forced into exile. This rubbing-out of the population is itself rendered as a process of whitening.

Ghostliness in *The Liberties* is expressed in relation to four main clusters of ideas, each of which substitutes absence for presence: insubstantiality; silence; disinheritance and a threatened paternity. First, as with *Defenestration*, there is a preoccupation with a substance that melts to nothing: Stella, by Howe's account, is a vestigial character and, by Swift's, she only eats "an ounce a week" (*Liberties* 152).¹ Swift doesn't preserve her side of their correspondence and there isn't even, Howe writes, a portrait of her that people can agree on (*Liberties*, 152). Stella died young, in her late 40s, much disturbed by Swift's relationship with 'Vanessa', yet "[n]othing is known of Stella's feelings or what she suffered from" (*Liberties*, 154). Swift and Stella never married and, as Howe notes, their friendship is surrounded by rumour and speculation. Although Stella looked after Swift's household, she lived elsewhere. Beside Swift, in short, Stella was a shadow. As so often in Howe, femininity is threatened with erasure.²

The preface attributes a culpable neglect to Swift in his relationship with Stella. Against this, another aspect of Swift – Swift the punster – is brought into play to give to Stella's 'soul' the attributes of swiftness. The word 'Swift' has a strange life in the poem: one of the refrains is "Swift, you are Swift" (*Liberties*, 188; 199) and "Swift, they were Swift" (*Liberties*, 185). Stella is "known for the swiftness of her soul" (*Liberties*, 163) and Stella's swiftness seems, in Howe's hands, to become an ironic rebuke to the paternalistic and legislating aspects of Swift (Swift tutored Stella when she was a girl). Her 'swiftness' is associated with the painful liberty of exile and her liminality. In the figure of Stella ideas of neglect and disinheritance on the one hand, and linguistic freedom and marginality on the other, are simultaneously rehearsed.

In "God's Spies", where Stella is brought back to life, these issues are treated in the presence of an insubstantial paternal figure: Swift appears in "God's Spies" as a ghost, who "walks through" Stella. This ghost "preaches a silent sermon" (*Liberties*, 193); he appears Lear-like and "fantastically dressed with wildflowers"; he sobs and cries to heaven. It is perhaps a representation of Swift's long senescence but the salient aspect of the scene is reversal: Stella speaks and Swift is a phantom. Stella reads one of her poems (Howe gives the full text in "God's Spies") and even quotes back at Swift's ghost

¹ Howe is citing a letter to Wallis, 12 February, 1723 (Swift, 1963, 450).

² Compare, for example, Howe's treatment of the figure of Pamela (from Sidney's *Arcadia*) in her work on the *Eikon Basilike*.

his chiding comment about her spelling: “say Stella when you copy next,/ will you keep strictly to the text?”¹ (*Liberties*, 193). Swift’s ghost finally exits, “distracted” (*Liberties*, 193). What Howe achieves in her treatment of Stella is, in part therefore, an exorcism of a baleful paternal presence.

Silence is also the prerogative of Cordelia. Her appearance in the poem constantly circles around her “Nothing, my lord” – at one point, she says the word “nothing” four times on one page (*Liberties*, 197). Also, she describes herself as “leafy” (*Liberties*, 195), echoing Stella’s “her snowy flesh was all in leaf” (*Liberties*, 187) and the Daphne imagery of *Pythagorean Silence*. Cordelia expresses a double-bind that consigns femininity to the margins:

But crucial words outside the book
those words are bullets.
Lodged in the ebbing actual
women in the flight of time stand framed.

Liberties, 178

While male speech enters the flux of history as written record, all Stella can boast is to be buried next to Swift, under his epitaph.² If “in history all people are dead” (*Liberties*, 187), the written record is the only permanence: “How did we happen – because we were written” (*Liberties*, 197), says Cordelia. In her not-thereness Stella shares Cordelia’s disinheritance. The fairy tale of the 12 wild geese and the myth of the children of Lir (elements of the poem that I discuss below) are also stories of disinheritance, set in motion by a break in familial continuity in the shape of a stepmother. In each case it is royal flesh – the point at which inheritance is sanctioned by heaven – that grows feathers and takes flight. In Howe’s poem the usurpation of women’s speech can be reversed by finding, in a poetics of montage, the freedom of flight that belongs to the birds in the tales that she cites.

One of the traumatising secrets of history, Howe’s poem is saying, is the secret of women’s experience. The figure of Stella, interred beneath Swift’s epitaph, is an

¹ The couplet is from Swift’s “To Stella, Who Collected and Transcribed My Poems”.

² See Foster interview, 166: “in the cathedral, Stella is buried under the floor near the entrance, or that’s where her grave marker is. You walk over it as if there were a dog buried there. Swift’s pet dog. At the same time, considering that Swift was the dean of the cathedral, it seems a flagrant gesture. A swipe at respectability.”

'encryption' – absorbing Abraham's sense of the word – of this experience.¹ The "homeward rush of exile" expresses a community of silence that places living women among the dead. One way of wresting intelligibility from the fragmented narratives of Howe's poetry, therefore, is to attempt to seek in it evidence of Abraham's "secreted words", which "wreak havoc, from within the unconscious, in the coherence of logical progression".² The broken and hybrid nature of the third section of the poem – the part that Howe considers most to do with sound – is the point at which the poem most approximates this enigmatic incoherence. There are several word-grids that suggest tangential communication between diverse words, and sequences such as the following defy readerly resolution:

vision
aleatory
necromancy
tranquility
suspendu
suspendu
trem

Liberties, 210

The words, falling one after the other, have an obdurate quality that will not yield grist to the interpretative mill. The word "necromancy" suggests, perhaps, that the dead may have secrets to reveal but if this communication is from the spirit world it is making no concessions to the living. Elsewhere in the poem, however, ghostliness is tangled up with paternity. Stella's relation to Swift, her former tutor, is akin to that of daughter and father. Cordelia and *The Wild Duck's* Hedvig, too, are daughters who are sacrificed. The entry of the ghost of Swift, "fantastically dressed with wildflowers", brings Swift and Lear together (*Liberties*, 189). *Hamlet* is of course also present – the ghost of Swift is also Hamlet's father, only this time his secret is unspeakable.³ Stella is the daughter of a steward on the estate of Swift's patron, Sir William Temple, but she is rumoured to be Temple's daughter – she shares with Hedvig an uncertainty about

¹ Esther/Stella – and, with "estersnowe" (*Liberties*, 205, my italics). Howe herself – doesn't have access to the literary establishment of her day. Howe's correspondence contains many references to her isolation as a woman writer of 'avant garde' poetry.

² Abraham, 175.

³ In Abraham's version of *Hamlet*, the ghost is lying. This ghost is a key figure for Howe. She wrote in a letter dated 25th September 1983 to Taggart: "[...] to this day I feel my father is like the ghost [in *Hamlet*]. Always with me, always smiling in that sad way and waiting to be avenged!!" See also "Sorting Facts" for more recent reflections on *Hamlet*, especially the Laurence Olivier film, important to Howe since she first saw it as a child.

paternity. Swift's father died before he was born and there has been speculation that Swift was either also the son of Temple or of Temple's brother John.¹

In "God's Spies", the line "Swift, they were swift" (*Liberties*, 185) is answered by "blind to the father's need", and "Swift you are swift" (*Liberties*, 188) by "blind to a father's need". Everywhere in the poem paternity is a vexed or doubtful issue. On the one hand, this might be autobiographical, as for example in Howe's 1982 letter to Ron Silliman on *Pythagorean Silence*: "When you are 4 and your father vanishes like that and you don't see him again until you are 8, something has been lost forever".² On the other hand, the ghostly father that haunts Howe's writing is the memorialisation of a divine lawgiver which Cordelia characterises as "Noone in first father" (*Liberties*, 197). Here Howe's poetry appears to address an evasive mystical divinity. In a letter to Taggart she makes a more explicit link between absence, paternity, divinity and her own poetics:

Lyric "I" is both guard of sacred vision, guard of the holy unseen, guard of what must remain unmutated – Truth, beauty, tenderness, charity; and a hunter of the words to say the vision. *Absence is what has not been said or spoken, the place to where our imagination keeps returning.* So poets admire and desire this absence. [...] Who did Christ cry for on the cross? Where was his absent father?³

While the Lyric "I" is anathema to many of Howe's peers – the guard, if anything, of the specious claim to coherence of the poem's speaking subject – for Howe, despite the polyphony of her writing, the "I" appears to guarantee an ethics of poetic 'vision'. The "I" is, in this view, a notional, quasi-divine absence that serves to underwrite the poem by preserving the strangeness of poetic speech. "Vision", here, is the absence to which poetic speech tends. It is, moreover, overseen by the paternal imago, which appears to guard the perimeters of symbolisation. The ghostly fathers of *The Liberties* represent an absence that is both traumatic and enabling. Howe makes an explicit link between paternal absence, an absent divinity and lyric poetry. It is as if, in her understanding of the event at Buffalo in 1941, the wound of paternal absence clears "the place to where

¹ See Johnson for the John Temple theory. The factual basis of the speculation, which Howe alludes to in her preface, is generally dismissed by recent biographers such as Ehrenpreis, but it seems possible that Swift himself may have considered himself to be related to Stella and to be unable for that reason to marry her. See Nokes, 19.

² Letter dated 4 August, 1982, cited above.

³ Letter to Taggart, 13 July, 1986. Howe's emphases. Howe is referring to Heidegger's essay "What are Poets For?"

our imagination keeps returning". The absence that she, as a poet, 'desires' also springs from the intuition that "something has been lost forever".

Again, Howe's method is to conflate distinct fields: the treatment of paternity in *The Liberties* can be detected in the vexed history of usurped sovereignty that haunts both Ireland and the literature of the Anglo-Irish tradition that is her "disinheritance". What she means by "vision" is, of course, untestable but it ultimately asks the reader to invest in a poetics of metamorphosis in which the continual melting of one category into another – in this case distinct motifs of paternity – provides the endlessly whirring metonymical motor of the poems. Despite her recourse to figures of ineffability and mysticism in some of her remarks about her work, the experience of reading the poems requires the reader to assent to a more earthbound process of open-ended association and substitution.

This quality of metamorphosis in *The Liberties* is, as in other of her poems, linked to border-crossing and to death. Stella, Howe writes, was buried at the crossing-over time of midnight, which, in *The Liberties*, is the time of the key scene in "God's Spies". Her interment is also the interment of an enigma and a mystery about paternity that will remain inaccessible to later generations except as it echoes in investigations such as *The Liberties*. Stella, Howe might be saying, was always buried. Her livid appearance demonstrates a death-in-life attributable to strangled speech. In the "Book of Stella" the line "SHE DIED OF SHAME" suggests that wavering paternal attention (Vanessa; Regan and Goneril) produces an unbearable anxiety. Crucial to the working of suffering in the text is the notion that death and speech are linked – again Howe is in similar territory to that which she would explore in her treatment of Ophelia's death in *Pythagorean Silence*. *The Liberties* is another metamorphosis poem and the lines "cries of souls transfigured./ Beating their wings—making great circles—/ upward—evermore—free—" (*Liberties*, 197) suggests that, in the passage to death, lyric poetry – imaged as a kind of freedom -- becomes possible.

Crossings: Swift has sailed into his rest

Yeats's rendering of Swift's self-penned Latin epitaph, cited in Howe's preface, begins "Swift has sailed into his rest", and *The Liberties* repeatedly returns to the motif of crossing-over announced in the epitaph and in the image of the Angel Victor on the airmail stamp.

When Howe writes of "A PENDULUM SWUNG BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES" she is writing first of all about relations between Ireland and England dramatised in the

Swift/Stella relationship.¹ The other “two countries” of which Howe speaks are, of course, Ireland and America. Howe is talking about her own, necessarily displaced, response to a displacement. The swinging pendulum, it is clear, also registers the to-and-fro between contending American and Irish voices.

The densest formation of crossing motifs occurs on pages 166-167. The first of these pages contains text arranged in a cross formation, in another echo of Concrete poetry. Writing about Ian Hamilton Finlay’s work “Fisherman’s Cross” in her article about Concrete Poetry, Howe describes it as “the cruciform, icon of redemption in continuity” and cites Henry Vaughn: “Death is a Crosse, to which many waies leade, some direct, and others winding, but all meet in one centre”.² Page 167 of *The Liberties* cites lines from Lady Wilde’s *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland*: “torches of dried bogwood/ to light the bride over ravines”. The lines are from a section of Wilde’s book that describes ancient wedding customs, but the emphasis, for Howe, is on the idea of a crossing over that involves feminine sexual identity.³ “Oldest idolatries called Arkite”, is also from Wilde and describes funeral rites. Such decontextualised rites of passage, drawn from Irish folk practices, buried in the poem thicken the texture of crossing-over references.⁴ For Howe, as for Vaughn, “Death is a Crosse”; but it is also an enabling moment of transformation and a traumatic uprooting.

The next lines, “the first danger/the first crossing”, extend the motif of a hazardous crossing. Then Howe writes “hiatus/ chiasma/ a kind of death”. The key term here is ‘chiasma’, a biological term taken from the Greek for “a cross-shaped mark” (*OED*). The literary term ‘chiasmus’ involves the idea of bridging (notably the chiasmic quatrain, with an *abba* rhyme scheme) and rhetorical mirroring. In the context of *The Liberties*, the term seems to apply to the way in which a term can be inverted once a certain border is crossed. It prepares for the phrase “HALLUCINATION OF THE MIRROR” two

¹ See Back, 74-76, for commentary on this phrase.

² “The End of Art”, 6.

³ Sexual estrangement is another form of exile that is addressed in *The Liberties*: Howe writes in the Book of Stella: “she must be traced through many dark paths/ as a boy” (*The Liberties*, 162); “small boy bird of the air” (*Liberties*, 163); “she// had a man’s dress mad/ e” (*Liberties*, 164). At the opening of “God’s Spies” Stella and Cordelia are described as “dressed as boys” (*The Liberties*, 183). And in the *Journal to Stella* Swift repeatedly refers to Stella and Mrs Dingley as “sirrahs” (or, in their baby language, “sollahs”). It is as though various possibilities for speaking are tried out – the gender which has been silenced finds a way to speak through wearing another mask.

⁴ The juxtaposition of courtly and popular forms in the *Defenestration* does similar work to that between Anglo-Irish literature and Irish folk tradition in *The Liberties*.

pages further into the book and imagines the changes that occur when a culture is transplanted elsewhere – a return to the “pendulum swung between two countries”.¹

The cross also brings the idea of sacrifice into the poem. At the end of the poem sequence there are specific allusions to Christ:

blood and water streaming
swift to its close
ebbs out
out
of
my pierced side
not in my native land.

Liberties, 212

Howe, removed from what is, in a doubled sense, her “native land”(s), returns us to the forsaken Christ on the cross, cited above in her correspondence with Taggart. Notably the poem’s speaker identifies with Christ’s forsakenness. The words “blood and water” extend the poem’s references to familial relationships. However, so abandoned is the speaker that it doesn’t seem to matter that blood is thicker than water. There is of course a startlingly direct assimilation of speaker and prophet which is particularly pointed when, on the facing page, the “I” is identified with Howe herself:

Across the Atlantic, I
inherit myself
semblance
of irish susans
dispersed
and narrowed to
home

Namesake
old Friends
on the seashore at Irishtown

¹ The mirror phrase may also refer to Lear’s request for a mirror to see whether the dead Cordelia might be breathing.

not in your native land.

Liberties, 213

Now the emphasis on the second person, with “*your*”, suggests that Howe – or the reader – is being addressed. The “I” like the lonely “I” of “to Ireland, I” and “Formation of a Separatist, I” is isolated. If Howe, as a mirror-image, can only be a “semblance” of the “irish susans”, the force of the word “semblance” is to stress sameness and difference at the same time. This paradox is analogous to that captured in the uncomfortable “homeward rush of exile”. Both the ‘horizontal’ displacement of exile and the ‘vertical’ displacement of history produce estranging effects in language. To overcome this troubling dual sense of home and estrangement, is to find words to fill the space left by Cordelia’s “Nothing, my Lord”.

Birds and the homeward rush of exile

The theme of crossing over – whether of exile, transfiguration or death – find its most frequent expression in *The Liberties* in the figure of birds, which are everywhere in the poem, mainly as swans or geese. *The Liberties* is the most visually striking of Howe’s works since 1974’s *Hinge Picture*. This time however, many of the shapes are not abstract: most of the pages in the first part of *The Liberties* contain a poem in the shape of a bird. Many of these examples, such as that on page 160, are very strongly marked. Once Howe has established these patterns it is hard not to see a line of swans in flight in such sequences as:

she raised her hand
a girl

it was sand
a horse

green there
a spear

[...]

Liberties, 165

The birds that fly across the pages demand the reader to attend to the non-semantic aspects of language – to words as shapes, quite distinct from the standard blocks of prose, justified right and left, or the succession of lines justified left of most poetry. *The Liberties* seeks to make its effects in the linked spheres of word, sound and image. It is

the only time that Howe tries so directly to render a key strand of imagery in a poem in visual terms.¹ The bird shapes that she brings into *The Liberties* are a way of reinforcing the dense layering of bird references in the text and lending homogeneity to a poem sequence that often appears fragmented to the point of risking its intelligibility. Although she was later to reject such concrete means of realising an image in textual form, it provides a forceful means of lending even more weight to an already overdetermined set of associations.

In terms of content, *The Liberties* gathers together disparate narratives of birds in order to assemble an ambitious collection of threads that runs from medieval Ireland through the early years of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy to Howe's own late-20th century anxieties about origins. Stella is first linked through birds to Ireland by means of a trivial detail in the *Journal* itself (it is typical of Howe to pick up on such apparently insignificant aspects of the work). We learn from Swift that his servant Patrick has bought a linnet and is keeping it in their accommodation. It is this bird that is referred to in the unreferenced citation from the *Journal* at the head of the first section of *The Liberties* proper: "As for Patrick's bird, he brought him for his tameness, and now he is grown the wildest I ever saw. His wings have been quilled thrice and are now up again: he will be able to fly after us to Ireland, if he be willing – Yes, Mrs. Stella...".² This epigraph prepares us for the themes of flight, migration, freedom and captivity that are to be developed in the poem.

The opposition of wildness and tameness prepares us for motifs that will coalesce around the poem's glancing allusions to Ibsen's *Wild Duck*. The return of Swift and his servant to Ireland repeats Stella's removal from England (she settled in Ireland on Swift's advice). The linnet's imagined voyage across the Irish sea is a precursor of both Howe's own journey across the Atlantic and that of the letter bearing the "Vox Hiberniae". So, when Howe writes "bird migration, story migration" (*Liberties*, 177), she is writing of a movement of displaced peoples and literatures that begins in her own experience.

"Lir was an ocean God whose children were swans" (*Liberties*, 172), writes Howe early in the "Book of Cordelia" section of the poem-sequence. Here the allusion is to the myth of the children of Lir, three children who were turned into swans by their stepmother

¹ See Howe's letter to Taggart of 13 November 1981, which again uses the notion of tripling: "I know for a sure thing that the deeper you go into writing the more musical is meaning and in *sound* is meaning. The heart is music if you can reach it. But I think beyond the heart is in the perfect marriage, a sort of holy trinity of music/word/object."

² The passage comes from Swift (1784), vol 1, 291.

and compelled to fly over the seas around Ireland for 900 years. The god Lir was also a precursor of Shakespeare's Lear. There are several direct quotations from the play, such as "We are left darkling" (*Liberties*, 176) or "Enter Bastard solus, with a letter" (*Liberties*, 217). Various allusions to Cordelia's "Nothing", as we have seen, animate the poem's strand of references to disinheritance and women's silence. The Lir/Lear complex of ideas, above all, is a method of linking flight to disinheritance.

The flight of the wild geese, or earls, that was the precursor of the dispeoplement of Ireland under the English is connected in the poem to the wild swans of the children of Lir myth. If the wild geese that Gabriel wishes to put to the knife in *The Dead* announce a scepticism about tradition, wild swans can perhaps escape the past. In 1888, Yeats, as parts of his folkloric endeavour, edited a collection of Irish fairy tales that contained the story *The Twelve Wild Geese*, a variant of the popular tale also found in Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen.¹ In the tale a princess finds herself obliged to take a vow of silence and knit jackets for her twelve brothers, who have been turned into geese by a witch. Again the metamorphosis is an occasion for an estrangement from human form, a kind of exile. The birth of the princess follows from her mother's wish: "oh, had I only a daughter with her skin as white as that snow, her cheeks as red as that blood, and her hair as black as that raven, I'd give away every one of my twelve sons for her."² Howe brings the tale into contact with Swift when she cites Swift's "On the Death of Mrs Johnson": "Her hair was blacker than a raven and every feature of her face in perfection."³ Through the raven and the geese, then, Howe links the fairy-tale princess, with her silence and self-sacrificing virtue, and Stella. As Howe elaborates a densely woven set of associations, the swan-princes, like the children of Lir and Cordelia, are removed from their inheritance. The princess's vow of silence in the tale extends, in the context of *The Liberties*, the poem's accumulating anxiety about women's relation to speech.

In her correspondence with Taggart Howe mentions that at 14 she played the part of Hedvig in *The Wild Duck*, and describes her as a "sacrificial victim".⁴ Hedvig, whose family have given sanctuary to a wild duck to which she has become particularly attached, feels herself betrayed by her father and shoots herself with a pistol. The duck had been shot and injured by the merchant Werle, who, we learn towards the end of the

¹ Hans Christian Andersen's version of the tale has seven birds, while Grimm's has six.

² Yeats ed (1888). 255. The version of the story that Yeats uses is by Patrick Kennedy.

³ Swift (1765), 391. Alluded to in Howe's preface and cited, without the 'in', later in the poem (*Liberties*, 163). During the playlet Stella reinforces the link with: "her snowy flesh" (*Liberties*, 187).

⁴ Letters of 11 and 24 May 1982.

play, is probably Hedvig's father. For Howe, a knot of attitudes towards both sides of her own family is filtered through the play:

I have known what it is to dislike a mother. When she nearly died I was overwhelmed by guilt and regret but now she is healthy and back to her old tricks – hate remains, and that is a fearful thing to feel towards your parent. There is no forgiveness by the anxious conscience for that sin, Ibsen once said about *The Wild Duck* in a little note – this influenced me in *The Liberties* more than one could ever guess –

[...]

comparison with wild ducks: when they are wounded – they go to the bottom, the stubborn devils, and bite on fast – but if you have a good dog, and it is in shallow water? then Hedvig like the wild duck – Gregor's knowledge of children's first and deepest sorrows. They are not about love; no, they are family sorrow – painful home circumstances.¹

The most explicit link with *The Wild Duck* is in the "God's Spies" section of *The Liberties*: a gun is fired at some wild geese (*Liberties*, 197); the last sound in the playlet is a gunshot; and crucially, during the cathedral sequence, Stella follows a recital of her poem by shooting herself in the heart with a pistol. Yet the autobiographical clues that one can glean from the correspondence and interviews are only ever launch pads from which Howe's wider arguments develop. The theme of paternal neglect is at the heart of Ibsen's play. And Hedvig's supposed father learns in the course of the play that his paternity is uncertain.² The wild duck is, in part, a metaphor for a kind of freedom which is set in opposition to the operations of the logging company run by Werle. When Hedvig is lying dead, having shot herself in the heart, Old Ekdal says, "The forest has taken its revenge."³ The forest once again appears as a key Howe motif, representing the asystemic against the corrupting order of human culture.⁴ To the extent that nature is seen as the repository of that which civilisation represses – and that this, in turn, is an index of an internal conflict – this is a kind of neo-Romanticism. While sharing the animus against 'master discourses' and hierarchical models of thought that was a topos of critical theory in the 1980s, Howe's critique of such systems owes as much to Thoreau and Dickinson as to Lyotard or Deleuze. Wilderness comes to represent a space of liberation, as she writes to Taggart, and, crucially, this is specific to American experience:

¹ Letter to Taggart, 22 May 1983.

² This uncertain paternity, then, hovers over Hedvig, Swift and Stella.

³ Ibsen, 214.

⁴ This theme is strong in *Thorow*.

I think that feelings about Nature are quite different in American writers than they are for Europeans. I have always had a great deal of trouble because I am half Irish half American – split allegiances. It is interesting to note that Williams had this problem as well in that he was first generation Am [sic]. In this book of mine I feel I was led into trying to explain why I am American – through my feeling for Dickinson. It has to do with geography and wilderness – the idea of newness (even now).¹

Howe is exploring a particular construction of wilderness – a mixture of Puritanism and American Renaissance literature that derives from the encounter of an old culture with a ‘new’ and notionally ‘uncultured’ environment. The problem with this assimilation of freedom to wilderness is that this notion of wilderness is thoroughly cultural. While, at times, Howe’s poetry appears to be a highly self-aware probing of the rhetorical status of the trope of wilderness in American literature, at others the fervid, romantic tenor of her utterances suggests that her work remains only partly cognisant of the difficulties that attach to her assignation of the ‘free’ to the forest.²

The Wild Duck is linked, in the seventh and final section of “God’s Spies”, to *King Lear*. Cordelia says:

King Lear asleep.

King Lear awakened by his daughter Cordelia.

(*Softly with flashing eyes*):

Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid.

We will leave the stage as prisoners (*Pause*)

In the bonds of—(*Pause*)

childhood. (*Pause*)

Let those who are gone rest—let them rest.

Haphazardly they lie—there—on the bottom—

tangle and seaweed—grinding their teeth.

Liberties, 198

¹ Letter of 13 July 1986.

² See also, in the same letter, which discusses *My Emily Dickinson*, a distinction between the forest and the forest clearing: “We, as poets, are wandering in a forest of language, but when you *really* (this is my experience) start to enter a poem and really start to write it, you come to a clearing. There you are utterly free. You can’t think of two things at once. Another poet can start you off but then you lose her/him. After you have written the poem you are back in the forest. But in this clearing is the great freedom of Poetry.”

The link between the two plays can be made through Howe's reference, in the letter to Taggart cited above, to the injured wild duck going to the bottom and "biting on fast". A few lines further on Cordelia says: "They bite themselves fast in the tangle—grinding their teeth—listening in dread—the seamount (pause) blotted out—shoved away (*Liberties*, 199). *Lear* and *The Wild Duck* are linked, in these compressed lines, through the intensity of the father-daughter bond and a suggestion of severe emotional damage. The passage to death ("let them rest"), then, is seen as a return to childhood and the father-daughter bond depicted with ambivalence – both the enablement and imprisonment that is in the "birds i'the cage" image of *King Lear's* final scene (V, iii, 9).

The image of the injured wild duck going to the bottom refers to a realm of children's experience that is a kind of refuge from trauma or "painful home circumstances".¹ In these lines Howe addresses a clotted nexus of guilt, sacrifice, revenge, neglect and constraint. The refrain "they murder each other", often spoken in "God's Spies", refers as much to familial loathing as to *Lear* and Cordelia or Swift and Stella – especially if read in conjunction with Howe's remarks to Taggart about hatred for the mother. An earlier exchange expresses a similar link between the wild duck's refuge and death:

Stella: Tangle and Seaweed—

Cordelia: In history people are all dead.

Liberties, 187

The dead are envisioned as ghosts trapped in suffering, "grinding their teeth". "When we find them, will we lose them?" ask a "terrified" Stella (*Liberties*, 199). Perhaps the ghosts are not only the ghosts of the dead but of former selves that carry marks of a psychic wounding: this would correspond with the "polar bears—pearls" (*Liberties*, 198) that takes Howe back to the formative childhood experience at Buffalo zoo.

These questions of violence and abandonment are intimately linked with birds in *The Liberties*, which become metaphors for sacrifice and displacement. Yet, at the same time, birds represent, against this violence, a kind of freedom. Howe places this freedom in the orbit of the metamorphoses and the passage from life to death she would soon approach in *Pythagorean Silence* and *Defenestration of Prague*. In *The Liberties*, developing again the angel image of the frontispiece, Howe writes: "Her spirit flew in

¹ Letter to Taggart, 22 May, 1983.

feathers” (*Liberties*, 187). A few pages further into “God’s Spies”, a flock of wild geese fly overhead. Cordelia says:

Transfigured cries. The cries of souls transfigured.

Beating their wings—making great circles—

upward—evermore—*free*—

Silence.

A swan. White swans—seven.

Liberties, 197

The geese and the swans refer, via fairy tale, myth and Yeats, to a metamorphosis.¹ But Howe brings ambivalence to her treatment of her subject, linking the metamorphoses to the idea of liberty. In Cordelia’s speeches (such as the apophatic declaration: “Nothing is our own!”, *Liberties*, 197) darkness, fear, death, freedom and exile coincide. The dark, primal space in which the wild duck bites hard onto the tangled seaweed is a place of banishment but it is somehow uncolonised. Howe is writing of a volatile conjunction of loss and freedom. With “Her spirit flew in feathers” (*Liberties*, 187), the lyric impulse is given wings, but on condition of a painful metamorphosis. The transfiguration into a bird – goose or swan – that haunts Irish history and myth is also a translation into death that, like Ophelia’s fleeting siren swan song, makes a form of poetic speech possible. Lyric is, in this view, a kind of refuge. Hedvig’s death is the “revenge” of the forest and the wild duck’s dive into underwater vegetation suggests a potential for the embattled poetry of a “destitute time”.²

This underwater space is explicitly linked to a paternal absence by Cordelia, who comes to a visionary identification of homing, exile and freedom:

I learned in leafy woods hmmm—depths of the sea

that No one in first father—so soon a terror

of feathery wings—soft and tremblingly swift—

How did we happen—because we were written.

¹ See the Andersen tale cited above. Apollo’s chariot, moreover, was harnessed to seven white swans. See Yeats’s “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”: “Some moralist or mythological poet/ Compares the solitary soul to a swan: I am satisfied with that”. The lines also echo Yeat’s “Wild Swans at Coole”: “All suddenly mount/ And scatter wheeling in great broken wings/ Upon their clamorous wings.”

² Heidegger’s “What are Poets For?” meditates on Hölderlin’s question “what are poets for in a destitute time?”

*She tears off her blindfold. Blinks in the light. Then, as if searching
her memory*

Come to the surface again, true love, True.
You with your cradlegrave cords. Nothing can
estrangle the tattling deep of summer hummed
in honeyed trees hmmm—a hush of homing—
homeward rush of exile—flight—Liberty.

Liberties, 197¹

The “homeward rush of exile” is the poem’s key paradox, linking the flight of political exile with the estrangement and abandonment Howe herself describes when she writes about her father’s departure for the war and his death, and about her own Anglo-Irishness and Americanness. She, her father and her mother are under water, trapped in the “cradlegrave cords” of inheritance. The “wild geese in a stammered place” (*Liberties*, 153) that scud graphically across Howe’s pages represent the embattled freedom of a voice half-strangled by these “cords”. In Cordelia’s “No one in first father” Howe presents an experience of abandonment and “terror” that is also liberating.² The scene at Buffalo Zoo, as she has said, formed her as a poet but it is impossible to disentangle the poetic liberty it inaugurated from suffering. This painful ambivalence in the poem involves a turning-away from the maternal example, as Howe tries to “understand” her mother through writing about Dublin – the move towards ‘understanding’ suggests a rationalising shift away from the “sin” of hatred.³ This assertion of identity is both an embrace and a rejection of the “irish susans” that she does and does not resemble (*Liberties*, 213).

¹ See Yeats’s “The Madness of King Goll”: “And now I wander in the woods/ When summer gluts the golden bees.”

² See the working sketchbook journal entry, 14 May 1985: “But my father I am here to hold onto you – the daughter you really did not like very much. This mystery of birth.” This notebook also contains further mention of Howe acting the part of Hedvig.

³ See Foster interview, 166, and Howe’s remarks to Taggart, both cited above.

Conclusion: *The Europe of Trusts*

Although *The Europe of Trusts* does not follow the sequence of publication of its constituent texts, there is a rationale to its ordering that lends it coherence as a book. *Leaves*, which postdates any of the poems in the collection, functions as a preface to the entire collection, setting out many of Howe's principal areas of interest as a poet. This preface shares material referring to the events at Buffalo Zoo with the "Pearl Harbor" section that opens *Pythagorean Silence* and it is logical for the sequence of three long poems to begin at this point. The composition of *Pythagorean Silence* and *Defenestration* was concurrent and there are clear continuities of style, register and content between the two poems which justify their sequencing in the book. Finally, the appearance of *The Liberties* at the end of *The Europe of Trusts* allows it to develop the Irish concerns of *Defenestration* and, with its theme of displacement and border crossing, to anticipate the movement of Hope Atherton in *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (published in 1987, four years after *Defenestration*).¹

The continuities between the poems are numerous. Chief among them are the themes of transformation and mimesis. Transformative motifs include the death of Ophelia, the blurring of actors into one another in *Defenestration* and the bird-transformations of *The Liberties*. Each of these becomes an allegory for the writing of lyric poetry. These transformations are often cast in metaphysical terms, as if the border crossed were that between matter and spirit. Questions of representation are presented in various ways: death, dream-life and whiteness in *Pythagorean Silence* each represent an evanescent condition of mimesis; mirroring, masquing and the "fictive" in *Defenestration* probe similar territory, though in a more playful register that draws on pastoral comedy; in *The Liberties*, the poem is motivated by the problem of representing cultural displacement and departs from conventional poetic practice to incorporate both visual poetics and drama.

Authority is a central thread in *The Europe of Trusts* – particularly in *Defenestration* (through the perspectival politics of the masque) and *The Liberties* (through the insubstantial figure of Swift's ghost). This authority is characterised as paternal, and Howe, at points such as the "Pearl Harbor" section of *Pythagorean Silence*, allows this to be inflected with autobiographical content. Against the figures of authority in the poems are set representatives of suppressed or damaged feminine speech: Daphne,

¹ Although *The Liberties* was originally published in 1980, when it was reprinted in 1983 it followed *Defenestration* in the Kulchur Foundation edition of those poems.

Ophelia, Florimell, Stella and Cordelia. Each of these rescues some form of lyric utterance or potential from their predicament.

The “Iwho/ crawl/ between thwarts” (*Liberties*, 177, 179) of *The Europe of Trusts* is a writerly persona that identifies with silence, space and gaps, but who seeks to wrest a form of poetic utterance from those sites of inarticulacy. Howe probes canonical texts but shifts the reader’s perspective towards them by turning them in the direction of what Pythagorean oppositions might designate the ‘crooked’, the ‘feminine’, and the ‘dark’. Her task is at once to identify with and resist such tropes of externality, reinflecting them in her efforts to forge coherent poetic speech.

3: SINGULARITIES: THE AMERICAN WILDERNESS

i) *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time: Migratory Path to Massacre*

With *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, first published by the small press Awede in 1987 and reprinted by Wesleyan as part of the *Singularities* collection in 1990, Howe returned to writing poetry concerned with American history. It was the first such work she had published since 1978's *Secret History of the Dividing Line*. This poem series and *Therow*, also collected in the *Singularities* volume, are her most sustained attempts at addressing the colonisation of America and its ramifications for American literary identity. The poems reflect some of the research Howe undertook during the 1980s into captivity narratives, antinomianism, colonialism and American literary history, some of which is published in *My Emily Dickinson* (1985) and in the papers and essays collected in *The Birth-mark* (1993).

Susan Howe is a poet of history but one whose commitment to intelligibility often appears so slender as to threaten any idea of the 'story' within history. Expository narratives sometimes have a place in her prefaces but the poems surrender to a perplexing temporality that crushes past and present together. The traffic between past and present, however, is central to her concerns and *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* meditates on the legacy of the doctrine of predestination and its consequences for the contemporary poet. The relation between history and prophecy, in particular, and the kind of authority that underpins each of these discursive modes is of great interest to a poet seeking to rethink narratives of the settlement of New England.¹

If Howe seeks to reconsider such narratives from within, it is also the case that she is writing from within a 20th century tradition of the "poem containing history": the scale of her historical ambition places her in the Pound/Olson line of poets, a current in poetics that she writes both with and against.² Other genealogies – such as

¹See Schultz (2001), for an important extended discussion of the question of authority in this poem. As will become clear, however, I do not concur with Schultz's optimistic contention that "By performing and taking apart the central ideologies that separate Puritan theology from the native American context in which they found themselves, Howe aims to get back to a point where the story can begin again, where it can be more inclusive" (n.p). This "point where the story can begin again" remains elusive for Howe, as does any representation of the "native American context". Her work's pursuit of grace and her vatic notion of poetic language is, rather, highly specific to the culture that grew out of the colonial era.

²See Keller (1997), 187, and Fraser for feminist readings of Howe that place her in the context of the Pound-Olson line.

Dickinson, Stein and HD or Eliot and Stevens – might be plausibly argued. However in discussing Howe's poetics of history an admiration for the formal and theoretical range of verse epics such as the *Cantos* and the *Maximus* poems is apparent alongside a critique of the will to power that sustains them.

In *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* Howe's treatment of the settlement of New England resonates with the dictum "Prophecie is History antedated and Historie is Postdated Prophecie", cited in her preface to the poem. (Howe attributes this to John Cotton but Bercovitch notes that the formulation was used "repeatedly" by New England ministers.)¹ Howe's poem is informed by the New England acceptance of the Calvinist idea of predestination, which gave the settlers' own experience both a literal and a figurative meaning: their own history was the chronicle of a specific earthly community and at the same time the unfolding of the narrative of God's chosen people. "The newness of New England," writes Bercovitch, "becomes both literal and eschatological, and (in what was surely the most far-reaching of these rhetorical effects) the American *wilderness* takes on the double significance of sacred and a secular place. If for the individual believer it remained part of the wilderness of the world, for God's 'peculiar people' it was a territory endowed with special symbolic import, like the wilderness through which the Israelites passed to the promised land."²

This combination of secular and sacred, literal and eschatological, is everywhere evident in Howe's poem, which claims the fusing of these realms for a poetic language that works against rather than with the teleological imperatives of the Puritan typological marriage of bible and history. For Howe, the interpenetration of secular and sacred represents an anti-narrative impulse that is ultimately antinomian – a claim I will explore below. The fusion of literal and eschatological registers in Puritan writing finds an analogue in the doubleness of Howe's texts, in which an expanded but obscure metaphoricity is substituted for religious symbolism.

In using a citation that assimilates history to prophecy in her preface, Howe is indicating that she believes that the idea of predestination still has purchase on the American political imagination. It is this fantasy of pre-eminence, of being "God's 'peculiar people'" that she wishes to undo with her own countervailing form of prophecy: reading Hope Atherton's wanderings as emblematic of a kind of poetic or artistic unsettling of certainties. Howe's treatment of America's present is, then, a

¹See Bercovitch (1975), 62 and 218, n28.

²Bercovitch (1978), 15.

treatment of what the present represses. Her gloss of a line from *Articulation* in a 1987 letter to Taggart makes her ambitions clear: “Well I meant by ‘migratory path to massacre’ – migration that lead us on as an Errand into the Wilderness in which we *massacred* Indians – that was our corrupted Errand. Of course I mean future too and present as I do always in all these ‘meditations’.”¹

Sound through cult association: an antinomian undervoice

In her introduction to *Birth-mark* Howe describes the antinomian conflict of the 1630s, which gripped colonial New England at its very inception, as “the primordial struggle of North American literary expression” (*Birth-mark*, 4). This dispute among the Puritan settlers offers Howe not only a point of purchase on her literary antecedents, but a way of grounding her own poetics. Issues of authority and poetic inspiration collide, in her reading of the controversy’s influence, with the policing of literary works by academic and publishing institutions in the 20th century:

The issue of editorial control is directly related to the attempted erasure of antinomianism in our culture. Lawlessness seen as negligence is at first feminised and then restricted or banished. [...] The antinomian controversy in New England (1636-38) didn’t leave Massachusetts with its banished originator. The antinomian controversy continues in the form, often called formlessness of Emily Dickinson’s letters and poems during and after her crisis years of 1858-60. It continues with this 19th-century antinomian poet’s gesture of infinite patience in preferring not to publish. Her demurral was a covenant of grace. The antinomian controversy continues in the first recording and revision of her manuscripts according to a covenant of works.²

The covenant of grace, in the language of the Puritans, was God’s compact with the Elect and the covenant of works, declared redundant by Calvin, corresponded to the importance of earthly deeds in gaining salvation. The antinomian current in American literature, for Howe, follows a line that runs from the banishment of Anne Hutchinson from the Bay Area colony to the marginalisation of the poetic avant garde in the late 20th century:

¹ Letter of 29 May, 1987.

² *Birth-mark*, 1.

I see a contemporary American practice that isn't what necessarily gets into the canon and has trouble getting published. It is an echo of an undervoice that was speaking from the beginning and is peculiarly American. This voice keeps speaking against the grain.¹

Choosing to work to one side of academic prose, her critical writing, indebted to Olson's *Call Me Ishmael* and Williams's *In the American Grain*, is an extension into prose of her highly associative manner of thinking. This mode enables her to negotiate a structural analogy between antinomianism and radical poetics. In a remarkable – and questionable – feat of conflation, she sets up an opposition between grace, spiritual immediacy, poetic inspiration and a “contemporary American practice” of writing, on the one hand, and legislating religious, political and literary forces on the other. Howe at times, as in the citations above, appears to valorise the asystemic, at others to strive for a balance between law and grace (and their various analogues), and at still others to complicate this opposition with a third term, often gendered as feminine.² Her use of dichotomies is itself rooted in the exigencies of place: “Contradiction is the book of this place” she writes in *My Emily Dickinson*.³ However, while undoubtedly resonant and fertile texts, her critical essays run the risk of unsustainable and ahistorical comparisons – suggesting, for example, a continuity between what Charles Bernstein has called “official verse culture” and the authorities of the Bay Area colony – that fail to illuminate either side of her stacked dualisms.

Nonetheless, in Howe's reading of American religious and literary history it is possible to find a ground for the arguments around the inarticulate that proliferate in her work.⁴ Anne Hutchinson, the woman at the centre of the antinomian controversy, was accused of propounding the view that the Puritan ministers of the Bay Area colony preached a covenant of works, not of grace.⁵ She was said to be alleging, in other words, that they placed greater emphasis on deeds in the world than on the believer's knowledge that he or she was among the Elect, predestined for salvation. Her opponents feared that her views could lead to a disregard for moral law that might shatter the social cohesion of the fragile colony. In her defence, during her public

¹ “Incloser”, 192.

² See my account *Eikon* for further discussion of this ‘third term’.

³ *My Emily Dickinson*, 45. The passage may be indebted to Perry Miller's observations on the Ramist complexion of Anglican and Puritan thought: “When Ramus had arrayed all things and all ideas in pairs, he found that while some pairs harmonise with each other, as do cause and effect, others set up oppositions, as do night and day, true and false, in and out. Therefore he provided a large place in his plan for serried ranks of opposites or contraries” (Miller, 1938, 33). Of Miller, for whom enthusiasm was a form of “chaotic emotionalism” (ibid. 11), Howe remarks: “historical consciousness is still male” (Foster interview, 168).

⁴ See also Nicholls (1996) and Back for accounts of Howe's reading of the antinomian crisis.

⁵ Hall, 318.

'examination' in 1637, Hutchinson cites a passage from 2 Corinthians: "Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." Hutchinson seeks to contrast moribund literal interpretation with the directness of intuitive understanding. The turning point of the examination concerns this directness, when Hutchinson admits that God spoke to her in what she calls "an immediate revelation," with the words: "I am the same God that delivered Daniel out of the lion's den, I will deliver thee."¹ This spiritual encounter leaves Hutchinson sceptical of the worldly authority of her examiners: "But now having seen him which is invisible," she says, "I fear not what man can do unto me."²

The dispute also involved language itself.³ During the trial that led to her excommunication from the church and banishment from the colony, Hutchinson makes a distinction between word and referent with: "I confess I have denyed the Word Graces but not the thing itself."⁴ The first governor of the colony, John Winthrop, says of her "immediate revelation": "Ey it is the most desperate enthusiasm in the world, for nothing but a word comes to her mind and then an application is made which is nothing to the purpose, and this is her revelations when it is impossible but that the word and spirit should speak the same thing."⁵ For Winthrop, then, Hutchinson's enthusiasm, far from the passing of the divine into human language or the first glimmerings of an incipiently American form of speech, is a whimsical and socially irresponsible challenge to the referentially stable communal bond of language.

Howe's writing looks for an understanding of the ways that a loosening of referential fixity – a linguistic indirection that she associates with antinomianism – might be regulated by the discourses that seek to deny it. In so doing it attempts a historicisation of the category of the 'outside' in American culture and proposes a literary resistance to the marginalisation of this 'antinomian' element. Having unsettled the would-be theocracy of the settlers, Hutchinson is described by Winthrop as the "American Jesabel". Hutchinson's banishment from the colony is followed a

¹ Ibid, 337; 338.

² Hall, 338.

³ My remarks on this point are indebted to the work of Patricia Caldwell, whose essay on the antinomian controversy is cited by Howe in the opening acknowledgements to *Birth-mark*. Howe makes the point that American antinomianism is, first, distinct from its European counterpart, and, second, gendered as feminine (*Birth-mark*, ix-x). Caldwell writes that Hutchinson "was intolerable to [her examiners] because she called attention to the failure of language to operate according to their expectations. Anne Hutchinson's loosening of the form of language, her ambiguities and arbitrariness, must have seemed a threat to the very foundation of things" (359). Howe cites Caldwell's suggestion that Hutchinson was speaking "a different language" that had "serious literary consequences in America" (Caldwell, 347).

⁴ Hall, 381.

⁵ Ibid, 342.

year later, in what is claimed as a vindication by her persecutors, by her death in a massacre carried out by Native Americans. Howe traces a line between the suppression of antinomianism and the “repudiation of alterity, anonymity, darkness” in contemporary America.¹

Howe’s business is with the underside of history, not with direct commentary on the present – the repressed, in her work, returns mutely, arriving as a linguistic effect. At issue, then, is the co-existence of different kinds of silence: that of historical actors rendered inarticulate in various ways, and that of a metaphysical notion of absence. Part of the combustible energy of Howe’s poetry, problematic as it is, lies in its ability to map and overmap such incommensurable models of ‘otherness’. It is a poetry of homologies and one that brings with it the danger of simply conflating different versions of the ‘outside’.

In Hutchinson’s ‘immediate revelation’ Howe finds a prototype of the experience of poetic language. In her banishment she finds the institution of a scapegoating template responsible for certain contemporary ills. Configurations of language and power have a long half-life in Howe’s reading of American history. There is, however, a danger in ethical readings of Howe which move from the notion of exclusion to reading the poetry chiefly in terms of the way it tracks phobic responses to social ‘otherness’: femininity, the racial other, and so on. Back, in particular, reads the work as the realisation of a fairly unexceptional (within the academy) openness to the “Other”. This, an account that is certainly invited by passages in some of Howe’s critical texts, may be more of a partial reading than an outright misreading. However, it leaves the poetry marooned in a banal counter-hegemonic project in which numerous ‘others’ are conflated and, worse, held to share in an implied coalition against what Back terms “normative language practices”.² Such interpretations risk muffling the force of Howe’s writing by being too quick to name the negativity which informs it: the poetry is not primarily carrying out a work of redress. Readings such as Back’s serve to point up the problems that follow from neglecting the complex polyphony and the many ambivalences of Howe’s poetry and, following oppositions that the writing sometimes encourages, reducing it to a conflict between the systemic (always repressive) and the asystemic (inevitably liberatory).

While she has been characterised as an “antinomian” writer, she had found the voice that appears in the *Singularities* poems long before she embarked on her serious

¹ *Birth-mark*, 89.

² See Back, 40.

research on captivity narratives and Anne Hutchinson.¹ However, while it is not hard to find elements of quasi-Puritanical, typology-driven dogmatism in the politics of the American right, it may not be especially helpful to apply the term “antinomian” to the poetic practices of the late 20th century avant garde.² Such a designation, indeed, appears more to be a means of providing a historical grounding for positions that are characteristic of the American academy of the 1980s and 1990s: interrogations of national and cultural identity, an exploration of the marginalisation of the ‘other’ (eventually, of course, “othering”), feminism, the new historicist re-examination of the operation of past ideologies, and post-structuralist attentions to the discursive sleights of hand through which texts repress their metaphysical underpinnings.

On one hand, the way that Howe’s work wears its critical theory on its sleeve perhaps accounts in part for its relative popularity compared to the work of some others, at least, of the language poetry generation. On the other, to read her work through the ‘antinomian’ lens at least reaffirms its close engagement with her literary antecedents, and Dickinson and Melville in particular. While it is not particularly illuminating to compare, for example, Thomas Johnson’s editing of Dickinson to the expulsion of Anne Hutchinson from the Bay Area colony, reading Howe’s work through an antinomian lens helps provide a literary and historical context for her poetry’s fascination with crises of authority and with a form of American poetic language that privileges hesitancy. Yet, as her research on antinomianism did not fundamentally alter the character of her poetry, antinomianism in her work needs to be understood as, in part at least, the result of an anxiety about origins in her work that causes her to fashion a genealogy culminating in her own name. Howe’s antinomianism can be described as a self-fulfilling prophecy, as, like many other writers before her, she writes herself into her own interpretation of literary history.

Articulation of Sound Forms in Time, with its treatment of a 1676 conflict between settlers and native Americans near a colonial settlement on the Connecticut River Valley, Deerfield, has received more critical attention than any other of Howe’s poems. Back, Nicholls, Perloff and Reinfeld are among the scholars to analyse the poem-sequence.³ However, most of this analysis has dwelt on the relation between the first two of the poem’s three sections – a prose preface and the section entitled “Hope

¹ Back makes the curious suggestion that the essential difference between an ‘antinomian’ writer and an ‘avant garde’ writer is that the former is “situated within tradition” (124).

² See, eg. George W Bush’s State of the Union address, 28 January 2003: “We must [...] remember our calling as a blessed country is to make this world better”.

³ See Nicholls (1996) for commentary on the source material for the second section of the poem. George Sheldon’s *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts*.

Atherton's Wanderings".¹ My discussion will combine a discussion of the preface with the sequence's long third section, "Taking the Forest", and evaluate Howe's declaration in her preface that she sees Atherton as "an emblem foreshadowing a Poet's abolished limitations in our demythologized fantasy of Manifest Destiny" (*Articulation*, 4). I will consider what kind of poetics we can extrapolate from this 'emblematic' figure of the 'Poet' and how this poetics is put into practice in Howe's poem-series.²

In "Taking the Forest", while Howe's view of poetry derives immense energy from oppositions such as that between "total systemic circular knowledge" (*Articulation*, 28) and the "truant freedom of dream" (*ibid*), it also renders these oppositions unstable. Hope Atherton, in other words, belongs to neither colony nor 'wilderness' – he is rejected by the communities on both sides of the divide. He therefore represents a third, negative term, through which poetry complicates such oppositions. In her interview with Foster, Howe comments: "Here was this person. A man with a woman's name. He had this borderline, half wilderness, half-Indian, insanity-sanity experience. He was a minister accompanying an army. The enemy thought he might have been God. Was he telling the truth? Had he been hiding or marching?" (Foster interview, 167). Hope's 'borderline' experience allows Howe to envisage a form of poetry that is marginal but not abandoned to an incoherent fetishisation of the asystemic.

A Historical Poetics: Pound, Olson, Howe

The starting point for *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* is the excursion of a minister into territory controlled by Native Americans following a skirmish in 1676. Atherton, who had become separated from his company and ended up wandering for several days, later said that he had tried to give himself up to the Indians but that they had refused him. When he returned to his community no one believed his story and, writes Howe, he "died soon after the traumatic exposure that has earned him poor mention in a seldom opened book" (*Articulation*, 4). Atherton's journey troubles the European/non-European opposition around which the conflict over land is based. Once he has crossed the line, he belongs to neither community. Hope is also a transgendered figure, with a woman's name that might, Howe suggests, "prophetically engender pacification of the feminine" (*ibid*) .

¹The Awede first edition contained no preface.

²What Howe calls Hope's 'epicene name' is, of course, only a consonant away from her own. In her letter of 29 May 1987 to Taggart Howe compares it to Joyce's use of the word 'epicene' to describe his own name.

Atherton's excursion, is, as we have seen, described by Howe as "an emblem foreshadowing a Poet's abolished limitations in our demythologised fantasy of Manifest Destiny". Once again an apparently forthright assertion opens onto ambiguity. Manifest Destiny was the 19th century doctrine that justified the continuing expansion of America into Mexican and Native American territory. This project of conquest by a nation attempting to free itself of the anti-egalitarian weight of European history was based, in its formulation by John L O'Sullivan in 1839, on the "sacred and true and noble idea of equality".¹ Howe appears to be taking the position that the notion persisted in the 20th century – shorn of its initial liberalism – as a guiding principle of American foreign policy. Against this, she offers the figure of the poet, whose "limitations" have been "abolished". It is unclear what Howe means by these "limitations" – literary history? formal restraints? institutional disregard? It is likely that, in keeping with her remarks on antinomianism, Howe wishes the "emblem" to stray across several fields. Although Howe's poetry is often informed by a juxtaposition of captivity and freedom, her most common position is that poetry is unfixable and able to wander to and fro across such boundaries. Poetry, in this view, is a corrosive, negative force, offering itself as a counter to American colonialism because it can begin the task of unpicking the language that sustains damaging constructions of alterity.

Time, too, plays a curious role in these last few lines of Howe's introduction to the poem: "Putative author, premodern condition, presently present, what future clamors for release?", she writes of Atherton (*Articulation*, 4). His name "draws its predetermined poem in" (*Articulation*, 4). Howe is exploring the idea of destiny – central, of course, to Puritan theology. The word has two meanings in Howe's preface: first, a political "fantasy" sustaining American imperialism and, second, predestination. This latter version of destiny retrospectively inscribes a poem – Howe's poem – in the emblematic figure of Atherton. Howe's rhetorical feat is to reach into the past to meddle with destiny and unsettle the teleology of predestination. She is flattening time but doing so from the point of view of the future rather than that of an extratemporal divinity. Atherton, a "presently present" footnote of history, is made available to the contemporary artist, whose poem becomes a self-fulfilling prediction. This capacity of poetry to negotiate the relation between past and present has an important antecedent in the work of Olson and, through Olson, inevitably, Pound.

¹See Rogin, 72-75. Rogin links O'Sullivan's political nationalism to the literary nationalism of Melville's "Hawthorne and his Mosses".

One of the two epigraphs to *Singularities* is from DH Lawrence: “She was looking for the fragments of the dead Osiris, dead and scattered asunder, dead, torn apart, and thrown in fragments over the wider world.”¹ In Egyptian mythology, Osiris is killed and his body is torn into 14 pieces, which are distributed throughout the land. His wife and sister Isis, with the help of the gods, reassembles the parts and fans the corpse with her wings, bringing Osiris back to life. For another modernist, the young Pound, as Howe must have been aware, the myth of Osiris was also a key motif. Between November 1911 and February 1912 Ezra Pound published a series of prose and translations entitled “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris” in the periodical *New Age*.² As he demonstrated what he called the “New Method in Scholarship”, Pound drew on his reading of philosophers of history such as Dilthey, Croce and Pater and set out to translate their anti-positivist notions of history into a historical poetics.³

Pound’s historical project was to accord to poetry the power of the wings of Isis: it could reanimate the past through its pursuit of revelatory detail:

The artist seeks out the luminous detail and presents it. He does not comment. His work remains the permanent basis of psychology and metaphysics. Each historian will ‘have ideas’ – presumably different from other historians – imperfect deductions, varying as the fashions, but the luminous details remain unaltered.⁴

Pound’s art would, then, be in some sense transhistorical: a pursuit of the ‘luminous detail’ that would make past communicate with the present.⁵ Pound’s early Imagist urge to “present an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”, could be extended, in the words of Bernstein, to present a “historical and cultural complex” as well.⁶ “It was now possible,” writes Bernstein of Pound’s developing aesthetic, “for Pound to include history itself among the ‘objective’ subjects treated in terms of Imagist and Vorticist aesthetics.”⁷

¹ From Lawrence’s 1928 novella, *The Escaped Cock* (also known as *The Man Who Died*), 38. Lawrence’s book tells the story of Christ, post-Resurrection, culminating bathetically in his sexual awakening in the temple of Isis: “I have risen” (88).

² These articles saw the formulation, of what Keller considers “many of the important tenets of poetic modernism” (Keller, 1997, 315n).

³ See Longenbach, 46.

⁴ Pound, (1911-1912), 23.

⁵ See Bernstein, 84-85, on the mystical and neo-Platonic elements in Pound’s thought.

⁶ See Bernstein, 37, and Pound (1913), 4.

⁷ Bernstein, 37.

Susan Howe's work is, broadly speaking, in the Pound line. If her links between late 20th century avant-garde poetics and the 17th century seem audacious, the linking of present artworks to the documents of the past implies a belief in a principle that connects the two. While for Pound this might be expressed as an overarching consciousness, for Howe it would be an undergirding unconscious which makes itself felt in terms of linguistic gaps, 'stutters' and parapraxes. In an early poem, "Histrion" (1908), Pound announces his access to the pre-eminent artists of the past:

And yet I know, how that the souls of all men great
At times pass through us,
And we are melted into them, and are not
Save reflexions of their souls.¹

Howe admits this kinship between the literary voices of past and present but inverts it. Her work is not predicated on the clarity and directness that were crucial to Pound, at least in his own account of his work. The voices of the past are made present for her in lacunae in her text. Rather than "the souls of all men great" she directs her attention at voices – often not those of men – that have been effaced from the record. If, at the fringes of her text, there is a Poundian interest in a Diltheyan "kinship of all human psychic life", the medium through which this is experienced is a language that registers the shocks of the whole of that psychic life, including inarticulable unconscious processes.² The past is apprehended through language, not only in what Nicholls identifies as an "antimetaphorical" and "cryptic" non-figural use of words, but in the powerfully figural sense discernible, for example, in Howe's discussion of the word 'pearl' in her letter to Silliman on her Buffalo zoo experience, of 'sovereign' in *My Emily Dickinson* or the interpenetration of symbol and reality that she discerns in Spenser.³ Howe's method is often, much like Bercovitch's characterisation of Puritan sensibility, to pursue literal and allegorical tracks simultaneously. Words in her poems can sometimes present themselves with "cryptic" obduracy, almost actively repelling interpretation, but at others there are abundant metaphorising energies at play.

In the concluding lines to page 36, for example – "Scythe mower surrender hereafter// Dear Cold cast violet coronal// World weary flesh by Flesh bygone/ Bridegroom" – a stanza is concluded with figural zest. "Mower" brings, with "Scythe" and "hereafter",

¹ In Pound (1977), 71.

² See Schwartz, 139, on Pound's relation to Dilthey.

³ See Nicholls (1999), 156.

a reference to the death and judgement. Howe is perhaps echoing the language of Cotton Mather's *Agricola* on Psalm 37's "They shall soon be cut down as the grass": "Uncertain the time when the mower will come, the offspring of the earth is not always of one age and of one bulk when the mower applies the scythe unto it."¹ "Violet coronal" sounds like a literary citation but it is drawn from the language of astronomy. The word 'coronal' can mean garland or crown and the line functions as another metaphor for sovereignty.² "World weary flesh by Flesh bygone" again suggests death, suffering and succeeding generations. The combination of 'flesh' and 'Flesh' brings the biblical "flesh of my flesh", only the 'flesh' is affected by Mather's eschatological cast of the surrounding lines.³ "World weary" has connotations of apocalypse and word "bridegroom", echoing "bygone" and standing in enigmatic isolation at the end of the poem, recalls Thomas Shepard's sermons on the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.⁴ Christ was often described as a bridegroom by Puritan ministers and the conclusion of this stanza develops an intricate figural web of reflections on death and resurrection.

Howe's tracking of a "Migratory path to massacre" (*Articulation*, 22) can be understood both as a summary of the Puritan errand and a longer, quasi-typological view of American history. In the May 1987 letter to Taggart in which she glosses aspects of *Articulation*, Howe comments on the lines: "Cries open to the words inside them/ Cries hurled through woods" (ibid). She remarks: "The woods were a region of terror and the only answer was to hurl brutal cries of war through them – to cut down the wood – even to burn and defoliate the forest in Vietnam."⁵ This reduction of language to fragmentary particles that nonetheless retain the potential to knit together past – Atherton's adventure – and 20th century war (Vietnam) is characteristic of Howe's shadowy inversion of the luminous detail.

In "Taking the Forest" Howe repeatedly reminds the reader of the resistance of the scattered material that she assembles to efforts of interpretation. She writes, for example: "Predecessor and definition/ incoherent inaccessible muddled inaudible" (*Articulation*, 21). The enigmatic lines leave the reader grasping at what might be communicated. In the end, the passage, which almost reads like a hostile review,

¹ From Cotton Mather's *Magnalia* (c1725), excerpted in Heimert and Delbanco, 333-334. *Magnalia* is frequently cited in *Birth-mark*.

² An ultra-violet coronal spectrometer is a device which allows analysis of the sun's corona rather than the sun itself.

³ Genesis 2:23 "This is now the bone of my bones and the flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of man."

⁴ See "Incloser", which mediates at length on Shepard's use of this parable.

⁵ Letter dated 29 May 1987. This, in turn, echoes the "Cashel has fallen/ trees are turf" of *Cabbage Gardens*, 75.

advertises its own incoherence and inaccessibility as a means of the enacting the difficulty of the poet's task. Later in the poem, there is a similar sense of eavesdropping on a conversation that cannot quite be heard: "muffled discourse from distance/ mummy thread undertow slough// Eve of origin Embla the eve" (*Articulation*, 32). This time there is a different emphasis, as a hidden "undertow" of coherence is attributed to a maternal inheritance (Embla is a Norse version of Eve).¹ Where Howe differs from Pound's pursuit of the unaltering luminous detail is in the extreme prominence that hesitancy and uncertainty is given in her poems. The material unearthed by her scholarship – despite the apparent directness of her critical prose at times – is equivocal and its messages "muffled" to the point of inaudibility.

It is in the work of another poet of the Pound line, Olson, however, that Howe's historical poetics finds a more immediate source.² As Howe began to make the transition from visual art to poetry in the late 1960s the writing of Charles Olson was a crucial enabling influence. This is surprising for several reasons. Olson's epic concerns would appear to be at a considerable remove from Howe's preoccupation with silence, space and the marginal. His overtly phallic mythopoesis seems at odds with the importance to Howe's work of a provisionality that is coded as feminine.³ Olson desires to restore physicality and 'breath' to poetic utterance, while Howe places a decisive weight on the physicality of the text itself – the look and feel of the poem on the page. Nonetheless in interview Howe has said:

Much of my inspiration as a poet comes from Modernist writers. At first Charles Olson (a late Modernist or first postmodernist) gave me a certain permission. The early edition of *Maximus IV, V, VI* was crucial.⁴

Howe was particularly interested at the time in the typographical experiments of *Maximus* poems, which seemed to afford a point of connection to her use of texts in her visual art:

At his best, Olson lets words and groups of words, even letter arrangements and spelling accidentals shoot suggestions at each other,

¹ Back, 49, notes several maternal references in "Taking the Forest".

² Howe has written very little on 20th century poetry but she has published essays on Olson and two other Black Mountain poets, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan.

³ See Mellors, 82.

⁴ See Keller interview, 20.

as if each page were a canvas and the motion of the words – reality across the surface.¹

Both Howe and the Olson of *Maximus* are concerned with events occurring during the settlement, in the 17th century, of what would become New England. Each suggests that a damaging cultural template was established for American society and that this was achieved through the violent ambition of the Puritan leadership of the Bay Area Colony. Surrounded by a wider argument couched in mythical terms, Olson's *Maximus* is a "demythologising" counter-history that draws on a vast range of historical sources in its attempts to diagnose the ills of Olson's America.² Howe's work is similarly counter-historical in its revisionism and, in relating Hope Atherton to the figure of the contemporary poet, it makes attempts to imagine the creative act as a collapsing of past and present that recalls an Olsonian notion of poetry's capture of simultaneity.

In 1987, the same year as the first edition of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* appeared, Howe published an essay on Charles Olson in the Vancouver journal *Writing*. "Where Should the Commander Be?" expands themes addressed in *Call Me Ishmael* and announces itself as a "preliminary exploration of the hidden feminine in Melville and Olson" (although femininity is not explicitly addressed until the closing paragraphs). Howe's essay is concerned with teasing out the affinities between Melville and Olson through an examination of their shared preoccupation with the deep logic of American culture.³ Each, in her view, is preoccupied with the ways in which the language of religion, myth and history can be parsed into literature. Part of "Incloser" is dedicated to *Billy Budd* and, in her interview with Foster, Howe describes her interest in the feminine and "Christological" side of Melville, something that Olson repudiated but which, according to Howe, is present in the gaps and silences of *Maximus*.⁴ One of the epigraphs to *Birth-mark* is Melville's description of Billy Budd, who despite his "masculine beauty", and like one of the "beautiful women" in one of Hawthorne's tales, has a blemish – his stutter.⁵ Howe, then, extends her idea of the antinomian current, "gendered feminine", in American literature to include two authors who, in ways that run against received readings, enact a kind of brokenness or hesitancy. In identifying this as "feminine", Howe is continuing the feminist revision of

¹ "Commander" 6.

² See Bernstein, 235, on myth as counter-myth in *Maximus*.

³ See also Howe's comment in her *Acts* essay on Olson: "For me, Olson gave birth to Melville, and *Call Me Ishmael* gave birth to *My Emily Dickinson*" (167).

⁴ See *Birth-mark*, 80-83 and 179-81.

⁵ *Ibid.*, v.

'Pythagorean' oppositions that she began in *Pythagorean Silence*. Her thought is influenced on this point by 'French' feminism's analysis of women's marginality within Western culture. Alice Jardine, whose 1985 book *Gynesis* Howe praises in her interview with Foster, provides an apposite example of the American reception of this body of thought and proposes a process, *gynema*, that is close to Howe's style of reading Melville or Olson:

This *gynema* is a reading effect, a woman-in-effect that is never stable and has no identity. Its appearance in a written text is perhaps noticed only by the feminist reader – either when it becomes insistently "feminine" or when women (when defined metaphysically, historically) seem magically to reappear within the discourse. This tear in the fabric produces in the (feminist) reader a state of uncertainty and distrust – especially when the faltering narrative in which it is embedded has been articulated by a man from within a nonetheless still-existent discipline.¹

Howe directs her attention, with rather less distrust than Jardine's "(feminist) reader", towards this "tear in the fabric" in the "faltering narrative", pursuing an idea of absence at the fringes of a symbolic system that is organised according to patriarchal precepts. Howe, in linking Olson and Melville, is doing more than tracing a male genealogy and reading the feminine against the grain of their texts. She introduces herself, a woman poet, into a familiar pattern of influence and rivalry:

[Olson's] first book shows that we see everything and nothing in laws. Artists bow to no order. In a duel of emulation one figure eternally confronts another. Sympathy/Antipathy. The conflict is projected into space. Emancipation of a Subject from body and destiny is a never-never play of resemblance and rivalry.²

Howe is, by strong implication, writing herself into this "play of resemblance and rivalry". But gender alters the terms of her emulation: her writing must interrogate the problematic gendering of this "stutter" or "faltering narrative". It is typical of

¹ Jardine, 25. See also, 38: "'She' [ie 'Woman' as a rhetorical space] is created from the close explorations of semantic chains whose elements have changed textual as well as conceptual positions, at least in terms of valorization: from time to space, the same to other, paranoia to hysteria, city to labyrinth, mastery to nonmastery, truth to fiction." The title of Howe's essay "Women and their Effect in the Distance" combines Jardine's processual "women-in-effect" with Nietzsche's phrase "Women and their Action at a Distance" (from *The Gay Science*).

² "Commander", 6.

Howe's paradoxical mode of thought to find herself caught between a rejection of her antecedents and an assimilation of their methods. She sees the poet as simultaneously a law-abolisher and law-maker: "Olson-Ishmael-Maximus subjugated while yielding to subjugation, and captured while freeing, the protean splendour of Herman Melville's restless, hieroglyphic nature."¹

Olson's view of history found expression in a capacious mythopoesis. The archetypal figure of Maximus is part of a schema that counterposes conventional historiography with a mythic immediacy held to be the only method of approximating man's being in its fullest sense. In order to encounter the Real and the literal, the poet had to reject many constraints: syntax, history as objective fact and ego. The mode of being proposed is a form of pseudo-Jungian selfhood which is, in Anthony Mellors' words, "other to rationalism, Hellenism, Christianity, commodification; in short, everything that might come under the heading of what Olson termed 'pejorocracy'."² A view of the 'concrete' is suggested which can only be apprehended through myth. Olson's method is, writes Mellors, "a method of interpretation which regards myths as accounts of real historical incidents, an attempt to make figural language literal."³ Myth is for Olson the final horizon of his project to demythologise the present. As Michael Bernstein glosses it, Olson's history:

[...] is not a series of absolute, impersonal occurrences but 'a concept denoting intensity or value', and the unique opportunity of an epic writer is by the stance he takes towards the specific events which serve as the 'plot' of his poem, to reveal 'history' [as] the function of any one of us," that is to let us see we possess the freedom to determine by what values both our individual lives and our society are governed.⁴

Melville, in Olson's view, made possible a reconceptualisation of time in which the artist could roam freely and in which moral oppositions were suspended. Melville's time:

[...] was not a line drawn straight ahead toward future, a logic of good and evil. Time returned on itself. It had density, as space had and events were objects accumulated within it, around which men could

¹ Ibid. 4.

² Mellors. 76.

³ Ibid. 83.

⁴ Bernstein. 235.

move as they moved in space. The acts of men as a group stood, put down in time as a pyramid was, to be re-examined, re-enacted.¹

Olson evinces a quasi-mystical faith in the ability of the poet to discern a discontinuous past in the present. When historical knowledge inheres in present reconfigurations of past events in the mind of the historian or poet, an understanding based on chronological sequence is replaced, in a Poundian shift, by a model based on a gathering-in of fragmentary matter.

Words for Howe are minutely inscribed with the 'Malice' of history: "Malice is the history of Progress".² The poet can explode a word's condensed significance, releasing a chaotic freight of earlier meaning and intertextual reference.³ "Etymologies and genealogies are precious allegories for poets swimming through libraries," writes Howe, adapting a famous Melville passage.⁴ Howe's "infinite miscalculation of history", is a suggestion that temporal being is built on quicksand rather than solid ground (*Articulation*, 17). The historical insight afforded the poet – much like Melville's idea of truth, "forced to fly like a white doe in the woodlands" – is fleeting.⁵ Language is a "Word forest" and any quest for origins a deluded search for a "corruptible first figure" (*Articulation*, 17).⁶ The poet's "precious allegories" are not archetypal but provisional – volatile constellations of meaning that momentarily arise in poetic language's negotiations with past and present. The couplet "Predominance pitched against history/ Collision or collusion with history" (*Articulation*, 33) suggests that there is a violence to her poetry's encounter with the past – it must either collude with existing narratives or, in search of something outside the record, it must collide with them, producing the shattering effect found everywhere in *Articulation*, from the visual poems of pp14-15 to the broken sense that pervades "Taking the Forest". Yet the poetry's resistant qualities, are combined, as Peter Middleton argues, with an attenuated purchase on the borderline phenomena that it hopes to render: "Howe's work shows that literary experiment is not necessarily 'destructivism', but can also be an exploration of what is never clearly text nor clearly

¹ Olson (1947), 97. Howe does much to disrupt lines "drawn straight ahead", often returning to motifs of drifting or errancy.

² "Commander", 9.

³ Cf Howe's discussion of the word 'whale' in Melville, cited below.

⁴ "Commander", 11. See *Moby-Dick*, chapter 32: "But I have swam through libraries and sailed through oceans". The phrase forms the epigraph to the preface of *Melville's Marginalia*.

⁵ Melville's "white doe" comment, from "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (408), is cited in *Call Me Ishmael* (43). The image recalls Howe's characterisation of Florimell in *Defenestration*.

⁶ The "Word forest" is from *Thorow*, 49

other, only a history of boundaries, captures, escapes, genocides and glimpses of something 'seen once'."1

Howe's historical poetics has an ambition similar to that of Olson or, behind Olson, Pound. It privileges the artist, or poet, with the capacity to effect a visionary synthesis of past and present, yet it vigorously resists the overbearing and legislating voices that drive the epics of Olson and Pound. Indeed, it resists the impulse to completeness or coherence that sustains the epic mode. Howe arrives at something like a negative version of Pound's luminous detail, effecting conjunctions across diverse historical periods but adopting a faltering style of enunciation that both enacts and troubles the marginalisation of the feminine voice.

Pound's didacticism, his literary authoritarianism and his aim for direct treatment of the thing are utterly distinct from Howe's deployment of hesitancy as an anti-authoritarian strategy. Howe is similarly removed from the heroic ambition and "phallic energies" of Olson.² If Pound's 'ego scriptor' continues to resonate in Olson, Howe's 'unconscious scatter syntax' shifts the writing process away from the organising certainties of either. Her linguistic intransigence separates her from her antecedents in the formulation of a modernist poetics of history: her notion of the fragment appears in her writing at the level of the broken word – the "velc", "ythian" or "quagg" (*Articulation*, 10); the citation; the private reference; or the interrupted syntax. Yet, in addition to this insistence on disjunction, Howe's accompanying commitment to "lines of association" offers her another means of asserting the importance of occulted histories – through etymology and word associations.

If Olson can say "my memory is/ the history of time",³ Howe refuses such a vast, all-encompassing poetic persona. Her poet is a different being, attuned to barely decipherable voices from the past but hesitant to make sense of them. The "short, quick probings at the very axis of reality" that Melville celebrates in Shakespeare are, for Howe, as fleetingly discernible as the voices she strains to hear in the Connecticut River Valley.⁴ The lines "Snatched idea/ Recollection fallen away from ruin" (*Articulation*, 19) suggest the evanescence of the perceptions she is pursuing, as if the "ruin" of history were accessible only to "snatched" forms of "Recollection". The same page's "Slipping from known to utmost bound" asserts once again the liminality of the experience to which the poem dedicates itself.

¹Middleton, 93

²Olson (1970), 23.

³Olson (1960, 1968, 1975) 11.86

⁴Melville (1850), 407.

In the juxtaposition of material, whether apparently unconnected words or shreds of cited text, Howe's poetry pushes itself with cultivated uncertainty into territory that Olson had prepared. "I felt an immediate shock of recognition," Howe has said of her first encounter with Olson's poetry. "It was his voracious need to gather 'facts', to find something, a quotation, a place name, a date, some documentary evidence in regard to place. To collate the collection quickly with something else without explaining the connection."¹ It is this commitment to the decontextualising energies of montage and the rootedness of historical particulars in place that most strongly connects the two poets.

The space of "Taking the Forest"

To understand the nature of the discontinuity in Howe's poetry, and its organisation of time and space, I will examine a page from *Articulation's* "Taking the Forest" section. This part of the poem sequence is similar in form – arranged in units that combine short single lines and couplets – to much of *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, and to the "Pythagorean Silence" and "Speeches at the Barriers" sections of *Pythagorean Silence* and *Defenestration of Prague*. While "The Falls Fight", the preface, speaks of Atherton as an "emblem" and the second section is a thoroughly broken series of poems which draws on a history of Deerfield, experiments with layout and uses part-words, this section is less obviously dedicated to rupture. How might we relate such lines to Howe's claims about an antinomian undervoice? And how do such lines embody Howe's poetics of history? Looking closely at the poetry's discursive range it becomes apparent that, 'discontinuity' or 'opacity' notwithstanding, her work tends to operate within a framing matrix of determinate linguistic fields. The following is a single page-poem from the series.²

Left home to seek Lost

Pitchfork origin

tribunal of eternal revolution

tribunal of rigorous revaluation

Captive crowned tyrant deposed

Ego as captive thought

¹ Swenson interview, 381.

² In the Wesleyan edition this poem is not given a separate page.

Conscience in ears too late

Father the law

Stamped hero partner

pledge of creditor to debtor

Destiny of calamitous silence

Mouth condemning me to absence

– Uneasy antic alibi

dimmed dimmest world

final fertile mantle of family

Leap from scratch to ward off

Articulation, 25

In these lines the “leaving home” and “being lost” that Howe speaks of are evidence of her aim to create a poetry of abandonment. As she comments to Taggart in her letter on *Articulation*, the forest is, at one level, “Grimm’s forest” and this couplet bears an echo of the Hansel and Gretel wandering in the wood and the earlier “Cries hurled through the Woods” (*Articulation*, 23).¹ “Left home” also recalls the radicalism of Christ’s request that his disciples be prepared to leave everything behind them – a radicalism shared by those Puritans who left home to seek the New Jerusalem. The compound of personal and collective exile which figured so prominently in *The Liberties* is present in the line. The words “[...] to seek Lost” might mean either that the seeker is looking for something or that the seeker is herself lost. The upper-case ‘L’ gives the impression that ‘Lost’ is an interloper from another sentence altogether. Even in five words Howe has avoided a grammatical unit and allowed a stuttering syntax to open the poem. “Lost” also implies a spiritual risk: damnation, of course, was at stake for 17th-century religious disputants such as Anne Hutchinson.

The two words of the next line, “Pitchfork origin”, however, remove the poem from such a network of meanings. The phrase, suggesting irreducible doubleness, recalls René Thom’s “catastrophe of bifurcation”, used to describe ‘singularities’ in mathematics –

¹ Letter dated 29 May 1987.

Howe adopted the term 'singularities' for the collection including *Articulation*.¹ Another of Howe's techniques is to juxtapose two incompatible words: the reader tries in vain to make the concrete farmyard object bear some adjectival weight. The next couplet, "tribunal of eternal revolution/ tribunal of rigorous revaluation", abstracts the notion of permanent revolution to the spiritual plane and suggests that, somewhere inaccessible, a kind of judgement is being made. Again Howe's strong historicising tendencies are accompanied by an almost transhistorical mystical impulse. This seems to depend on a potential for "eternal revolution" that surfaces in different forms in different epochs. However, the process of judgement and the agent of the "revaluation" both remain obscure – as unapproachable as the implacable divinity of the Puritans. The mini-anaphora and the sound association between 'revolution' and 'revaluation' bring the two lines together, yet they resist assimilation to one another. The theme of judgement by an inaccessible authority which is announced in these lines is important to the rest of the poem.

"Captive crowned tyrant deposed" suggests Charles I – about whose death *Eikon Basilike* is organised – although, more generally, the notion of sovereignty itself is at issue.² In the next line, "Ego as captive thought", the 'captive' is reinflected. She is once again applying pressure to key words in order to force them to signify in different contexts: Howe adopts psychoanalytic terminology to restate Freud's unseating of the ego – her "eternal revolution" is opened to another meaning, becoming the unsettling force of the unconscious. Poetry registers this disturbance, superego notwithstanding, in "Conscience in ears too late". Howe is shuttling between the notion of a divine authority standing outside history and psychic interiority. "In ears", furthermore, bears an echo of the poisoned King that is the point of departure for the action of *Hamlet* – another motif of ghostly or aporetic paternity that surfaces at many points in Howe's poetry.³

However, it is at the point at which Howe makes the blunt Lacanian identification "Father the law" that it is uncertain whether the writing is living up to its "wild thoughtpath" ambitions.⁴ The promise of risk in the poem, I would argue, is not fulfilled by such formulations, which are more subtly pressed elsewhere in her work. The line forces home a link that is repeatedly made within the poetry – a connection

¹ See Foster interview, 173-174.

² A chapter of *My Emily Dickinson* is devoted to the theme, often developed in Howe's writing via allusions to *King Lear* and *Hamlet*.

³ The ghost has already made an appearance in the poem, as Howe explains in her letter to Taggart of 29 May 1987: "'By face to know helm' [page 19] was a sort of reference to the ghost in *Hamlet* – all you see is the ghost's helmet - helm/him pun [...]".

⁴ See *Scattering*, 64: "on wild thoughtpath".

between paternal authority and legislation – but remains trapped in a critical lexicon that undermines the curious power of lines such as “pitchfork origin”. However, law and its suspension, whether in the divine or secular orbit, are, of course, the essence of antinomianism and such lines allow Howe to continue her collapsing of religious, political and personal domains.

“Stamped hero partner” takes the poetry into more obscure territory again, echoing the “hero-shadow” of the previous poem on the same page. The line “pledge of creditor to debtor” draws a parallel between the language of financial contracts and the Covenant with God, specifically the “covenant of works” that Anne Hutchinson deplored, with its final reckoning of good and bad deeds. Howe inverts the normal sequence – here the creditor makes the pledge: the divinity is authorising or guaranteeing in its covenant with humanity.¹

The next couplet, “Destiny of calamitous silence/ Mouth condemning me to absence” perhaps suggests the judgement of exile pronounced on Anne Hutchinson. The lines also address an abyss between the speaking subject situated in language – the ‘I’ in inverted commas – and the self who speaks – the I. The “calamitous silence”, in this reading, would be both the invisibility of exile and the lack of a present self in *any* utterance.

The stanza goes on to draw in the Shakespearean “antic” – the word appears in *Hamlet* – and the legal equivocation of “alibi”, although neither the nature of the crime, nor the identity of criminal or victim is clear. Hamlet’s “antic disposition” is a kind of “alibi”, a means of dissimulation that is designed to draw attention from his suspicions.² Yet, even with the link to *Hamlet*, the line is of uncertain meaning. Again Howe is writing as if haunted by some obscure primal transgression. As she remarks in interview: “Sometimes I think my poetry is only a search by an investigator for the point where the crime began. What is the unforgivable crime? Will I ever capture it in words?”³

From there we move to the strange euphony of “final fertile mantle of family”. “Mantle”, a cloak or robe, is most commonly used as a metonym of authority – indeed the words “mantle of [...]” almost elicit the continuation “authority”. The line suggests a linking of genealogy and authority, possibly the literary authority she herself draws

¹ I explore the notion of an “authorising absence” in my account of *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*.

² See *Hamlet* I, v. 172.

³ Beckett interview, 21.

on in her extension of the antinomian current in American literature. The enigmatic final line, "Leap from scratch to ward off", cannot be persuaded to tie up any of the page's loose ends. It seems to describe the movement from an empty point, "scratch", to an uncertain ending coloured by the defensive "ward off", a leap of faith from nothing to nowhere.

While this poem, like all of the poems that make up the *Articulation* series, bears no direct reference to antinomianism, or to Hutchinson or Mary Rowlandson, it does coincide with Howe's researches into antinomian language. "Taking the Forest" is a sustained series of mystico-philosophical speculations on language and power which abstracts the mode of *Pythagorean Silence* and *Defenestration of Prague* and places it in a different contextual frame. However, the lines are in fact remarkably similar to the earlier work, with references to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*Articulation*, 21); Parmenides (*Articulation*, 17); Hegel (*Articulation*, 22); Spinoza (*Articulation*, 28); and perhaps even Joyce ("Shadowy Icarian figuration", *Articulation*, 30). Lines such as "Meditation of a world's vast Memory" (*Articulation*, 33) could easily have occurred in earlier work in which the centre of gravity was on the other side of the Atlantic. At the same time, some of the language is recognisably American: "Enunciate barbarous jargon" (*Articulation*, 31) cites a quote from Macaulay, "barbarous jargon", that appears in the 1913 edition of Webster's dictionary as a definition of 'jargon', so becoming part of the American lexicon; "sharpshooters in history's apple-dark" (*Articulation*, 22) recalls Howe's interest in the Leatherstocking tales (discussed in *My Emily Dickinson*); and "Bridegroom" (*Articulation*, 36) anticipates her discussion, in her essay "Incloser", of the 17th century Puritan minister and settler Thomas Shepard's use in his sermons of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.¹

It is possible to discern in this poem a treatment of authority that crosses the borders between the literary, the personal and the political. Law and its subversion are approached through *Hamlet*, through the personal and religious understandings of 'Father', and through the deposition of a "tyrant". The law of intelligible syntax is also transgressed: there is no conventional subject-predicate relation in the lines. Indeed, the elided subject of "Left home to seek Lost" and of "Captive crowned tyrant deposed", leaves the poem denuded of agency. Howe's pursuit of "for the point where the crime began" is forestalled by her grammar.

¹ "Incloser" (*Birth-mark*, 43-86) is closely concerned with Shepard's use of the parable.

A further element of resistance is introduced with adjective/noun combinations such as “pitchfork origin” and “fertile mantle”. Such terms pull the reader up short, requiring an investment of interpretative effort that is likely to lead out into other poems of the series. But these unlikely word combinations are not entirely without a referential frame, even if it is hard to strike sparks of meaning from them in isolation. A crucial aspect of the overall effect of Howe’s poetry is that of diction, which is often either archaic or removed from contemporary speech. Such vocabulary as “seek”, “pitchfork”, “crowned tyrant”, “eternal”, “hero”, and “destiny” announces that this formally advanced work is enmeshed in the linguistic textures of a pre-20th century past. Howe’s work communicates as much by these contextual markers as by the relation to one another of discrete units of meaning. As a result the work has a hieratic quality that is quite at variance with the demotic mode that dominates the innovative poetry of the latter half of the 20th century. With the notable exception of Robert Duncan (and a few lesser known writers such as Ronald Johnson), Howe’s cultivation of these associations is unique in the tradition in which she writes.¹

While ‘oppositional’ writing has often chosen the demotic mode as a means of distancing itself from the vernacular of authority, Howe’s writing is far removed from the speech and writing of her time. When she is not actually citing the texts of others she is often engaging in a more diffuse form of citation, making reference to historically marked styles of writing. One might describe this as a heightened emphasis on timbre but, more importantly, Howe, writing after Olson, is treating time spatially. For Olson, as we have seen, Melville’s time “had density, as space had and events were objects accumulated within it”. Howe’s mode of writing in sequences such as “Taking the Forest” is no less disconcerting than her most radical reorganisations of the space of the page. The conceptual space of “Taking the Forest” is an extreme textual reduction of Olson’s spatialised time with “objects accumulated within it”. Here the objects are simply words. The reader’s movements within this space – a kind of word forest – are an encounter with history’s resistance to interpretation. Lines or paths may be followed this way or that, taking the individual word as the point of departure, but in the end the text’s obdurate refusal to surrender to interpretation cannot be evaded. The linearity of the Puritan notion of an already-written history is supplanted by a notion of history in which present and past are mutually determining. Howe’s texts, in other words, reveal language’s historical rootedness; but at the same time they enter the space of the past and reveal historical consciousness always to be guided by the demands of the present. “What is most radical in her work,”

¹ By this I mean a postwar tradition of writers roughly defined by Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry* anthology. Black Mountain and language poetry.

writes Susan Schultz, “is her sense that the tradition is wild and that entry into the wilderness makes the poet into a scout or a captive, not an empire builder.”¹ Howe’s scout-captive-editor’s ambition is to construct a poetry of intellectual ambition that resists the empire-building gestures that lie in the background of the *grands projets* of Pound or Olson.

Once Atherton has been installed as the poem’s emblematic poet in the first two sections of *Articulation*, in “Taking the Forest” the poem detaches itself from colonial Massachusetts and embarks on a voyage which roams freely across discursive and geographical boundaries. If the “Destiny of calamitous silence” suggests that the voices of the past are condemned to mutism, the poem’s surfaces nonetheless beckon the reader with the promise that they conceal layers of occulted knowledge – what are described as “Pilings of thought under spoken” (*Articulation*, 30). Howe’s feminist dissolution of Olsonian authority blows apart the possibility of a history energised by the force of the poet’s ego; her poems-containing-history offer instead a polyphony that gravitates around manifestations of authority and a stuttering energy that suggests that the flow of retrieved words is forever on the point of halting altogether.

¹Schultz (2001). n.p.

ii) *Thorow*: European grid on the forest

“The talent of composition is very dangerous,—the striking out the heart of life at a blow, as the Indian takes off a scalp. I feel as if my life had grown more outward when I can express it.”¹

Thorow is concerned with the relationship between language, history and place. Howe, as she explains in her introduction, wrote the poem while working as a writer-in-residence at the Lake George Arts Project in upper New York State. The poem, which contains relatively few of the philosophical references of *Articulation*, interleaves material relating to Howe’s own encounter with the landscape of Lake George and the surrounding Adirondack mountains with literary and historical documents. The two main textual resources that Howe uses are the writings of Thoreau and the papers of an 18th-century Irishman named Sir William Johnson.²

The poem follows the triadic form favoured by Howe in most of her long poems, although, unlike *Articulation*, the introduction stands apart from the numbered sections. The first section of the poem incorporates much material drawn from Johnson’s papers.³ The second is more concerned with Howe’s own experiences at Lake George, as the landscape ‘speaks’ through her: it enacts the introduction’s “I heard poems inhabited by voices [...] The Adirondacks *occupied me*” (*Thorow*, 41).⁴ In this section Howe at various points reprises in miniature Thoreau’s descriptions of nature – either as quotation or imitation. The brief third section is the most fragmentary and, on pp 56-57, contains one of Howe’s most impressive poems of textual scattering. However, as with *Articulation* (and, indeed, most of her work) the poem has a curiously suspended temporality, and it is often unclear where in time a particular phrase or line is drawn from.

Johnson was a powerful fur trader and landowner who renamed the lake after the English king in 1755 and, during the French-Indian War of 1754-63, oversaw the British forces in the Battle of Lake George.⁵ Johnson was also present at the widely reported massacre by Indians fighting for the French of the defenders of Fort William

¹ Thoreau (1849), 265. In her letter to Taggart of 29 May 1987 Howe admires this “murderously urgent” description of composition.

² Interview with the author.

³ These are published in a 14-volume edition.

⁴ Later in *Thorow* a poem that begins “Walked on Mount Vision” ends at the foot of the page with “my whole being is Vision” (*Thorow*, 49) – again Howe assimilates herself to the landscape.

⁵ Steele, viii. The lake had earlier been named Lac St Sacrement by the French. The French Indian War is also known as the Seven Years’ War, referring to the years, 1756-1763.

Henry, a fort Johnson had himself had constructed.¹ Like Hope Atherton, Johnson was a kind of border-crosser: he was an intermediary between the colonialists and the native Americans, responsible for overseeing trade between the English settlers and various native American tribes.

While at Lake George, Howe lived alone and immersed herself in the work of Thoreau.² His idea of nature, particularly as expressed in his late writings, permeates the conceptual landscape of *Thorow*. The poem explores Thoreau's idea of wilderness as a resource for cultural renewal at the same time as it acknowledges that such a direct and unmediated encounter with the natural world is – and always was – impossible. Landscape and language continually fold into one another in the poem and each becomes a metaphor for the other. For Thoreau, the American wilderness is the liberating antidote to a moribund European culture; for Howe language itself is a “wild interiority”.³ Rather than the fantasy of finding an ‘Other’ to human culture in the natural world (itself a supremely cultural fantasy), she looks to the “Word forest” of language (*Thorow*, 49).

Howe appears to be suggesting that the phenomenal experience of landscape is organised through language. Language is associated in the poem with both the amorphous generative potential of wilderness and with the sclerotic fixities of authority. Much like the landscape of 18th century upper New York State, language is a battleground in the poem. Howe's oblique reflection on the culture of colonial violence rests on the notion that the settlers in the new land arrogate to themselves the Adamic role of naming.⁴ Her role is to question that authority and to counter it (or its inheritance) with the instabilities of her poetry. The poem does not address violence itself; rather it directs itself at the linguistic and, by extension, cultural matrices that sustain that violence.

Once given names, places enter a European linguistic and cultural framework and so become part of what Howe calls the “Elegiac western Imagination” (*Thorow*, 55).⁵ “Elegy” is a key category in the poem, recalling the “psychology of the Lost/ first

¹ A massacre by Mohawks of surrendered British and Americans that became notorious as an illustration of Indian brutality and French duplicity. See Steele for a sceptical recent account that suggests that the extent of the violence was exaggerated.

² Interview with Keller, 16.

³ Beckett interview, 25.

⁴ See Genesis 2. 19-20.

⁵ Although there is little in the poem proper that explicitly addresses gender, the introduction's “Interior assembling of forces underneath earth's eye. Yes, she, the Strange, excluded from formalism” suggests that femininity is also outside the ordering Howe is struggling against.

precarious Eden" (*Thorow*, 52) by imagining American literature as a mourning for the pre-colonial state of 'wilderness'. This mourning is more broadly understood, however, to be imported by the colonisers, an extension of the postlapsarian thread in the "western Imagination".

These thoughts are explored in Howe's "Spiritual typography of elegy" (*Thorow*, 55). The line puns on 'typology', the mode of religious enquiry that deals with symbolic representation, employed by theologians to link events in the Old and New Testaments and also an important tool of the Puritans as they read their own fate as a chosen people in terms of the Old Testament. Bercovitch writes: "Typology recommended itself [after the Reformation] as an ideal method of regulating spiritualisation, since it stressed the literal-historical (as opposed to purely allegorical) level of exegesis, and then proceeded to impose the scriptural pattern upon the self, in accordance with the concept of *exemplum fidei*."¹ In typology the self is regulated according to its spiritual nearness to the figure of Christ, which stands as a historical fulcrum between the Old Testament and the continuing fulfilment of prophecy throughout contemporary history. Howe is exploring the intersection between the idea, inherent in typology, of a present overshadowed by a predictive past, and a *typography* that escapes from its ordained manoeuvres.² The form of elegy, as Bercovitch notes, assumed through typology a communal character, using "the saint's glorification to project the country's coming glory."³

Howe, then, imagines the landscape as a *significant* space, with its own typology, in which present and past are given a quasi-hieroglyphic encoding. Here she is close to Thoreau's idea, expressed in *Walden*, of the language of nature: "Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf. What Champollion will decipher this hieroglyphic for us, that we may turn over a new leaf at last?"⁴

The language of nature is understood in the wake of Thoreau's: "There are other letters for the child to learn than those which Cadmus invented. The Spaniards have a good term to express this wild and dusky knowledge, *Gramática parda*, tawny grammar, a

¹ Bercovitch (1975), 36.

² See my account of *Melville's Marginalia* for a discussion of this idea of temporality in relation to the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*.

³ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴ Thoreau (1854), 548. Champollion was a Frenchman who in the 1820s deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphics. As Irwin notes, his work is important to Emerson, Poe, and Melville as well as Thoreau. See Irwin, 3.

kind of mother-wit”.¹ This ‘wild knowledge’ is accessible not through maps but through a Thoreauvian wandering revoiced as the work of ‘drifting’: “Unconscious demarkations range// I pick my compass to pieces// Dark here in the driftings/ in the spaces of drifting” (*Thoreau*, 55). Howe is suggesting that the apprehension of landscape through the lens of culture – a landscape ‘spelled into place’ by successive waves of settlers – must be ‘unspelled’ and made open to a different kind of apprehension, a kind of openness towards the wildness of both landscape and poetic language. At the conclusion of the poem she appears to have reached such a point, with the ‘unspelling’ of “anthen”, “uplispth”, “enend”, “wov” (*Thoreau*, 59).

In this Howe is again rethinking a Thoreauvian imperative.² In Joan Burbick’s account, “Walking” asserts that, “what must be erased is exactly the cartographic grid that fixes geography and imparts a precision to the landscape; sympathy, not understanding, is demanded. Nature in this instance exists also outside of time, and its traces cannot be measured or fixed.”³ Howe’s response to both Thoreau and the Adirondacks extends this analysis into language itself. In her introduction she inveighs against mapmakers and “positivist efficiency” (*Thoreau*, 41) and the entire poem seems to arise from a meditation on Thoreau’s injunction: “The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence”.⁴ In other words, Howe is less interested in the positivist mode of attention, directed at the known and the named, than an intuitive apprehension of nature that allows for the resistance of the natural hieroglyph to translation.

Howe has praised the ability of Olson’s work to make links between diverse phenomena and she has praised another Black Mountain poet, Robert Duncan, in similar terms: “Robert Duncan believed in connections between apparently unconnected people, places, and events. Maybe he could have explained, why, for me, Lake Erie is an allegory of elemental irrationality.”⁵ Howe’s encounter with Lake Erie is mediated by the rhetorical term allegory: the lake appears in the ‘book’ of nature as a representative of a primal disorder.

¹ Thoreau (1862), 622.

² Howe’s response to Thoreau’s writing draws more on the wandering Thoreau of the late essay “Walking” than that of the natural historian – the “patient collector of empirical observations and laws” that, in Joan Burbick’s reading, characterises the Thoreau of *Walden* (Burbick, 81).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Thoreau (1862), 623. Or, more pithily: “I would say to the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, sometimes. Go to grass. You have eaten hay long enough.” *Ibid.*

⁵ Howe (1988), 54.

Howe's poem seeks to reflect the allure of what might be termed the negative aspects of enlightenment thought without succumbing to the "irrationality" that the landscape represents. *Thorow* is suffused with Thoreauvian perspectives on wilderness and language but it explores them from the inside: it is a diagnosis of a way of speaking that knowingly remains a prisoner of a certain rhetoric but subjects it to such deformations that its ideological underpinnings begin to come apart.

The problem, however, is that the poem's allegiance to such terms as "spirit" and "wilderness" begins to paint it into an irrationalist corner. Such might certainly be the conclusion drawn from certain of the comments in Howe's highly condensed introduction to the poem, one of her most polemical pieces of writing on colonial New England. Its defining statement is:

In the seventeenth century European adventurer-traders burst through the forest to discover this particular long clear body of fresh water. They brought our story to it. Pathfinding believers in God and grammar spelled the lake into *place*. They have renamed it several times since. In paternal colonial systems a positivist efficiency appropriates primal indeterminacy.

Thorow, 41

In describing the territory through which the colonists blazed their trails as undifferentiated wilderness she is revoicing the views both of the early settlers who sailed in search of a "Virgin land" and of Thoreau's understanding of nature. European place-names, she contends, force the wilderness into culture. Nature, it is implied, is inevitably viewed through a European lens because of the imprint left by place-names on the landscape. Crucially, the poem recognises that it is itself part of that European trajectory – "My ancestors/ tore off the first leaves" (*Thorow*, 52) – and that, as we shall see, it is itself susceptible to a reification of the opposition between nature and culture.

Naming, rather than offering the potential for anarchic punning that Howe elsewhere celebrates, is in *Thorow* in the service of human agency and specifically linked to the exercise of colonial power: "Every name driven shall be as another rivet in the machine of a universe flux" (*Thorow*, 42).¹ Naming, then, is the point of entry of

¹ Howe gives a machine-age gloss to the words of another American Romantic, Emerson, on the mobility of poetic language: "But the quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze [...] Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false. For all symbols are

nature into culture. It is hard to escape the implication that the relative indeterminacy of Howe's text is therefore to be read as a partial recovery of wilderness – a return, in other words, to Thoreau's ideas of the 'wildness' that poetry should strive for.

Howe's introduction raises further problems: the non-European, Native American presence is swept into a category of inarticulate otherness that assimilates it to the 'wilderness' of the land that surrounds them. Language, through naming, is held to be part of the machinery of domination but it might be argued in response that any resistance to that domination is thereby denied coherent expression. Cartography can, moreover, be a tool of liberation as well as of domination. The assimilation of the specific evils of patriarchy and colonialism to one another is troubling for various reasons, not least the sheer violence with which Howe brings together these distinct orders of oppression. The further extension of these categories into those of "grammar" and "efficiency" is questionable – Howe is erecting another edifice of overdetermined structural analogy that, in aligning grammar, patriarchy and cartography, for example, sheds little light on the operations of any of these terms. Also, the complexity of allegiances during the Seven Years' War is not reflected by the poem's European/non-European division. The combatants included Canadian and American colonists, the French, the British and the Indians of the Six Nations (who fought both on both French and British sides), all with rather different agendas.

Once again, Howe is setting in opposition a force of conservative fixity, understood in terms of both language and politics, and a mobile, radical force of disruption. Clearly, assigning the 'feminine' – "she, the Strange" – to the latter risks disenfranchisement by repeating the very equation of the feminine with inarticulacy that it seeks to attack. Despite the immense rhetorical energy of Howe's prose in such passages, its extreme elision of categories and an essentially dualistic vision tend to work against her endorsement of a thinking of "multiplicities" (*Thorow*, 42). The alignment of 'open' texts with a liberatory politics is again questionable. It is uncertain, moreover, whether Howe seeks merely to celebrate the 'multiplicity' side of the dyad or, by stressing its constitutive nature, to overcome the dyadic structure itself. While the poem itself is a complex and resonant response to historical violence, the forcing style of prose in Howe's preface, with its crushing-together of categories and its declarative tenor, reflects elements of the aggressively programmatic language use that she seeks to dismantle.

fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead" (Emerson, 1844, 211).

First precarious Eden: place and language

Critic Rachel Tzvia Back has suggested that the way in which Howe links language and colonial power was influenced by Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America*.¹ Early in his book, Todorov describes Columbus's near-obsession with naming features of the landscape and the islands he came upon:

[...] Columbus knows perfectly well that these islands already have names, natural ones in a sense (but in another acceptation of the term); others' words interest him very little, however, and he seeks to rename places in terms of the rank they occupy in his discovery, to give them the *right* names; moreover, nomination is equivalent to taking possession.²

While Todorov's argument about colonial 'discovery' and nomination changes considerably when he begins to discuss Cortes, his assertion about naming and possession – suggesting an identity between linguistic and actual violence – is certainly close to Howe's comments in her introduction. *Thorow's* meditation on meaning and political power shares Todorov's perspective on the links between cartography and political domination. However, the 'equivalence' that Todorov speaks of and which is found in Howe's radically condensed polemic deserves to be met with some suspicion: language may be a form of power, even a realisation of power, but "nomination" might more plausibly be described as a consequence rather than the "equivalent" of "taking possession".

Naming is seen in Howe's preface as the point at which the land becomes "*place*" (*Thorow*, 41) and enters the network of human representations. Not only is it "*place*", moreover, but part of a specifically capitalistic system of representations that is held to have banished "spirit": "a four-star Ramada Inn built over an ancient Indian burial ground", writes Howe. "And what is left when spirits have fled from holy places?" (*ibid*) The colonial-commercial cartographic apparatus, in this view, is part of a dangerous process of disenchantment.

In an essay on Charles Olson published at the end of 1987, the same year that Howe was living in the Adirondacks, Howe expresses an even more explicit version of her ideas on capitalism and naming:

¹ See Back, 51. Todorov's book was published in English in 1984.

² Todorov, 27.

Naming delimits the open and defines dominance. Re-naming is an overt coercion of original freedom. A specialist wants to positively identify something. Each product in a Capitalist system must have a certified trademark. Naming is an affirmation of value by man. In the history of the Americas, Christian connotation nullified aboriginal tradition and imagination.

“Commander”, 16

Howe links the capitalism of the modern era to the spread of Christian culture, and again distinguishes between a state of anterior ‘openness’ and posterior ‘dominance’.¹ She also suggests that language is a system of exchange and that the act of nomination itself brings objects within the circulation of commodities.² The scientific positivism decried in the introduction to *Thoreau* is again compared to the urge to impose form on inchoate matter. Howe orients the reader towards what falls outside the descriptive powers of positivism, the irreducible flux she describes as “primal indeterminacy” or “elemental irrationality”.

In probing the colonial imagination Howe often touches on the Puritan notion that the promised land would be the site of the redemption of God’s chosen people.³ Howe approaches this yearning for redemption as a desire for a return to Eden, specifically the “New Eden” or Arcadia of early accounts of America. When she writes “Slipping back to primordial/ We go through the word Forest” (*Thoreau*, 49) and “psychology of the lost/ First precarious Eden” (*Thoreau*, 52), it is as if the first settlers were experiencing the landscape in its pristine and nameless state. Yet, discussing *Thoreau* in interview, Howe has displayed an ambivalence about this state of prelapsarian integrity:

For some reason this beautiful body of water [ie Lake George] has attracted violence and greed ever since the Europeans first saw it. I thought I could feel it when it was pure, enchanted, nameless. There never was such a pure place. In all nature there is violence. [...]

¹ One might ask questions here of the position of women in pre-capitalist cultures – and whether all forms of ‘dominance’ in the history of the Americas are to be aligned with ‘Christian connotation’.

² Cf Bataille’s theory of ‘expenditure’, which counterposes utilitarian principles of exchange to an impulse to unproductive expenditure that is essentially sacrificial and outside the cycle of production. See, Bataille, 120: “The term poetry, applied to the least degraded and least intellectualised forms of the expression of a state of loss, can be considered synonymous with expenditure; it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss.”

³ Bercovitch (1975), 38-44, discusses the “redemptive history” of Cotton Mather’s biography of John Winthrop.

Uninterrupted nature usually is a dream enjoyed by the spoilers and looters – my ancestors. It's a first dream of wildness that most of us need in order to breathe; and yet to inhabit a wilderness is to destroy it.¹

Howe is imagining the landscape as the Puritans did, as what she has called: “a dialectical construction of the American land as a virgin garden pre-established for them by the Author and finisher of creation” (*Birth-mark*, 49). Howe's poem attacks this “dialectical construction” from within, even as it appears to confirm it. It is, moreover, a historical investigation that is oriented towards the present, as she observes in “Incloser”: “Now I know that the arena in which Scripture battles raged among New Englanders with original fury is part of our current American system and events, history and structure” (*Birth-mark*, 47).

Howe's writing is both more knowing and pessimistic than Schultz allows when she writes of Howe's desire to return to “a point where the story can begin again”.² *Thoreau* laments the impossibility of such a return even as it desires it. Howe is writing about a compromised temporality – the feeling of being “outside of time” when writing *Thoreau* – but her writing also knows that it can neither escape the context of its production nor think itself into a vanished past. There is little in *Thoreau* to offer hope of a new and “inclusive” beginning.

Howe's work is also an attempt to constitute an ambitious notion of poetic language that would somehow evade the language of “domination”. Taking the position that “naming delimits the open”, Howe wants to assert the instability of nomination and to reclaim some of this “open” territory by loosening the bond between word and place. Her point of departure in this, linking landscape, history and poetry, is Thoreau's version of the ‘wild’. If nature often appears in *Thoreau* to be that “neatly dialectical other to community” that Nicholls credits Howe with avoiding in her description of wilderness, the reason lies in her close engagement with the work of Thoreau during her months at Lake George.³ Howe enters the framework of Thoreau's thought and explores its internal contradictions. Her problematic pursuit of origins is both a reawakening of Thoreau's version of the American wilderness and a questioning of it.

¹ Beckett interview, 21.

² Schultz (2001), n.p.

³ Nicholls (1996), 589.

Thoreau believed that the American wilderness encountered by Cabot, Raleigh et al could be found, even his own day, in the American interior.¹ Wilderness for Thoreau not only allows civilisation to rethink itself, it is emblematic of the possibilities of a literature no longer tied to the decadence of Europe. In "Walking" he writes:

In literature it is only the wild that attracts us [...] Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring which the frost has heaved; who derived words as often as he used them – transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; whose words were so true, and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring.²

The very words to which Thoreau ascribes value are of a primitive quality, part of nature itself. A few pages further into "Walking", he assimilates this quality of natural language to the "savage":

A familiar name cannot make a man less strange to me. It may be given to a savage who retains in secret his own wild title earned in the woods. We have a wild savage in us, and a savage name is perchance somewhere recorded as ours. I see that my neighbor, who bears the familiar epithet William, or Edwin, takes it off with his jacket. It does not adhere to him when asleep or in anger, or aroused by any passion or inspiration. I seem to hear pronounced by some of his kin at such a time, his original wild name in some jaw-breaking or else melodious tongue.³

Thoreau, then, bases his notion of language on a fantasy of uncorrupted wilderness: the only way for American culture to go forward is to go back in pursuit of "primitive senses". There is, in this view, a natural, originary language which lies beneath the secondary language of civilised humans. European culture obscures the chaotic flux

¹ In *Ktdaan* Thoreau writes of the woods of Maine: "These are not the artificial forests of an English king – a royal preserve merely. Here prevail no forest laws, but those of nature. The aborigines have never been dispossessed, nor nature disforested [...] the country is virtually unmapped and unexplored, and there still waves the virgin forest of the New World" (Thoreau, 1864, 111).

² Thoreau (1862), 615-616.

³ *Ibid.*, 620-621.

of drives that it supersedes. Sleep, anger, passion or inspiration permit the primitive name to return and obliterate the appearance of civilisation.¹ “Primitive” names attach to things. The poet presses nature into her service, aiming to ‘derive’ words from nature and nail “words to their primitive senses”: words must come from nature and they must not be allowed to stray from their original senses.

The couplet “The literature of savagism/ under a spell of savagism” (*Thorow*, 49) reads as an acknowledgement of Thoreau’s theory of the “wild savage” within and its relation to the wildness in literature.² However, read in the context of Thoreau, it becomes clear that Howe’s return to origins is only masquerading as such: it is better understood as an act of literary ventriloquism, read, like the “machine” of flux, from a contemporary perspective. Howe’s refusal of the “scandal of materialism” (*Thorow*, 52) that her ancestors had perpetrated is in sympathy with Thoreau’s attitude towards commerce but she appears to be both enthralled by and sceptical about the sort of immediate encounter with nature that Thoreau writes of. There is no recourse to the possibility of a prelapsarian language, yet poetry, in evading the instrumentalised language of commercial exploitation, contains the potential to voice the ‘uncolonised’ areas of the psyche that Thoreau considers the domain of the ‘savage’.

Sacvan Bercovitch notes the religious origins of Romantic attempts to read the ‘scripture’ of nature:

All Romantics regarded nature as the temple of God. All of them, that is, were the heirs of natural theology – the traditional Christian view, shared by Catholics and Protestants alike, that Creation is God’s “other book”, a Holy Writ of living hieroglyphs. The tradition leads forward to Romantic naturalism through a process of redefinition which, for our present purpose, may be simply stated. As the Bible gradually lost its authority after the Renaissance, *sola scriptura* became *sola natura*.³

Howe, following this tradition, transposes the sacralised nature she finds in Thoreau into the space of contemporary poetics. Her sustained interest – from her installations

¹ Cf Freud’s belief that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny: that the infant’s development repeats the movement from savage to civilised human. See, for example: “The content of the Ucs. may be compared with an aboriginal population in the mind.” Freud (1915), 195.

² See Sayre for an extended treatment of Thoreau’s relationship to savagism, which he describes, 3, as “the complex of theories about Indians held by nearly all Americans of Thoreau’s time”. Howe’s “under a spell of savagism” adapts Sayre’s description of the younger Thoreau as “under the spell of savagism” (Sayre, 18).

³ Bercovitch (1975), 152.

to her work on CS Peirce's symbolic logic – in the relation between visual and verbal signification might be read as an extension of Thoreau's attempt to decipher the 'hieroglyphs' of nature.

Howe's lament that the "spirits have fled" from Lake George can be understood, through *Thorow*, as decrying the process of disenchantment that follows from the colonisation of experience by the commercial imperatives of American capitalism. Her attempt at the recovery of a 'wilder' speech is pursued through a wandering movement that is at once an asystemic resistance – conducted in time and across the page – to colonial map-making and a careful suspension of linguistic conventions. The errant 'Scout' figure that Howe takes from Johnson's papers (*Thorow*, 43) treads a path that deviates from that of the "pathfinding believers in God and grammar". Instead she suggests that her mission is to, "Let myself drift in the rise and fall of light and snow, re-reading and re-tracing once-upon" (*Thorow*, 41).

Howe here uses a word, 'drift', that is crucial to *Thorow* and that will reappear at the end of section two in the lines: "Dark here in the driftings/ in the spaces of drifting" (*Thorow*, 55). The term may have entered the poem's lexicon via Lyotard's introduction to his *Driftworks*, another of the books Howe was reading at the time *Thorow* was composed.¹ In it Lyotard proposes the principle of drifting as a position that resists the authoritarian implications of knowledge and (Marxian) 'critique': "Don't you see that criticising is still knowing, knowing better? That the critical relation still falls within the sphere of knowledge, or 'realisation' and thus of the assumption of power? Critique must be drifted out of. Better still: *Drifting is in itself the end of all critique.*"²

In a move characteristic of postmodern aesthetics, Howe adopts asystemic methods to counter a late-20th century capitalism that appeared all-encompassing and impervious to critique.³ Her strategy is to generate a mobile language that would seep through the cracks in the "European grid" and offer a literary formalisation of an anti-authoritarian "politics of marginality".⁴ Her aim is to write in language that is inimical to the operations of power, with its tendency, in Lyotard's scheme, towards a univocal monopoly of knowledge.

Howe does not mention Lyotard in her introduction but she does quote two other French theorists of the postmodern, Deleuze and Guattari, on the proper name. Her citation

¹ Comment made after a 1988 reading. (Audio cassette L945, held at the UCSD archive).

² Lyotard (1984), 13.

³ I am thinking of the continuing influence of Deleuze's rhizomatic model.

⁴ See Marsh, 251.

concludes: “The proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity. The proper name is the subject of a pure infinitive comprehended as such in a field of intensity” (*Thoreau*, 42). Howe here finds a reconsideration of naming that substitutes Thoreau’s savage, primal name for a principle of multiplicity. The Romantic pursuit of origins is replaced by an entirely different conceptual framework, one that would replace Thoreau’s implicit topography of surface (civilisation) and depth (the wild) with a collapsing of perspectives and a valorisation of wandering. Yet the two notions of naming share a quality of uncoercible motility that allows Howe to force them together. Thoreau’s inner savage, with its implicit chaotic, atemporal space of drives, finds some echo in the language Deleuze and Guattari employ: “instantaneous apprehension”; “a pure infinitive comprehended as such in a field of intensity”.

Besieged and besieged: place and iteration

Thoreau, in “Walking”, deploys the metaphor of the compass to play the cultured East against the “wildness” of the American West: “My needle is slow to settle,” he writes, “[...] but it always settles between west and south-west. [...] Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free.”¹

Howe absorbs the metaphor but discards the trope of westward movement, preferring to wander: “I pick my compass to pieces” (*Thoreau*, 55).² In *Thoreau*, the drifting is not only spatial but temporal, as the textual space incorporates both present and past. In her introduction Howe announces that her work of drifting is a kind of return or rediscovery: “Let myself drift in the rise and fall of light and snow, *re-reading* and *re-tracing* once-upon” (*Thoreau*, 41, my emphases). The words “once-upon” stress the folk-tale fictiveness of the fantasy of origins. This fantasy, evident at numerous places in the work, is shadowed by an emphasis on its unattainability. At the same time as the poem appears to invoke an unmediated encounter with wilderness – whether understood as the landscape or linguistic indeterminacy – Howe is acknowledging the impossibility of achieving any such nearness. While the work draws on both Puritan and Thoreauvian ideas of wilderness, the notion of “slipping back to primordial” is approached as a figure that is built into the American literary imagination.³ In one

¹ Thoreau (1862), 603.

² Howe thereby transposes the notion of westward movement from the particularly Irish associations that she had explored in *The Liberties*. For discussion of the compass see Elizabeth Joyce.

³ The early settlers saw the land as a blend of “unmitigated harshness and tremendous potential fertility”, according to Slotkin, 19. Thoreau’s vision, at least in “Walking”, gives pre-eminence to the wild as the source of a cultural renewal. At one point he simply writes: “In short, all good things are wild and free” (*Thoreau*, 1862, 618).

sense Howe's scout is in pursuit of a kind of 'sympathy' with Thoreau.¹ Lines such as "Besieged and besieged// in a chain of Cause/ The eternal first cause" (*Thorow*, 51) and "Hunt and not the capture" (*Thorow*, 53) suggest an inapprehensible poetic object, as if the pursuit of inaccessible origins were an almost inescapable obligation.

The obligation is not only felt as the private quest of the author but as a renunciation of agency: Howe seeks to depict the process of writing the poem as one of hearing "poems inhabited by voices". "The Adirondacks," she writes, "occupied me" (*Thorow*, 41). This opens the idea of possession to two interpretations: territorial occupation of natural landscape and the possession of the internal landscapes by 'external' or unconscious forces. The summary incursions of landscape and voices into the writer's consciousness establish a mode of literary representation that collapses inside and outside, while temporality folds into the "present in the past now" (*Thorow*, 43).

If the "return of the repressed" is one of the broad conceptual foundations of Howe's poetry – the voices of the dead return as an affective disturbance in the texts of the present – Howe's manner of working might be compared to another of Freud's theories which has entered the cultural mainstream: the compulsion to repeat. The theory arose as a means of accounting for the tendency of analysands to repeat disguised versions of earlier trauma and, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is described thus:

The manifestations of a compulsion to repeat exhibit to a high degree an instinctual (*Triebhaft*) character and, when they act in opposition to the pleasure principle, give the impression of some 'daemonic' force at work.²

Howe's poetry is similarly prey to an irresistible urge to return to the scene of the originary trauma.³ And, as in Freud's hypothesis, her poetic speech demonstrates an abdication of agency on the part of the speaker. The imposition of the "European grid on the Forest" (*Thorow*, 45) – land-grabs, cartography and European languages – generates a countervailing impulse that, akin to Thoreau's wildness, forces itself into the language of Howe's poem as a principle of disturbance. What Howe characterises as "understory" (*Thorow*, 50) and "underthought" (*Thorow*, 53) asserts itself as the marker of cultural damage.

¹ *Melville's Marginalia* is explicitly concerned with such relations between authors.

² Freud (1920), *SE*, XVIII, 35.

³ See again her remark, cited in my discussion of *Articulation*: "Sometimes I think my poetry is only a search by an investigator for the point where the crime began" (Beckett interview, 21).

Freud allows that the compulsion to repeat does not only occur within the transference.¹ In one passage in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he even proposes it as a rational way of understanding humanity's sense of the "compulsion of destiny".² My point is that Howe is enacting – again and again – a return to barely articulable but traumatic repressed material.³ This material arrives in the poetry with the force of 'outsiderness' – it unsettles syntactical coherence and demonstrates the "daemonic" qualities of which Freud writes.

Howe has described the role of the poet as an openness to other voices: "You open your mind and textual space to many voices, to an interplay and contradictions and complexity of voices."⁴ Howe's surrender to these voices is in *Thorow* a way of invoking the "spirits that have fled" the scene of Lake George.⁵ In other words, part of Howe's project of "re-tracing" is to require her poems to counter the language of "positivist efficiency" (*Thorow*, 41) with one that seeks a form of linguistic re-enchantment.

Howe, following Thoreau, writes of a wildness that is both inside and outside. Only, for Howe, this wildness is distanced from its characteristics of primal intensity, even as her language repeats this essentially Romantic movement. For her there is no naive encounter with nature and, rather than offering an encounter with an inner 'savage', the language of the unconscious is a transindividual phenomenon – a place where the voices of others might be encountered and so a space of plurality rather than of *echt* originary utterance.⁶

Early in the poem there is a metaphor for defences destroyed by an incursion from outside: "Fence blown down in a winter storm// darkened by outstripped possession" (*Thorow*, 44). Howe might equally well be describing nature sweeping away the incursions of civilisation or the subjection of the conscious mind to Freud's "'daemonic' force". For Thoreau the fence is the emblem of possession. In "Walking", he yearns for a "people who would begin by burning the fences and let the forest stand!"⁷

¹ Freud (1920), 21.

² Ibid, 21-23.

³ Howe uses the term 'transference' – although in a different sense – when she describes her encounter with Thoreau: "When I wrote *Thorow* I was staying several months alone on a lake in the Adirondacks and I surrounded myself with books by and about [Thoreau], so I reached some kind of transference" (Keller interview, 16).

⁴ Beckett interview, 24.

⁵ Cf Howe's wish to 'tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted, inarticulate' (*Europe*, 14).

⁶ See Lacan, 49: "The unconscious is that part of the concrete discourse, in so far as it is transindividual, that is not at the disposal of the subject in re-establishing the continuity of his conscious discourse."

⁷ Thoreau (1862), 598.

Indeed, he goes on, in hyperbolic mode, to describe a land surveyor as the “Prince of Darkness”.¹ In Thoreau’s view, then, it is the civilising forces – analogous to Freud’s acculturated ego – that are the representatives of evil. The natural world – an analogue of Freud’s threatening “aboriginal population in the mind” – on the other hand, is benign and close to heaven.²

The ‘daemon’ – let us say a principle of externality compelling speech – lives on both sides of the fence in *Thorow*, and is implicated in the voicing of both paradise and apocalypse. The poem embarks on an attempt which it knows must fail to reimagine an Edenic wilderness and encounters instead a landscape marked by territorial strife. In her essay “Incloser” Howe writes of the difficulties the settlers encountered on arriving in a supposed paradise:

Schismatic children of Adam thought they were leaving the “wilderness of the world” to find a haven free of institutional structures they had united *against*. They were unprepared for the variability of directional change the wilderness they reached represented. Even John Winthrop complained of “our wildernes troubles our first plantings”.

Birth-mark, 48

In attempting to re-encounter the wilderness Howe is continually confronted with the recollection of events such as the “Armageddon at Fort William Henry” of 1757 (*Thorow*, 51).³ At the same time, the deadening process of civilisation that Thoreau was attacking has proceeded to a point at which the traces of its own violence are only available in the touristy “Simulacrum” – Howe’s co-option of the then-popular Baudrillardian terminology – that dominates the town of Lake George.

When the voices of the past return – like the symptom – it is in a different guise, the elliptical, warped language of Howe’s poem. In the poem’s first section much of this derives from a sifting of the language in William Johnson’s papers. The first three lines in the poem, for example, “Go on the Scout, they say/ They will go near Swegachey/ I have snow shoes and Indian shoes” are taken from a letter to Johnson by his deputy, George Croghan (*Thorow*, 43).⁴ On pp46-7 the words “At Fort Stanwix the

¹ Ibid.

² Freud (1915), 195.

³ See note above.

⁴ Johnson (William), vol. II, 780.

Charrokey/paice”, “Agreseror”, and “that time the Shannas & Dallaways” also come from a Croghan letter.¹

If the revisiting of trauma and *re-tracing* – encountering for a second time – is central to both the poem’s temporality and its critique of Thoreauvian immediacy, the idea of repetition is built into *Thorow* at the level of the individual line. On page 45, for example, there are the lines: “Must see and not see/ Must not see nothing/ Burrow and so burrow/ measuring mastering”² and “So empty and so empty” and “Dear Seem dear cast out”. On page 51 there occur the lines: “Besieged and besieged// in a chain of Cause/ The eternal First Cause” and “Author the real author”. By repeating words such as ‘burrow’, ‘empty’, ‘dear’, ‘besieged’ and ‘author’ within the space of a single short line Howe’s poem seems to depend on a frustrated urge to find the sameness in return.

Howe’s poem briefly unites textual fragments of America in the pre-colonial and colonial eras (differing visions of wilderness), the 18th century (Johnson and the French Indian War), the 19th century (Thoreau) and the present. Howe knows that her work cannot recover a ‘virgin’ landscape or some notional space of ‘pure’ poetic utterance. Neither can the battered speech of her poems perform any restitutive function: it can only testify to the damaged present, compromised in its relation to the past, that she gestures at in her account of the Lake George gift shop. While the introduction appears to be sustained by a fantasy of wilderness, in the body of the poem Howe is acknowledging the mediated nature of these encounters with the landscape. Despite the immense pull of the Thoreauvian account of the wilderness, her poem knows that this is itself thoroughly ‘cultural’. If repetition is at the core of the poem’s thought-world, the “primal indeterminacy” of the introduction is revealed within the poem to be a chimera, but one that has had an enduring life in American literature.³ As well as inhabiting the landscape Howe is inhabiting the metaphorical environment that the landscape has generated. The poem attempts, in a necessarily

¹ Ibid, vol. VII, 652. The second poem on p47 also includes excerpts from vol. XI, 726. *Thorow* also cites Thoreau. The line “squadrons of clouds” (*Thorow*, 51) is from a journal entry, August 5, 1851 (Thoreau, 1906, II, 374); and the line “A sort of border life” (*Thorow*, 50) comes from “Walking” (Thoreau, 1862, 625). Mt Vision (*Thorow*, 49) and Erebus (*Thorow*, 54), and Shelving Rock (ibid) are all place names from the immediate area. Johnson had a house nearby at “Sacandaga vläie”. (*Thorow*, 58)

² These lines contain an allusion to the last stanza of Paul Celan’s poem “Ice Eden”: “It sees, it sees, we see./ I see you, you see me” (Celan, 177). The Celan poem appears at the beginning of Howe’s working sketchbook journal for April-June 1987.

³ Writing as late as the 1960s, Perry Miller could still describe wildness as a fundamental characteristic of the American artist: “the American, or at least the American artist, cherishes in his innermost being the impulse to reject completely the gospel of civilisation, in order to guard with resolution the savagery of his heart” (Miller, 1961, 207).

glancing and indirect manner, an immanent critique of that encounter as it has been staged and restaged at various points in American history.

Force made desire wander: the scattered text

The most striking example of visual repetition is in the mirroring of pp 56-57 – the second of the two pages closely resembles an upside-down version of the first (see fig 2). However, certain elements of the composition are substituted and others repositioned in the second version of the page.¹ While the mirroring on these pages looks back to typographical experiments in the *Secret History of the Dividing Line* and *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, it also performs something specific to the thought-world of *Thorow*. The point I wish to make is a paradox about the encounter with the past. When Howe installs such disturbed repetition in her text there is an analogy to be drawn with her treatment of history. Through her speculative re-tracing both first and second terms of the repeated elements – whether a page or a single word – are altered. Past and present continually bring pressure to bear on one another. In asserting a principle of *similitude*, repetition has a flattening effect, telescoping different times and allowing speculative structural parallels to be drawn. In asserting a principle of *difference*, repetition brings home the inescapable alterity and inaccessibility of the past.

Asked by Keller about her use of mirroring techniques, Howe cites Duchamp's "Large Glass" as an influence. Of *Thorow* she says: "I had done one scattered page and made a Xerox copy and suddenly there were two lying on my desk beside each other, and it seemed to me the scattering effect was stronger if I repeated them so the image would travel across facing pages. The facing pages reflected and strengthened each other."²

Howe's description is confined to the visual impact of the "image". For Rachel Tzvia Back "these two pages of *Thorow* enact language's liberation, its release from the bonds of syntax, word units, and normative use of page space."³ In my view this reading is too quick to take up Howe's apparent invitation in the preface to equate wilderness with syntactical and typographical disruption. I believe this account of

¹ The arrangement of words at the top left of page 56, for example, is omitted on the facing page and the first four lines of the sequence top right of the same page are replaced by different lines on page 57. See Perelman, 136, for the useful observation that the word "covery" (on the first of the two pages) might indicate an anxiety on the part of Howe that the work fails in its archeological ambitions and serves instead to add "another layer over what it wants to reveal".

² Keller interview, 9.

³ Back, 56.

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Parted with the Otterware
 at the three Rivers, & are
 Gone to have a Treaty
 with the French at Oswego
 & singing their war song
 The French Hatchet
 Messages
 a very deep Rabbit
 of which will not permit of
 fitted to the paper, the Margins
 Frames should be exactly
 fitted to the paper, the Margins
 of which will not permit of
 a very deep Rabbit
 Messages
 The French Hatchet
 & singing their war song
 with the French at Oswego
 Gone to have a Treaty
 at the three Rivers, & are
 Parted with the Otterware

Can not be every where I entreat
 R e s o J u n t i o n
 snapt
 Picked up arrowhead
 hieroglyph
 At this end of the carry
 sheen
 Their Plenipo
 disc
 lily root
 swamp
 dumms
 coin
 chip
 grease
 cusk
 wavelet
 shrub
 mud
 waterbug
 Cove
 Places to walk out to
 Escalade
 Tranquillity of a garrison
 Traverse canon night siege Constant firing
 Parapet
 Gabion

Gabion
Parapet

Traverse canon night siege Constant firing
 Escalade
 Tranquillity of a garrison
 Places to walk out to
 Cove
 waterbug
 mud
 shrub
 wavelet
 cusk
 grease
 splint
 drisk
 Messages
 The French Hatchet
 & singing their war song
 The War B&P
 Messengers say
 over the lakes
 Of the far nations

The Frames should be exactly
 fitted to the paper, the Margins
 of which will not permit of
 a very deep Rabbit
 chip
 coin
 lily root
 swamp
 Their Plenipo
 disc
 sheen
 At this end of the carry
 & singing their war song
 The French Hatchet
 Messages
 of which will not permit of
 fitted to the paper, the Margins
 Frames should be exactly
 fitted to the paper, the Margins
 of which will not permit of
 a very deep Rabbit
 Messages
 The French Hatchet
 & singing their war song
 with the French at Oswego
 Gone to have a Treaty
 at the three Rivers, & are
 Parted with the Otterware

Encampment
 wood
 canoes
 Fires by night
 Picked up arrowhead
 hieroglyph
 The War B&P
 Messengers say
 over the lakes
 Of the far nations

Fig 2, pages 56 and 57 of Thorow

Howe's work – which is not confined to Back's version of Howe – to be wrong both as an interpretation of the local effect and of the nature of "freedom" in Howe's work as a whole.¹

Such a reading would seem to imply that Howe is transposing, without scepticism, a Thoreauvian view of wilderness to the field of language. The pages would therefore perform the opposition between the preface's "light letters exploding" and the spelling "of the lake into place". However, the effect of such pages cannot be reduced to a simple dualism between constriction and restraint, the "normative" and the liberatory. Howe's poetry needs both these moments, and a fuller response to the poetry must point, for example, to its compacted layers of historical documentation, its curiously transhistorical assertions, its balance of autobiography and historical narrative, and its mixture of a Romantic conception of imagination as "the last uncolonised space" and a postmodern scepticism about such unsullied points of origin.

In the visual scattering of pages 56-57, the disarranged page is symptomatic of the clashing vernaculars that lay claim to the territory of Lake George. On these pages, as Back and Perelman note, militaristic language ("Gabion/ parapet" and "night siege constant firing") meets descriptions of landscape ("Cove/ waterbug/ mud/ shrub/ wavelet [...]"). The texture of the cited language suggests that it is drawn, once again, from William Johnson's papers. Howe uses several visual effects. Sometimes sequences of words or lines ranged to the same point follow each other, and sometimes these blocks of text are set at an angle or inverted. Some words are themselves broken, with the individual letters subjected to the force of scattering. With "covery" a part-word is almost pulled apart. Page 56's "Traverse canon night siege Constant firing" is mirrored in the line immediately above it in a similar way to the treatment of the words "secret history of the dividing line" in the poem of the same name.

Rather than a kind of typographical anarchy these pages demand to be read as carefully constructed visual and verbal compositions. The opposition between the battle for territory, on the one hand, and the landscape, on the other, is certainly present. But the "scattering" effect seems more appropriate to the language of warfare – the struggle over the colonial map – than to the wilderness side of the poem's central dyad. Moreover, language in the poem is not unfree: it is, through naming, the agent of colonial violence. These pages do not somehow escape from the naming capacity of

¹ Back's account of Howe is marred throughout by a banal narrative of "norms" and their "subversion".

language: they are, as the inclusion of place-names such as Otterware and Oswego emphasise, thoroughly enmeshed in it.

With the doubling of the page, the opposition between French-speaking and English-speaking forces is itself relativised. The third term is the landscape. This, however, is present in these pages through words apparently absorbed from Johnson's papers. The disturbance of the words suggests the warping of language as distinct cultures struggled over the right to the territory around Lake George. The visual meshing of words describing landscape and military episodes is not so much an opposition of wilderness and colonial nomination as a recognition that the two are irretrievably entangled. The idea that the wilderness in *Thoreau* can somehow stand as a representation of uncoercible freedom is shown, once again, to be an alluring fantasy.

However, it should be noted that Howe's preface – and her writing elsewhere – does prepare the territory for the kinds of reading that I have been cautioning against.¹ In defending Howe against her own account of her work – and one that has been endorsed by several critics – it might be observed that the rearrangement of the field of the page in these and other of Howe's pages is not merely a suspension of law: these arrangements are rather complicated communicative units that depend on the combined energies of word and image. Howe's shapes can perhaps be read as an abstract realisation of the metaphor of "drifting" that guides the work. But this is not a drifting into non-meaning: the pages are as rigorously conceived and susceptible to interpretation as any in her poetry.

Relics: under a spell of savagism

The pages discussed above contain, in one phrase, a condensed indication of Howe's response to Thoreau's version of the past. The lines "hieroglyph/ picked up arrowhead" occur twice amid the mirrored debris of these pages. Thoreau was fascinated by arrowheads and other Indian relics and he collected them throughout his adult life.² In March 1859 he devoted several pages of his journal to a meditation on arrowheads and the messages they might offer future generations. He considered them to combine

¹ See Howe's characterisation of the editing of Dickinson: "The production of meaning will be brought under the control of social authority. [...] Provoking visual fragmentation will be banished from the body of the poem proper. [...] Lines will be brought into line" (*Birth-mark*, 140).

² *Arrowhead* was also the name of the farm at Pittsfield, Massachusetts in which Melville lived when he was a neighbour of Hawthorne (Melville chose the name after finding numerous Native American relics in the soil of his land).

characteristics of nature – having the generative potential of seeds or a fruit – and culture, the visible inscriptions of humanity:

They are sown, like a grain that is slow to germinate, broadcast over the earth. Like the dragon's teeth which bore a crop of soldiers these bear crops of philosophers and poets, and the same seed is just as good to plant again. It is a stone fruit. [...] It is humanity inscribed on the face of the earth, patent to my eyes as soon as the snow goes off, not hidden away in some crypt or grave or under a pyramid. No disgusting mummy but a clean stone, the best symbol or letter that could have been transmitted to me. [...] It is no single inscription on a particular rock, but a footprint – rather a mind-print – left everywhere, and altogether illegible.¹

The arrowhead is emblematic of Howe's own concerns – a symbolic representative of the "underthought" and "understory" that shadow her words and are rendered at least partially visible by her poetry. The lines "Thaw has washed away snow/ covering the old ice" (*Thoreau*, 51), moreover, are close to Thoreau's idea of a cultural "symbol" that is gradually revealed by nature – much as the landscape around Lake George transformed itself into "voices" as it "occupied" Howe. The arrowhead's 'illegibility' renders it enigmatic – the image is strikingly close to Howe's efforts to extrapolate a form of poetic communication from her exploration of various literary and historical meeting points between nature and civilisation. She cannot enter the past or make present the history that falls outside the written record, but that history exerts a continuing pressure on the present, much as the "crops of poets" that Thoreau writes of follow in the wake of the "mindprint" of the arrowhead.

A communicative fragment that is "illegible", the arrowhead can nonetheless suggest a "story" to later generations, even unlettered ones.² The arrowhead, then, is a communicative figure – a kind of material hieroglyph – that can reveal a marking of the landscape that precedes the imposition of the "European grid". With her concern to assert the interdependence of visual and verbal in her poetry, Howe is looking for pseudo-hieroglyphic ways in which meaning can be communicated and which skirt the linguistic stamp – the "naming [...] defines dominance" that she associates with

¹ Thoreau (1906), vol 12, 90-91.

² Ibid, 92. In this journal entry Thoreau fantasises about the destruction of the British museum by "some Vandal chieftain" and imagines the arrowheads that the Museum contains lying in the rubble on the "bared surface of the earth", to be picked up again by some "shepherd or savage", to whom they will "once more suggest their story".

the colonial presence. Instead, the arrowhead can be assimilated to the elusive intensity of the introduction's: "light letters exploding apprehension" (*Thorow*, 42).

Burbick reads the arrowheads as a recognition by Thoreau of the mark of a "defeated" culture: "By making the arrowhead illegible, Thoreau silences the documents of the past. The arrowhead may be a 'clean stone', and as such may testify to the presence of mind, but as a cultural symbol it is also evidence of a vanished and defeated society caught in the tragic destructiveness of civilised progress. The existence of the arrowhead on the surface of the American landscape means that this distinct geography cannot suppress the violence of its past."¹

Nature's hieroglyphs, for Thoreau, await their Champollion – they, like the arrowheads, are significant, in other words, but they remain undeciphered. It is this form of illegibility – both in nature and in history – that Howe is seeking to approach in *Thorow*. The poem aspires to a saving linguistic opacity that transfers Thoreau's ungovernable nature into the sphere of an uncivilised language whose discursive territory straddles the boundary between interiority and the external world.

In Burbick's view, Thoreau's view of nature, replete with the possibility of access to a paradisaical fullness, is also a theory of history: "Left without a vision of progress in the stories of civilised men and women, Thoreau clings to the events of the natural world to revive the possibility of historical redemption."² Howe's hope, on the other hand, lies not in the 'wilderness' but in language itself. It is in testing its communicative capacity to the point where the fence that separates it from non-reference is "blown down" that a redemptive possibility might be found.

When Howe writes of the "Fire of words", of "light letters exploding", or of the "instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity" her armature of late 20th century theoretical references cannot conceal an investment in an essentially Romantic vocabulary of immediacy. In *Walden*, Thoreau writes of the generative capacities of nature: "The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history [...] but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precedes flowers and fruit – not a fossil earth, but a living earth".³ Howe's poetry reverses the terms of this aspect of American romanticism: it is

¹ Burbick, 149.

² Burbick, 150.

³ Thoreau (1854), 549. Here there is another echo of Emerson's essay "The Poet": "The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry. [...] the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other. This expression, or naming, is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree" (Emerson, 1844, 205).

not the earth which is “living poetry”, a living resource with a dynamism that poets must seek to approximate. Howe finds this dynamism – or “flux” – in poetry itself. However, poetic language does not attain the originary qualities of Thoreau’s “living earth”. While Howe seems drawn to accord it an immanent transcendence, it remains polyphonic, shifting and rooted in its relations with history.

For Howe, the discontinuities of her poetic forms coincide with a mode of political thought that is suspicious of representations of social authority. The question of the political purchase of a language of ‘drifting’ is integral to the problems of Howe’s poem. Just as she understands colonialism in linguistic terms, she plots a form of resistance in poetic language. The forces of polyphony, multiplicity and drifting are ranged against that of univocal authority, yet the very energies of dispersal in the former grouping inevitably militate against the possibility of her text gaining the kind of critical foothold that prose argumentation might achieve. Eschewing the monolithic forms of ‘critique’ that Lyotard attacks, her style of critique is negative and seeks to dismantle from within the violent and authoritarian ambitions that she imputes to the legacy of colonial New England.

Thorow contemplates the place to which enlightenment thought assigns “elemental irrationality” and explores the impossibility of a direct encounter with ‘wilderness’. Something went very wrong in American history, it suggests, and poetry is the means by which that failure can be voiced. The double bind of the poem is that, in conceding “grammar” to colonial linguistic identity, it leaves itself with the task of articulating the inarticulable.¹ So *Thorow* situates itself on the borders of coherence, striving pessimistically for an experience of enchantment that it knows to be inaccessible. The poetic form of *Thorow* is a kind of acknowledgement that linguistic estrangement is always a negotiation with particles of syntax and meaning, not a liberation. The poem’s greatest resourcefulness lies in its exploitation of the ironies of treading the boundary between an anglophone literary culture and the natural ‘other’ that that culture designates as external to it.

¹ See my introduction’s remarks on the central problem of illuminating a “dark side of history” that has been “waiting from forever to be spoken” (*Leaves*, 14).

Conclusion: *Singularities*

The poems of *Singularities* are poems of place, especially concerned with the situation of New England in the American literary imagination. Even more than the poetry of *Frame Structures* or of *The Europe of Trusts* they are poems of violence. Each poem understands language use to be a defining element of colonial aggression and each seeks to embody a poetic counter to what it identifies as the ends-oriented linguistic imperatives of conquest. Howe replaces the Puritan 'errand into the wilderness' with errancy – a quality of 'wandering' manifests itself at every level of the poetry. However, Howe's American poetry is not confined to the arcana of long-past territorial and theological conflicts. It rests on the implicit deduction that the belligerent logic of American capitalism can be understood in opposition to a poetics that is unmoored from utility and direction.

The poems of *Singularities* bespeak a muted fury at the outcome of the American adventure. Howe has a particular understanding of the legacy of the settlement of New England that finds the grounding for her poetry of resistance in her version of antinomianism. This is a composite of ideas that compresses anti-authoritarianism, religious enthusiasm, a halting form of 'feminine' speech, and the linking of mystical immediacy with poetic vision. In *Thorow*, this uncoercible agency is transposed onto the landscape and read in the context of Thoreau's attempt to revivify the American errand through a renewed experience of 'wilderness'.

The idea of an 'antinomian' form of speech that runs through the writers of the mid-19th century and resurfaces in her own work raises problems of anachronism. Howe's poetry appears to depend on a revived romanticism that reads the natural world as a source of cultural renewal. Yet the poetry's attraction to the destructuring externality of 'wilderness' (a development of the "Chaos" of *Leaves* [13]) is tempered by an awareness that such constructions of nature are profoundly cultural.

Singularities closes with a short poem entitled *Scattering as Behaviour Toward Risk*. This poem, a combination of 'scattered' texts and more conventional stanzas, takes, in typically oblique fashion, the function of money and property as its chief theme. However, it begins with an extract from *Billy Budd: The Genetic Text* which illustrates an editor's attempts to render through typographical means the disorder of Melville's last manuscript. In this short poem Howe begins to find another location for the wildness that her writing courts. This is reflected in both her critical work and her subsequent poetry. Emily Dickinson's manuscripts are the principal focus of Howe's

critical prose but *Birth-mark* also addresses Coleridge's marginalia and Shelley's manuscripts. *Eikon* re-edits a compendious bibliography of editions of the controversial "King's Book" and *Melville's Marginalia* draws on Shelley's manuscripts and, of course, Melville's marginalia. The quality of enthusiasm that dominates *Singularities* is transposed in later work to an identification of the workings of spirit in books and manuscripts.

4: THE NONCONFORMIST'S MEMORIAL: AUTHORITY AND GRACE

i) *The Nonconformist's Memorial: Pure Sacrosanct Negator*

The Nonconformist's Memorial takes its title from a 1702 book cataloguing the silencing of nonconformist ministers following the Act of Uniformity in 1662.¹ Howe's poem, however, is attempting a different kind of memorialisation – in her early 1990s *Linebreak* interview Howe describes the poem as “a meditation on the marginalisation of women in religious history.”² Mary Magdalene, the first witness of the resurrection, is the figure around whom Howe organises her poem.

There are, once again, three parts to the poem. The first is formally mixed and includes text that runs upside-down, perpendicular to the main lines and diagonally, as well as in combinations of more conventional single lines and lines grouped in pairs. The brief second section begins with an epigraph taken from the Book of Revelation, 19, 17 – “And I saw an angel standing in the sun” – and contains two poems that use upside-down text. Each of these first two parts of the poem series combines strongly biblical language with more referentially opaque passages such as “Arreption to imagery// of drift meadow edge/ of the woods here” (*NCM*, 17). The final section is the most thematically unified, with several recurring strands – wandering, Love, confession, redaction and negativity. There is a ‘she’ in this final part of the poem that may be Mary Magdalene and it hints at a vestigial narrative that speculates on her life after the Resurrection. There are more or less oblique references throughout the poem series to the scene between Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the garden.

If *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* and *Throw* are concerned with relating language to the limit points of ‘civilisation’ and the role of the wilderness in the American literary imagination, *The Nonconformist's Memorial* transposes this concern with boundaries and with wandering to the field of religious discourse. Magdalene is used to make a point both about the past and about the role of the poet.

¹ By Edmund Calamy. The lines “The act of Uniformity/ ejected her” (*NCM*, 5), appear to refer to the general exclusion of women by institutionalised Christianity.

² *Linebreak* interview.

Writing to Lyn Hejinian in 1989, three years before the first publication of the poem, Howe remarked:¹

[...] this moment when [Mary Magdalene] sees and knows and says Master and is pushed back – maybe it's in that space that some women work – I think this can apply to HD. The Master Letters Dickinson wrote are the most mysteriously powerful and central pieces of her work to me – they were found *in her poems*, not among letters that were to be burned – and yet all the critics want to find a specific Master and by this they are closing her in the very prison she is breaking out of. Now Mary at that tomb acts from pure disinterested love – and that space between the Master and the world that cannot ever be crossed may be [...] a space so powerful that it is another power – a space of silence, mystery, *unacknowledgement*.²

Howe is writing of a disempowerment that is, oddly, paradoxically, enabling. It is this 'space' between 'Master and world', with which I will be concerned in my discussion of this poem. Magdalene's encounter with Christ in John's Gospel is another of the metaphysical tableaux – like Ophelia's death or the metamorphosis of Daphne – that haunt Howe's work as she formulates her notion of poetic speech. The resurrection provides her with another way of approaching this. This time it is the notion of feminine witness that organises her perceptions, and the poet-witness is in the presence of a kind of authority. Now, rather than the dynamism of "light letters exploding" in *Thorow*, she discusses poetic language in terms of "silence, mystery, *unacknowledgement*".

In describing the 'Master' of Dickinson and Mary Magdalene as separated by a space that "cannot ever be crossed" I understand Howe to be thinking of poetry as a form of negative theology, arising in the presence of an inaccessible divinity. While positive theology reflects on the nature of God, negative theology is, in Kevin Hart's words, "a discourse which reflects on positive theology by denying that its language and concepts are adequate to God."³ Divine or paternal authority is invariably absent in Howe's work. If the scene at Buffalo Zoo is one example of this, in later work this apprehension of absence takes on a more theological character.

¹ The first printing was a limited edition 'artist's book'.

² Letter dated 24 February 1989 (Howe's emphases).

³ Hart, 175.

Howe's poetry is saturated with terms which muse on unrepresentability. While an unmediated encounter with wilderness is a frustrated ambition of *Thoreau*, this ambition, which remains frustrated, is transposed to religious experience in *The Nonconformist's Memorial*. The poem is marked, in diction and syntax, with the language of incompleteness and absence. More than any other of her long poems it expresses itself in the vocabulary of religion.

In a 1994 conversation with the poet Robert Creeley, published in the *Village Voice* magazine, Susan Howe remarks that "poetry is, I hate to say it, something holy" (*Village Voice*, 21). Howe is talking about the marketing of a poetics course that she and Creeley teach at the State University of New York, Buffalo. The university prospectus of the time marketed the course by listing a number of high-profile journals to which former Buffalo poetics students had contributed poems. In her dialogue with Creeley, Howe laments this emphasis on worldly renown, preferring the apparent indifference to the reading public shown, in different ways, by Emily Dickinson and George Herbert. Her lack of regard for the values of mainstream American poetry publishing is unsurprising but her use of the term 'holy', marked as it is with the ambivalence and embarrassment of "I hate to say it", immediately separates her from most of her peers.

This declaration of a religious sensibility is rare from a contemporary American avant-garde poet.¹ In a 1989 interview, she says more, with less embarrassment, on the relation between poetry and the sacred:

Carpentry, teaching, mothering, farming, writing, is never an end in itself but is in the service of something out of the world – God, or the Word, a supreme Fiction. This central mystery, this huge Imagination of one form is both a lyric thing and a great "secresie" on an unbeaten way; the only unbeaten way left. A poet tries to sound every part.²

Is Howe merely finding a provocative way of saying in such statements that religious categories continue to be powerful determinants of contemporary culture? She might then be repeating the desacralising movement of her subject in her book *My Emily*

¹ Other poets Howe might be aligned with in this respect would be Duncan, Taggart and Fanny Howe.

² Beckett interview, 21. Howe's language echoes the language of Puritan sermons – the "unbeaten way" comes from the Puritan cleric Thomas Hooker, who founded the town of Hartford, Connecticut, only a few miles from Guilford, where Howe has lived for many years. Howe's working sketchbook journal for the period 30 December 1987 to 21 June 1988 contains the source quote: "The secresie of God does drive men to much trouble, it is like an unbeaten way to the seamen, they must sound every part of it."

Dickinson, who, she says: “takes sovereignty away from God and bestows it on the Woods” (*MED*, 80). Or, more than this, is her writing better understood in the critic Peter Quartermain’s terms, as: “essentially religious, devoted to a lively apprehension of the sacramental nature of our experience of the world, and of the sacramental nature of the world”?¹

Whatever the nature of the “mystery” that Howe is gesturing at, it is beyond reach, as inaccessible as the enigmatic, ever-receding God of negative theology. The poetry is written around a silence that finds a voice in what Nicholls has called the “noncognitive” aspects of her poems’ language – the visual aspect of the poem, and above all the sound of words.² Howe has no reservations about using the term ‘lyric’ – again unusual for a poet with links to a loose grouping of poets often hostile to such constructions of poetry.³

However, one must be careful not to miss the criticism of contemporary culture in her words. Behind her characterisation of poetry as “the only unbeaten way left” is a conception of progress as a process of disenchantment before the encroaching forces of what Howe in *Articulation* describes as “total systemic circular knowledge” (*Articulation*, 28). This “way” is analogous to the drifting trajectory of the scout in *Thoreau*, in pursuit of the “spirit” that has “fled from holy places” (*Thoreau*, 41). The linguistic environment of late 20th century capitalism, she seems to be asserting, leaves the poet only a few bolt-holes, and these will be decorated with scraps recovered from the past. One of the poet’s tasks, then, is to strive pessimistically to carry out a repair job on a damaged cultural memory.

It is unclear – perhaps to Howe too – whether this last uncolonised space, “this huge Imagination”, is in the last analysis conceived of as interior or lodged in some exterior divinity. Perhaps, if we accept Peter Quartermain’s words on the sacramental aspirations of the work, a theological poetics might attempt a bridging of the gulf between inside and outside, linking the earthly and the divine. Or perhaps the use of such metaphysical terminology deflects the reader from a more valuable close apprehension of Howe’s handling of patterns of sound and sense in poetic language.

¹ Quartermain, 194.

² See Nicholls (1996), 597

³ Howe has enduring friendships with some of the protagonists of the Language poetry network that grew up in the 1970s and 1980s and her work has appeared in Language-oriented anthologies.

Howe's unworldly affiliation with "something holy" is accompanied by a disdain for poetry's meeting with commerce. In Howe's view, poetry is inimical to the workings of worldly power. "The reading of poetry," she says, "is beyond the control of any authority. The publishing industry is controlled by money and money establishes false authority. That's why small presses are so crucial".¹ Howe's project, then, would be "in the service of" a kind of 'true' authority, while, at the same time, she insists that poetry treads an "unbeaten" path. Once again, the notion of "liberation" is at issue, beckoned, on one hand, through her characterisation of poetry and relinquished, on the other, through its dependence on God (or a secular analogue). She has spoken of this contradiction, saying, without much clarifying the matter, in her Keller interview: "[...] it must seem strange that I say poetry is free when I also say I'm getting orders. It can become very frightening. [...] It connects to blasphemy and to the sacred for me. It connects to God."²

Mary Magdalene and the fourth gospel

Howe's starting point in her "meditation" is the Fourth Gospel and, in particular, John 20, 15-18, the point at which Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Christ. This passage, which narrates the "noli me tangere" or "Touch me not" incident – a popular subject with painters – is cited at the beginning of Howe's poem and is at the heart of its preoccupations.

In her *Linebreak* interview, Howe briefly describes the nature of her interest in Mary Magdalene. She links Magdalene to her research on captivity narratives and antinomianism, describing Magdalene as "the first, original biblical nonconformist [...] in a Puritan, protestant sense".³ Mary Magdalene's place in the Christian narrative was downplayed and serves, for Howe, as a prototype for the editing, by men, of early American captivity narratives or the banishment of Anne Hutchinson from the nascent Bay Area Colony in the 1630s:

When you look at the history of religious sects – for example, the Quakers, splinter groups that are very radical – very often women are involved at the beginning who are then written out of the story. As it's popularised and institutionalised then the men take over [...] By the Book of Acts Mary Magdalene is nameless – the fact that she might have

¹ Beckett interview, 24.

² Keller interview, 24. Howe continues: "That's why I like George Herbert and *Four Quartets* and Stevens." See below for discussion of Eliot and Stevens in relation to Howe's poetics.

³ Ibid.

been a strong partner, a disciple and fellow teacher of Christ at the beginning [...] The only place that's acknowledged is the one brief mention in John.¹

The figure of Mary Magdalene has attracted a great deal of attention throughout the history of Christianity. However, much of this has been the result of certain widely disseminated misidentifications. Pope Gregory the Great in the 6th century linked Mary Magdalene with the sinful woman of Luke and the woman who, in Mark, has seven devils thrown out of her. She was also often identified with the Mary of Bethany (the brother of Lazarus) and the woman taken in adultery in John.² While the Orthodox church maintained distinctions between these biblical personages, the Western Christian tradition relied on a composite figure until the Roman calendar was altered in 1969. Thus the dominant Western representation of Magdalene was as a reformed prostitute. In the words of Susan Haskins, "through the centuries she was to become the symbol of the contemplative life and model of repentance, while the significance of her actual role in the New Testament as disciple and primary witness of the resurrection receded into the background."³

In all four gospels Mary Magdalene is the first to witness the resurrection. In John's gospel, Christ urges her to tell the disciples that he has risen, and she is therefore the first apostle. In Matthew, however, Christ appears to the disciples before the women have reached them. And in Luke and Mark she is disbelieved. Haskins points out that, under Judaic law, women were not trusted as witnesses.⁴ The notion of feminine witness is vital, in this and other of Howe's poems, to the elaboration of a poetry that can in some way incorporate the voices of the "anonymous, slighted" (*Leaves*, 14) voices of the dead. In *The Nonconformist's Memorial* Howe directs her attention at a woman who is at once central and peripheral to the inaugural moment of Christianity.

Authorship is a crucial question in all of the long poems collected in the volume *The Nonconformist's Memorial*. King Charles's authorship of *Eikon Basilike* is contested and Melville is approached, in *Melville's Marginalia*, through the books that he read rather

¹ Ibid.

² See Haskins, 16; 96.

³ Haskins, 26. Haskins suggests that the differing emphases given Mary Magdalene in gnostic and canonical versions of Christ's life are evidence of disputes about the status of women in the early Church: "It is a situation inferred in the synoptics through the disciples' disbelief in the women's account of the resurrection and in Paul's omission of the women's witness of the resurrection, but never alluded to directly by the orthodox Christians, namely the suppression of the feminine element within the church which had gradually been taking place from the second century" (ibid. 42).

⁴ Haskins, 407, n62.

than his own texts. The authorship of the fourth gospel is a contentious subject for biblical scholars and John the Evangelist is another contested witness. It is now generally accepted that its author is not the same as the 'John' of Revelation and that it was written during the latter part of the first century AD by a member of the Johannine community, an early Christian grouping thought to have developed from a number of disciples of John the Baptist.¹ It is also likely that the author of the prologue to John is not the same as the author of the gospel narrative. However, the prologue too is thought to emanate from the Johannine community.² Both texts make great use of light and dark symbolism, which is pervasive in Howe's poem.³

I will draw on this nexus of ideas for my discussion of *The Nonconformist's Memorial*. The poem is built around questions of embodiment and intangibility; bearing witness, particularly poetic witness; the metaphorical freight of terms such as 'light' and 'dark'; and the ramifications of the posited encounter between an inaccessible Logos and a fallen language. I will consider first of all how these issues in the poem can be approached through a discussion of negative theology and deconstruction. Second, I will ask what happens to notions of 'voice' and 'presence' – central terms to deconstruction's critique of the metaphysical grounding of Western thought – when we follow Howe in thinking of *The Nonconformist's Memorial* as a *sounded* poem.

Negative and no echo: the via negativa and deconstruction

When, in interview with Lynn Keller, Howe discusses the lines "The nets were not torn// The Gospel did not grasp" (*Nonconformist's Memorial*, 7) she says:

By 'nets' I mean to associate Jesus as fisherman; somehow the net gets torn, the idea gets broken – the Gospel when it becomes Gospel, when it is written, grasps. Mary, the disciple, the first one who witnesses the resurrection, the one whose story we go by, gets dropped away almost at once.⁴

The points at which the net gets torn and the text presents itself as insufficient are central to *The Nonconformist's Memorial's* concern with suppressed speech. Once again, two different kinds of silence are at issue. At one level Howe's talk of slipping

¹ See Painter 63-73 on the authorship question. Painter also discusses the Johannine community.

² Painter. 32..

³ Ibid.

⁴ Keller interview. 11.

through the net appears to describe the historical failure of the Christian church to recognise women. Yet the net analogy might also suggest a failure of reference – a problem of representing something that is inherently resistant to capture. Ineffability, a defining characteristic of negative theology, is a recurring theme in Howe's poetry.¹ In *The Nonconformist's Memorial* Howe uses the figure of darkness in an attempt to gesture towards unrepresentability.² There is a cluster of references to darkness or negation towards the end of the third section of the poem sequence. These include: "steal to a place in the dark" (*NCM*, 23); "Undertype Shadow Sacrifice" and "the clear negative way" (*NCM*, 26); "Spirit snapping after air/ dragged down to visible" (*NCM*, 27); "The abiding and transitory/ were negative and no echo" and "darkness rushing and the true" (*NCM*, 28); "As night to understanding/ or truth to fiction" (*NCM*, 29); "if in silence hidden by darkness/ there must be a Ghost" (*NCM*, 30); "Isled on all removes/ When night came on" (*NCM*, 32); and "Dense in parameter space/ the obscure negative way" (*NCM*, 33).

The light/dark opposition is, of course, among the most conventional available to literature. The dualistic prologue to the Fourth Gospel equates light with Logos and divinity, and human salvation with the illumination of darkness. Christ, in the prologue, is envisioned as the passing of the divine into the earthly order – the incarnation of the Logos. The oppositions in John 1 are stark: on one hand there is Spirit, Light and Logos and on the other matter, darkness and the fallen language of humanity. Christ's appearance on earth is a transaction between earthly and divine and John the Baptist's witness, anticipating that of Mary Magdalene, provides human recognition of his divinity. Howe draws on another tradition, however, that does not accept this teleological movement from darkness to light, one which shrouds the approach to an essentially unknowable divinity in darkness, obscurity and negation. The fullness of Logos is not accessible to this tradition and reference is no longer guaranteed by the divine Word. In seeking "the truth where impossibility meets us" Howe is invoking a tradition based on absence, not presence. Truth is found not

¹ See Braine, 759: "The pre-Christian idea of a name as a means of control over what is names, bringing it within reach of human science and manipulation, is echoed in the negative emphasis both in the Old Testament and the Greek Fathers, who said that God 'has no name', or is 'ineffable'. This negative perspective was reinforced by Exodus 33: 18-23, which represents Moses as unable to see God's face, but only his back, and is echoed in the Gospels: 'no man has seen God at any time' (John 1:18). [...] later Eastern tradition developed the idea that we never say anything positive of God's 'essence' (God as he is in himself), but only about his 'uncreated energies'."

² The presiding spirit of negative theology, Pseudo Dionysus, is cautious on this point. In his *Mystical Theology*, 141, he writes: "It [ie divinity] falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth – it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial." The distinct ideas of darkness, absence and nay-saying are encompassed within Howe's synoptic survey of the language of negation.

through the light of divine presence but in obscurity: “As night to understanding/ or truth to fiction” (*Nonconformist's Memorial*, 29).¹

The movement of negative theology, with its rejection of a vocabulary of divine presence, has in the recent past been compared to that of deconstruction, with its emphasis on the unfigurable category of *différance*, or the trace. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw several treatments of the question, and Jacques Derrida himself devoted an article to the subject in 1989.² This essay was an extended differentiation of deconstruction and negative theology, developing distinctions made several times previously, notably in a succinct passage in his book *Margins of Philosophy*:

[...] the detours, locutions and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology. Already we have had to delineate that *différance is not*, does not exist, is not a present being (on) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything that it *is not*, that is *everything*; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent. And yet those aspects of *différance* which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being. Such a development is not in question here, and this will be confirmed progressively. *Différance* is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological – ontotheological – reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology – philosophy – produces its system and history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return.³

While Derrida acknowledges a resemblance between his thought and negative theology, he asserts that negative theology preserves a doctrine of “superessentiality”,

¹ St John of the Cross is an influential mystic in this tradition whose descriptions of the ‘dark night of the soul’ use darkness to describe the passage to a knowledge beyond understanding.

² See essays in Berry and Wernick, eds; Hart; Budick and Iser, eds; and Scharlemann, ed. Derrida’s fullest treatment of the subject, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials”, can be found in Budick and Iser, eds.

³ Derrida (1982), 6.

a reinstallation of the Godhead over and above the very assertions of absence that would deny to God any mode of 'conceivable' existence. *Différance*, on the other hand, remains immune to such a hypostatisation of absence. As a principle of radical difference it is nothing and nowhere, irreducible even to the hypothetical presence implied by the notion of absence.

Kevin Hart glosses the difference between the two different forms of interest in ineffability, that of negative theology and deconstruction, thus:

The apparent similarity of the theological and grammatical vocabularies betrays a fundamental difference. The God of onto-theology reveals *that* He is yet conceals *what* He is; the play of *différance* is revealed in the phenomenal differing and deferring of meaning yet is concealed at the level of the transcendental, not because it is inaccessible but because there is no independent transcendental realm.¹

Negative theology functions, in Hart's terms, first as a critique of the terms of positive theology from within – the insufficiency of finding God through cataloguing and defining attributes such as 'goodness', 'truth' and so on. But it is also heterogeneous to positive theology, existing as a "supplement" that always precedes the movement of positive theology. For Hart – and this is where he parts ways with Derrida – negative theology, conceived of as external and prior to positive theology, can be thought of as a "non-metaphysical" deconstruction of positive theology in which any residual transcendence is (to enlist the familiar terminology) 'under erasure': "Just as 'sign' must be crossed out in the deconstruction of metaphysics," he writes, "so too must 'God' in the deconstruction of positive theology. The God of negative theology is transcendent in that he transcends being, all conception of being as presence, as well as categories of gender. The negative theologian uses language under erasure [...]"²

While it is far from the rigours of a programmatic deconstruction, the resistant quality of Howe's work is indebted to a notion of absence that approaches the blankness of the 'God'-under-erasure of Hart's meticulous theorisation. The turn in Howe's poetry towards inexpression and absence, enacting the difficulty of negotiating "the only unbeaten way left", demonstrates the paradoxes of poetic utterance in a way that

¹ Hart, 186-87. Hart understands negative theology as a form of deconstruction rather than vice versa.

² Hart, 202-203.

might, although avowedly less thoroughgoing than the scholarly work of deconstruction, be said to get its hands dirty with the labour of negation. The work performs a double bind that sees it caught up in the nets of metaphysical terminology: as it invokes the “Obscure negative way” (*Nonconformist’s Memorial*, 33) it must, in seeking to speak of that obscurity, eventually transgress its own commitment to negation.

However, despite the rich exploration of negation and transcendence that is performed by texts such as *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*, at times Howe speaks of the distinction between speech and writing in a way that would be anathema to deconstruction. In her *Linebreak* interview, for example, she speaks of an “immediate infusion”, which is “what Anne Hutchinson is about, being instantly infused with grace so there would be no text – there would be no need for law because this direct experience would come that had no use for print”.¹

Howe’s account of Hutchinson describes a desire for an unmediated experience of divine grace. Mystical speech, at such moments in her thought, is accorded a charged communicative pre-eminence over the fallen form of “text”. Yet the mode of communication that Howe implies is hesitant, broken and fissured: the infusion of “grace” is a category of religious experience that bypasses not only “text” but utterance itself. Howe’s work, because of its investment in an extrinsic grace, might be said to be vulnerable to the terms of Derrida’s critique of the ‘superessentiality’ preserved by negative theology.² In other words, Howe frequently invokes a metaphysical vocabulary of negative transcendence. Her language tends to imagine any divinity or ground of authority as absent yet the very terms it uses to express this ineffability serve to endorse the possibility of a transcendent guarantor of meaning. For all their play with tropes of negativity, Howe’s poems evince a persistent concern with a divine non-presence. Her writing is underpinned by the idea of an authorising absence that is analogous to the residual attachment to the category of presence which Derrida discerns in negative theology.³

¹ Bernstein interview.

² However accurate that critique may itself be: Hart points out that Derrida’s critique of Pseudo-Dionysius is based on a mistranslation of “superessentiality”, which should be rendered by a more negative term.

³ For further discussion of ‘authorising absence’ see my account of *Eikon Basilike*. Budick and Iser provide the following formulation of the impossibility of silence for a negative theology: “In subtle but marked distinction to [the] figuration of the unfigurable or the allowing of the unsayable to speak, negative theology aims at a silent union with the ineffable. Yet the apophatic movement of negative theology cannot contain within itself the principle of its own interruption. This movement can only defer indefinitely the encounter with its own limits. If negative theology attempts to attain union with God, a speaking of that union becomes necessary, and whenever that speaking occurs one is forced to speak of place, height, distance and proximity” (xv-xvi).

In *The Nonconformist's Memorial* the issues of speech and presence are brought to the fore as, in Christ's resurrection, Howe explicitly addresses issues of incarnate divinity – the point, prepared by the opening of John's gospel, at which human language meets divine Logos. To consider this in more detail, I will discuss a poem from early in the poem-sequence that is preoccupied with the insertion of Christ in language as a speaking subject:

In the Evangelist's mind
it is I absolutely I
Word before name
Resurrection and life are one
it is I
without any real subject
all that I say is I
A predicative nominative
not subject the I is
the bread the light the door
the way the shepherd the vine

NCM, 10

The poem appears to contain elements of a text or texts Howe might have encountered when researching the Fourth Gospel – lines 1, 3, 4, 6 and 8 appear to derive from a scholarly commentary on the Prologue. Interpolated are assertions of “I” and the poem concludes with a compressed reference to Jesus' various “I am” statements in John – with the “I am” removed.¹

Howe's two voices allow a poetic consideration of presence – both that of the author and of immediate physicality. First of all the poem speculates – “In the Evangelist's mind” – on the intentions of the author of the Fourth Gospel. The line is interrupted by “It is I absolutely I” – a voice that strives to assert its presence through an address to another. The poem continues as a set of utterances that gather round the elusive evangelist and a nameless presence that asserts its own being but nothing else. It is thus a telescoping of the Prologue's distinction between an inaccessible Logos and its earthly incarnation in Christ. The relation between finite worldly utterance and the

¹ See Keller interview, 9-16, for Howe's discussion of the ways in which opposing voices speak in *The Nonconformist's Memorial*. These lines are sometimes printed upside down (as in pp 6-7) but page 10 allows the voice of exegetical commentary and the insistent voice of “I” to run alongside one another. For Jesus' “I am” statements (also noted by Back, 166), see, respectively, John 6, 35; 9, 5; 10, 7; 14, 6; 10, 11; 15, 5.

unboundedness of Logos is conveyed in the succession of “I am” analogies, which continually revise what it is “I am”.¹

The line also echoes another “It is I”. In her interview with Foster, Howe refers to a passage from Melville’s journal that describes a woman beside a new grave, crying “Why don’t you speak to me? My God – It is I.” Howe comments:

The woman is wailing, “My God, it is I”, but Melville is saying, “My God, it is I.” He is the woman. There is everything in that to me. She’s calling to the dead. Who has been buried? Is it her husband, a parent, a child? Melville doesn’t know her. He doesn’t name her. There is no naming and no answer. She is herself, and he sees himself in her. I think that detail holds everything.²

Back aligns this comment with Howe’s grief at her husband’s approaching death. But the remarks also combine what Howe calls the “Christological pull” of late Melville with a feminine identification on Melville’s part.³ Placed in the context of *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*, “It is I”, read through Melville, functions as an act of identification rather than an assertion of selfhood. The “I” of *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* is an empty vessel whose ‘absoluteness’ masks an absence.

The phrase “It is I” also occurs in all four Gospels when Christ walks on water and it is used in Luke (24:39) when Jesus meets the disciples after the resurrection. It is thus uttered at moments when miracles – signs of Jesus’s divinity – threaten to make him unrecognisable as a man.

“Word before name” suggests Logos, an absolutely anterior Word beyond human naming. “Resurrection and life are one” appears to develop the thought of the first line, suggesting a commentary on the theology of the prologue. Then there is another repetition of the assertion “it is I”, followed by “without any real subject”: the “I”, the subject pronoun, is again presented as an empty index of subjecthood. “Without any subject” may also be taken from an account of the grammar of the prologue, which is almost certainly indicated by the line “A predicate nominative”.⁴ Interposed between

¹ Back, too, discusses these lines in relation to the “dramatic scriptural events as experienced by Mary”, suggesting that Howe is attempting to restore the “absent I” of the “acting individual” to “tradition” (167).

² Foster interview, 179.

³ Ibid.

⁴ This phrase is probably a reference to “Colwell’s rule”, which has been used to argue that because a Greek predicative nominative must refer back to its subject, then the beginning of

the two, “All that I say is I” stresses the personal pronoun with even greater urgency: it is as if grammar and the speaking subject are at loggerheads.

“Not subject the I is” is itself ungrammatical and, typical of Howe’s fissiparous short lines, it lends itself to various constructions. It might be understood to refer to the “predicative nominative”; it might refer forwards to the absent “I” of the “I am” analogies; it may be a contorted restatement of “It is I”; or it may simply underline the earlier “without any real subject”. The “I am” that lurks behind “It is I” is never stated and the assumption of an elemental subject position within language is deferred. The repetitions of “I” – six in nine lines – lend an anxious quality to an assertion that falls short of predication, or becoming the subject of a statement. Indeed, the subject, “I”, itself becomes a predicate in the phrase “It is I”. To follow these nervously presented “I”s with the series of identifications – bread, light, shepherd and so on – that Jesus invokes suggests a restless logic of metaphorical substitution that is propelled by the insufficiency of each term on the list.

The phrase “It is I” is a part of English language which (as in “it is raining” or “it is cold”) obscures the subject of the statement (what is raining? what is cold?). So the phrase itself is “without any real subject”. Where can this “I” rest? A series of veils obscures the passage of the subject into language even as it asserts its own non-identity with itself in “It is I”. The act of predication is, in this case, built on the absence of both subject and predicate.

Howe’s questioning of the act of speech is a version of her metaphysical anxiety about origins: the sovereign “I” is an index of presence that is repeatedly invoked but found to conceal an absence. This not-thereness, the vacuum around the “I”, might be read alongside another Derridean formulation, which addresses the question of the subject in language: “The speaking subject discusses his irreducible secondarity, his origin that is always already eluded; for the origin is always already eluded on the basis of an organised field of speech in which the speaking subject vainly seeks a place that is always missing.”¹ The “I” in Howe’s poem dramatises a troubled negotiation with language but at the same time the question of the “origin”, which haunts her poetry, is troubled. While it never attains this originary point – here we might adduce Howe’s “God, or the Word, a supreme Fiction” – neither does it relinquish its desire for an origin. In Derrida’s terms, even if “God is refused the predicate of existence”, negative

the prologue must be understood as “the word was God” and not “the word was a god”. See Colwell (1933).

¹ Derrida (1978). 178.

theology will, at a further remove, acknowledge his presence. Howe's "supreme Fiction" is a "superessentiality" that can be identified with the sustaining guarantee that underpins negative theology. Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Christ might appear to be a materialisation of that guarantee, only it too is beset with uncertainty: "Touch me not", says Christ, "for I am not yet ascended to my father".

The scene in the garden following the resurrection recalls the dying Ophelia at the end of *Pythagorean Silence*, in that it captures a figure suspended at the moment of a metamorphosis from matter to spirit and suggests that this might be a privileged point for poetry – Howe's "space of silence, mystery, *unacknowledgement*". For Howe, this charged space, which we might equate with the "something holy" of her conversation with Robert Creeley, has enormous productive potential. Howe is writing in a tradition of negative transcendence that valorises the "stutter" – a moment poised between utterance and silence, just as Ophelia, in *Pythagorean Silence*, and Christ, in *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, are poised between worlds.

Howe's poetry, moreover, is deeply committed to the material presentation of text – its physical appearance as a book and the materiality of sound, whether that of a voiced text or the 'internal' voicing that accompanies silent reading. *The Nonconformist's Memorial's* "meditation" on the marginalisation of women in religious history is shadowed by a meditation on incarnation. The word-becoming-flesh motif is appropriate because the poem seeks to explore the full communicative potential of that materialised utterance. What Howe is attempting in her poetry might be described as a metaphysical manoeuvre of capture that seeks to articulate what Howe has elsewhere called, speaking of Benjamin, the "entrance of the messianic into the material object".¹

Echoes of a place of first love: the sounding of Howe's texts

Another factor, beside the religious content that marks Howe's poetry as different from that of many of her contemporaries of the American poetic avant garde, is a preoccupation with combining 'literary' diction and sound effects.² Howe has said, in her interview with Bernstein, that the more she has written, the more important sound has become.³ In her interview with Keller, sound is described as "absolutely

¹ Keller interview, 29.

² See, however, Perloff (1985), 228-232, for a discussion of the importance of sound patterning to the language poets. Howe's sound play is never programmatic – it is an orchestration of acoustic echoes and differences that draws heavily on older poetic conventions.

³ Bernstein interview (n.p.).

crucial” and she says, “the strongest element I feel when I am writing something is acoustic”.¹ In a letter to Taggart in which she comments on one of her best known assertions, “I write to break out into perfect primeval Consent”, “I couldn’t just say ‘I write to break out into perfect Consent’ because it doesn’t *sound* right. I need the syllables of primeval.”² A much later essay, “Ether/Either”, can be read as an oblique extended meditation on how sounds “speak to memory”.³

In addressing the ways in which sound works in the poems, I attempt to throw a provisional bridge between the apparently arbitrary nature of the phoneme and the meanings of words. Sound, for Howe, appears to be a vehicle – the vehicle – for the various configurations of transcendence that inform her work:

Sound is part of the mystery. But sounds are only the echoes of a place of first love. [...] I am part of one Imagination and the justice of Its ways may seem arbitrary but I have to follow Its voice. Sound is a key to the untranslatable hidden cause. It is the cause.⁴

It is hard to disentangle the poetic theory in these comments from the rubble of Puritan religious vocabulary. Is she, perhaps, suggesting an affinity with a divine and dictatorial “Imagination”? Or a kind of hazy collective unconscious that somehow determines her word-choices? Or, perhaps, with “echoes of a place of first love”, is she following the then-popular Kristeva of *Revolution in Poetic Language* and invoking a pre-verbal space that is the locus of a mute flow of drives which irrupts in the poetic language of modernism?

Howe’s remarks imply each of these overlapping – and to some extent mutually exclusive – theories of the generation of poetic language. I would suggest that the best way to interpret this quotation is to retain the flexibility of its metaphorical applications – in other words Howe is concerned with a kind of originary “transcendent” inexpression but she is reluctant to settle with an exclusive theorisation of that space. The vocabularies of religion, philosophy, psychoanalysis and history can all be adduced to gesture towards their own communicative boundaries. Howe is transposing an essentially mystical language – “the untranslatable hidden cause” – to the field of poetics in her characterisation of the importance of sound to her work. Paradoxically, this notion of sound appears to

¹ Keller interview. 13.

² Letter of 24 July 1985.

³ *Ether Either*. 119.

⁴ Beckett interview. 21.

inhabit the same sacralised space as that of “silence, mystery, *unacknowledgement*”. Howe appears to be in pursuit of the points at which meaning is communicated – or, at least, reinforced – through non-verbal means.

Howe’s poems invite, in all their sounded materiality, a reconsideration of ‘voice’ in poetry. This is partly a question of the polyvocal nature of her writing – on the facing page of the poem discussed above, for example, is a poem that announces “We plural are the speaker”.¹ However, the careful acoustic ordering of the poems also points the reader towards that agency of acoustic association in poetic language that Denise Riley has called “a continuous white noise, an anarchic whirring-away, unstoppable, relentless, sinking sometimes into the background, sometimes dominant in full cry”.² Such “white noise” might be said to find its fullest expression in sounded concrete poetry. In Howe’s work it is part of a prominent battery of effects that appeal, through repetition and sound association, to the ‘noncognitive’ aspects of the experience of reading.

Garret Stewart’s work on the phenomenology of reading has focused on the ‘inner ear’ that is activated in the reading process. For Stewart, voice can be considered as the *destination* of reading, rather than its *origin*.³ Stewart argues that Derrida’s grammatology and its adaptations in Anglo-American literary criticism have tended to sideline the internal sounding, or “subvocal text production”, that occurs during silent reading.⁴ For Stewart, *phone* and *gramme* are involved in a “mutual supplementation”.⁵ Derrida’s reversal of priority between speech and writing can itself be deconstructed to allow for a principle of *différance* in which the phonemic ‘trace’ is activated by the graphic in the experience of reading:

Of Grammatology has... deconstructed the metaphysical premises of Saussurean linguistics by introducing the proto-scriptive gap in order to erase the misleading metaphysical gap between the sensible (phonic) and the intelligible (semantic). All becomes properly semiotic, a tracery of signs, a differential notation. But in the sense that such a deconstruction is taken to reconceive language in a graphic rather than

¹ See, eg. Beckett interview, 24: “I think that a poet is like an ethnographer. You open your mind and textual space to many voices, to an interplay and contradictions and complexity of voices. These voices are marks and sounds and they form a polyphony that forms lines and often abolishes lines. [...] [James] Clifford says, ‘the writing of ethnography [is] an unruly, multi-subjective activity.’ So is the writing of poetry.”

² Riley, 72.

³ Stewart, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

oral image of itself, it must be admitted that grammatology leaves out a theory of textuality as a *reading effect*. To include such considerations of speech in textual reception would reinstate, would indeed reinscribe, the phonemic stratum. It would be returned not as a dimension of full presence, never more than the mere trace of speech in writing.¹

Following Stewart, it might be possible to see the intricate working of sound patterns in Howe's poetry as an intensification of the experience of the phonic trace during the process of reading. If reading itself might be conceived as depending on an inner voicing, what might the effect be of a form of writing that brings to the fore punning, assonance, dissonance, complex consonantal echoes and rhyme? Poetry's reliance on sound makes it the form of language in which the operations of the "phonic trace" will be most discernible. Stewart writes that the "phonemic supplement is [...] actually recirculated through the written word as the revealed dynamic of its generation: its deviance from, and so deferral of, alternatives".² My suggestion, explored below, is that rhyme is the poetic device that makes this process most apparent – if not consciously so – in the subvocal experience of reading.

The back-cover blurb of the New Directions edition of *The Nonconformist's Memorial* refers to the ordering of the four poems in "half-ironic nonconforming counterpoint to Eliot's *Four Quartets*". Howe has spoken of her admiration for *Four Quartets* and there are parallels to be drawn between the relation of sound and meaning in her poetics and in that of Eliot. These can, in turn, usefully be compared to the theories of Wallace Stevens, another of the Modernists that Howe greatly admires. The chief point of communication that I wish to examine is that Eliot, in his essay "The Music of Poetry", considers 'music' to be intimately bound up with the historicity of meaning. Sound effects, for Eliot, are not inherent to words but are only discernible in context and in relation to the immediately surrounding words; the relation need not be "melodious" either – "cacophony", too, has a place.³ The secondary meanings that a word suggests can – "at certain moments" – "insinuate the whole history of a language and a civilisation".⁴ Eliot does not make it clear when such "moments" might occur or who might be equipped to identify them. However, the most striking part of his argument is his suggestion that sound and historical resonance might be placed at an "intersection": "My purpose [...]," he writes, "is to insist that a 'musical poem' is a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary

¹ Ibid, 104.

² Ibid, 135.

³ Eliot (1942), 59.

⁴ Ibid, 60.

meanings of the words which compose it, and that these two patterns are indissoluble and one.”¹

Leaves contains a formulation that appears strikingly similar in aim to Eliot's wedding of sound and secondary meaning: “In my poetry, time and again, questions of assigning the cause of history dictate the sound of what is thought.”² Howe links sound to language's capacity to register historical trauma in a way that is comparable to Eliot's exploration, through secondary meanings, of the “whole history of a language and a civilisation”. The continual disruption of syntactical sequence in Howe's poetry may be a way of calling forward the reader's interpretative ambition in order to place particular emphasis on the “secondary meanings” of words. It is impossible to consider the phonetic qualities of Howe's works in abstraction: the sounds always function in relation, not just to “secondary meanings”, or word histories, but to the patterns of lateral association that unfold around them through wordplay and generic expectation.

Published in the same year as Eliot's “The Music of Poetry”, Stevens' “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” takes a different view of sense, sounding and history. His discussion of the historical ebb and flow of emphasis on either the “denotative” or “connotative” aspects of signification partially intersects with Eliot's description of successive waves of “revolution” and “elaboration” in poetic diction.³ Stevens, pursuing the “imagination” that resists the “pressure of reality” is less historically minded when he discusses sound: “the deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings, which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search for the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them.”⁴

Howe's poetics can be understood in relation to both these positions. The way in which Eliot links the accumulated historical resonance of words in poems to their sounds is close to Howe's pursuit of a historically charged vocabulary. But it is clear that her poetry is neither simply an “elaboration” of modernism's radical formalism (‘experiment’ as a tradition in itself, in other words) nor a return to the “common speech of the time”, “revolutionary” or not. At the same time, Stevens' emphasis on

¹ Ibid, 60.

² *Europe*, 13.

³ Stevens, 13ff; Eliot 58ff.

⁴ Stevens, 32.

imagination as a resource that can offer a space to resist a damaged present – “a violence from within that can protect us from a violence without” – can be aligned with Howe’s poetics, as can Stevens’ interest in a historically conditioned moment of “connotative” pre-eminence in poetry.¹

Howe would not, however, despite her vatic statements on the subject, be comfortable with Stevens’ timeless “unalterable vibration”. While Stevens’ atemporal “vibration” leads to a disengagement from “the pressure of reality”, in Howe poems such as *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* the “connotative” dimension of language cannot be separated from either its sounding or its complex – sometimes negative – relation to the historical moment.

Both Eliot and Stevens cite Wordsworth’s call for a return to the “real language of man”. For Stevens this represents the “denotative” pole of his dualism while for Eliot Wordsworth’s “refreshment” of poetic diction is part of the movement of “revolution”, as “the music of poetry [...] must be a music latent in the common speech of the time”.²

Howe in effect uses Stevens to turn Eliot inside out: her notion of a revolutionary “refreshment” of poetic diction is a turn away from the “common speech of the time”. For her the “pressure of reality” is such that the “common speech” of both mainstream and avant garde poetics concedes too much to the damaged and degraded discourses of the culture of contemporary capitalism. Yet, while she up-ends Eliot’s idea of common-speech “revolution”, she retains his conviction that the workings of sound in poetry cannot be abstracted from the workings of the poem’s meanings within the history of the language community.

If Stevens’ ahistorical conception of an “unalterable vibration” seems to contradict his point about historical pressure, Howe’s work bears a similar contradiction, pulled as it is between the exigencies of history and a mystical “something out of the world”. The twin impulses in her work – an apprehension of historical injustice and an appetite for the ineffable – are hard to reconcile as the pursuit of grace is a different matter from the pursuit of poetic redress. In a letter to Taggart that comments on her preface to *The Europe of Trusts* Howe worries about exactly this incompatibility: “One thing disturbs me because you are right, I have contradicted myself. How can I want to assign the ‘cause’ of history at the same time as wanting to break out into perfect

¹ Stevens, 36.

² Eliot, 58.

primeval consent.[?]"¹ This problem is at the heart of the poetry's irreconcilable ambitions. What prevents this irreconcilability from seriously damaging the poetry itself is its technical resourcefulness. Sound throws up a connection between the twin ambitions to encompass historical purchase and mysticism. If, on one hand, the role of sound in the poetry is to emphasise the phonic qualities that are resistant to translation into semantic content, it is also a means of capturing Eliot's historically rooted "secondary meanings".

To look at the question of sound in more detail I will discuss a poem from *The Nonconformist's Memorial*. In what follows I will use the term "rhyme" in a loose sense that will include half-rhyme and internal rhyme – the recurrence of the same or the similar, in other words. I will avoid a formalistic analysis of distinct phonemic events. I do not claim that the example I discuss exhausts the sound techniques at Howe's disposal but I do suggest that the density and communicative power of the sound patterning is typical of Howe's writing. My account of these lines is a speculative close reading that seeks to identify the kind of patterned phonic effect that is often vaguely assigned to a poet's 'ear'. I will also link these effects to the graphic text. As with the poem discussed above, I will be especially concerned with the vowel 'i'.

King of Righteousness
At the end of history
interminable trajectory of authority
So truly primitive
Night when the warrant comes
such a ravenous coming
Undertype Shadow Sacrifice
Who is this distance
Waiting for a restoration
and righteousness

NCM, 26

The first vowel sound is a short 'i'. This is a graphic anticipation of the long 'I' sound, (or ΛI diphthong) of "Righteousness", with the unstressed neutral vowel of 'of' allowing a chiasmic half-eye-rhyme to develop within the line. This play between short 'i's and ' ΛI ' diphthongs runs throughout the poem. Although the sounds are

¹ Letter of 24 July 1985.

phonetically entirely distinct, the graphic identity between short vowel sounds and diphthongs allows English-language poets to make considerable play with the tension between visual identity and phonic separateness.

In the second line there is similar play between the long and short 'e's of "the end"; also, the consecutive 'e's follow the consecutive 't's of "at the". The 'e' of "the" is echoed in the final 'y', and the two 'e' sounds form an inverted half-rhyme with the vowels of 'ory'. The 'i' of "history" echoes the 'i' of "king". The 't' of "history", like the 't' of "righteousness", is followed by two unstressed syllables. Even in these two lines Howe is building up a subtle pattern of echo and half-echo. It is a version of rhyme understood as a delicate interplay of graphic and phonic resemblances.

In the third line, the two short 'i's of "interminable" develop the 'i's of "king" and "history". The -/-- stress pattern of "trajectory" is echoed in "authority" and the endings of the words form a half-rhyme, just as "trajectory" rhymes with the "-ory" of the preceding line's "history". In the fourth line the three consecutive 'i's of "primitive" echo those that have occurred in every preceding line, while the 'y' of "truly" echoes the three previous 'y's sounded as 'i:'. The '-mi-' of "primitive", moreover, echoes that of "interminable". In the fifth line, "Night" answers the first line's "Righteousness" and continues the meeting of 'i's and 't's in the poem.

The sixth line is the only line not to have such a pairing. However, the 'tch' – or 'tʃ' – sound in "such" contains a disguised 't', present in the phonic text even if it is not graphically represented. The '-ous' of "ravenous" repeats that of the first line's "righteousness" and the '-ing' of "coming" also looks back to the first line, to "King".

In the seventh line "Undertype" again develops the sound of "comes", "such" and "coming". There is another 't' and the 'ty' of '-type' is a reversed echo of the "-ight" of "Night" and "Righteousness". The 'a'-to-'o' movement of "Shadow" is a half-rhyme with the preceding line's middle word "ravenous" and it also contains a half-echo of the play between 'a' and 'o' in 'warrant'. And, just as line six's "such a" mirrors "coming", so "Undertype" and "Sacrifice" are each dactylic words (two of several in the poem following the /-- pattern) ending in an 'ʌI' diphthong. The 'o' diphthong sound, followed by an 's', in '-ow S-' is a reversed echo of line four's "So".

Line eight contains play with hard and soft 's's. The 'ʌI' diphthong in '-ice' of the previous line's "Sacrifice" is modulated to the short 'i's and 's's of "is this distance" with the concluding "-ce-" making a partial visual and phonic rhyme with the previous line ending. Indeed, line eight in its entirety is an echo of line four's "So truly

primitive”: each begins with a monosyllable containing the letter ‘o’; each contains the long ‘oo’ sound; and each contains three successive ‘i’s, followed by a final syllable that begins with a ‘t’ and ends with an ‘e’.

In line nine, “Waiting for a restoration”, the initial ‘W’ stands immediately beneath that of the preceding line. “Waiting” contains the poem’s eleventh ‘a’ but the first ‘eI’ diphthong. This, in turn, is repeated in the syllable ‘-ration’ at the end of the line. The line, with its suggestion of political crisis, stands apart, therefore in terms of both sense and sound. The ‘r’ of “restoration”, like those of ‘righteousness’ and ‘ravenous coming’ provides a consonantal echo that offers a barely perceptible sonic endorsement of the idea of a messiah-like return or a re-occupation of the seat of authority.

The final line, “and righteousness”, returns to the “righteousness” of the first line. Only, after what has gone before, the dactylic pattern, the succession of ‘t’s and ‘a’s and the play between the short ‘i’ and the ‘AI’ diphthong make the word resonate in a completely different way. Indeed, given that the first part of the ‘AI’ diphthong of ‘right-’ is a buried short ‘a’ sound, one might conclude that much of the phonotextual activity in the poem involves the coming together and dispersal of ‘a’ and ‘i’ sounds. Sometimes, as in ‘warrant’, the ‘a’ sound, is entirely estranged from either the short ‘a’ or the ‘eI’ diphthong. This diphthong only finds enunciation in the penultimate line but it has been latent in the text since the first line.

If we match this phonic consideration with semantic content, it can be argued that Howe has entangled the ‘eI’ and ‘AI’ diphthongs with the same language of divine right and British political history that she had explored in *Defenestration* and *Eikon*. An ‘undertype’ or ‘shadow’ of the narrative of the sacrificed king comes to the surface in the flaring ‘eI’ diphthongs of the penultimate line, which in themselves are a kind of ‘restoration’ as the first letter of the alphabet, long deferred, is finally enunciated at this point (though numerous variant pronunciations of ‘a’ and ‘i’ have preceded it). I am not quite seeking to extrapolate a royalist phonic subplot from the poem’s sound patterns but my point is that the religio-political language of ‘right’ or ‘righteousness’ is shadowed by a subtle pattern of sound echoes. In the end “Waiting for a restoration” is ironic: there is a restorative quality to the emergence of the latent ‘eI’ diphthong while at the same time the sense tells us that the restoration is yet to come. The final line reasserts “righteousness”, with its ‘AI’ diphthong, yet returns us to the first line *minus* the word “King”.

In other words, the seat of authority is felt as lacking but its return is deferred: something happens with the phonic and graphic release of the penultimate line but the phonic surge of the 'eI' diphthong does not quite produce or perform a sense of completedness – despite the near-repetition of the first line in the last line, the poem does not come full circle and the king does not assume the throne.

While this is not a poem in which Eliot's "secondary meanings" are closely linked to sound patterns in an etymological sense, there is, I would argue, a connection between the connotative range of 'restoration' and the sound patterning in the poem. Stevens' "vibration" is discernible in the acoustic qualities of the text but these can at the same time be read back into the poem's themes of divinely sanctioned kingship, sacrifice and absence. In terms of Stewart's consideration of the "inner ear" of the reading process it might be argued that sound-oriented poetry such as Howe's provides an exemplary arena for the "mutual supplementation" of *phone* and *gramme*: the "phonemic stratum" is not dissociated from the graphic.

Writing of the workings of sound during the compositional process, Riley argues that there is a distinct temporality, for both writer and reader, to rhyme's echo sounding. The question of time obtrudes when Riley discusses the coercive effect of the "bullying dictations of rhyme" on the poet:¹

You anticipate rhyme's arrival, but you can hear it in retrospect; aurally, it works forwards and backwards, although on the page you can see it coming. Though conventions such as the couplet and the terza rima establish their own aural regularities, for a less rigorously shaped writing, only an aural hope can be entertained by the ear. Then it works by a gratified anticipation, or else through jarring or denial. [...] sound-anticipation runs in the ear well before the eye gets to track and to pull back what's typed. Instead, the ear instructs the eye, while reason must intervene later. This eccentric temporality, this time of rhyme in its strange undecidability, is an instance of retrospective knowledge.²

Howe's poetry would certainly fall into the category of "a less rigorously shaped writing" and what Riley terms "aural hope" is a helpful way of describing the

¹ Riley, 38.

² Riley, 71. See also Nicholls (2002) for a discussion of retrospectiveness in Howe's *Pierce-Arrow*.

experience of reading Howe's work as the ears become attuned to emergent patterns of sound. The patterning of the text gives it both anticipatory and retrospective qualities. Of course, in the context of the apparently fragmentary and syntactically dissonant poetry of Howe, an excess of echoic patterns might bring an effect of excessive consonance – a twisted equivalent to chiming end-rhyme – that would detract from the poems' qualities of brokenness. However, Howe admits enough of what Riley terms "jarring" elements to diffuse any risk of an over-sweet phonic text.

The poem cited above has neither a rhyme scheme nor a prosaic absence of phonic patterning. Instead it is a tightly organised set of echoes and half-echoes. If Riley's "gratification" is understood as a somatic pleasure in repetition's return of the same (rather than the dubious 'musical' comforts of consonance) then that quality is certainly discernible in this poem. The poetry embodies a version of the temporality that Riley describes: the phonic patterns give rise to an anticipation of echo but they are clearly not strong enough to lead the reader to expect a given sound to arrive at any particular point. So the temporality – the quality of expectation – is not firmly established. There is "sound anticipation" but it never quite delivers on time – there is enough of a pattern for the ear to expect echo but this is left suspended. The uncertain look forwards and backwards is the phonic realisation of a quality of temporality that is discernible in Howe's poetry in other ways. It is a kind of examination of the past that seeks to understand the past's determinative power at the same time as acknowledging the instrumentality of the present perspective in constructing a view of the past.

Howe's poetry might be said to explore at the level of rhyme the problem of predestination and its relation to the role of the contemporary poet that animates her reflections on the formula "Historie is backdated prophesie" in the preface to *Articulation*. The reader's ear knows that there is likely to be a preordained pattern and is vouchsafed what Riley calls a kind of "retrospective knowledge". This allows the poem a spectral coherence that is not so readily available at the semantic level.

Looking briefly at another poem, I wish to suggest that the relation between the poetry's syntax and its line breaks has similarities to the patterns of anticipation and deferral that organise the sound, despite the brokenness that is the salient syntactical feature.

When night came on
Windows to be opened
so as to see the sky

She saw herself bereft
of body
would only seem to sleep
If I could go back
Recollectedly into biblical
fierce grace
already fatherless
Isled on all removes
When night came on

NCM. 32

Each of the brief lines of this poem has an internal coherence: each might be part of a larger whole and the syntactical breaks are between lines. The first line appears to introduce a narrative. The second and third might go together, though it is unclear whether they might fall within the 'night' announced in the first line and unclear why windows need to be opened "to see the sky". Who might 'open' or 'see' is also unclear. The fourth line has a subject – an unidentified 'she'. This 'she' is 'bereft' – if we allow the enjambment, 'bereft of body' (a phrase taken from Aristotle's description of the void in his *Physics*).¹ However, the reader, having experienced the uncertainty of the line breaks in preceding lines, cannot be sure that the enjambment is allowable. The sixth line's "would only seem to sleep" appears to be part of a conditional sentence. However the "If I could go back" of the next line does not complete it satisfactorily, and itself remains an uncompleted condition. It is here possible to imagine a thought extending over three lines: "If I could go back/ recollectedly into biblical/ fierce grace". The lines express a familiar desire for an immediate religious experience, almost as if Howe is trying to locate the space of "silence, mystery, *unacknowledgement*" that she associates with the Fourth Gospel's brief narrative of Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Christ.

The next line breaks different ground, evoking perhaps Christ's "I am not yet ascended to my Father" and the forsakenness of Christ on the cross. The next line's "isled on all removes" contain two fragments from poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins. The archaism "isled" appears in the conclusion of "The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe": "World-mothering air, air wild/ Wound with thee, in thee isled/ Fold home, fast fold they child."² And "on all removes" occurs in the sonnet "To seem the stranger, lies my lot, my life": "I am in Ireland now; now I am at a third/ Remove. No but in all

¹ The poem on the next page in the sequence also considers "space".

² Hopkins. 58.

removes I can/ Kind love both give and get.”¹ The poem concludes, like the poem beginning “King of Righteousness”, cited above, with a return to its first line: a beginning that reveals itself as a conclusion but which again discloses nothing.

In using such disjunctive methods Howe is not merely showering the reader with inchoate fragments. As with her use of rhyme there is a continual play with expectation and deferral that is organised around the line break. Only, in the case of grammar – to use a musical analogy – the accent is on dissonance rather than consonance. Howe’s stanzaic lines are usually not satisfactorily sense-bearing or syntactical units. The passage of the reading eye is disrupted and the reader’s impulse to make sense of the grammar is frustrated.

In such poems, the irregular rhyme and syntactical incompleteness both leave the reader expecting fulfilment of some kind. Each is, in part, generically freighted: Howe’s poetry so often draws on pre-modernist diction that the expectation of rhyme or of grammatical sequence is even stronger. The tendency for lines to ‘make sense’ in isolation also draws the reader into an attempt to construct a coherence that remains elusive – not only because the parts laid out on the page do not add up to a whole, but at the level of the encounter of the inner reading voice with the short, discontinuous line units.

The diction – “bereft”, “Recollectedly”, “isled” – is archaic. The word “isle”, for example, has, according to the OED, been used as a verb since the 16th century, when it was also an alternative to “aisle”. The “isled” that Howe derives from Hopkins confronts the reader with an obvious literary anachronism. The sound association might bring a churchbound sense of “aisled” and the word, which was also used by Tennyson, might suggest to the reader a kind of Victorian fetishisation of archaisms. The inner ear might hear, especially immediately after “fatherless”, an isolated “I”. Or the word might resolve visually into “is led”. The “I” sound also looks to the line that begins and ends the poem. There is, then, a sense in which sound, sense and diction are enmeshed in dialogue with the past at two levels: the first is to do with the distinct temporality of deferral that she builds into her sound and syntax; the second functions, not at the level of allusion, but as a way of drawing out experiences of reading that both recall pre-modernist forms of poetry and mark a distance from them through montage and disjunction.

¹ Ibid. 62. This poem’s references to a mother and father and to Ireland would have clear biographical resonances for Howe.

Desiring this absence

The poetry's formal characteristics match a thematic concern with absence – or a kind of negative transcendence – that recalls discussions of the encounter between negative theology and deconstruction that were current in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Moreover, while Howe's thought might at times appear antagonistic to deconstructive warnings against assuming the priority of voice, the idea of speech that she imagines may not necessarily be inimical to such perceptions. Stewart's rethinking of the sounding of poetry in the process of reading, which allows us to conceptualise a "trace of speech in writing", helps us to theorise a phonic dimension to *différance* that illuminates the sound qualities of Howe's texts – notably the simultaneous assertion of similarity and difference in rhyme. While her own observations in interviews seem to show an attachment to a point of origin that is conceived in terms of sound, this "central mystery, this huge Imagination of one form" is always – and necessarily so – gestured at through a poetry of inexpression. If sound, then, might be conceived by Howe herself as a kind of *origin*, it can equally be understood to manifest itself in the poetry, in Stewart's terms, as a *destination* – a differential sounding, or "subvocal text production", activated by the process of reading.

Given the historical reach of Howe's work and the range of material she draws on in her allusions, religion is necessary subject matter. First of all, the language of the sacred is the most culturally elaborated means of speaking around that which eludes figuration – it has a privilege in her work because of its predominance in the history of her and our culture. Yet Howe is not merely an explorer of resonant discourses: she is a religious writer rather than a writer who treats religious sources as 'found' material. For Howe, poetic language's affiliations with silence – in her understanding of both terms – lever it into religious space. If Wallace Stevens sought to replace the supreme being with the Supreme Fiction, Howe seems to think you cannot have one without the other. Yet this can only find expression in negatives. "Absence is what has not been said or spoken, the place to where our imagination keeps returning," she writes. "So poets admire and desire this absence."¹ Again and again her poems return to this absence: a void in the place of paternity, a gap where belief is directed, a silence that brings speech to a stuttering halt.

Howe's poetry is predicated on absence in more ways than one. Many of these techniques are shared by other contemporary poets but the highly distinctive voice she

¹ Letter to Taggart, 13 July 1986 (cited at greater length in my discussion of *The Liberties*).

has developed folds absence into every level of the poetic process. The divinity that is invoked in her poetry is the divinity of “the obscure negative way” (*NCM*, 33) and this founding absence radiates throughout the work. A set of material factors in the writing, notably repetition and especially rhyme, create a phonic expectation of fullness but the irregularity of the patterns means that the ear is never sure where this fullness will fall. Furthermore the diction of the poetry creates a sense of allusiveness that is itself not fulfilled: Aristotle and Hopkins are invoked in the lines cited above, for example, but the reader is more likely to perceive an effect of polyphony than to be able to identify the precise source of the allusion.

In *The Nonconformist's Memorial* the *noli me tangere* brings to the fore the question of embodiment, an analogy with the voicing of a text hedged around by silence. This emerges in Howe's poetry as a paradox, another of the borderline situations that occur in her work. The poetry tends towards figures of absence and negation but at the same time these cannot but be expressed in ordinary language. While there seems to be an investment in a transcendent Logos, the workings of the poetry itself meet this sceptically, as if trying to extricate themselves from a metaphysical alignment which they acknowledge as inevitable.

ii) *A Bibliography of the King's Book or, Eikon Basilike*: authorship and authority – “The First’s own hand”

A Bibliography of the King's Book or, Eikon Basilike, is, like *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, explicitly organised around the motifs of absence and authority.¹ Howe explores these themes by bringing together the textual debris generated by the death of Charles I and the literary-critical theory of the death of the author – a near dogma among anglophone writers and academics influenced by poststructuralist thought in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Howe’s poem is haunted by “the ghost of a king”, a flexible figure which serves to represent the psychic legacy of the regicide, an aporetic origin of social authority (often depicted as paternal), and the spectral return of the author in the affective contours of the literary text (*Eikon*, 50).

The execution of Charles I and the Christological interpretation of the event propagated by his supporters are central to the poem.² However, more than the actual regicide, Howe’s poem is a response to the texts that circulate around the event. The interpenetration of reality and representation, as with *Defenestration*, is a key theme, both for her and 17th century commentators. (Indeed, in its treatment of authority, performance and the feminine, the poem can be read as an extension of issues explored in *Defenestration*.) Howe’s poem builds on various documents surrounding the regicide, and links them in a sequence of “fragmentary narrative enclaves” (*Eikon*, 69). The poem is especially concerned with the *Eikon Basilike*, a compendium of prayers and meditations thought by many to have been written by the king, and *Eikonoklastes*, Milton’s thoroughgoing, point-by-point riposte to the booklet’s claims. Uncertainty about the authorship of the *Eikon Basilike* – ostensibly written by the king but now generally considered to be by either Bishop John Gauden, or both Gauden and the king – continues to the present day. As Howe points out in her introduction, however, more important than either the *Eikon Basilike* or its Miltonic rebuttal is her reading of the Victorian study *A Bibliography of the King's Book; or, Eikon Basilike*, by Edward Almack. This book, from which much of Howe’s ‘found’ textual material is drawn, lists and describes each of the editions of the *Eikon Basilike*, which was issued in 35 English editions and 25 foreign ones in 1649 alone. Almack’s book acts as a mediating frame, interposing an antiquarian filter between the warring texts Howe discusses and her own readers. The question of the authorship in the poem is thus already at one remove, approached as it is through Almack’s bibliography.

¹ I will refer to Howe’s poem as *Eikon* (in distinction to the *Eikon Basilike*. The poem was originally published in book form by Paradigm Press in 1989).

² The lines “crucified by ordinance” (*Eikon*, 56, 57); “of Gold of Thorn of Glory” (*Eikon*, 63) and the poem on page 65 all draw attention to this association with Christ.

Eikon is the first of Howe's long poems since *The Secret History of the Dividing Line* not to have a tripartite structure. Like *The Liberties* and the poems of *Singularities*, and unlike *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, it has a prose preface, although this, under the title "Making the Ghost Walk About Again and Again", is not demarcated from the rest of the poem. The main body of the poem contains visual poems, short lyrics, and blocks of text taken from other authors. It is Howe's most typographically disarranged work and, functioning as a single unit, with its themes of sacrifice, authorship, paternity, marginalised femininity and political and religious conflict, it is the most condensed single example of her methods and concerns.

The regicide has, for Howe, Shakespearean pre-echoes: "The real King's last word 'Remember' recalls the fictive Ghost-king's admonition to his son [ie in *Hamlet*]. The ghost of a king certainly haunted the Puritans and the years of the Protectorate. Charles I became the ghost of Hamlet's father, Caesar's ghost, Banquo's ghost, the ghost of Richard II" (*Eikon*, 48). The execution of the king, then, throws a shadow both over subsequent events and backwards, over prior literary texts. "Remember" is a prophecy that has retrospective agency – once again, Howe works with a temporality that depends on a shuttling between past and present. Caught in the historicity of language, the regicide cannot be disentangled from later readers' experience of the dramatic texts that preceded it. Howe also appears to be conjecturing, when she writes that Charles's "performance on the scaffold was worthy of that author-actor who played the part of the Ghost in *Hamlet*" (ibid), that the problem of sovereignty demanded both "fictive" and real enactment. In this case life was imitating art in the performance of a crisis of legitimacy that had been present in English culture since the Elizabethan period.¹ The regicide, in this view, is the fulfilment of a prophecy.

The poem approaches authorship and history by means of a matted web of allusions and overlaid texts deriving from Howe's work in the archives: contemporary accounts of the execution are cited; there are quotations from the bible and mythology, and from Sir Thomas More's *The History of King Richard the Third* and Dickens's *David Copperfield*.² Howe confects a kind of provisional history from the various textual

¹ See also Foster interview, 176: "[...] Charles, the king, is murdered by those who bowed down to him. He was God's representation on earth. People still believed a king was holy. And this was a culmination of violent deaths on the scaffold in England during the sixteenth century. Raleigh was executed; before him, Thomas More, Mary Queen of Scots, Lady Jane Grey, Essex, just a stream of women and men, powerful ones, religious heretics, biblical translators even, who ended their lives as sacrificial victims. These men and women in power had to be performers. They acted until the moment of death. So executions were staged but they were real."

² DuPlessis, 126, refers to Howe's texts as "matted palimpsests": Davidson applies the coinage "palimtext".

elements from different periods that feed into the poem. This history is represented in a manner that voices the vexed and recursive problem of literary origins that her poem circles around. Howe understands the regicide as an event of sacrificial violence whose consequences echoed in the subsequent history of the language community, down to the literature and politics of present-day America.¹ Peter Nicholls characterises the relation between form and representation in Howe by subsuming both under the overarching category of history:

Howe's history [...] is always uncertain: it will not quite become what Jean-François Lyotard has called "memorial history", it will not allow us to forget the original traumatic event by the psychic defense of a normalizing narrative. "One forgets," says Lyotard, "as soon as one believes, draws conclusions, and holds for certain."²

Howe's text is in accord with this imputation of a kind of forgetfulness to historical narrative, which her work suggests is characterised by stasis and certitude. Rather than the memorial, her history aspires to voice memory through a drifting and uncertain form of non-narrative.³ Howe's broken, centre-less text – or collection of texts – is an attempt to accommodate the "original traumatic event" by other means.⁴ Yet, once again, readers of Howe should be wary of an unreflective dismissal of "normalizing" narratives – the implication that such narratives are somehow inherently conservative (or psychically timid) is an example of an undialectical endorsement of the asystemic that has dogged Howe criticism.⁵

The array of historical fragments in *Eikon* also points to the question of the death of the author, an association which Howe cements in her introduction with a quotation from Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* that describes fictional discourse as:

¹ See my discussion of the 'facade' of Harvard, below. In her Foster interview, 175, Howe remarks on Hawthorne's story "Roger Malvin's Burial", which she reads as a portrayal of the guilt of the regicides.

² Nicholls (1999), 155. Nicholls is citing Lyotard's *Heidegger and "the jews"* (1990), 12.

³ See also Nietzsche's "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" for a related discussion of the "monumental", "antiquarian" and "critical" species of history. Howe discusses antiquarianism in her preface to *Frame Structures*, 17-18, and her excursions in the archive suggest that the business of antiquarianism is in part an ironic fetish and in part a dedication to "swimming through libraries" that sets itself apart from conventional academic research.

⁴ Lyotard, op cit, goes on to write: "The entire web of influences, contexts, conditions, causalities (and the respective, reciprocal hierarchies), woven by the historian, is certainly not completely compromised. [...] It itself exists only in expectation of its complements, supplements, corrections, additions, contributions." Such supplementation might be said to occur in poetry such as Howe's. Lyotard also posits, 11, a "deep unconscious" – a 'there'-ness' without representations – when attempting to theorise the elusive reality of history.

⁵ Again, I read *Back* as typical of this tendency.

“sealed and interminably completed or endlessly beginning again, diffuse and dense, coiled about an absent centre, which it can neither conceal nor reveal” (*Eikon*, 50).¹ Howe brings her various threads together immediately after this quotation by concluding the introduction with: “The absent center is the ghost of a king.” This notion, although more concerned with the nature of authorship, is another version of the preoccupation with power and the negative that I have begun to discuss in relation to *Defenestration*, *The Liberties* and *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*. In what follows I discuss Howe’s treatment of authority in *Eikon* in the context of questions of authorial presence, sovereignty and textual “scattering”.

Disembodied beyond language: author and absence

The idea that the literary author had, like the ‘Author of Creation’, ‘died’, was enormously important to the Anglo-American reception of the work of Barthes, Foucault and Derrida, and was a critical orthodoxy, even a shibboleth, at the time *Eikon* was written. In poetic practice, the author who found direct expression in a poem, and the related device of a more or less coherent fictional persona, had been under attack from the language poets since the early 1970s.² In a 1980s manifesto, six prominent poets of the language tendency – Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman and Barrett Watten – jointly attacked the critical consensus around the value of the hegemonic “expressivist lyric”, in which “[...] a particular kind of self is used as the vehicle for an aesthetic project in which the specifics of experience dissolve into the pseudo-intimacy of an overarching ‘authorial voice’.”³ This, they maintained, left poetry far behind the visual arts, monopolised by the literary equivalent of a “league of suburban landscape painters”.⁴

Howe, having moved from visual art to poetry, has similarly noted the comparatively low status of poetry, but she positions herself slightly differently with regard to the relation of author and text.⁵ It is clear from her critical writing and the strong autobiographical element in her interviews that she is unwilling to speak from either the position of polemical anti-subjectivism that was dominant in literary-critical interpretations of post-structuralism, or the variant that had grown up in language

¹ Macherey, 27. Howe misquotes slightly: Macherey’s phrase begins “[...] sealed and interminable, completed [...]”. Macherey’s book is also cited in *Birth-mark*, 46.

² This grouping, of course, looked to precursors in the early 20th century avant garde.

³ Silliman, Harryman, Hejinian, Benson, Perelman, Watten (1988), 264. The collective authorship of this manifesto is itself designed as a questioning of the role of the individual author.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁵ Beckett interview, 19.

poetry circles. That her work is at a considerable distance from the 'expressivist lyric' barely needs saying. She allows autobiography to emerge in her poetry, not just in interviews but also in the prefaces to *Thorrow* and *Eikon* and to the *Europe of Trusts* and *Frame Structures* collections. The references to the "the vexed question of authorship", the "absent center" and "the ghost of an author" in the preface to *Eikon*, prepare the reader for the collection of deracinated speakers that populate a poem in which, as often happens in Howe's work, it is hard to determine which words to attribute to Howe. The work appears to be radically anti-authorial but Howe's prefaces – always in a prose that is on the point of breaking into poetry – are semi-autobiographical "frames" that encroach on the picture. Howe plays an active part in opening her poems onto her life and it would be impossible to pay close attention to her poetry without heeding her invitation to follow the associative threads that pass through the autobiographical subject that forms part of her self-presentation as a poet.

While Howe has written that Foucault's influential essay "What is an Author?" "directly inspired and informed" her writing on New England cultural history, she has also distanced herself from elements of its argument:¹

How can "the subject (and its substitutes) [...] be stripped of its creative role and analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse" before we have been allowed to even see what *she*, *Emily Dickinson*, reveals of her most profound self in the multiple multilayered scripts, sets, notes, and scraps she left us? I cannot murmur indifferently: "What matter who's speaking?" I emphatically insist it does matter who's speaking.²

Howe, writing of Dickinson's manuscripts, is raising issues of the control exercised over literary texts by institutions such as Harvard, where Dickinson's fascicles are held. For Howe, these questions of power bring to the fore the issue of personal agency. She resists reading 'Dickinson' without reference to the author Emily Dickinson, choosing instead to pay attention to those aspects of a fully constituted 19th century subjectivity – however much an 'effect' of discursive or historical agency – that might be available to later readers. While the prominence of 'found' texts and ghostly authors in Howe's poetry clearly displays an interest in dismantling, or at least reorienting,

¹ *Birth-mark*, 37.

² *Birth-mark*, 19-20. The phrase beginning "the subject" is from Foucault's essay. "What matter who's speaking", from Beckett, and the idea of 'indifference' are also both imported from Foucault's essay, 115, 138. See also *My Emily Dickinson*, 13: "My voice formed from my life belongs to no one else. What I put into words is no longer my possession."

the idea of the author, there is nonetheless an accompanying concern both with the exercise of authorial control and with the ways in which a sedimented selfhood emerges in poetic language. Howe's position is congruent, perhaps, with that argued by Seán Burke in his consideration of the theory of the death of the author and its reception in the Anglo-American academy:

Once something is identified as an effect of language, the *episteme*, or whatever, the possibility of that effect becoming a cause at a later stage of development, of its engendering significant events in its train is abjured, even to the point of calling into question the very existence of that effect on the ground that it is an effect. [...] If the author is the site of a collision between language, culture, class, history, *episteme*, there is still every reason to assume that the resultant subject should be construed in each case differently, the psyche thus forged being irreducible to any one of those forces in particular. Short of taking this line of reasoning to the ludicrous extreme of asserting that subjects are constituted homogeneously, the difference between subjects remains to be explained.¹

The "lines of descent, connection, and association" that Marjorie Perloff discerns in Howe's writing are a means of mapping and making manifest these multiple determinants of a literary text.² In Howe's case the associations are so wide-ranging (linking, as we have seen, her maternal grandfather's role in colonial Nigeria to her own experience of Niagara, near Buffalo) that the text becomes overdetermined to a dizzying degree. Burke's "difference between subjects" is intrinsic to Howe's method of working. Autobiography in its broadest sense, almost all of it unavailable to the reader, is the ghost haunting what Perloff calls the "interstices" of Howe's poetry.³ In her interview with Foster, Howe expands on the various impulses that fed into *Eikon*, citing an unfinished essay on the Mathers that was overshadowed by the ghosts of her father and Perry Miller; the illness of her friend George Butterick, editor of Olson's poems; Olson himself; and her interest in typography.⁴ "Somehow," she concludes, "all my thinking about the misediting of Dickinson's texts, George's careful editing of Charles Olson's poems, all the forgotten little captivity narratives, the now-forgotten *Eikon*, the words *Eikon*, *Eikonoklastes*, and *regicide* – all sharp vertical sounds, all

¹ Burke, 156.

² Perloff (1999), n.p.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Howe links her father and Butterick, both scholars in the shadow of what she calls "commanding and prolific figures" (Foster interview, 174). In 1988 Howe began teaching at Buffalo in a department overshadowed by Charleses – Olson and Bernstein.

came together and then split open.”¹ This ‘splitting’ causes the autobiographical material to be distributed in such a way that it is, on the whole, beneath the threshold of visibility. Nonetheless it may contribute significantly to the elusive quality of coherence that appears to organise Howe’s texts.

It is significant, however, that Howe describes this ghostly authorial presence as “the ghost of a king”. The formulation is not merely, as we have seen, applicable to a regicide: Howe’s theorisation of the author is also a theorisation of authority and of paternal absence. While the suspension of any legislating paternal function seems to be one of the goals of Howe’s poetics, there is a more ‘literal’ engagement with the issue of paternity in the way Howe chooses to present herself as a poet. Paternal absence, as we have seen, has biographical resonance for Howe. In interviews and in other of Howe’s prose texts a picture of a Harvard scholar who was a diligent and conscientious professor of Law emerges.² From the outset Howe’s relationship with the archive seems to have been connected in complex ways with her relationship to her father: “During the 1950s, although I was only a high school student, I was already a library cormorant. I needed out-of-the-way volumes from Widener Library. My father said it would be trespassing if I went into the stacks to find them.”³

For Howe this idea of authority is closely associated with the regulation of knowledge by academic institutions: “If you are a woman, archives hold perpetual ironies. Because the gaps and silences are where you find yourself.”⁴ There is, then, a profound ambivalence towards an institutional acquisition of knowledge that is thought to be aligned with patriarchy (this is particularly so of Howe’s reading of the editing of Emily Dickinson’s manuscripts). On one hand, archives are considered to prolong the hegemony of the those who guard America’s cultural heritage; on the other, they are places to get ecstatically lost, the sources of wild, “out of the way” knowledge that might undermine that patrimony.

At another level, the paternal is represented as the origin of Law and identified with both authorial and divine creativity. Just as in *Call Me Ishmael* (a key book for Howe)

¹ Foster interview, 175. In an autumn 1988 letter to Taggart, Howe explained the background to a paper she had given at Buffalo that had been critical of Olson: “I think I was shattered by [Robert] Duncan’s death, George’s sickness, David’s sickness, the ghost of my father in Buffalo, and it all gathered into a striking out at fathers.”

² See the introduction to *Frame Structures*, 16-17, and “Ether Either”, 123.

³ *Birth-mark*, 18. the term “library cormorant”, also cited at the head of the essay “Submarginalia” in *Birth-mark*, 27. is Coleridge’s.

⁴ Foster interview, 158. See also *Birth-mark*, 18: “Thoreau said, in an essay called ‘Walking’, that in literature it is only the wild that attracts us. What is forbidden is wild. The stacks of the Widener Library and all the great libraries in the world are still the wild to me. [...] I go to libraries because they are the ocean.”

Olson drew on Freud's "Moses and Monotheism" so Howe has recourse to a notion of founding parricide in her thinking about the links between the regicide and the 'dead' author. When Howe writes "A First didn't write it" (*Eikon*, 63), she is drawing such an analogy – not in order to mystify her own activity but in order to question it. The dead paternal figure serves as an emblem that can link the death of Charles, putative author of the *Eikon Basilike*, to the 'death of the author'. The analogy is made more explicit further down the same page, when Howe writes of "The Author and Finisher/ The Author of the Fact". The status of this "Author" becomes equivocal with the sacrifice of Charles, with the doubts over the authorship of the *Eikon Basilike* and with the questions about Howe's father which lie in the background of the poem.

In my discussion of *The Nonconformist's Memorial* I described the divinity in Howe's writing in terms of the absent divinity of negative theology. Howe's concept of the workings of authority in poetic language is rooted in absence and the sacred. In this respect, the writing of Michel de Certeau, the radical historiographer, is helpful in theorising Howe's methods.¹ Howe's notion of the sacred depends on the legitimating function of sovereignty. The resistance to figuration around which mystical writing is organised becomes, in the thought of de Certeau, a point of departure for writing that is specifically poetic and which, for that very reason, proceeds from a notion of authority. To clarify, in a discussion of 17th-century mysticism de Certeau writes:

[...] the name of God is placed in the position of being *unthinkable* and *authorising* at one and the same time. It is all the more authorising precisely because it is itself authorised by no reason or system of thought. Therefore, it is not the experience that guarantees the existence of God: God, on the contrary guarantees the experience. The name is authorised by nothing. For that reason, its status is *poetic* – if Edmond Jabès is correct in saying that poetry is what nothing authorises.²

Howe's poetry hovers in similar fashion around the sacred, which makes itself felt as an unsayable non-presence that provides a "certain permission" for the poetry.³ In Howe's case, this point of origin is also a place of wildness and violence, as is evidenced in lines such as "wrath at fierce center" (*Defenestration*, 137) or "slipping back to primordial/ We go through the word Forest" (*Thorow*, 49). It is also an encounter with

¹ In a letter dated 1st November 1993 Howe writes to Taggart that she admires de Certeau's "writing about writing", and in particular his *Heterologies* (1986).

² De Certeau, 110-111.

³ See Keller interview, 20.

the Law. The very act of ascribing meaning is seen as a legislating act; Howe's poetry seeks to evade such limits, authorising its indiscipline by appealing to a chaotic understanding of the sacred. This sacred is, then, at once inside the law – an authorising force and – outside it – the radical disruption of authority. It is what Howe means by the term "Lawless center" (*Articulation*, 22), paradoxically authorising because subject to no law.

The execution of Charles is an exemplary moment for Howe. Her poem, far from being a consideration of the real event, is a treatment of the various qualities of fictiveness – myth, prophecy, and masque – that surround both the regicide and the possibly forged *Eikon Basilike*. Most importantly, the regicide is a figure around which a constellation of thoughts that both question and endorse sovereignty and the law can congregate. The death of the divinely sanctioned monarch enacts the very problematisation of legitimacy that haunts Howe's work: the law-giver, authorised by nothing, vanishes and poetry emerges in that "lawless center".

It might be possible to re-pose the question of an authorising absence through Carl Schmitt's notion of the sovereign, who, is "at the same time outside and inside the juridical order".¹ This is so, in Schmitt's view, because the sovereign is, by definition, permitted to suspend the operation of law through declaring a state of emergency. Agamben, discussing Walter Benjamin's use of Schmitt's theory of sovereignty in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History", writes that Benjamin identifies Schmitt's "state of exception" with the messianic kingdom, which "signifies a crisis and radical transformation of the entire order of the law."² This notion of a sovereignty that, from within and without, establishes the limit point of law is pertinent to *Eikon's* preoccupations: the regicide was a rehearsal of the messianic event, a crisis of sovereignty in which the limits of law were tested.³ De Certeau's theory of a simultaneously unthinkable and authorising divine name can be accompanied, at the level of juridical agency, by the testing of sovereignty, "both inside and outside" the rule of law, that occurred in the regicide period. The execution of Charles involved a usurpation of the "state of exception" of sovereignty, and was understood by both royalists and millenarian radicals as a moment of messianic import. *Eikon*, then, is a

¹ Cited in Agamben, 161. Agamben's essay is a discussion of Benjamin's application of Schmitt's theory of law and sovereignty in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (discussed in my account of *Frame Structures*). Agamben is quoting a 1922 work by Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985.

² Agamben, 162-163.

³ Throughout his trial Charles refused to justify himself, choosing instead to query the legal authority of the tribunal.

poem that imagines a space that precedes or suspends the law: it is this space of productive sovereignty that animates its layers of disputatious documentation.

In the preceding survey of Howe's descriptions of poetic origins, there is a degree of inconsistency between the ideas of a "wild interiority", a "lawless center" and an "absent center" – distinct but partially coinciding ideas that have guided my discussion of her poems. Each of these formulations attempts, in a different way, to formulate a space posited as incommensurable. The first – a broadly psychoanalytic perspective – might be understood as a psychic region of unvoiced drives. The second – a recovery of Romanticism – imagines a similar domain from a more abstract perspective, a fertile originary point beyond the reach of law. The third – a variant of deconstruction with a debt to negative theology – governs the conceptual environment of *Eikon* and stresses the void at the point which might underpin or guarantee meaning or law. Rather than seek to weld these into an elaborate non-contradictory poetics I think it more useful to observe that each is a version of Howe's fascination with a transcendent outsideness. This aspect of her thought can be filtered through the spiritual urgency of antinomianism; through the rhetoric of American romanticism (with Hawthorne, Thoreau, Olson and Duncan in the background); or through the literary-critical preoccupations of late 20th century. Her poetry is so populated with the voices of others that it is more appropriate to characterise it in terms of a set of overlapping and sometimes contradictory tendencies than to impose a univocal critical narrative.

Eikon is also preoccupied with the migration of motifs of power and sacrifice between literary and political spheres, with an author whose ghost stubbornly refuses quite to vanish, and with a counter-history (or "counter-memory") committed to excavating elided perspectives through disjunction and associative methods. The "gaps and silences" of the poem are of two kinds: first in the theorisation of the "absent center" and second in the recovery of the space of silence in which women readers and writers have tended to find themselves.

Published to undecieve: *Eikon Basilike* and *Eikonoklastes*

The following lines capture some of the poem's questions about authorship and authority – questions which are played out in the contention between "King's Book" and Milton's *Eikonoklastes*:

Father and the Father
by my words will I be justified

Autobiography I saw

Legal righteousness makes us servants
All good hearers

Eikon, 74

“Father and the Father” suggests the link Howe is making between paternity and divine authority. The following line, with “justified”, brings a Puritan slant to bear on these thoughts at the same time as alluding drily to typography.¹ “Autobiography I saw” returns to the problem of authorship and recalls the problem of reconciling a notion of poetic witness with the abdication of authorship. The following couplet links the law to Christian servitude, while “All good hearers” suggests both the congregation of a church and Howe’s readers. The lines obliquely posit a notion of literature that both rests on and subverts the covenant between God and his followers. The author forges a contract with the reader that demands an act of faith which is among the protocols of literary consumption; at the same time, the authority of the author as creator (the human analogue of the ‘Author of Creation’) is nowhere visible. *Eikon*, using the figure of the unknowable and sovereign author of the *Eikon Basilike*, seeks to ask questions of the manner in which authorial legitimacy is diffused as an immanent principle of a work of literature. What claim to authority, for example, is served by the Royalists’ insistence on Charles’s authorship? How is the subject said to stand behind a given text modified by the attribution of authorship? How did the death of Charles, the supposed author, alter *Eikon Basilike*’s readers’ encounter with the miscellany? Howe’s response to these questions is to pursue by proxy an investigation of the links between authorship and authority in the *Eikon Basilike* controversy.

The original *Eikon Basilike* met a formidable nemesis in Milton’s *Eikonoklastes*, a tract published in October 1649 that set itself up as a rational refutation of every claim made in the disputed “King’s Book”. However, both the *Eikon Basilike* and *Eikonoklastes* turned on the problems of legitimacy that are woven into the lines cited above. Howe’s poem at once preserves the violence of Milton’s iconoclasm and explores parallels Royalists sought to draw between the death of Charles and that of Christ. *Eikon* derives a great deal of its energy from the way it sustains the opposition between a

¹ “Justification” refers to the alignment of text with a margin. The line perhaps echoes the words of Christ, Matt 7. 20: “Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them”.

demystifying, democratising radicalism and a form of sanctified authority. It is this kind of mapping of both the broad cultural prehistory (in the role of sacrifice in mythology, for example) and the aftershocks of the regicide that Howe's poem-sequence performs. To put it in the camp of either of the contending bodies of propagandists would be to disturb the balance of forces within the poem, which include an abstract sympathy for Charles as a sacrificial victim. The poem reads more persuasively as the dramatisation of a cultural fault-line around the notion of authority, with the author's attention directed, rather than at the *Eikon Basilike* or *Eikonoklastes*, towards the "gap in ideology" she associates in her introduction with Pamela, a figure in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*.

This third term appears to represent something close to Howe's comments on the "gaps and silences" that the archive offers the woman scholar – an expressive void that is the potential site of a speculative commentary on marginality. One of Milton's principal levers in his attack on the King's Book was the inclusion in many editions of a prayer which, Milton pointed out, was "stol'n word for word from the mouth of a Heathen fiction praying to a heathen God; and that in no serious book, but the vain amatorious Poem of *Sir Philip Sidneys Arcadia*".¹ Some have since argued that, in an act of propagandist skullduggery, Milton himself arranged to have the prayer inserted into the anthology so he could more easily attack it.² In her introduction Howe writes "A captive Shepherdesse has entered through a gap in ideology. 'Pammela in the Countesses Arcadia,' confronts the inauthentic literary work with its beginnings in a breach" (*Eikon*, 49). This idea of the 'feminine' within the poem is the repressed of the dispute over legitimate authority being conducted between Puritans and Royalists. In this case, it is perhaps one of Howe's "perpetual ironies" that the cornerstone of the dispute is a representation of femininity that both functions as an emblem of inauthenticity and represents, for Milton, an image of pagan impropriety – a scapegoating vessel for his animus against the monarchy.

The figure of Pamela, Milton's "Heathen fiction", appears only briefly in the body of the poem-sequence, in a poem that places her alongside the issue of authenticity:

Heathen woman
out of heathen legend

¹ Milton (1649), 362. Howe glosses this as "the prayer of a pagan woman to an all-seeing heathen Deity" (*Eikon*, 49). The phrase "all-seeing deity" occurs in the editor's discussion of Pamela's prayer in the Hughes edition of *Eikonoklastes*, 153.

² For a summary of the correspondence on this point between Empson and other scholars in the *Times Literary Supplement* see Milton (1649), 154, n14.

in a little scrip
the First's own hand
Counterfeit piece
published to undeceive
the world
In his reply Pseudomusus
shifts the balance of emphasis

Eikon, 67

Pamela's fleeting appearance in a "Counterfeit piece" alerts the reader to what Milton considered the bogus piety of *Eikon Basilike*. For, Howe, however, Pamela's "religious supplications" (*Eikon*, 49) represent a way out of the battle between contending views of authority. Pamela, from a 'pagan' poem, belongs outside the Christian paradigm but her presence inserts a principle of uncertainty that threatens to overturn the terms of the dispute between Royalists and Puritans. Her appearance is followed by lines that set a metonym that serves both for divine creation and authorship – "the First's own hand" – against the denial of authenticity – "Counterfeit piece/ published to undeceive/ the world".¹ Read alongside Howe's introductory commentary, the lines suggest that the riddle of authenticity surrounding the prayer serves to expose the propagandist ends of both Milton and the Royalists. Pamela functions as a gendered third term that unsettles the claims to truth of both sides of the opposition. Moreover, as a token of inauthenticity and religious alterity, she can be understood to short-circuit the paradigm that depends on the author/creator as a guarantor of a text's integrity. The character of Pamela is, like Florimell in *Defenestration*, a means of rescuing the linking of femininity with deception (one that, in turn, can be found in Pythagorean oppositions) from its pejorative associations.

The execution of Charles passed into the realm of myth immediately.² William Marshall's famous frontispiece to the *Eikon Basilike* linked Charles to the image of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane and from then on the booklet attempts to construct

¹ A scrip is an archaic term for a wallet or purse. The word also appears in Howe's recent *Bedhangings II* (2002, n.p.). Pseudomusus is the name adopted by the pseudonymous author of a 1654 pamphlet on enclosure legislation.

² By coincidence (or not), the second lesson in Book of Prayer for the day of his execution included Matthew Chapter 27, which narrates the trial and crucifixion of Christ.

a mythological parallel between Charles and Christ.¹ This became the focus for Milton's opprobrium in his *Eikonoklastes*.²

A number of anti-Royalists endeavoured to meet the religious language of the King's Book with a similarly mythological language: some millenarian responses, for example, sought to cast Charles not as Christ but as the Antichrist.³ By contrast, Milton's aim was to pose a rationalist challenge to the very idea of myth-making. The tyrants to whom he compares Charles are drawn from English history or from pagan or classical stories as well as from the Bible. He continually seeks to confront truth with falsehood and to expose Charles as an actor:

But if these his fair spok'n words shall be heer fairly confronted and laid parallel to his own farr differing deeds, manifest and visible to the whole Nation, then surely we may look on them who notwithstanding shall persist to give to bare words more credit than to op'n deeds, as men whose judgement was not rationally evinc'd and perswaded, but fatally stupified and bewitch'd, into such a blinde and obstinate beleef.⁴

Milton's attack on 'bewitching' falsehoods replicates the Puritan suspicion of the stage. Howe appears to believe that Milton's icon-smashing work as a propagandist was a denial of his investment, as a poet, in the artifice required by representation. In her interview with Foster she comments:

Behind the facade of Harvard University is a scaffold and a regicide. Under the ivy and civility there is the instinct for murder, erasure, and authoritarianism. Behind Milton's beautiful words borrowed from other traditions is a rage to destroy and tear down. He hoped his *Eikonoklastes* would erase the *Eikon Basilike* or at least would show it to

¹ This frontispiece provides another continuity between *Defenestration* and *Eikon* (see my discussion of the importance of Steven Orgel's theory of masquing). Back, too, discusses this image.

² See Hughes's introduction to "Eikonoklastes", 161: "Milton's task in *Eikonoklastes* was to inspire his readers with proper contempt for the popular adoration of the Christ-like portrait of the king." Fragments from this introduction find their way into Howe's text at such points as "Even after the monarchomarchists" (*Eikon* 70, Milton 129, with 'before' instead of 'after'); "The regicide hack/ Robert Robins/ Piled up syllogisms" (*Eikon*, 70, Milton, 130); "Opening words of *Patriarcha*" (*Eikon*, 71, Milton 198, n40). See also Empson, 314: "Milton found especially offensive in the *Eikon* the repeated parallels between the troubles of Charles and the Crucifixion; the King not only claims Divine Right but elevates himself into a sacrificial deity – a pagan God, Milton would presume."

³ See Blair McKnight, to which my argument at this point is indebted.

⁴ Milton, 346-347.

be a forgery. But *Comus* is a masque and theatrical performance too. An elaborate facade, a forgery. A poem is an icon.

Foster interview, 176-177¹

Both literary artefacts and the institutions whose duty it is to validate and uphold their cultural status conceal, in this view, an atavistic urge towards violence.² The Milton of *Eikonoklastes*, for Howe, suppresses both its own violence and its reliance on rhetorical strategies: its performance of rationality is as much a performance as *Comus*. She accuses Milton of suppressing the forgery and dissimulation involved in all authorship. Poetic language, Howe suggests, is iconic and, like the masquing of *Comus* or of her own *Defenestration*, is a form of speech that is cognisant of its own artificiality. Poetry, in this view, exceeds logical argumentation such as that of *Eikonoklastes* and has the heightened communicative potential of an "icon".³ The demythologising rigour of *Eikonoklastes*, for all its rhetorical 'beauty', is a reasoned 'facade' that conceals a censorious violence.

Howe's alignment of Harvard with the execution of Charles I implies that the institution somehow inherited the legacy of the regicides, some of whom emigrated to America. Her description in *Birth-mark* of her father virtually policing entry to the Widener stacks suggests that one of the autobiographical strands running behind the poem is the forging, in the face of a paternal injunction, of a different encounter with knowledge through poetic language (*Birth-mark*, 18). There is an identification of the unsettling presence of Pamela and Howe's own pursuit of "gaps and silences" in the archive. However, this dense collection of personal, literary and historical associations leads the reader into territory sustained almost exclusively by the workings of analogy. The suggestive power of writing that can bring authorial and Divine authority together with literary theory; link Ivy League academic authoritarianism with a 17th century political tract; or find in a forged prayer an emblem of a contemporary woman writer's poetic practice is undeniable. Yet, once

¹ Her reference to the masque is an allusion to Milton's critique in *Eikonoklastes* (alluded to in my discussion of *Defenestration*): "quaint Emblems and devices, begg'd from the old Pageantry of some Twelf-nights entertainment at *Whitehall*, will doe but ill to make a Saint or Martyr [...]" (Milton, 1649, 342).

² Howe's strange polemic about Harvard and Milton appears to be indebted to the work of René Girard, particularly his book *The Scapegoat*, which Howe has said had "a big effect" on her (correspondence with author, 6 August 2002). *The Scapegoat*, like its predecessor *Violence and the Sacred*, argues that violence is the suppressed origin of human culture. The persecution of the victim, or scapegoat, is a means of bringing about the "cure" of a social crisis. See Girard, 44.

³ Howe might almost be reiterating Sidney's praise in the *Defense of Poetry* of the "perfect picture" painted by the poet against the mere "wordish description" of philosophical prose. (See my discussion of *Defenestration*.) The line "The Foundation of hearsay" (*Eikon*, 66) is a quotation from *The Defense of Poetry*.

again, such broad strokes elide important questions. The designation of Pamela as a “gap in ideology” risks continuing to consign the ‘feminine’ to a liminal space. The kind of reasoned rhetoric that Milton deploys against the mystification of *Eikon Basilike* has been crucial to numerous emancipatory discourses. And the concept of authority is caricatured when it is so often, across the fields of religion, history and literary form, held to be paternally identified.

Howe’s method of analogy is enormously enabling for the reader but, in its prose incarnation, it requests a different kind of engagement from the reader and, inevitably perhaps, falls short of making an unassailable case in all of the discursive fields that it engages with. This, again, is why I would argue, even in the face of some of her own statements, against locating the value of Howe’s work primarily in the positive ethical positions that can be discerned in the texts. Instead, the importance of her poetry lies in its resistance to such translation. Howe’s prefaces and some of her critical writing lend a helpful matrix of ideas with which to explicate the poetry, but the defining merit of the poetry is negative and inaccessible to such explanation. For this reason critical responses which reduce the work to an uncomplicated emancipatory narrative are, I would argue, rather conservative, tending to locate the radicalism of the poetry in the wrong place.

Dominant ideologies drift: scattering and the role of the poet

The poem’s various responses to authoritarian discourses, whether these discourses are explicitly political or modes of conceiving authorship, can be understood through her notion of ‘scattering’. This is especially apparent in the final pages of *Eikon*, which contain a treatment of ideological ‘drift’ and two metaphors for Howe’s poetry – the first as a kite on a long string, the second as an arrangement of threads. The first of these three instances, a brief poem, compresses some of *Eikon*’s key themes:

Dominant ideologies drift
Charles I who is “Caesar”
Restless Cromwell who is “Caesar”
Disembodied beyond language
in those copies are copies

Eikon, 80

The verse appears to suggest that political domination is a constant and that, despite the succession of hegemonic “ideologies”, there are analogies to be drawn between the successive sovereign figures of authority. Charles I and Cromwell are anticipated both

by Shakespeare's Caesar and by Caesar himself. Royalist iconography is locked in battle with Miltonic iconoclasm but each is similarly structured around an authorising central presence. The "scattering", which Howe celebrates in her Arachne and Ariadne pages, also at the end of the poem, replaces certainty with contingency, and the "authentic literary work" with a fascination with forgery: "in those copies are copies". Belief in authority and faith in the author are confronted with a principle of a literary work that can never be satisfactorily moored to an authorial subject.

At a 1988 reading Howe describes a passage from Dickens that she cites on the penultimate page of *Eikon* – a description of Mr Dick's kite in *David Copperfield* – as "a perfect definition" of her poetry.¹ The kite, "covered with manuscript" (*Eikon*, 81) alluding to the death of Charles I, corresponds to the associative movement of her poetry and its removal from the author on publication. Howe's talk of "drifting" and "scattering", in addition to its visual realisation, refers to this quality of happenstance and the poetry's dependence on the associations that readers bring to it:

'There's plenty of string,' said Mr Dick, 'and when it flies high, it takes the facts a long way. That's my manner of diffusing 'em. I don't know where they may come down. It's according to circumstances, and the wind, and so forth; but I take my chance of that.'

Eikon, 81

What is Howe doing when she suggests that her poetry, like Mr Dick's kite, "takes the facts a long way"? I do not read this as a denial of the availability of historical fact per se. I read it as a description of the ability of her poetry to transpose such material into an entirely different mode of expression. Far from Lyotard's characterisation of a forgetful history of certainties and conclusions, Howe's writing seeks a re-memorialisation of the past through her oblique and disjunctive methods. Not only are the more typographically innovative pages emblematic of a logic of scattering, but even the more conventional poems are apt to be blown by the "winds" of readerly interpretations.

At the visual level, Milton's iconoclasm is registered in the violent 'splitting open' that is translated into the extraordinarily broken texts of *Eikon* (Foster interview, 175). There are nine strongly visual poems in *Eikon*.² It is as if the theologically inflected social crisis surrounding the regicide had produced a visual echo in the text.

¹ Audio cassette L945.

² See pp 54, 56-57, 58-59, 73, 78-79, and 82.

Following the 1988 reading, Howe said that she considered the “icon smashing and the vertical lines” (see *Eikon* 54, 56-57) to be “a certain kind of dictatorship”. She, on the other hand, in a restatement of the Lyotardian thrust of *Thorow*, favours a “drifting” or a “scattering” movement, evident on the ‘Arachne’ and ‘Ariadne’ pages of the poem (respectively *Eikon* 79, 82).¹

Each of these pages develops the subject of the threading of narratives implicit in Howe’s engagement with her various documentary sources.² The closing Arachne page (see fig 3) is a final enactment of the poem’s movement from a crisis of authority towards a gendered third term associated with “drifting”. The strands and threads pursued by the scholar-poet hang down inconclusively, offering the reader various means of negotiating the scattered words.

The page begins with the word ‘silk’, a royal fabric. The word echoes a citation from Almack’s bibliography that describes an edition of the *Eikon Basilike* with “it has remains of light blue silk strings” (*Eikon*, 80). More importantly, the word recalls the threads of Arachne, which govern the page’s layout. The word “silk” is, like many of the words that follow it, printed at a slight angle. In this relatively gentle experiment (by Howe’s standards), there are none of the sharp intersecting lines that attend the 17th century political disputation in the visual poems from earlier in the book. Instead there is a slight upward and downward tilt which gives the effect of words falling down the page.³ The angled s’s of “silk” and “symbolic” give way to “Praeparative”, with the first syllable containing part of the Latin root of ‘prepare’: “*praeparare*”. The next word, “faith”, is skewed and followed by the upside-down “Ariagne”, which contains both “Ariadne” and “arraign”.

¹ Audio cassette L945. See Lyotard (1984), op cit: “*Drifting is in itself the end of all critique.*” Howe’s “scattering” comment nonetheless recalls the gendering of antinomian speech at the end of her interview with Foster: “History has happened. The narrator is disobedient. A return is necessary, a way for women to go. Because we are in the stutter. We were expelled from the Garden of the Mythology of the American Frontier. The drama’s done. We are the wilderness. We have come on to the stage stuttering” (181).

² Howe would develop this idea with her books *Bedhangings* (2001) and *Bedhangings II* (2002). Arachne the weaver produced a cloth so faultless that the goddess Athena tore it apart in frustration; Arachne then tried to hang herself but Athena loosened the rope, and Arachne became a spider and the rope a cobweb. Ariadne fell in love with Theseus and gave him the thread with which he found his way out of the Minotaur’s labyrinth; Ariadne was deserted by Theseus in Naxos, where she was married to Dionysus, who placed among the stars the diadem he gave her at their wedding. The two figures are closely linked for Howe. *My Emily Dickinson* contains the apparent error: “In myth at any time, a woman may suddenly change form. Ariadne became a spider” (101).

³ In the 1988 reading (audio cassette L945) cited above Howe chose to read down the left-hand side of the page and up the words to the right of the main column. However, I will follow my own preference of reading the page downwards.

**BEST COPY
AVAILABLE**

**Variable print
quality**

Silk

symbolic

Praeparative

faith

Arachne

Idman satter

the set Penned

stars
ENHCVRW SUN'S
ARACHNE
deft ray

through

She shield

was Thricealdd

winding trace

wool weft

Cloud

soft

threada

twist

Fig 3. Eikon's 'Arachne' page (82)

The judicial “arraign” may be an allusion to Charles I’s arrest and trial but it is also a compressed allusion to *King Lear*: it is used twice by Lear in the mock trial of Act Three — “It shall be done; I will arraign them straight” and “Arraign her first (*King Lear* III, VI, 20; 46); ’tis Goneril”. Towards the end of the play Goneril makes use of the word in a kind of contemptuous and antinomian reply: “[...] the laws are mine, not thine./ Who can arraign me for’t?” (*King Lear* V, III, 158-159).

“Idman” puns on “id” and the ‘I’ of ‘first’; “satter”, pointing downwards, is a disarranged “scatter”, strengthening the sense of words dispersing as they fall. The two non-words inaugurate a split into two wayward columns that continues to the end of the text on the page. “Panned” returns to authorial presence but contains a notion of circumscription; the “stars”, invoking the regal diadem of Ariadne, are set against the sovereignty of the “SUN’S/ray”. “ARACHNE” is upside-down, alongside “SUN’S”. Howe thus counterposes two principles: the first commensurate with a divinely sanctioned and masculine continuance of authority (Charles’s “son” is implied in the pun); the second with a wayward, errant femininity.

The text then tumbles through the word “deft”, suggesting dexterity in the weaving of threads, as well as the abdication of power, through its Middle English sense of ‘gentle’ or ‘meek’ (as a variation of ‘daft’). “She” is now set beside “shiel”, a part-word which is promoted to “shield” in the next line. The word “shield”, cannot be fully stated, however: it has “thread” woven into it. The text descends through various modulations of the threading theme, with alliterative w’s in the left-hand column. The word “winding” summons the sombre ‘sheet’, which is half-heard in “shiel”. And “trace” is angled painfully upwards, like the stair to the execution block; “weft”, the thread which runs from side to side in a web, is broken to contain an enigmatic “we”. The word also echoes the earlier “deft”.

That strand completed, the left-hand column continues through “Cloud/ soft/ threada/ twist”. “Cloud” obscures the sun; “threada” will not complete “readable” and the final “twist” revives “winding”, bringing the poem to an end. At its close, the poem gives the impression of a descent into insubstantiality. The “twist” and “winding” return the reader once again to the citation from Macherey’s in Howe’s preface, which she compares to the “discourse” in Almack’s bibliography: “sealed and interminably completed or endlessly beginning again, diffuse and dense, coiled about an absent centre which it can neither conceal nor reveal” (*Eikon*, 50).

Taken as a whole, the page concludes the poem with an image of textual motility that suggests a mode of writing that might not be coerced by the ‘authoritarian’ fantasies of

Puritans or Royalists. These tight arrangements of words offer the reader rich interpretative opportunities. The idea of the woman poet – a scout in *Therow* – is now that of a weaver of threads and webs of association. Yet the thread in *Eikon* is always apt to give out: if *Eikon*, like the royalist pamphlet, has its “beginnings in a breach”, the poem at the end returns to an ordinary absence or “a gap in ideology”. The poem seeks to provide shelter for the stuttering and uncertainty of the “Fragmentary narrative enclaves” that Howe privileges over monumental representations of authority. The straying threads are the visual representation of that movement.

Yet, at this point, it might be useful to counter Howe’s endorsement of “drifting” as a means of resistance to such ideas of authority with her assertion: “I emphatically insist it does matter who’s speaking.” The wandering threads of Ariadne and Arachne and Mr Dick’s errant kite are, as we have seen, a means of eluding an authority conceived of as a rigid system. Yet they risk denying themselves any purchase on the material at hand. *Eikon* has an ethical case to answer in that the edifice of associations that develops around the beheading of Charles beckons, though “scattering”, a dispersal of political agency that threatens to undermine Howe’s often-asserted intolerance of oppression. It does indeed matter “who’s speaking”. The twin sites of putative freedom, text and politics, once again interfere with one another rather than coinciding. While the gesture towards a theory of sovereignty is elegantly framed, it might be observed that Milton’s iconoclasm is more attuned to a progressive politics than the religious populism of the royalists. The “gap in ideology” that is exploited by Sidney’s shepherdess serves as a partial recontextualisation, through gender, of the contending ideologies of *Eikonoklastes* and *Eikon Basilike*. Although the network of associations that leads to speculation on broader issues of guilt, authority, sacrifice and authorship is complex, the core opposition of the poem is, perhaps, not sufficiently troubled by the gendered third term. This, in turn, has a tendency to reaffirm the association of ‘feminine’ writing with tropes of absence, indirection and fragmentedness: a willed inarticulacy that is enabling as a notion of poetic speech but inhibiting when it becomes the reserved domain of the feminine.¹ Once again, the twin ambitions of Howe’s poetry – to be at a “miraculous reach” from the world and conventional language use,² and at the same time to be involved in the rhetoric of politics – create immense tensions. In its efforts to reserve for itself a specifically poetic form of expression, the poem displays impatience with the political prose of *Eikonoklastes* and a concomitant attachment to the pathos of Charles’s execution. This

¹ There is an uncertainty in Howe’s work on this point. See *My Emily Dickinson*, 138: “Poetry leads past possession of self to transfiguration beyond gender.”

² *My Emily Dickinson*, 13.

thread in the work shortcircuits the poem's ethical ambitions and risks tipping into the kind of fascination with sanctified authority which provoked Milton's scornful dismantling of the Christological manoeuvres that hold the readers of the "King's Book" in thrall to "a Masking Scene [...] set there to catch fools and silly gazers".¹ Yet to dismiss the poem in this way would, in the end, be to ask the wrong questions of it: as if its primary value were as an encryption of topoi drawn from the literary and critical theories of its moment. While Howe surrounds her poetry with such critical discourses, *Eikon* resists such translation as much as it invites it.

¹ Milton (1649). 342.

iii) *Melville's Marginalia*: poetry and thought transference

Mettez cela dans votre pipe, et fumez-le, mon Public (James Clarence Mangan)¹

The concluding poem of *The Nonconformist's Memorial* is a long and immensely ambitious work in which Howe is to be found, once again, deep in the archives. On this occasion she is pursuing Melville. However, she does so indirectly, through the figure of the Irish writer James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849). The poem, like *Eikon*, soon immerses the reader in a welter of texts that collect around its subjects. A complex notion of intertextuality emerges from her researches that effects a marriage between Irish and American literary traditions. Beneath the voluminous paperwork generated by her researches – Melville's annotations to his own books, Mangan's bizarre faked 'translations', the visual dynamism of Shelley's manuscripts – is a powerful reflection on the unconscious processes activated in the reading process. However, although it pursues numerous obscure lines of literary connection – it is a poem of unofficial genealogies – it is certainly not simply a hymn to wayward scholarship. Indeed, it is one of Howe's most 'enthusiastic' poems, with a less equivocal endorsement of 'spirit' than is apparent in work such as *Thorow* or *Eikon* (where the sceptical prism of contemporary critical theory is more readily discernible).

Melville's Marginalia is both a meditation on relations between writers and a negotiation of Howe's own relationship to Irish and American literary identity. In place of the romanticism of her view of Ireland in "Western Borders" or "Cabbage Gardens" (both works of the 1970s) is a delicate appraisal of the figure of Mangan. The Irish author is approached through Howe's construction of Melville's response to his life and writing. Mangan shunned the English literary establishment and he remains an obscure figure in 'English' literature. In Ireland, however, he became a totemic author, greatly admired by Yeats.² Mangan was one of three authors (along with Davis and Ferguson) associated with the mid-19th-century Young Ireland movement about whom Yeats wrote brief essays in which he presented himself as the inheritor of a particular tradition of English-language Irish writing. Yeats makes the nature of his self-fashioning explicit in his poem "To Ireland in the Coming Times": "Know that I would accounted be/ True brother of a company/ That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong, Ballad and story, rann and song; [...] Nor may I less be counted one/

¹ James Clarence Mangan, cited in Sheridan, 59.

² See Swenson interview, 375, for the importance of Yeats: "Perhaps I'm obsessed with the spirits who inhabit a place because my mother brought me up on Yeats. Before I could read, I heard 'Down by the Salley Gardens' as a lullaby."

With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson". Yet, in his writing on Mangan, as with Howe's, the question of cultural nationalism is obliquely addressed – Yeats speaks more directly of the peculiarity of Mangan the "magician".¹ He writes of the "electric flashes" of Mangan's style and observes: "He never startles us by saying beautiful things we have long felt. He does not say look at yourself in this mirror; but, rather, 'Look at me – I am so strange, so exotic, so different.'"²

Although Howe does not mention Yeats's response to Mangan directly, Mangan's odd life in her poem resonates with the strangeness that Yeats imputed to him. Yeats's "electric flashes" provide a metaphor that is close to her descriptions of her own method of exploring the links between authors. In Howe's treatment of these issues the personal and epistolary links of literary biography do not figure large, however; and the question of 'influence' is approached in a highly unconventional manner. *Melville's Marginalia* does its work at the outer periphery of vision, encouraging speculative connections to radiate, like Yeats's "electric flashes" from the starting point of Melville's library. Howe's poem is proposing a rethinking of 'influence' that is highly dependent on the unconscious absorption of cultural motifs and on intuitive affinities between authors.

As with *Eikon*, the initial impetus for the poem lies in a work of scholarly arcana, in this case Wilson Walker Cowen's edition of Melville's marginalia, which, over two volumes, reproduces every passage from the books in Melville's collection that the author chose to mark or annotate. Howe's poem is especially concerned with Melville's edition of Mangan, and her *Melville's Marginalia* also accommodates a number of secondary works on Mangan, along with material by Shelley, Arnold and Joyce. As Howe notes in her preface, in the years following his death Mangan became known to American readers.³ The October 1851 issue of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, for example, carried a special Mangan feature as part of a series on Irish poets.⁴ The journal was part of the "Young America" movement, styled on the Young Italy, Young Poland and Young Ireland initiatives and dedicated to spreading

¹ Yeats (1891), 27, is citing the judgement of John Mitchel. Mitchel was a leader of the Young Ireland movement and the editor of the collection of Mangan poems that Melville owned.

² Yeats (1887), 25-26.

³ The 'Young America' movement was contemporaneous with the 'Young Ireland' movement associated with the *Dublin University Magazine*, to which Mangan was a prominent contributor. Rogin, 74, distinguishes between the literary Young America of the 1840s and the more explicitly political Young America that supplanted it.

⁴ See Leeds's 1851 article in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, which, Howe contends, influenced Mangan. The article, which discusses the range of Mangan's poetry and 'translations', briefly describes the miserable lot of the clerk in an Irish law firm. In the third part of the article, Leeds writes of Mangan that, "The strangest connections, whether of sense or rhyme, gave him infinite pleasure" (408).

the republican values of the American Revolution. The review published Hawthorne, Whitman and Thoreau and its editor, John O'Sullivan, was the inventor of the term "Manifest Destiny", a tag for the doctrine of westward expansion of the United States, including the annexation of Texas.¹ Publishing Mangan in the Young America's house journal was a means of stressing the movement's affinities with progressive European movements and of advancing an Anglophobic notion of anglophone literature. Howe, by approaching Melville through Mangan, is bringing together these strands of literary insurgence.

A number of relationships between authors are suggested in the poem: intensely personal ones such as that of Melville to Hawthorne or of Shelley to Byron, and literary relationships such as that of Melville or Joyce to Mangan.² However, a more unusual association dominates *Melville's Marginalia*: at the centre of the poem's first section is the speculative contention that Mangan, once a clerk, was the prototype of Melville's *Bartleby*.³ My chapter will be organised around the ramifications (but not the substance) of the claim that Howe makes when describing her examination of Melville's edition of Mangan's poems: "I saw the pencilled trace of Herman Melville's passage through John Mitchel's introduction and *knew by shock of poetry telepathy* the real James Clarence Mangan is the progenitor of the fictional *Bartleby*" (*MM*, 106; my italics).

The idea of 'poetry telepathy' in *Melville's Marginalia* is a variant of the ambivalent preoccupation with immediacy in Howe's work that I have discussed in earlier chapters. Howe uses the term as a way of discussing how one writer's words might be said to inhabit another. The word 'progenitor' might suggest a genealogy of direct influence but Howe's poem is closer to endorsing a combination of conscious and unconscious determination, with a strong emphasis on the latter. Far from a Bloomian agonism of generations, conducted in the shadow of Oedipus, I am positing a more casual dissemination of words, through which the presence of one author in another might be said to approximate the hermetic riddle of the transgenerational phantom, or undisclosed secret, discussed in my account of *The Liberties*. In other words, I will stress the enigmatic nature of such relations, which may depend less on any literary 'influence' than on Howe's distinctive form of strong reading for the connections to be retrospectively assigned by the latterday reader.

¹ See Rogin 70-73.

² Joyce wrote two papers on Mangan: a translation of the second of these, originally written in Italian and delivered in Trieste in 1907, is cited by Howe in the first section of her poem. Joyce, as we will see, was critical of aspects of Mangan's nationalism.

³ Like Charles I and Hope Atherton, Mangan has an effeminate quality (Howe cites the the *United States Magazine's* description of "the feminine softness of his voice". *MM* 107).

Howe cites a letter from Melville to Hawthorne in her introduction: "Ah! It's a long stage, and no inn in sight, and night coming, and the body cold. But with you for a passenger, I am content and can be happy" (*MM*, 91). The notion of incorporation or assimilation suggested by the word 'passenger' is important to the working of Howe's poem, as an index of the strangeness that citation can bring to a text. Elsewhere, Melville's letters to Hawthorne evoke an embattled community of explorers in virgin territory:

This most persuasive season has not for weeks recalled me from certain crotchety and over doleful chimearas, the like of which men like you and me and some others, forming a chain of God's posts round the world, must be content to encounter now and then, and fight them the best way we can. But come they will, for in the boundless, trackless, but still glorious wild wilderness through which these outposts run, the Indians do sorely abound, as well as the insignificant but still stinging mosquitoes.¹

Melville's "chain of God's posts" indicates a quasi-spiritual kinship among authors, who, in turn, are part of a cultural vanguard comprising "men like you and me and some others". Howe's "shock of poetry telepathy" is, like the title of her book *My Emily Dickinson*, a means of inserting herself as both reader and writer into this dialogue between authors. Telepathy is also comparable to the experience of grace in her reading of antinomianism, as it bypasses the written word.² Just as Hutchinson could claim an immediate religious encounter, so Howe suggests an intense form of communication that can accompany and transfigure the reading process. Perhaps, like Melville, she believes that "genius, all over the world, stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole world round".³ Yet her pursuit of the marginal, the excluded feminine and the silenced voices of the past indicates a more critical relation to Melville's global power-grid of geniuses. Rather than inducting herself into a questionable confraternity, Howe is celebrating the strangeness of the act of reading: the uncontainable and unpredictable short-circuits that are risked in one writer-reader's attempted assimilation of another's linguistic signature.

Howe notes how close the name "Mangan" is to "margin" (*MM*, 106). She also indicates that the margin is the "brink or brim of anything from telepathy to poetry" (*MM*, 92).

¹ Cited in the Wilson edition of the correspondence, 238.

² A key strand in the poem is its reflection on the relation between letter and spirit.

³ Cited in Walker Cowen, xiii.

thus bringing the marginal to the very centre of her research.¹ There are two kinds of 'telepathy' at work in the marginal excavations of *Melville's Marginalia*: the communication between the texts of the writers Howe addresses, and an extra-textual immediacy that both questions the importance of publication and, more than that (like *Bartleby's* reluctance to put pen to paper), leads, once again, to a theorisation of writing in quasi-metaphysical terms.

Howe's text neither assumes a fully self-determined poetic voice nor abandons itself to the voices of others. Still less does it perform the feat of assimilation suggested by the image of Melville's 'passenger'. Instead, her poem exists as a field of textual dynamism that could be represented in the figure of light that appears towards the end of the poem, or the Promethean creativity that Howe invokes through her treatment of the Shelleys. The poem is haunted by P.B. Shelley's death and his final manuscripts and my essay will ask whether, in the passage into book form, Howe's text also mourns a kind of death in the falling-off from the kinetic immediacy of "poetry telepathy".²

Approaching 70 pages in length, *Melville's Marginalia* was, on publication, Howe's longest poem series. While, as we have seen, Howe from *The Liberties* onwards prefaces some of her poems with explicatory introductions, the 'introduction' to *Melville's Marginalia* in fact comprises half of the total text. (There is a brief, separate 'Preface'.) Howe goes further than hitherto in her attempts to break down generic barriers: the first section is a combination of prose, often quite straightforward and often in the form of quotations, and highly fragmented verse texts. There is a sketch of Mangan's life; an account of Walker Cowen's *Melville's Marginalia*; a description of Howe's pursuit of her intuition that Mangan was the 'progenitor' of *Bartleby*; and several excerpts, typographically rearranged, from passages that Melville marked in his editions of Arnold.³ The second half of the poem mainly contains stanzas of 14 or 15 lines of even length, eschewing the series of single lines and couplets that Howe had hitherto often favoured. The effect of these stanzas is to give these parts of the poem a less discontinuous quality – although relationships between lines are often just as oblique, the compact blocks of text offer a less disjunctive reading experience.

Shelley appears in the first section (as a boy Mangan might have seen Shelley speak at a meeting held in his Dublin street) but he is a stronger presence in the second section.

¹ See also the previous page's "Margins speak of the fringes of consciousness or marginal associations".

² The front cover of *The Nonconformist's Memorial* is the last page from Shelley's notebooks – a sketch of a boat.

³ See Davidson for discussion of the ways in which Howe's textual montage "destroys the force of Arnold's condescending rhetoric and reveals its class biases" (88).

which draws in places on facsimiles of Shelley's notebooks.¹ There are four main parts to this second series of poems: a preliminary and a concluding section that are predominantly the words of Howe, and two middle sequences which draw heavily on Shelley and Mangan material.

In her first section, Howe describes the importance of Walker Cowen's *Melville's Marginalia* to her compositional method: "I began to write *Melville's Marginalia* by pulling a phrase, sometimes just a word or a name, at random from Cowen's alphabetically arranged *Melville's Marginalia* and letting that lead me by free association to each separate poem in the series" (*MM*, 105). This element of 'free association' guides my discussion of the poem's 'telepathic' concerns. Michael Davidson's powerful reading of Howe's dismantling of bourgeois aesthetics in her rearrangement of Arnold material presupposes a greater engagement on Howe's part with the precise content of the source material than Howe's "at random" would suggest. Both Howe's account of her methods and the dislocating experience of reading the poem indicate that her texts have more invested in the estranging effect of decontextualised citation than a close engagement with the aesthetics or politics of the source texts.

'Free association' is central to Howe's assertions about the affinities between poetry and telepathy: "Poetry is thought transference," she writes. And, immediately, "Free association isn't free" (*MM*, 105). With this formula Howe in fact follows Freud, who, in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, writes of two theorems that are fundamental to his clinical technique: "that when conscious purposive ideas are abandoned, concealed purposive ideas assume control of the current of ideas and that superficial associations are only substitutes by displacement for suppressed deeper ones."² This notion of a purposiveness operating at a level that exceeds readerly perception is central to the poetics of *Melville's Marginalia*. When Howe writes of "poetry telepathy" she might mean *poetic* telepathy but she seems to be suggesting an equivalence between the terms, especially as she goes on to say "poetry is thought transference". Neither poetry nor free association can escape the hidden hand of purposiveness.

Howe's theorisation of reading and writing through the paranormal concept of telepathy is reminiscent, once again, of aspects of the thought of Benjamin. In his "Surrealism" essay Benjamin discusses the "mysterious side of the mysterious":

¹ See Davidson, 90-92.

² Freud, *SE*, V, 531.

Any serious exploration of occult, surrealistic, phantasmagoric gifts and phenomena presupposes a dialectical entwinement to which a romantic turn of mind is impervious. For histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further: we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognise it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday. The most passionate investigation of telepathic phenomena, for example, will not teach us half as much about reading (which is an eminently telepathic process), as the profane illumination of reading about telepathic phenomena.¹

While one might be tempted to accuse Howe of just such an undialectical immersion in 'mystery' as that criticised by Benjamin, in *Melville's Marginalia* two factors rescue her from this trap – first, her interest in the 'everyday' materiality of the book, as is evidenced in her exploration of Melville's library and, more importantly, her commitment to something akin to the "profane illumination" of reading. This latter is, finally, what I take Howe to mean by "poetry telepathy": an experience of reading that is grounded in the physicality of the book but which opens on to the "impenetrable", finding a visionary potential in the encounter with the words on the page.

Free association is not free: telepathy and genealogy

Howe approaches Melville indirectly, by means of his readings of other authors. In her preface she writes: "I thought one way to write about a loved author would be to follow what trails he followed through words of others" (*MM*, 92); and, in the first part of the poem: "If there are things Melville went looking for in books so too there were things I looked for in Melville's looking" (*MM*, 105). Howe's opening chronology lists such diverse events as Shelley's speech on Fishamble Street, Mangan's death in 1849, and the appearance in the US four years later of another 'scrivener', *Bartleby*. Then, in her preface, Howe cites an extract from Melville's journal that describes a visit to the grave of Shelley (*MM*, 89). Howe is motivated, perhaps, by Walker Cowen's speculation, in his own preface, that Shelley's relationship with Byron put Melville in mind of his own with Hawthorne.² From these details Howe constructs links between the writers:

¹ Benjamin (1929), 236-7.

² See Walker Cowen, vol 1, xxxiii.

Shelley functions as a kind of thread linking Mangan to Melville. He is associated with the young Mangan and with the older Melville, and his death is linked to the abject deaths of Mangan and Bartleby. It is not merely Hawthorne that Melville carries as a 'passenger' – he is carrying other authors as foreign objects too, and Howe's poem is an attempt to give voice to some of these relationships.

The link between Mangan and Shelley is also made by Joyce in an earlier version of the paper on Mangan cited by Howe: "[...] in 'Dark Rosaleen', [Mangan's poetry] does not attain to the quality of Whitman indeed, but is tremulous with all the changing harmonies of Shelley's verse".¹ Howe quotes from a lecture that Joyce gave in 1907. There are several pages missing from Joyce's manuscript and Howe's passage must break off at the point at which Joyce is about to declare the "memorial" that Mangan "would have wished" (*MM*, 109).² In another part of Joyce's lecture (a point that is unclear in Howe's extract) Joyce criticises Mangan for what he perceives to be his enslavement to nationalistic *ressentiment*: "Love of sorrow, desperation, high-sounding threats, these are the great traditions of James Clarence Mangan's race; and, in that miserable, reedy and feeble figure, a hysteric nationalism receives its final justification."³ The phrase "love of sorrow" in the Joyce essay is one of several that echo the language of Mitchel's introduction to his edition of Mangan's poems – in this case "Mangan revelled in the expression of passionate sorrow". Howe cites Mitchel's formulation (*MM*, 131) and it is clear that, in another of the poem's literary conjunctions, she, Joyce and Melville are working from the same edition of Mangan.

Howe addresses Mangan directly in the first part of the poem – "You are everywhere in Joyce's writing. [...] Your sister is there in 'Araby'" (*MM*, 108) – and the words "Beatrice" (*MM*, 142) and "Araby" (*MM*, 139) both occur in the second section of her poem.⁴ In his lecture Joyce writes of Mangan's early attachment to a female pupil and he also describes Mangan's dedication to an exotic "imaginative personality" which he compares to "Vittoria Colonna, Laura and Beatrice."⁵ A version of this figure

¹ Joyce (1902), 57.

² *Melville's Marginalia* gives 1904; the Oxford edition of the text gives 1907.

³ Joyce (1907), 136. The editor of this text, Kevin Barry, 300, points out the links between Joyce's Mangan and the character Davin in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Mangan's description of his father as a "human boa-constrictor" in the autobiographical fragment in *The Poets and Poetry of Munster* (xxxvi) reappears in *Finnegans Wake's* "myfnadher was a boer constructor".

⁴ See Stone's commentary on "Araby", 348. Stone writes of Joyce's admiration for Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen", dedicated to "a girl who represents Ireland, physical love and romantic adoration", and suggests that Joyce's short story is a variation on Mangan's poem. See also Muldoon, 103-104, where Mangan's translation "The Brightest of the Bright" is discerned in the vocabulary of Joyce's "The Dead".

⁵ Joyce (1907), 132.

reappears in Joyce's story "Araby", in *Dubliners*, in which the protagonist becomes infatuated with his friend Mangan's sister.

With Melville's library at the centre, Howe is exploring the links between Irish cultural nationalism and poetics. Yet, Howe approaches this tangentially. In Joyce's paper "the poet who hurls his anger against tyrants would establish upon the future an intimate and far more cruel tyranny."¹ But Howe's poem, on the other hand, finds in the very effeminacy of the "miserable, reedy and feeble figure" a stranger vocation, as his "passionate sorrow" is transposed to Bartleby's sceptical quietism. *Melville's Marginalia* uproots Mangan from his minor place in Joyce Studies and inserts him into an alien tradition. Howe's attachment to such correspondences, with its flouting of temporal and national demarcations, plays predominantly on half-buried textual affinities and ranges in its speculations far beyond the sphere of conscious influence.

Davidson describes Howe's response to the texts of the past thus: "The sea change wrought by poet musing on poet, verso bleeding through recto, is the explicit subject of Howe's 1991 work in *Melville's Marginalia*, in which she discovers Shelley quite literally in the margins of Melville's reading."² Yet, the relationship is more than one of "musing" – rather, the nature of 'telepathic' intertextuality is more proper to Freud's "suppressed deeper" associations and, through a different theoretical prism, to Benjamin's profane illumination of "thought transference". There is no doubt that the poem examines a considered set of 'musings' of the kind that Davidson proposes but, in the beginning and end of the second section of the poem, the linguistic paths that Howe follows are far harder to tie to source texts. Without such unpredictable and impenetrable passages the poem would indeed be closer to a meditation on 'influence'. However it has less direct ways of communicating its ideas of literary affinity. Howe's work can be seen to combine archaeological and architectural stances towards the text: on one hand it attempts to attune itself to the obscure channels of communication between literary works, on the other it is a highly considered shaping of the material at hand.

Describing an analogous combination of recovery and elaboration in the psychoanalytic setting, Christopher Bollas compares the task of recollection to the creative work of historians in re-envisioning the past:

¹ Ibid.

² Davidson, 84.

[The] movement of the real upon the self has the effect of giving the self the feel of its own many deaths; but in a psychoanalysis this past, transformed into a history, gives the real a place that is open to the continuously transformative workings of the imaginary and symbolic, the very movement that Freud termed *Nachträglichkeit*, translated into English as “deferred action” or into French as *après coup*.¹

Bollas writes from the perspective of the present assimilation of the past. His account of the creative work of reconstruction is comparable to Howe’s work on Melville’s marginalia, following “what trails [Melville] followed through words of others” (*MM*, 92). A good deal of the poem is devoted to present transformations of the past – her text is a reconsideration of those that cluster in the margins of Melville’s library. Yet, it is certainly not the case that Howe arrives, even momentarily, at a satisfactory narrative that would explicate the links between Mangan, Melville, Hawthorne, Shelley, Byron and Joyce. What she is performing, in her ‘free’ association, places her in the word-filled space between the analyst’s chair and the couch: she offers evidence of a series of connections but she is both unwilling and unapologetically incapable of imposing an interpretative narrative. This is partly due to her conviction that the traumatic ‘real’ is in some final sense irrecoverable – the poet can only track its affective impact on the texts she examines and produces.

However, there is another way of looking at *Nachträglichkeit*, a view which reverses the priority of past and present and which is reflected more in Strachey’s English translation, “deferred action”. From this angle, the emphasis is forwards rather than backwards, on the action of past trauma on the present. In this version of *Nachträglichkeit* the emphasis is on the unassimilable event, such as the infant’s experience of desire, which reappears subsequently to provoke the interpretations of the sexualised adult. The initial experience, therefore, is a kind of ‘time-bomb’.² Here, once again, we are close to the formula “history is Postdated Prophesie” (*Articulation*, 4) – the past is considered from the perspective of its action on the present, rather than as the subject of later reconstruction.

Thus, at the same time as reading *Melville’s Marginalia* as a creative reconstruction of the reciprocal connections between earlier authors, we can interpret Howe’s response to these authors in the light of their action on her: she makes herself receptive to the

¹ Bollas, 143. See Nicholls (2002) for a different construction of the role of *Nachträglichkeit* in Howe’s work.

² Laplanche, 261.

action of buried textual strands within Irish and American literature. Her position (characterised earlier in my discussion of the early poems as poised between the alert passivity of the medium and the organising activity of the editor) preserves the doubleness of *Nachträglichkeit*, containing both its forward-facing and retrospective orientations – what might be described, in the vocabulary of Jean Laplanche, as its “deterministic” and its “hermeneutic” moments.¹

However, while Laplanche’s translation of *Nachträglichkeit* – ‘afterwardsness’ – is intended to incorporate both these elements, Laplanche still finds the concept insufficient as a way of theorising the relation between the present and a founding trauma. This is because of the constitutive part played by the desire of the adult – an affective force that would be incomprehensible to the infant – in the traumatic event. In other words, standard formulations of *Nachträglichkeit* concentrate on the psychoanalytic subject to the exclusion of the other who is present at the initiating moment of the trauma. Laplanche’s “Copernican Revolution” is to reinsert the enigmatic and unintelligible messages of the other’s desire into Freudian metapsychology:

It is impossible [...] to put forward a purely hermeneutic position on this – that is to say, that everyone interprets their past according to their present – because the past already has something deposited in it that demands to be deciphered, which is the message of the other person. [...] right at the start, there is something that goes in the direction of the past to the future, from the other to the individual in question, that is in the direction from the adult to the baby, which I call the implantation of the enigmatic message.²

To transpose this to the field of poetics is clearly to do a certain violence to Laplanche’s concept of the “enigmatic message” and I would certainly not contend that the resistant qualities in Howe’s writing are in any simple sense an untranslated communication of this enigma. However, in the context of the present discussion of temporality and genealogies, the concept can have a powerful and nuanced explicatory force. Howe’s writing is capable of representing trauma in both progressive (deterministic) and retrogressive (hermeneutic) fashions: the textual marks of past violence and dispossession in her work present themselves in her reorganisations of historical texts, which become a symptom of a disturbance that

¹ Ibid. 260-265.

² Laplanche. 265.

exerts a pressure on the present. At the same time, for all its difficulty, her work *is* a reorganisation of material and it does contain the kind of creative restructuring of the past that Bollas describes. If Howe has described her work as “a catastrophe of bifurcation” we might complicate this duality by insisting on the foreignness and heterogeneity of the texts she attempts to assimilate.¹ Indeed one might even say that her work is a failure of incorporation: caught in the cleft stick of *Nachträglichkeit*, the object remains unassimilated and its strangeness is not neutralised through full accommodation within Howe’s text.

Texts by Joyce, Mangan, Shelley, Arnold and Melville exist in *Melville’s Marginalia* but they are often decontextualised and, unless the reader follows Howe into the archive, often also invisible. Howe’s method of free associating around seed phrases from Walker Cowen’s compendium of marginalia also builds an element of resistant strangeness into her text. The method, combining the words of others with Howe’s ‘free’ association, increases the “impenetrable”, hallucinatory potential of reading by installing a question-mark over the relation between utterance and source.

The lines “according to/ Vallencey every Irishman is/ an Arab” (*MM*, 135), an unsourced citation from one of Mangan’s “Literae Orientales” essays, are a case in point.² Mangan is critical of the idea that linguistic scholars could seek a founding extrinsic authenticity for the Irish language in Oriental origins.³ In one of these essays, not present in *Melville’s Marginalia*, he disdains the “old Orientalism”, preferring to annexe a vagrant freedom for the imagination:⁴

The mind, to be sure, properly to speak is without a home on the earth. Ancestral glories, genealogical charts, and the like imprescriptible indescriptibles are favourite subjects with the composite being Man, who also goes now and then to the length of dying in idea for his fatherland – but for Mind – it is restless, rebellious – a vagrant whose

¹ Foster interview, 174.

² Lloyd makes a persuasive case for attaching certain postmodern motifs to Mangan. The phrase is discussed in Lloyd, 123-4. Lloyd remarks on the coexistence in George Moore’s *Lalla Rookh* of the “parallel fashions of Orientalism and Celticism”. Lloyd’s book on Mangan is cited in the first part of Howe’s poem. The words “Araby”, “Lalla” and “Rookh” occur in a poem in *Kidnapped*.

³Lloyd, 121. notes the importance to Irish cultural nationalism of Orientalist and philological theories that gave “a scientific orientation and therefore credibility to the tradition that placed the Eden of human origins in the Middle East.” Mangan published numerous ‘translations’, some of which were from tongues of which he had no knowledge.

⁴ Cited in Clifford, 95.

barren tracts are by no means confined to the space between Dan and Beersheba. It lives rather out of the world.¹

In citing Mangan, Howe perhaps wants her text to accommodate the Orientalism alluded to in the title of Joyce's "Araby" and present in the writings of Byron and Shelley.² Yet the phrase that she cites, "every Irishman is an Arab", is the opposite of Mangan's position, which is to confront an ideology of origins and authenticity with the veil, the cloak, fakery and the nomadism of Cain.³ One aspect of the 'afterwardsness' of Howe's text lies in this preservation of the remnants of a once-faddish Orientalist exoticism in her poem. This element is so decontextualised that it almost fails to communicate anything other than its own strangeness – "every Irishman is an Arab". Behind this strangeness is the ambivalence about origins and fictiveness that is present in many of her poems. The link between the initial context of the phrase – a debate within Irish cultural nationalism – and its reappearance in *Melville's Marginalia* is almost severed. Yet, the foreign material is never fully assimilated. The presence of extraneous texts in such abundance ensures that the disturbance in Howe's text is not in the full possession of the author. This foreign material is subsumed to the exigencies of her own voice through its identifiable formal signature, but that voice can never hope to contain the conflicting energies of the complexes of thought that it touches on. The fragments that she cites contain traces of other desires and imperatives – something akin to Laplanche's 'enigmatic messages' – that are entirely alien to her text and whose associative potential continually exceeds it.

Howe cites a passage from the 17th century playwright Philip Massinger that opens Mangan's "A Fragment from an Unfinished Autobiography": "A heavy shadow lay/ On that boy's spirit: he was not of his fathers" (*MM*, 87).⁴ While Mangan is clearly having a stab at his "boa-constrictor" of a father, the phrase also evinces an unease with national identification. The words, which can be aligned with Howe's poetry's

¹ Cited in Clifford, 94.

² See, for example, Shelley's "Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude" (1816) and Byron's "The Corsair" (1814).

³ Mangan wrote of "the veil of Sais", an image of veiled beauty prominent in the German Romantic tradition (see Lloyd, 125); he described himself as "the man in the cloak"; his 'translations' were often pure invention; and described the mind as "a Cain who may build cities, but can abide in none of them" (cited in Clifford, 94). There are also links between Mangan and Byron in the figure of Cain. See Lloyd, 194 and *Melville's Marginalia*, 140, for reference to Cain. The emphasis on insincerity and artifice is an extension of similar points in *Defenestration* and *Eikon*.

⁴ See Lloyd, 159-188, for a psychoanalytic account of citation in Mangan's work, which is organised around the father and which "fundamentally resists assimilation to a nationalist tradition of autobiography predicated on the cancellation of debt through the sublimation of a paternal figure of originality" (187).

abundant anxieties about paternity, display, once again, something of Howe's desire to query origins. When Howe also cites a phrase from a parish register that lists the deceased Massinger as a "stranger" on his burial, she is herself applying a principle of strangeness or otherness to her text – not in the sense of the ubiquitous 'other' of contemporary critical discourse but in a more delimited sense, that of the presence of unassimilable literary material in her texts (*MM*, 83).

Poetry is thought transference: Bartleby's potential

In addition to the investigation of textual otherness or externality in the poem, *Melville's Marginalia* directs its attention to the hinge between Being and non-Being. This element of the poem can be read as a continuation of the treatment of Ovidian metamorphosis and Ophelia's death in *Pythagorean Silence*, and of incarnation in *The Nonconformist's Memorial*. It has broader affinities with the recurrent figure of the dividing line in Howe's work, from *Hinge Picture* or the territorial demarcations of her later American poems to the semi-transparent interleaf inserted in the recent *Kidnapped* to indicate a "relational space".¹ In exploring this set of ideas I will draw on Agamben's discussion of Bartleby in his 1999 book *Potentialities*, not only because of its powerful theorisation of Bartleby's inertia, but also because of the essay's links to Howe's conception of antinomianism and to the Promethean language of light and fire towards the end of *Melville's Marginalia*.

Agamben finds in Bartleby a figure who might be linked to the Sceptics, especially as summarised by the writing of Diogenes Laertius on Pyrrho of Elis in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, a book that Melville owned and which was published in the year that he wrote *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. For the Sceptics, writes Agamben, "what shows itself on the threshold between Being and non-Being, between sensible and intelligible, between word and thing" is the space of "potentiality", a point that is neither positive nor negative but which is simply the "luminous spiral of the possible".² Agamben describes a position of generative stasis which derives its productive potential from the ability to at once be and not be. Bartleby's suspended state of being, contends Agamben, is Melville's approximation of this sceptical avoidance of affirmation or denial:

¹ Howe (2002), 18.

² Agamben, 257. This is clearly a different conception to that of the negative, explored earlier in this thesis. Often, however, the category of Nothing and the aporetic guarantor of the Law in Howe are generative.

As a scribe who has stopped writing, Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality. The scrivener has become the writing tablet; he is now nothing other than his white sheet. It is not surprising, therefore, that he dwells so obstinately in the abyss of potentiality and does not seem to have the slightest intention of leaving it.¹

In Howe's poem, behind the jostling textual fragments, is a linking of Bartleby's intransigence to Mangan. Howe mentions certain aspects of Mangan that might have drawn Melville to him, notably the "poet's occupation as scrivener, the 'feminine softness of his voice', the political rebellion in his writing, and his death by starvation in the city of Dublin" (*MM*, 107). But, beneath this, beyond the fascination with the details of Mangan's life, is a reimagining of the Irish writer as a chaotic precursor of the figure to whom Melville brought such austerity and rigour. Howe finds that Mangan's "restless, rebellious", "vagabond" mind, his appetite for intoxication and his dandyishness – the various ways, in short, in which he rejected his straitened circumstances – are refined in Bartleby into a pure ethic of refusal.

While it might appear strange to suggest that a poem over 60 pages long can share a poetics with the verbally parsimonious Bartleby, especially in Agamben's metaphysically pregnant reading, it is possible to argue that the "stutter" that Howe links, via Olson, to Melville is a form of hesitancy that reaches its apogee in the scrivener. A stutter is, after all, a way of returning speech to a moment of suspension analogous to that of Bartleby. Howe's poetic method is, as each of my preceding chapters has argued in one way or another, characterised by disjunction. There is a moment of arrest that prevents language flowing, through the normal syntactical routes, from one thing to another. To take an example of this characteristic of the work, here is a page from the beginning of the poem's second section:

Wearied human language
take me so that I no longer
am perpetually dispersed
and appear not to know
When I wander far off
roughened and wrought human

¹ Agamben, 253-254.

to the matter of fact
Refuting and chastising
Love a secret between two
Certainty decreed to go
They are always marked

MM, 114

In these lines there is a repeated threat of blankness. Enjambment is possible with the first four lines but is unlikely elsewhere. Nonetheless a continuation of sense remains a potential that the reader cannot help but explore. Each line stands under threat of effacement by the succeeding line (an effect which is more noticeable at a reading). The cumulative effect of this appearance and disappearance of linguistic fragments gives the same prominence to the silent moment at which sense and syntax are disrupted as to the actual words of the text. With “When I wander far off/ roughened and wrought human/ to the matter of fact”, for example, the reader has with each new line-unit to break off and begin again. The meaning, moreover, of a line such as “roughened and wrought human” is so elusive that the reader is urged to look outside the line for a completion of sense which is withheld. The character of Howe’s poetry is shaped by this dependence on the unsounded shifts in direction that it demands of the reader. It is here that the evanescent presence of the stutter – and Bartleby in particular in this poem – is located in the text.

Howe’s reading of Bartleby, whose suspended pen is the embodiment of a potentiality that evades the deadly fixity of print, draws on her antinomian understanding of grace.¹ In her *Birth-mark* collection of essays she describes Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” as “an antinomian gesture”.² In the same book she writes, as we have seen, of Dickinson’s “gesture of infinite patience in preferring not to publish.”³ In her *Village Voice* conversation with Robert Creeley she admires the invisibility of Emily Dickinson and George Herbert: “There is some metaphysical thing about the word and perishability, and about having an audience,” she tells Creeley.⁴ And, in her interview with Charles Bernstein, she remarks that, with Anne Hutchinson’s “instant infusion” of grace, “The moment a word’s put on a page, there’s a kind of death [...] but if it wasn’t put on the page there’d be another kind of death.”⁵

¹ Agamben, 270, sees Bartleby as a Messiah dedicated to the negative task of saving “what was not”, thus distinguishing his reading from that of Deleuze, who reads Bartleby as the “New Christ”.

² *Birth-mark*, 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 1. see, again, my account of Anne Hutchinson’s importance to *Articulation*.

⁴ *Village Voice*, 22.

⁵ Bernstein interview (n.p.).

Howe's antinomian understanding of Bartleby's hesitation is a preservation of the dynamism of that moment between those two kinds of death – silence or the mediatedness of print. Agamben is again close to Howe when he extends his reading of Bartleby with an analysis of the phrase "On errands of life, these letters speed to death".¹ Noting Bartleby's possible former occupation in the dead letter office, Agamben reads this sentence in the context of Paul: "But now we are delivered from the Law, that being dead where we were held; that we should serve in the newness of spirit, not in the oldness of the letter" (Romans 7:6).² This returns us to Anne Hutchinson's appeal to Paul during her trial, when she criticises those who are "ministers of the letter and not the spirit".³ *Melville's Marginalia* is sympathetic to a reading that would organise itself around an aesthetic of hesitancy. The appeal to telepathy, too, as an invocation of a putative extra-textual conduit of communication, can be understood in terms of spirit rather than the letter.

Howe's comments reveals a fascination with the passing of a moment of pure intellection into the material world. The poem, paradoxically, seeks to communicate a moment prior to its own appearance in print. Bartleby's hesitation captures the compacted potential for expression of this moment. The antagonism between spirit and letter is particularly evident in the closing passages of Howe's poem, where there is a nexus of treatments of light, print and immediacy. The poem's final 12 pages, while they contain allusions to Byron, Shelley and Shakespeare, are apparently free of the extensive line-by-line citation of the middle section of the poem-series. As the poem draws to a close there is a growing sense of religious enthusiasm. The book's final poem opens into a space in which an intense light is perceptible – "Light in which we were rushing" (*MM*, 150) – an echo, perhaps of Anne Hutchinson's "I think the soule to be Nothings but Light."⁴ Against the dead letter of the law, Howe offers a term which locates life in immediacy.⁵

The lines "So essay caustic perjured mirth/ perilous mirth of Jacobean tragedy" and "no cloak smothers my mirth" (*MM*, 143) initiate the closing pages with dangerous laughter.⁶ The thread of disorder continues with the following page's "Tradition wild imagination", another example of Howe's familiar valorisation of 'uncolonised' interior space. The poem seems here to be affirming an association with Mangan's

¹ Agamben, 269.

² Ibid. See also *Eikon's* "Paul also was Romans 7" (*Eikon*, 76).

³ See my discussion of *Articulation*. Agamben, *ibid.*, notes this phrase too.

⁴ Hall, 356.

⁵ See Howe's question in *Birth-mark*, 16: "What is the nature of epistolary enthusiasm?" – for a different kind of letter.

⁶ The latter phrase may be a citation or an allusion to Mangan's predilection for cloaks.

vagrancy – “you know not what a vagabond I am!” (MM, 104).¹ The following page contains, on the second line, “The delirium of enthusiasm”, a phrase that requires to be read against the poem’s closing “Dominion sere imagination”, which suggests the withering effects of political tyranny.² The strand comes to a halt with “Soothe say a wild/ an unimagined song” and “Certain it is wild” (MM, 148).

This ‘wild’ and unfettered thread is interwoven with another which has its roots earlier in the poem, in a page which appears to derive from the facsimiles of Shelley’s notebooks:

Shelley’s pen slipped
referring to the Sun
Isle Continent Ocean
The date July 1st 1822
across “?fury” may be
“day” or “fiery”
by mischief superimposed on *wild*
tercet mask tercet

(MM, 119)

Here the almost illegible manuscript presents the editor with a wildness that is associated with sun and fire. Howe may have intended a further allusion to Joyce’s *Dedalus* but the stronger association is with Prometheus, revolutionary hero of Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* and the mythical figure behind Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. Prometheus is both the thief of fire and the creator of man. In the poem’s closing sequence “Because he stole the light” (MM, 146) reasserts the poem’s Promethean set of associations. In the world of Howe’s poem, this light can be understood as a refusal of the printed word: the moment of suspended law that she discusses in her *Linebreak* interview, and the “direct experience [...] that had no use for print”.

The phrase “Printing ruins it” (MM, 147) is set against the “spatter” and “splatter” of ink. The opposition between printing and an inspired immediacy that is represented by Hutchinson’s soul-light association is a key theme of *Melville’s Marginalia’s* final

¹ From a paragraph from Mangan’s “My Bugle, and How I Blow It”, excerpted in the first section of Howe’s poem. This sense of restless motion echoes Melville’s “Lord, when shall we be done changing?”, from the letter to Hawthorne cited by Howe.

² Prometheus was for Shelley a reimagining of Milton’s Lucifer; Byron’s Cain, also commemorated in this closing sequence of Howe’s poem, was allied with Lucifer.

page, 150. The phrase “rushing light”, taken from Shelley’s *Masque of Anarchy*, is central. The poem’s second line is “Light in which we were rushing.” There is an unidentified ‘we’ and ‘he’ in the lines but the “rushing light”, an indication of ‘spirit’, finds its translation into the dead letters of print with “[...] you know print settles it” and “print is sentinel so sages say”.¹ The poem’s final two lines, “Obedience we are subjects Susan/ Scared millions and on he rushed” sketch an impression of subjectedness in language but offer a final escape route, located in the kinetic Promethean potentiality of the closing pages of the poem.

Howe’s investment in manuscripts – Shelley’s notebooks, Emily Dickinson’s fascicles and, later in her career, those of CS Peirce – is reflected in the attention she devotes to the experience of writing, the experience that is so searchingly examined in *Bartleby*. Even though Howe’s work repeatedly returns to archives, something of the energetic immediacy of “poetry telepathy” is lost when a work passes into general circulation in its printed form. The attachment to libraries is accompanied by a contradictory affinity with the isolation she associates with Dickinson and Herbert, indicated perhaps by the penultimate page’s “voiceless reclusion veil/ Between ourself and the story” (*MM*, 149).

These ruminations at the end of the poem are anticipated by the epigraph to the entire book, a passage from Mary Shelley’s *Journal* that is marked in Melville’s edition of *Shelley Memorials*: “The enthusiast suppresses her tears, crushes her opening thoughts, and – all is changed.”² By choosing this passage, Howe is forcing a line to be drawn linking Mary Shelley to Melville. Although the text scarcely engages with Melville’s writings, his absence becomes a negative space towards which all other lines tend. For Mary Shelley, the intense seclusion of the enthusiast harbours a generative, law-smashing energy, much as *Bartleby*’s Messianic rebellion is characterised by withdrawal. *Bartleby*’s ‘potentiality’, suspended between being and non-being, action and passivity, harbours a transformative impetus that is anticipated in Mary Shelley’s “all is changed”. One of the poem’s ironies is that the cultural nationalism of Yeats or John Mitchel and the different engagements with liberatory politics of Byron or Shelley are given less prominence than the destabilising quietism and hesitancy of *Bartleby* or the vagabond eccentricity of Mangan.

¹ The twinning of rushing light and grace also appears in *Birth-mark*, 47: “A poem can prevent onrushing light going out. Narrow path in the teeth of proof. Fire of words will try us. Grace given to few. Coming home through bent and bias for the sake of why so.”

² Walker Cowen, volume 2, 508. The choice of this epigraph may also be related to the death of Howe’s husband, David von Schlegel, in 1992.

Telepathy and lyric temporality

'Prometheus' means "forethought" and Howe's Promethean reflections on the immediacy of poetic thought lead in the direction of the questions of temporality that have concerned us earlier. Again, Agamben offers a helpful way into these questions. Melville's innovation with *Bartleby*, in his view, was to give a retrospective dimension to the poised quality of potentiality – Melville's character, he argues, implicitly unsettles the "irrevocability of the past" by installing a potential not-to-be alongside past events.¹ Agamben reads this idea of the past alongside a passage of Benjamin that confers a redemptive potential on remembrance:

What research has established can be modified by remembrance. Remembrance can make the incomplete (happiness) complete, and the complete (pain) incomplete. This is theology – but the experience of remembrance forbids us to conceive of history in a fundamentally atheological manner, even as we are not allowed to write history directly in theological concepts.²

This passage, with "theology" understood as the capacity for a redemptive reimagining of past eventualities, depends on a dialectic between history and theology that is analogous to that between the everyday and the impenetrable, reading and telepathy. The "dialectical optic" opens history on to the possibility of a transformative remembrance.³

Howe's close interest in the moment before the 'death' of print can be projected backwards to restore to manuscripts the "immediate infusion" of grace – a retrospective glance that captures the past's potential to have been otherwise. Her focus on light, grace and enthusiasm in the closing pages of *Melville's Marginalia* works in tandem with her desire to restore the voices of the dead, even if these only emerge as an affective disturbance in poetic speech. Her ironically sober expository prose in much of the first section masks a potential for the "delirium of enthusiasm" (*MM*, 105) – the hallucinatory potential of the everyday or the reading process – to transform the facts of recorded literary history (Shelley, for example, making a speech on Fishamble Street) into a volatile constellation of surprising contiguities. The poem thus counterposes Promethean artifice with Joyce's *Dedalus*, for example, or reads

¹ Agamben, 266.

² Cited in Agamben, 267, but unreferenced. The phrase derives from a response to a letter of Horkheimer in the *Arcades* project (Benjamin, 1999, 471, where it appears in a slightly different translation).

³ See my discussion of the opposition between memory and history in my account of *The Liberties*.

Anne Hutchinson's embrace of spirit into Melville by means of a Pauline rejection of the dead letter. Considered visually, the moments when Howe's poem breaks up across the page is similarly a transgression of the imperatives of print which reasserts the "rushing light" that precedes the fixing of typography.

Howe's preface to *Melville's Marginalia* includes a passage by Mangan in which he proudly asserts his vagabondage. The passage concludes with a description of a stasis that he cannot achieve and a reckless pun: "Other men sojourn for life in the country of their choice; there is a prospect of ultimate repose for most things; even the March of Intellect must one day halt; already we see that pens, ink, and paper are – stationary" (*MM*, 104). Melville's extension of Mangan in *Bartleby*, whose defining desire is "I like to be stationary", allows the Mangan figure to "repose", but in abstracting him from his wandering vocation, endows him with a more abstract capacity to roam.¹ This investment in motion and change is hypostatized in the figure of *Bartleby*, arrested between being and non-being.

Bartleby, then, represents a "stationary" quality that is pregnant with the possibility of expression. The chaotic figure of Mangan, prolix and hostile to stasis, is captured and his restless energy becomes a kind of potentiality. When, towards the end of Melville's story, *Bartleby* is imprisoned in "the Tombs", it is because he is a "vagrant".² So, in the two figures, Howe brings together inertia and wandering. Howe's "Lyric for crossing over" (*MM*, 149) captures this doubled quality, another version of the tension between fixity and non-fixity that is often apparent in her work. The conclusion to the poem communicates, in the image of light, the extra-textual dynamism that Howe's concept of "poetry telepathy" seeks to communicate.

Howe negotiates the redemptive potential of remembrance in a way that infiltrates the hesitant syntax of her poem. To take an example, I will look at the final page:

Spoke of the hearts of the poor
Light in which we were rushing
Life is so the merchant either
gains the shore both hands full
of dollars or else one day waves
wash him up on that sandbar so

¹ Melville (1853). 126. "I like to be stationary" is the epigraph to the second, "Conversion" section of the book *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (43).

² *Ibid.* 127.

what and Massinger smiled and he
said you know print settles it
Out of view of the rushing light
print is sentinel so sages say
Dollars he said and hoped they'd
have made a bed for him then he
would call whatever gaol a goal
Obedience we are subjects Susan
Scared millions and on he rushed

MM. 150

The relation of grammar to line break in these lines can be understood in the light of Lacan's comment on the *Nachträglichkeit* of syntax, the sentence that completes "its signification only with its last term, each term being anticipated in the construction of the others, and, inversely, sealing their meaning by its retroactive effect".¹ In Howe's writing, the nature of the line breaks and the play with deferral cause the kind of retrospective closure described by Lacan to be both anticipated and suspended.

The poem offers diverse interpretative possibilities. Some lines, such as the first two, stand alone. Others allow the potential for the enjambment to run over several lines. The reader could plausibly imagine the following as a discrete syntactical unit (although the sense is stretched): "the merchant either/ gains the shore both hands full/ of dollars or else one day waves/ wash him up on that sandbar so/ what and Massinger smiled and he/ said you know print settles it".

The sense of line four could end with 'full' or line five with 'waves' (which could be understood as a verb). The line break "...so/ what..." is an abrupt shift from the promise of explication to a verbal shrug. None of the lines in the poem is a full sentence, although "Out of view of the rushing light" is a complete clause. The last two lines, "Obedience we are subjects Susan" and "Scared millions and on he rushed" each appear to be composed of two distinct parts. To sum up, the line is usually not a satisfactorily sense-bearing or syntactical unit. Syntactical parts sometimes occupy more than a line, sometimes less. Enjambment is an option in places and not in others. The dynamism of the poetry consists in its ability to bump up against the line break, without it being clear whether it will stop short or press on. The syntactical units may rest within the line or extend over several lines, or the reader may exercise choice in

¹ Lacan, 303.

the matter. The result is a constant questioning of the relation between greater and smaller parts and a repeated deferral of the reconciliation of wholeness. This play between different kinds of anticipation, although very skilfully worked, is not of course unique in post-Olsonian verse: the distinctiveness of the writing inheres in the combination of these methods with particular lexical fields.

In terms of temporality this might be expressed both as an unfulfilled promise and as a backward look that cannot achieve the comfort of reconciliation.¹ Thought in terms of Laplanche's formulation of *Nachträglichkeit*, neither the forward-falling shadow of the 'determining' moment, nor the backward interpretation of the 'hermeneutic' perspective succeeds in imposing intelligibility. The pervasive citation and the continual deferral of the meaning-making contract between writer and reader create an effect of suspension. This is both a realisation of Bartleby's hesitation and a capture of the moment at which a text has the potential to be otherwise.

The lines on this page (bar the penultimate one) vary in length, containing between six and nine syllables. Yet they are of approximately equal length on the page – the visual contingency of typography is an ordering device. The line break is experienced as the intervention of an otherness that applies an extraneous, almost arbitrary authority on the broken elements of the language. With prior determination and retrospective interpretation equally in suspension, the enigmatic order of the linebreak is felt as a foreign structuring element.

Howe's poetry implies a complex of possibilities for the transaction between the past and the present. Rhyme and syntax offer both forward-looking and retrospective moments and each has the character of suspension. Her handling of both citation and the line break imposes, in different ways, a qualities of inscrutable externality that is comparable to the mysterious extraneous messages discussed in Laplanche's formulation of *Nachträglichkeit*. The quality of "remembrance" that colours Howe's sensitivity to the negative in history is, via Bartleby, a means of imagining the transformative potential of his intransigent refusal to put pen to paper. At the heart of *Melville's Marginalia* is a response to Melville. Although the approach to this "loved author" is indirect in the extreme, the poem is a thoroughgoing engagement with the implications of Bartleby's "antinomian gesture".

¹ See my account of *Articulation* for discussion of Denise Riley's notion of "retrospective knowledge" and a treatment of the ways in which sound offers a conciliatory undertow to syntactical brokenness.

Howe's poetry is, as we have seen, often ambivalent about the moment of charged immediacy that she associates with antinomianism. In *Melville's Marginalia* there are two contradictory impulses. On one hand there is a fascination with textual impurities: how authors can inhabit one another's texts and how Melville, for example, can be pursued through an eccentric "chain of God's posts round the world" – authors including the Shelleys, Byron and Joyce. On the other hand, beneath this palimpsest-like textual arrangement, is a profound investment in an intuition that is figured in terms of "spirit", "rushing" light and the emblem of pre-scriptive intellection that is Bartleby.

When the potential of Bartleby is conceived in temporal terms, as a historically rooted potential-to-speak, it is close to Howe's ambition to offer a voice to those denied speech by the historical record. Understanding history to contain a potential for utterance, Howe allows her poetry to accommodate something akin to Benjamin's "remembrance" – to make a fundamentally ethical judgement about poetic form and its capacity to communicate trauma. *Melville's Marginalia*, the last of her poems to be published before a six-year hiatus, found her moving towards her most fully achieved synthesis between the spiritual imperatives of grace and her desire to bring "similitude and representation to configurations waiting from forever to be spoken".¹

¹ *Leaves*, 14.

Conclusion: *The Nonconformist's Memorial*

Howe's reflections of grace and enthusiasm reach a synoptic breadth of utterance in this collection of poems. The preoccupation with the negative that has shadowed her poetry finds rich expression in the poem *The Nonconformist's Memorial* and *Silence Wager Stories*. This writing around divinity is reinflected with *Eikon's* treatment of sanctified authority. With the suspended pen of Bartleby in *Melville's Marginalia*, Howe finds an allegorical solution to a defining paradox in the poetry: the difficulty of articulating an experience of grace that, like the voices of the dead, appears to fall outside the expressive potential of language.

The Nonconformist's Memorial is divided into two sections, "Turning" and "Conversion", in what the book's back cover describes as "half-ironic non-conforming counterpoint to Eliot's *Four Quartets*". The poem I have not discussed, *Silence Wager Stories*, is brief, comprising 13 13-line sections. It is an extremely elusive work, dense with religious language and lines which suggest a response to the illness of Howe's husband and his death in 1992. As with *The Nonconformist's Memorial* a mystical tenor dominates the poem. The preoccupation of *Silence Wager Stories* with silence, darkness and inexpression aligns it with the concerns of the poem *The Nonconformist Memorial*. The second part of the collection explores the notion of the book as physical object, drawing out the implications of Bartleby's pun "I like to be stationary". While "Turning" addresses love at the religious or personal level, "Conversion" pursues a similar quality of intensity through the encounter with books. The quality of stasis that pervades the book can be read as a "half-ironic" and enthusiastic adaptation of the "still point" of *Four Quartets*.

With the exception of *Eikon* (the earliest poem in the collection), the poems of *The Nonconformist's Memorial* mark a shift from the large-scale reflections on violent conflict that lie behind the long poems of *The Europe of Trusts* and *Singularities*. Similarly, there is less concern with the nature of exile and the meeting of disparate cultures. The Irish-American channels of communication that interest Howe in *Melville's Marginalia* happen at a textual level, not that of the movement of populations. While figures such as Hope Atherton and William Johnson are outsiders who move between cultures, Mangan and Bartleby are insider-outsiders, foreigners within their own communities. The poems tilt away from endeavours such as *Thoreau's* exploration of colonialism and naming and towards the relation between religious experience and the experience of reading.

CONCLUSION

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". Howe assumes the identity of Antigone, consigned to a place from which speech is impossible. The corpse of Antigone's brother Polyneices is torn apart by wild dogs. Like Isis, and like Pound, gathering the limbs of Osiris, Howe seeks to achieve through the presentation of brokenness a kind of coherence. Her poetry strives to make itself adequate to a cultural landscape dominated by wreckage. 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. Yet Howe clings to the consolation offered by the transformative capacity of poetic language.

Howe's privileged speakers are women who undergo a metamorphosis or speak from a liminal space: Daphne, Ophelia, Florimell, Stella, Cordelia, Anne Hutchinson, Mary Magdalene, Arachne, Ariadne and Pamela. Mary Shelley's "all is changed" indicates the potential for such lyric transformation in the reader. These marginalised women speak at the borders of intelligibility, the place at which Howe sites her poetry. Enthusiasm is, for Howe, a way of returning poetic language back to a founding and uncoercible strangeness. A quality of outsideness – haunting, the enigmatic message, citation, the violence of the linebreak – allows the poetry, like Mr Dick's kite, to drift beyond the control of either writer or reader. The guidance that Howe offers her readers in some of her prefaces can diminish the peculiar shock of reading the poetry, and the critical reception of her work has been strongly influenced by such readily 'translatable' elements of the writing. The writing's greatest resource, however, is its ability to tap into an "understory" – a linguistic unconscious that permits communication of the kind that Howe calls "telepathy".

Howe's accomplishment in her poetry is her ability to effect the interpenetration of historical witness and grace. This contract between temporal and atemporal registers is unstable and it puts the poetry's competing ambitions under enormous pressure. The great problems that she sets herself in *Leaves* lead to a complex body of work that makes the resistance of interpretative endeavour almost a condition of its existence.

Later works – *Pierce-Arrow*, *Bed Hangings*, *Bedhangings II*, *Kidnapped* – pursue many of the themes discussed in this thesis. *Pierce-Arrow*'s protagonist, CS Peirce, is another of Howe's intellectual outsiders and the poem explores the visual aspects of his manuscripts in ways that recall Howe's interest in the manuscripts of Shelley and

Dickinson. The two *Bed Hangings* books examine the communication of cultural history through the motifs embroidered in the fabrics of the bed chamber. These short books mark a return to the figure of thread as a channel of communication. In the afterword to *Bed Hangings* Howe writes, “For Calvin the Bible contains two kinds of knowledge – ecstatic union and law” (n.p.). Yet the late poetry is less driven by this antinomy than the earlier work. Howe has moved away from the public poetry of the 1980s and early 1990s to a form of quietism, in which humour, a quizzical prose style and autobiography play a more prominent role. The assimilation of poetry to mystical immediacy is a less urgent imperative and the great figures of divine, paternalistic authority that cast a shadow over earlier work no longer appear.

Kidnapped is a return to her mother’s family and Anglo-Irish identity. ‘Spirit’, in this work, now resides in the book itself. Howe thus develops concerns present in both *Eikon* and *Melville’s Marginalia*. *Kidnapped* opens with a prose piece (prose dominates the work) which revolves around the books that belonged to her Uncle John. These books are described through an adaptation of the Winnicottian term “transitional object” (*Kidnapped*, 20). They become the physical vessels of feeling, history and spirit. “Maybe one reason I am so obsessed with the spirits who inhabit these books,” writes Howe, “is because my mother brought me up on Yeats as if he were Mother Goose” (*Kidnapped*, 21). Howe here imagines the ‘telepathy’ that binds Mangan, Shelley and Melville operating at an even more fundamental level in her relation to Yeats. It is through the maternal gift of Yeats, an affect-laden bridge between her mother and the world, that Howe offers a revised description of the formation of her own voice, as a “separatist”:

She clung to William’s words by speaking them aloud. So there were always three dimensions visual textual auditory at once. Waves of sound connected us, by associational syllabic magic to an original but imaginary place existing somewhere across the ocean between the emphasis of sound and the emphasis of sense. I loved listening to her voice. I felt my own vocabulary as something hopelessly mixed at the same time hardened into glass.

Kidnapped, 22

The constituent elements of this passage – tradition, cultural displacement, the intensity of familial emotion – shift the emphasis in the inauguration of her poetic identity from a paternal relationship to a maternal one. Instead of the link between

public and private distress communicated by the scene at Buffalo Zoo, Howe explores her “maternal Anglo-Irish disinheritance” as a literary and emotional complex.¹ Yet the continuity between earlier and later work is powerfully evident. The words “visual textual auditory” and “associational syllabic magic” indicate that, from *Hinge Picture* to *Kidnapped*, the poetry’s animating energy is the capacity to exploit the hidden lines of association that cathect language, the “Pilings of thought under spoken” (*Articulation*, 30).

¹Swenson interview, 376.

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