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## The Reviser in the Word Forest: Susan Howe and the American Typology of Wilderness

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A woman wanders alone through the woods. As this is a forest in New England, the trees she passes are deciduous: maple, sycamore, birch. There is thick undergrowth between the trees, burr-patches of moss and wood fern, the occasional lightning-stricken log softening under each season's growth of termites. Occasionally, as she moves into a clearing, she notices the sun overhead, pale light filtering through tightly latticed leaves.

Her movement is difficult, for this is a landscape still unsurveyed, still free of the mappings that would later arrive — stagecoach routes, railroads, and, later, interstate highways. If she has been told about them or is sharp-eyed enough to spot them on her own, she can trace her path through the woods by old Indian trails, just barely visible now under the rising canopies of witchgrass and Queen Anne's lace. She is more interested in the trails, the long-buried movements that they trace, than she is in her own progress. She has come to the wilderness to renounce progress. Unlike Theseus, she carries no yarn; unlike Gretel, she does not mark her steps with bread crumbs. Sometimes she glances for a moment over her shoulder, and then, very quickly, she runs the sole of her shoe over the dirt behind her, hoping to hide the prints that she has left so far before escaping further into the gaps between the trees.

The woman is Susan Howe, wandering through the wilderness of the early "New England . . . the place I am" (*Birth-mark* 47). For Howe, the "continuous peculiar and particular voice" that she finds in American literature is both constituted by and inseparable

arable from the culture of New England, with its residues of “iconoclastic Puritan piety,” its lingering anxieties caused by the “[h]eavy pressure of finding no content” (49).<sup>1</sup> This lack of content was, for her, the inevitable result of the political displacement the first settlers in New England suffered. In moving from the old world to the new, they went from being united, in dissent against the monarchy, to inhabiting a condition of statelessness, in which “there was nothing to unite against any more” (“Encloser” 190). Deprived both of the unity bred by rebelliousness and of the old covenant between king and people, the colonists clung to a conception of America as having been “pre-established for them by the Author and Finisher of creation” (181).

This conception depended in large part on the typology of America as virgin wilderness. As Peter Carroll notes, this typology had its roots in Biblical figurations of the wilderness as a site uniquely suited to religious fulfillment. One such figuration found in the wilderness a “refuge from worldly corruption,” a sanctuary from the increasing degeneracy of England (2). The wilderness also functioned as the “place of religious insight,” the space in which, because of its distance from the secular bustle of the marketplace, God had always chosen to instruct his disciples. But perceptions of the wilderness possessed a more sinister valence as well: instead of functioning as a space set aside for religious instruction, the wilderness could easily degenerate into “a living, green labyrinth harboring wild beasts and wild men,” a trope for the secular world of reprobation and sinfulness (Canup 22).

The phrase “wild men,” used in a North American context, refers, of course, to Native Americans. As a consequence, the trope of the wilderness, of the uncultivated Eden in the New World, carries with it the ethnocentric bias of the Old World. Howe herself acknowledges this bias, noting that “most books about the period and place must hesitate over the word *wilderness*. Because it wasn’t wilderness to Native Americans” (*Birth-mark* 161). Indeed, the Puritans’ rhetorical construction of America as “a virgin garden preestablished for them by the Author and Finisher of creation” necessarily suggests that the “them” for whom the garden is preestablished will seek to expel the “not-them” who dare to interfere (49). As new waves of colonists realized that the reality of the North American continent differed from the hyperbolic promotional material to which they had been exposed, they became intent upon subduing “the wild nature of America before it could devour them” (Canup 20).

At times, though, the wilderness — the unmapped landscape itself and the Native Americans who, not yet subjected to mapping, populated it — did devour them. The results of such encounters take the form of captivity narratives, narratives that, as any reader of *My Emily Dickinson, The Birth-mark*, or “Articulations of Sound Forms in Time” knows, have exerted an enormous influence upon Howe’s work. Within the Manichean logic of Puritanism, to be held captive in the wilderness, isolated from familiar traditions, was to be in Babylon, the no-man’s-land in which “affliction and initiation are violently One” (Howe, *Emily* 42). Consequently, captivity narratives became strenuous performances, metaphors for “the process of Conversion” designed to prove that, while beyond the circle of community, the captive one had not become as “prone to evil as any Heathen” (43).

Howe's "Articulations of Sound Forms in Time" reflects her attention to the implications of such narratives for the trope of wilderness. The poem takes as its point of departure the story of the Reverend Hope Atherton, who, after an Indian raid in which he participated ended in defeat, attempted to surrender to the Indians, was rebuffed, and spent days wandering alone in the woods. Howe notes that the incident left Atherton unanchored: since no one in his community believed that his offer to surrender had been rejected, he died an isolated figure shortly after returning home. To mime the liminality of Atherton's journey, which took him through that aspect of wilderness neither inhabited by native Americans nor appropriated by Puritan settlers, Howe sets her poem's syntax free to embody a play of possible meanings. The second part of the poem, for example, opens as follows:

Prest try to set after grandmother  
 revived by and laid down left ly  
 little distant each other and fro  
 Saw digression hobbling driftwood  
 forage two rotted beans & etc.  
 Redy to faint slaughter story so  
 Gone and signal through deep water  
 Mr. Atherton's story Hope Atherton  
 (6)

To read this text is to become, like Atherton, a wanderer within the "Nature" that is "no soothing mother" (*Emily* 21). For example, the first word, "Prest," could be an indication that the poem will discuss the fate of Atherton, the "priest" figure "pressed" into the margin between two competing cultures. But the next line and a half do not deliver the narrative information that such a reading would require. It is unclear, when reading this passage, who or what is trying to "set after grandmother" or what it might mean to be "laid down left ly." Because the word "Prest" possesses neither a subject nor an object, in other words, it is impossible to locate a coherent narrative within the passage's fragmented syntax. Instead, the poem must be read as an attempt to enact disjunction and indeterminacy, states that recall the "Limitlessness," the liminality, of Atherton's particular wanderings (*Birth-mark* 96).

In attempting to represent such limitlessness, Howe is doing more than simply pursuing an easy equation between "the fragmentation of the universe" and the "fragmentary nature of the text" (Perloff 526). Rather, she is trying to rewrite, to write beyond, the Manichean dualism that characterized not only the Puritan but also the Transcendentalist way of conceptualizing the wilderness. As Howe notes in *My Emily Dickinson*, the Puritans regarded the wilderness as simultaneously "a microcosm for Mankind's fallen condition" and a New World Eden provided especially for them by the provider of all things (40-41). Emersonian Transcendentalism, by contrast, defined the natural world as an Eden for the "inspired creative imagination" (Buell 171). This imagination both constituted and justified itself by locating within nature "signs . . . that ultimately 'tell' the story of redemption, the triumph over limit and fate" (Burbick 30).

It is precisely this dualism within the trope of wilderness, the tension — between the wild seen as Babylon and as Eden — that it embodies, that Howe's poetry and prose confront. Howe's "Thorow" does not necessarily call attention to this dualism any more effectively than her "Articulation of Sound Forms in Time" or her *My Emily Dickinson*. Instead, what makes this poem particularly noteworthy is its focus. By invoking Thoreau in her title, Howe suggests that the poem will concern, at least in part, her relation to this literary predecessor. Howe's choice to focus on Thoreau (interestingly, when referring to nineteenth-century influences, she never mentions his mentor Emerson) is not surprising, as the two share a belief that "exaggerated history is poetry" (*Birth-mark* 96). But while "Thorow" honors Thoreau in many ways, it also questions the typology of wilderness that he both inherited and expanded. As the poem's pattern of wilderness imagery shows — references to woods or trees can be found on almost every page — Howe embarks, in "Thorow," upon her own simultaneous resurrection and revision of this typology, one fully conscious of its role in the violence with which America was settled. The poem thus constitutes an attempt to honor the threatening otherness that this trope has historically embodied, while also criticizing the ways in which the natural world has been used to construct visions of national and personal development. In short, Howe exploits both valences of the typology of wilderness, both that of the wilderness as Babylon and that of the wilderness as Eden, while simultaneously calling attention to the dangers inherent in each.

In interrogating this typology, Howe makes of her own work a linguistic wilderness. The forms of her wilderness register, in their splintered, fragmentary nature, the repercussions of American misreadings of the natural world. Writing about Howe's "Articulation of Sound Forms in Time," for instance, Linda Reinfeld notes that "language is broken and made strange by the history it seeks to articulate" (127). Peter Quartermain has adumbrated the precise ways in which Howe's language is broken, referring particularly to her "eschewal of conventional meaning[,] . . . rejection of conventionally intelligible syntax[,] . . . [and] weird notation on the page" (189). Such choices reflect Howe's emphasis on recording "the stutter in history that cannot be translated," her desire to inscribe the tensions and involutions within the historical process rather than to efface them (Howard 108).

This emphasis on representing process while at the same time "perpetually and continuously . . . re-casting, re-seeing" that process makes of Howe's poems a maze or labyrinth (Quartermain 187). Unlike the pathways in three-dimensional labyrinths, though, these linguistic trails constantly turn in upon themselves, running into one another in unexpected ways as Howe breaks down the distinctions between words. She accomplishes this in part by coining new words, altering their spelling so that they call to mind several existing words without definitively resembling any of them. Toward the beginning of "Thorow," for example, Howe writes the following: "at Fort Stanwix the Charrokey / paice" (46). Readers familiar with the conventions of pronunciation in American English will instinctively want to pronounce Howe's neologism as if it rhymed with "pace." But it is impossible not *also* to hear in it an echo of "pays," and, simultaneously, to see in it a sort of eye-rhyme of the word "peace,"

even as its soft ending “ss” sound calls to mind the word “pass.” As a result this word hovers among at least four other words, simultaneously suggesting all and none of them.

The same principle is at work in the following set of lines:

So empty and so empty  
Go back for your body  
Hindge

It is tempting to read the last word of this section as if it rhymed with the word “hinge,” tempting because such a reading reinforces the idea that this last word acts as a hinge from one section to the next. But to interpret the word in this way would overlook the “d” that forces readers to consider a wider range of meanings. “Hind” might be an echo of “behind,” especially since a body clearly lies “back” somewhere beyond the speaker(s). Read as a separate word, “hind” also suggests a red deer, perhaps the subject of the “Hunt and not the capture” with which the poem is in part concerned (53). With this interpretation in mind, “hind” can also suggest the hind quarters of the animal as it runs through the forest, always (since there has been no capture) just one length ahead of its pursuers. Knowing that a hind is specifically a “female deer” expands the possibilities still further (see “Hind,” *OED*). The female deer on the edge of the forest, constantly eluding capture, becomes a metaphor for both Howe herself and the marginalized, elusive women — Anne Hutchinson, Emily Dickinson — by whom her poetic practice has been inspired.

In Howe’s text, then, the individual word itself often becomes a labyrinth. That is, each word presents a wilderness of equally possible, and equally satisfying, meanings. By design, there is no single way to emerge from this labyrinth, no privileged meaning or set of meanings. Instead Howe indicates, by coining neologisms that play both against and with existing words, that she wants readers to become further and further “lost” in the play of possible significations that she presents.

This same emphasis on linguistic play characterizes Howe’s manipulation of phonemes. In “Thorow,” for example, Howe writes, “tent tree sere leaf spectre” (55). Obviously, most of these words contribute to Howe’s play with, and interrogation of, the typology of wilderness: the “tent” could be that of the “Scout” mentioned earlier in the poem, while the “sere leaf” may be attached to the “tree” nearby. More important, though, is the linguistic fluidity that this line embodies: the move from the short “e” of “tent” to the long one of “tree,” the shift from the hard consonant “t” to the short one “s,” the end-rhyme of “sere” and “spectre,” and the final blending of “t” sounds and “s” sounds in “spectre.”

Such phonemic fluidity also characterizes the last page of “Thorow,” which I reproduce here in its entirety:

	anthen	uplispth	enend	
	adamap	blue wov	thefthe	
folled	floted	keen	Themis	

thouscullingme  
Thiefth  
(59)

In this section, Howe combines her affection for neologisms with her insistence upon the play of sound and meaning. “Anthen” calls to mind both the typical narrative bridging device — “and then, and then” — and the anthems, both religious and nationalistic, with which the New England of Howe and Thoreau was settled. At the same time, it glides seemingly without effort into “enend,” a word that suggests that the text has come to *an* end, can no longer be *emend*-ed, even as, of course, it continues. The movement from short “a” to short “e” traced in this line continues into the next one, where “adamap” leads to “thefthe” just as the map of Adam (the Bible) helped to effect the “thefthe” of New England’s wilderness from its original inhabitants. “Th” sounds dominate the remainder of the text, as Howe invokes the presence of Themis, the Greek goddess of justice, to witness the “Thiefth” responsible for the darker side of the North American conquest (and perhaps to implicate Themis in that theft as well). The “th” at the end of “Thiefth,” with which the poem ends, extends the “th” sound into the space beyond the text, reminding readers of the consequences of that conquest — and of the Puritans’ religious, political, and sexual ideology — in contemporary America.

The fissuring of phonemes is not the only factor contributing to undecidability in “Thorow,” of course. Howe also avoids creating textual hierarchies by eschewing syntactical connectives. This emphasis on parataxis, combined with her frequent use of neologisms, contributes significantly to the difficulty inherent in determining to whom or what many of Howe’s phrases refer. In the example “at Fort Stanwix the Charrokey / paice,” for instance, are the Cherokee pacing while they await word of a peace settlement for which they will later be forced to pay? Could Fort Stanwix be a literal or metaphorical site at which peace with the Cherokee was constructed (or destroyed)? Or does the word “paice” suggest the many possibilities of peace that were passed over by the settlers arriving in what they thought of as their new country, or, in French, *pays*? Each interpretation seems equally possible; the text offers no clues about which one(s) to favor.

Another example of such undecidability occurs in the following passage:

The true Zeno  
the immutable morality

Irruptives  
thorow out all  
the Five Nations  
(46)

Zeno’s paradox suggests that, among other things, it is possible to divide substances in half endlessly without reaching any central, constitutive essence. Taken to its logical extreme, such an argument undermines the foundations of

Western rationalism, which assumes a binary distinction between surface and depth. Does this paradox suggest that “the immutable morality” that Christianized Western culture posited for so long was also a mirage? Or does “Zeno” play on the word “xenophobia,” in which case “the immutable morality” might simply be an ironic invocation of the force that, if it existed, would prevent xenophobia?

The word “Irruptives,” with its sense of something “having the quality of . . . an . . . invasion, especially of a hostile force or tribe,” does not help to resolve these questions (see “Irruptive,” *OED*). Instead, “Irruptives” seems to modify the phrases that follow. Read together, these phrases may convey the state of the five Iroquois nations — in what is now New York State — as waves of white settlement began to displace them. Not surprisingly, though, Howe refuses to provide confirmation of such a reading. Instead, she immediately switches to a different voice in the lines that follow: “To cut our wete / Of the Jentlemen” (46). In so doing, she covers over any traces of a path that she may have inadvertently uncovered, insisting once again on the inaccessibility of her syntactical wilderness.

It is useful here to consider Quartermain’s contention that one of the most visible conflicts in twentieth-century American poetics has been that between “semantic singularity and multiplicity” (9). To foreground the latter is, in turn, to de-emphasize conventional and paraphraseable referentiality, or the “clarity and definition of deixis, of pointing, of *the*” (Quartermain 187). Howe’s insistence on the elliptical and emblematic, in both her syntax and her diction, situates her poetics firmly on the side of semantic multiplicity. In thus expanding the possibilities of reference, Howe seeks to avoid what she calls, in her introduction to “Thorow,” “appropriating primal indeterminacy” (41). Instead, her poetic method at once undermines and opens up the “the,” surrounding it with “a halo of wilderness” (Quartermain 187).

The issue of appropriation is crucial to “Thorow,” as it would be to any poem with so much invested in the typology of the American wilderness. If this typology is one of the primary “fairy tale[s]” in American culture, it is also one that, when examined closely, reveals “traces of blood” (Howe, “Thorow” 44). As Carroll notes, the Puritan settlers believed that the American wilderness was simply vacant soil. This belief, along with their knowledge that the Indian population in New England had been decimated by plague shortly before their arrival, provided them with “a rationalization for claiming title” to the lands they found (Carroll 13). Differences in social organization between the whites and the Indians provided further rationalizations for such claims: John Winthrop, in particular, argued that the Indians had no right to the land because “they inclose noe Land, neither have [they] any settled habytation, nor any tame Cattle to improve the Land by” (quoted in Carroll 14). In his culture based on law, the rights conferred by title and property inevitably superseded all other claims.

If the underside of the American typology of wilderness is its culpability in the decimation of Native American culture, then the underside of “Thorow” is Howe’s focus upon this culpability. The introduction to “Thorow” makes this focus clear. Particularly noteworthy, at least for my purposes, are the quotations



from Sir Humphrey Gilbert and from Thoreau that Howe inserts here. These quotations foreground the “crooked” ways in which American culture has attempted to construct Native Americans, and the role that the typology of wilderness has played in such constructions (42). Characteristically, though, Howe does not make of her text “a specific political agenda for improvement”; instead, she pursues a more crooked path, allowing her words to “escape into their own mystery” while at the same time using them to recover truths “edited out of our history” (“Encloser” 195).

The first hint that “Thorow” will concern itself with such truths comes in its opening lines:

Go on the Scout they say  
They will go near Swegachey  
I have snow shoes and Indian shoes. (43)

Here, the text to come is framed as a hunt, or “Scout.” While these lines do not provide any clues about the object of this hunt, they do suggest that it will be conducted in both “snow shoes and Indian shoes.” This journey of exploration, unlike those of the original settlers, will acknowledge the presence of Indians, as well as that of whites.

Even as Howe frames her text as a journey of exploration and redemption, she criticizes the role that the rhetoric of exploration played in the violent settlement of the New World. Such rhetoric constituted a “European grid on the Forest,” a grid established by the “Measuring mastering” impulses of settlers who confused property titles with ownership (45). In their eagerness to construct America as a “First precarious Eden,” she suggests, the Puritans instead created a world in their own image, one “darkened by outstripped possession” (44, 52). From behind the “Bars of a social system” based on “materialism,” the “cast out” Indians gradually became “invisible always,” distorted and erased by the “literature of savagism / under a spell of savagism” (45, 49, 52).

The social system that the colonists erected was, of course, based not only on materialism but also on law. Howe traces the effects of this system through the poem as well, identifying the role of her New England forefathers as “Bearer[s]” of “law” (46). Noting that the instantiation of law often accompanies that of settled cultivation, Howe links the two in the neologism “Agreseror.” Here Howe’s “notation for the eye plays against and with that for the ear,” emphasizing the similarity between words beginning with “ag-”, such as “agriculture,” and those beginning with “agg-”, such as “aggression” (Quartermain 185). As a result, agriculture and aggression appear inextricably linked, much as they were to settlers who used the Indians’ failure to enclose agricultural land as an excuse for aggression against them. It is, Howe maintains, the “origin of Property / that leads here,” property seized in spite of the “Indian names” that it already possessed (“Thorow” 52).

To remove the “Revealing traces / Regulating traces” of the intrusion of property from the forest (which is, of course, also a “Word Forest”), Howe stages a purification ritual of sorts (“Thorow” 46-9). Thus, the snow, which is “falling very deep” at the beginning of the text, eventually evolves into the

“Wood and feld / all covered with ise” (48). Covered in this way, the landscape comes to seem a “world anew,” one that gives rise to a “New life after the Fall” (48-9). As a result, the “Thaw,” with its “Spring-suggesting light,” leads, in Howe’s redemptive vision, to a recreation of the New World, a “Flood of light on water” suggestive of the Biblical creation itself (51-4). Lest there be any doubt as to the origin of this purifying force, Howe reminds us that “The source of Snow” is “The nearness of Poetry” (50). Poetry may have the power to indict Puritan culture but it also possesses the ability to counter its effects, if only by enumerating them.

This attempt to purify the polluted landscape links Howe to Thoreau, the figure after whom “Thorow” is at least partially named. Howe indicates his influence on her text in her introduction, where she compares her visit to the Adirondacks (the visit that, she implies, suggested the trail of associations embodied by “Thorow”) with his to the Maine woods. At times in “Thorow,” Howe momentarily gestures toward an idealism, a belief in the rejuvenative powers of *poesis*, similar to that in Thoreau’s work (52).<sup>2</sup> This belief certainly surfaces in such texts as *Walden*, which follows Emerson in its tendency to sacralize the natural world as a mystic counterpart to the human one. Such a sanctification of matter depends upon the Swedenborgian conception of the natural world as a coherent network of signs waiting to be decoded by the faculty of imagination. In this closed system, the natural world derives the justification for its existence from the imagination, whose authority and redemptive power are in turn renewed by its successful interpretation of nature.

Yet *Ktaadn*, the text to which Howe refers in her introduction to “Thorow,” dramatizes the failure of this system. In this text, Thoreau explores the upper reaches of Maine around the region of Mt. Katahdin, an area that in his day was still considered extremely rugged and inaccessible. So rugged and inaccessible was it that Thoreau himself never made it to the top. Nonetheless, his experience near the summit left its mark:

Perhaps I most fully realized that this was primeval, untamed, and forever untameable Nature . . . while coming down this part of the mountain. . . . Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. . . . I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. . . . *Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?* (Thoreau 524-5)

Here Thoreau expresses a sense of being overwhelmed not only by the region’s vastness but also by its sheer materiality. Rather than being a site for his encounter with the spiritual, then, nature becomes for Thoreau the confirmation of his link to materiality. As such, his experience on Mt. Katahdin exemplifies the alienation of body from spirit, an alienation that threatens to close off the system of correspondences on which his relationship with nature has been based. The natural world thus fails to provide him with the “habitable ground of being” that Transcendentalist principles suggested it should (Milder 40).

By contrast, Howe does not seek, in the reinscription of wilderness typology that “Thorow” enacts, to use nature to create such a ground of being. In fact,

as I have already suggested, she attempts to disassemble the construction of the natural world as the “domain of transcendental subjectivity” throughout “Thorow” (43). She does so most notably by avoiding mimesis, a “refusal of narrative or hierarchical order” that constitutes her bid to reinvigorate the “ravaged and war-blighted landscape” of seventeenth-century America (Reinfeld 134). Rather than, like Thoreau, presenting the struggle of a single consciousness to encounter and define itself — and its limits — through physical reality, Howe thus structures “Thorow” so as to emphasize the potential polyvocality of the literary text. Although she does not provide narrative information that would enable readers to identify the various voices in “Thorow,” readers can nonetheless identify some distinct differences between the voice of “Go on the Scout they say / They will go near Swegachey,” the one claiming, “I stretch out my arms / to the author,” and the one (or ones) commenting, “selving / forefending / Immeadeat Settlem / but wandering” (43, 51, 58). Here, then, Howe reinvents the typology of wilderness. In her hands, it becomes not the site of a single subjectivity’s encounter with — and affirmation of — itself but rather that of an expanded definition of subjectivity, one that finds identity to be necessarily polyvalent and its representation to be the “instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity” (42).

Moreover, Howe’s avoidance of mimetic representation precludes the sort of hard and fast divisions between nature and self, or mind and world, upon which Transcendentalist subjectivity depends. Perloff has commented on Howe’s “deconstruction of image” as the ground on which the poem is based (78). To be fair, this assessment of Howe applies far less to “Thorow,” in which images frequently occur, than to many of her other texts. Nonetheless, even in “Thorow” Howe makes sure to destabilize her own invocations of image to ensure that they do not dominate the poem. At times this destabilization takes the form of syntactical splintering. On the last pages of the text, for instance, such phrases as “lily roof” and “swamp” hover close to “Encampt canoes wood” (57). Howe here avoids mimesis by eschewing any syntactical connectives that would tell readers whether, for instance, the canoes are “encampt” on the beach, or whether the “lily” is anywhere near the “swamp.” Even when her images seem more conventionally coherent, as in the passage that reads “The snow / is still hear / Wood and feld / all covered with ise,” their generality — we don’t know what trees are in this wood, for example — gives them a remote, almost allegorical, nonmimetic feel (48). Such destabilization of mimesis collapses the distinction between subject and object. In so doing, it allows one of Howe’s speakers to evolve from walking “on Mount Vision” to claiming that “my whole being is Vision” — the movement that Thoreau, in *Ktaadn*, found himself unable to make (“Thorow” 49).

On that trip, and on his other naturalistic excursions, Thoreau was not, of course, concerned exclusively with his own subjectivity. As Philip Gura suggests in his article, “Thoreau’s Maine Woods Indians: More Representative Men,” Thoreau originally visited the Maine woods, including the region around Mt. Katahdin, in order better to understand “his own race’s paradoxical longing for wilderness” (67). The figure through which he purported to do so was, not surprisingly, that of the Indian. It would be incorrect to condemn outright

Thoreau's relationships with, and conceptions of, Native Americans. *The Maine Woods*, of which *Ktaadn* is one component, was, after all, "a deliberate encounter with the Indian as much as the forest" (Schelling 117). So strong was Thoreau's interest in the Native American way of life that he kept eleven notebooks on the subject, notebooks that were not discovered until after his death. In a period of American history — and literary history — during which Indians were more often condemned than celebrated (and when they were, more often than anything else, extinguished), his genuine curiosity about their culture was noteworthy.

But for all of its sincerity, Thoreau's interest in Native American culture revealed the prejudices of his era. As Robert Sayre notes, Thoreau was influenced by the ideology of "savagism," the Euro-American "universal myth of the condition of uncivilized people" (x). According to the terms of this ideology, Native Americans might be either "noble or base" but would invariably be "simple hunters who were not Christian and not civilized" (xi). Thoreau's Native American is thus more a type than a human being, an image of "the Indian" composed of equal parts escape fantasy and paranoia.

Such fantasies are clearly at work in *Ktaadn*, which was, as Gura maintains, written specifically to "discover what was representative about the Indians" (69). Thoreau privileges the same qualities in the local Native Americans that he does in the local landscape: the more "savage" and unspoiled by society, the better. For this reason, his first glimpse of a Native American in *Ktaadn* takes the form of a lament. Noticing an Indian man carrying an empty keg of whiskey, Thoreau makes an example of the Indians' "history of . . . extinction" (481). This history, according to Thoreau, accounts for the newfound popularity of both Catholicism and politics among this particular tribe, a trend that he deplors as being less authentic and respectable than "a row of wigwams, with a dance of powwows, and a prisoner tortured at the stake" (482). Similarly, he expresses his preference for Native Americans living in the wild to what he terms their "degraded" counterparts, whom he compares to the "lowest classes in a great city" (529). For Thoreau, then, as for most who subscribed to the myth of the noble savage, Native American customs were only notable insofar as they bore little or no resemblance to white ones.

By the same token, Thoreau associates Native Americans with the landscape when he wishes to emphasize its wild and relatively untraveled nature, but de-emphasizes their presence as he sees fit. Almost the first fact a reader learns is that "Ktaadn" is "an Indian word signifying highest land" (479). Later in the text, he notes that "Indian hunters" were responsible for the skeleton of a moose lying "on this very spot," thereby underscoring his own proximity to the mountain's summit — and, consequently, his distance from society (514). Having rhetorically filled the landscape with Indians, Thoreau proceeds to empty it as he approaches the zenith of his journey. Gura notes that Native Americans become part of the background as Thoreau nears the summit of Mt. Katahdin, an absence that Thoreau rationalizes by claiming that "simple races, as savages, do not climb mountains" because they consider them sacred (520-1). As in modern quest narratives, in which the *sherpas* of the Himalayas are often overlooked once they shepherd Western spiritual seekers to their chosen *lamas*,

Thoreau's Native Americans prove useful to his quest only when they do not get in his way.

It is just such corners of the "elegaic western Imagination" that Howe burrows into in her poem ("Thorow" 55). As Andrew Schelling notes, "Thorow" is marked throughout by Howe's awareness of the logocentric ideology of savagism, "the inscriptional power that reduced 'Indian' to a literary convention, a book's cliché" (117). This ideology is partly responsible for the "European grid on the forest" — that is, the grid of prejudices through which Euro-Americans have constructed Native Americans as the other (Howe, "Thorow" 45). This grid is of course, also a literal one: Schelling reminds readers that Thoreau often earned money "measuring mastering" the New England landscape as a surveyor (Schelling 115; Howe, "Thorow" 45). The result of such surveying, Howe suggests, was the substitution of "First trails," and then "lines," for the "little known" place names granted by the Indians, names that were simply "tossed away" in the Euro-American onslaught (53).

Central to the suppression of Native American society has been the tendency, in Western cultures, to privilege textuality over other methods of conceptualizing and organizing knowledge. For this reason, Howe subverts the conventions of textuality throughout "Thorow." Perhaps the most obvious way in which she accomplishes this is by emphasizing that "[t]ranscription of articulate sound onto paper always gets it down wrong" (Schelling 115). In Howe's text, "Swegachey," which was, as Schelling maintains, probably a French word, becomes an example of the "systematic derangement of hearing" committed by Anglophone settlers upon words from other languages (Schelling 116). Similarly, Howe represents "Cherokee" as "Charrokey," a way of reminding readers that all transliterations of Indian names into English exemplify the imperialism that led to the seizing of Indian land ("Thorow" 46).

Nor are foreign names the only vehicle Howe chooses to press home her point. She also employs archaic spellings of familiar words — as when, for instance, she refers to "gentlemen" as "Jentelmen," and to "wheat" as "wete" ("Thorow" 46). She also scatters capital letters randomly throughout the text, writing "Seem," for example, with a capital "S" (45). Writing in a different context, Charles Bernstein has identified in such strategies an "antiabsorptive formal effect" designed to "insist on a jerky, or hesitant, reading" (25). By building such hesitations into the process of reading, Howe causes her reader to "dwell *in, on,* be of / . . . to be / the thing described" (Bernstein 25). Like her avoidance of mimesis, this reliance on archaic spellings and modes of punctuation breaks down the traditional distinction between subject and object and suggests, by implication, that conventional notions of poetic subjectivity are yet more "regulating traces" (Howe, "Thorow" 46). So too do Howe's strategies foreground the ways in which the historical process causes some spellings, and some forms of usage, to be codified, while others come to be considered incorrect. By exploding such textual conventions, Howe reveals that they are no more than conventions, with no inherent or universal grounding. She thus calls attention, albeit indirectly, to the inherently exclusionary nature of convention itself.

In Howe's hands, then, the "figment of a book" — that is, of textuality — that has dominated Western culture is exposed as an unwitting instrument of

Euro-American oppression (“Thorow” 54). Textuality may not be evil in and of itself, she suggests, but when it becomes “the literature of savagism / under a spell of savagism,” it contributes to the forces of “Complicity” with that oppression (49, 55). “Thorow,” with its literally “broken letters,” attempts to break the Book, and to substitute in its place the “Original of the Otherside / understory of anotherword,” a language that resists the codifying pressures of logocentrism (50). In this project, Howe is the “Author the real author,” scouting for the last remaining “Indian names” in the “Word Forest” (49, 51, 52).

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that “Thorow” ends by exploding beyond the visual boundaries of textuality itself. The first thirteen pages of the poem provide little sense of the explosion to come. Here, Howe breaks her text into relatively brief segments ranging from six to twenty-one lines each. Within each of the poem’s two parts, she establishes a normative length for each segment; thus, most of the segments in the first part of the poem are ten lines long, while many of the ones in the second part run twice that length. Because of this normativity, and because of the short black lines demarcating each segment from the next, the bulk of the poem visually recalls the “grid on the forest” that the Puritans and later settlers employed as part of their “measuring mastering” project (45).

As if to signal Howe’s repudiation of that project, this grid-like appearance disappears from the poem’s final four pages. Instead, the poem here exceeds the customary rectangular format of textuality in general. At one point, a snippet of text — significantly, the words “Cannot be / every / where I / entreat” — curves toward the upper left-hand corner of the page; at another, the words “neck / islet / batteau” overlap lines reading “Gone to have a Treaty. With the French at Oswego / & singing their war song / The French Hatchet” (56). In an ironic commentary on the restrictions imposed by textual convention, Howe includes the warning, “The Frames should be exactly / fitted to the paper, the margins,” on a page where precisely the opposite is the case (57).

It would have been exceedingly easy for Howe to end her poem in this way, with the words on the page placed so as to mirror the chaos of the wilderness beyond. Yet even if Howe differs from the Puritans and Transcendentalists in her reluctance to find, in the typology of wilderness, a totalizing narrative, she is equally unwilling to abandon that typology to solipsism, to the “Chaos and Violence of my own hands clapping” (*Emily* 114-5). For this reason, the last page of “Thorow,” its twelve words carefully laid out on the page, is a particularly striking way for Howe to have chosen to end the poem. Because I have already discussed the phonemic fluidity of this ending, I will not do so again here. It is worth noting, though, that the layout Howe has chosen for this page calls to mind an image of rocks forming a path across a stream. Each word in a language, she thus suggests, constitutes a path out of the forest, a way to reframe conventional, and conventionally damaging, constructions of wilderness. At the same time, by choosing to end the poem with neologisms and archaisms — “folléd,” for instance, recalls the obsolete word “follery,” or foolery — Howe reminds her readers that each word also embodies a path further into history (see “Folle,” *OED*). Only in “sounds and spirits” — especially in the sounds and spirits of individual words, whether they are obsolete, current, or

exist only in the future — can we locate the “traces in a geography” that represent Howe’s vision of history (*Birth-mark* 156).

I suggested at the beginning of this essay that Susan Howe had come to the wilderness to renounce progress. Progress, whether technological or political, has been intimately bound up in American literature and culture with the impulse to conquer wilderness. To conquer wilderness had always been to subject it to linearity — that of maps, of telegraph wires, of railroad tracks, of naturalists’ notebooks. Thus spelled into place, the wilderness was put, more often than not, into the service of nationalistic ideology, employed to shore up “an American identity founded on representing a landscape of immensity and wildness” (Wilson 5).

No wonder, then, that Howe pays particular attention to “the gaps, the silences” in early American texts, and includes absence as such an important structural component in her own (*Birth-mark* 180). Gaps and silences preclude the linearity inherent in all grammatical systems. So too do they resist being put in the service of cultural and nationalistic mythologies. Instead, their emptiness emblemizes all of the voices — voices of women, Native Americans, antinomians, or simply those who fall between the cracks of category — that such mythologies leave out.

In foregrounding such ellipses in her own work, Howe destabilizes the Transcendental opposition between self and nature, or between text and world — an opposition that can in turn be regarded as a reaction against the Puritan one. In doing so, she makes her text itself a wilderness of linguistic play, an indeterminacy riddled with ellipses. She thus rescues the typology of wilderness from its service to nationalism, reinventing it as the “sounding of uncertainty” that nationalism represses (*Birth-mark* 181). Such a mission, of course, is no more than the writers in her personal canon — Dickinson, Melville, Rowlandson, Thoreau — have also tried to do. How tempting, then, to end with a vision of Howe back in the forest, scuffing the dirt of the Indian trail she has discovered so as not to leave footprints. As she looks up, she sees a figure ahead of her, stumping along with his walking stick, muttering to himself as he scribbles in his notebook. To someone observing from a distance, the two figures might almost, in the grayish-blue wash of a late winter afternoon, momentarily blend together — then the two shapes break apart, going their separate ways, yet comfortably wandering in the same word forest.

## Notes

1. Howe has spoken in interviews of her inability to conceive of poetry as something apart from history, the actuality within and against which the writer works. This actuality is in turn inseparable from geography. As Howe notes, there is “an amazing difference between the history of upper New York State and the history of Massachusetts. . . . Trust the place to form the voice” (*Birth-mark* 156). Such texts as William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain*, D. H. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature*, and in particular Charles Olson’s *Call me Ishmael* have, Howe maintains, made crucial contri-

butions to her conception of the essential relationship between “writing and place and force” (158).

2. Despite her brief gestures toward rejuvenation in “Thorow,” Howe is, as I have previously noted, profoundly different from Thoreau in the skepticism she manifests toward the trope of an earthly Eden. Even “Thorow,” whose tone at times belies such skepticism, ends in the scorn and spat-out despair of thousandingme / Thiefth” (59).

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