

**Elegaic Materialism:  
The Poetry and Art of Susan Howe**

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## Abstract

The American poet Susan Howe (1937-present) began her career as a visual artist, but owing to a dearth of information about her early collages it has been difficult to say anything substantive about how they might have shaped her poetic practice. In 2010, she placed her collages on archive. Along with a number of personal interviews with Howe, this heretofore unavailable material has enabled me to consider Howe's subsequent work in a new light and to establish significant links between her early visual aesthetics and the poetics of bibliography, historiography, and elegy for which she is now known.

Howe's collages, like her poetry, focus on details that are at risk of vanishing from cultural memory and printed record. For this reason, I argue that her work evinces an 'elegaic materialism', or a way of reading, viewing, and thinking about texts that is attuned to loss. If "history is the record of the winners," as Howe says, then one way of rescuing marginalized perspectives is by regarding manuscripts as drawings, thereby rescuing the concrete particulars deemed irrelevant by editors and historians. As Howe's late work turned increasingly toward elegy, her early aesthetic contributed to a nuanced poetics of personal loss and to a series of astonishing new formal tropes.

The Introduction to this thesis discusses Howe's materialism in the context of current literary theory and textual scholarship. Chapter 1 concerns itself with Howe's art historical context. Chapter 2 analyses a selection of her word-drawings. Chapter 3 considers Howe's transition to poetry. Chapter 4 addresses her turn to archival documents in her middle period. Chapter 5 looks at the influence on Howe of documentary film, especially in connection with the task of representing a lost loved one, and Chapter 6 discusses her two most recent elegies, *The Midnight* and *THAT THIS*. A Coda completes the circle by once more considering Howe in the context of the visual arts at the moment she was selected to exhibit at the 2014 Whitney Biennial.



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## Introduction.

### ‘Spiritual typography of elegy’

This thesis begins with an apparent error in its title, a frequent misspelling or variant spelling of the word ‘elegiac’. In Susan Howe’s oeuvre it first appears in *Pythagorean Silence* (1982):

I walk through valleys stray  
imagining myself free  
My mind’s eye elegaic Meditation  
embracing something  
some history of Materialism (*PS* np; *ET* 71)

Then, in *Singularities* (1990), she employs the standard spelling, also in a context that evokes a tension between materiality and immateriality:

Elegiac western Imagination

Mysterious confined enigma  
a possible field of work

The expanse of unconcealment  
so different from all maps

Spiritual typography of elegy

Nature in us as a Nature  
the actual one the ideal Self

tent tree sere leaf spectre  
Unconscious demarkations range

I pick my compass to pieces

Dark here in the driftings  
in the space of the drifting

Complicity battling redemption  
\_\_\_\_\_ (*S* 55)

This standard spelling appears once again in *That This* (2010) where she writes, ‘History intersects with unanswered questions while life possesses us, so we never realize to the full one loyal one—only an elegiac ideal’ (*TT* 19).

Before glossing the above passages, I pause to ask, was this a typo? A printer's error? *Merriam-Webster* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* show only 'elegiac' to be in current usage—and neither of the current editions show any history of 'elegaic'. Nevertheless, a simple online search shows a host of books, many still in print, employ the variant.<sup>1</sup> And, although absent from all other editions, one nineteenth-century printing of Webster's dictionary includes it. In the 1884 *Webster's Complete Dictionary of the English Language*, 'elegaic' appears in the following entry:

elegize: v. t. To lament in an elegy; to celebrate in elegaic verse; to bewail' *Carlyle*<sup>2</sup>

Definitions of 'elegiac' and 'elegize' since have also included the verbs 'lament' and 'bewail', but the word 'celebrate' vanishes. Is this significant? Do the first two occurrences contain this phantom connotation while the latter two do not?

Whether or not we decide to look into the possible significance of the orthographic disparity will, beyond any passing curiosity we may have about philology or orthography, depend on a number of preconceptions we have about what a text *is* and what critical readings of them ought to perform. If we take the text to be an inherently immaterial phenomenon, that is, to be a reproducible entity consisting of certain words in a certain order, then we will probably be more concerned about the *ideas* behind the text than its material particulars, including any aberrant spelling. The two spellings would get subsumed under one common meaning. If, on the other hand, we take texts to be inherently material phenomena then we *will* be interested in preserving its idiosyncratic spelling. We may or may not, however, regard it as significant and would probably be inclined to regard it as an error—either a misspelling or a typo.

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<sup>1</sup> *Early English Books Online* shows 28 incidences of '-aic' in book titles from ca. 1450 to 1900 and 800 of '-iac'.

<sup>2</sup> *Webster's Complete Dictionary of the English Language*, eds. Chauncey A. Goodrich, Noah Porter, and C.A.F. Mahn (London: George Bell & Sons, 1884), s.v. 'elegize', 1555

But say we did look into it. And say that we also put the author aside for a moment. In this case we are not concerned with what ‘elegaic/elegiac’ meant to Howe and are concerned only with what it could mean at all in the context of this poem written in American English. Not presuming there to be apprehensible intention behind the words, we would be far less likely to care that the spelling changed over the course of the author’s oeuvre because we care less about what the words mean for one particular author than what the words mean period. We wouldn’t care, for example, that the poem was written by a poet-scholar who writes impassioned prose about manigraphic detail and editorial omissions. Nor would we care that she simultaneously remains committed to texts being open and supportive of a plurality of readings. Taking there to be no discernible intention, we have very little motivation to second-guess what appears to be a meaningless mistake or printer’s fault.

But say that, in addition to believing that a text’s material particulars are important, we also believe that the author’s intention matters. In this case we might second-guess the assumption that this was a typo, knowing, as we do, that the author in question is interested in the instability of diction and orthography over time. Perhaps then we would bother to look into ‘elegiac’ and discover the curious appearance in Webster’s 1884 dictionary of ‘elegiac’ and its variant connotation of ‘celebrate’. Knowing that in her scholarship she cites the 1852 and 1971 editions of Webster’s *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, we go to those sources but find no evidence of ‘elegaic’.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps we decide to give up here, or, perhaps we know her to be so vigilant about material details that we insist, on the basis of her poetics and comments in interviews, that she must have had something else in mind. Perhaps we would check her archived notebooks for these books and then proceed to trace a nuance of ‘elegaic’ in their work that inflects our reading of it in hers. Perhaps we would do all that and still come up empty. Perhaps we decide it is a red herring; it doesn’t produce a strong

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<sup>3</sup> Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1854). Howe cites the 1854 edition in *My Emily Dickinson*.

enough reading of the poems to warrant critical attention, so we choose to ignore it, adding the notation '[sic]' whenever we quote the lines to indicate we remained faithful to the text but still recognize the error.

But say, regardless of what we believed about the materiality of the text or the relevance of the author's intention, we decide to do a close reading of the above excerpts. In the first case we might note the invocation of Psalm XXIII ('I walk through valleys stray') and see that instead of being comforted, the speaker consoles herself by 'embracing something'. We might also note the two capital letter *M*'s and conclude that 'elegaic Meditation' is being contrasted with 'Materialism'. But a '*history* of Materialism' is different from plain 'Materialism'; it implies an evolving tradition with different incarnations. We might also observe, noting the beginning of this twelve-line poem, that this 'history of Materialism' relates to both 'Some particular place' and to 'Particulars/fleeting and frail'. Noting the obvious tension between materiality and immateriality ('Nature ties a body to my soul') we might conclude that the 'history of Materialism' refers to the rejection of universals and the belief that reality exists in particulars, in other words, to *Nominalism*.

The second poem (in which we find the standardized spelling 'Elegiac') appears following a prose essay about manifest destiny in colonial America in a sequence called 'Thorow'.<sup>4</sup> Here the lure of colonizing land is conflated with the lure to demarcate meaning in language. The 'Elegiac western Imagination', which we understand to have spawned the western expansion, is linked through capitalization to other ideologies produced by those in power, namely 'Nature' and 'Self'. An outmoded spelling still persists in 'demarkations', however, a variant that, like the boundaries it signifies, will soon be rendered obsolete by

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<sup>4</sup> An epigraph following the essay tells us that the name 'Henry David Thoreau' was rumoured to have been a pseudonym and that his real name was David Henry. Howe draws the title 'Thorow' from a limerick a friend once wrote him ending in 'So leave the land of *Thor*, and *row* along our shore!' (S 42) The opening essay also points to orthographic discrepancies that occurred as a result of assimilating Indian names of rivers into the English language (S 41).

those in power.<sup>5</sup> The poem ends with the speaker's decision to 'pick her compass to pieces', and, without any orientation to guide her, to remain 'in the spaces of drifting' where she must resist the lure of expansion and experience 'Complicity battling redemption'. Then, in the last example, the line taken from *That This*, 'elegiac' is again used to refer to an 'Ideal' that is contrasted with 'the full one loyal' person, that is, the actuality of the particular, inimitable individual. Even if we disregard the author and disregard the orthographic idiosyncrasy to be a typo, we would conclude that 'elegaic [sic] Meditation' is a mind-frame that orients itself to what is about to be lost, to material 'particulars' that, 'fleeting and frail', are at risk of vanishing. And we would also conclude that the 'elegiac Ideal' and 'Elegiac western Imagination' are dematerialised ideals that sacrifice particulars for the sake of a common narrative. We would read, in other words, an argument that material particulars, such as the orthographic disparity we just disregarded, *do* matter.

\* \* \*

'A too rapid unification, and an excessive appliance to parts and particulars, are the twin dangers of speculation,' wrote Emerson in 'Plato, or the Philosopher', an essay which was important to Howe.<sup>6</sup> The opposing philosophical views he illustrates here, of Realism and Nominalism, are better known throughout history as 'the problem of universals', the philosophical dilemma that has persisted since Plato's proposition that the world is divisible into ideal forms. Nominalism was the medieval belief that universals did not exist, that they were merely *names* for *things* and that reality consisted of concrete particulars.<sup>7</sup> Its opposing belief, which went by the rather confusing term Realism, maintained that universals did exist.

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<sup>5</sup> It also contains the word 'mark' which is an important word for Howe. It is not only the name shared by her father and her son but refers to the physical mark on the page that is so vital to her work. See Rachel Tzvia Back, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Plato, or the Philosopher,' *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joseph Slater et al, 9 Vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971–2011), Vol. 4, 30. Howe cites the essay in *The Birth-mark* (BM 151).

<sup>7</sup> It should be kept in mind that Nominalism has a complex history and several distinct branches of beliefs. But, and for the purposes of my discussion of Howe's oeuvre, the most salient form is Nominalism that rejects

If, as the above poems argue that we ought to, we privilege material particulars over unified principles, are we not prone to committing ‘an excessive appliance to parts and particulars’, one of the ‘twin dangers of speculation’? Such a disposition might lead to reading meaning into randomness, to weaving analytic narratives about trivialities like typos, and we might create something that wasn’t put there or miss the idea of the poem in the process. We could instead do the more sensible thing and subsume both iterations under one meaning. But wouldn’t that veer toward ‘a too rapid unification’ of concrete particulars, resulting in the other ‘danger of speculation’?

In fact the Nominalist vs. Realist debate underscores much of the historical discourses about language and literature, although it rarely gets acknowledged as such. The ‘problem of universals’ belongs to the unpopular and embarrassing branch of philosophy known as metaphysics.<sup>8</sup> But this disfavor appears to exist on account of its general insolubility as well as its historically unsavory arguments for humanist values. In our current scientific and anti-humanist climes, universals and the discourse about them are thought to be both unclear and essentialising. Raying out around this question is of course the dynamic between the one and the many, the individual and the collective. The metaphysics of Realism have consequently been understood as an essentialism that excludes marginalized individuals in an attempt to establish classes and categories. But Nominalism is an impractical solution for most scholars and thinkers because it denies the concepts that are used to make arguments. Rather than tackling the insoluble ‘problem of universals’ head on, academic disciplines have mostly

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universals. For an overview of its various nuances see Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra. ‘Nominalism in Metaphysics,’ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2011), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/nominalism-metaphysics/> [accessed 2 May 2013].

<sup>8</sup> Philosopher John Heil, for example, declared the twentieth century had been ‘not kind to metaphysics’ (John Heil, *From an Ontological Point of View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), and Hilary Putnam published an ‘obituary’ for ontology in 2004 (Hilary Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 71-85). Quoted here from Joseph Urbas, ‘“Bi-Polar” Emerson: “Nominalist and Realist”’, *The Pluralist*, 8:2 (Summer 2013), 78-105; 78.

chosen to ignore it. But we would be wise to heed the advice of American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce who once remarked,

Find a scientific man who proposes to get along without any metaphysics, and you have found one whose doctrines are thoroughly vitiated by the crude and uncriticized metaphysics with which they are packed. We must philosophize, said the great naturalist Aristotle—if only to avoid philosophizing.<sup>9</sup>

The struggle between particulars and universals is there whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. Ignoring them hardly erases the problem; it only makes us more unconscious to their operation, rendering them all the more insidious.

Much of this debate has historically centered around the implications that the problem of universals has on the vehicle most often used to record and disseminate laws, ideas, and culture: *text*. The universalized word, as a replicable, unchanging concept, has been the obvious preference for authorities who wished to maintain control over their doctrines. When an instance of language is materialized, that is, understood to be a single, concrete occurrence in speech or writing, however, it threatens to undermine authorized meanings. In his book *The Materiality of Language*, David Bleich discusses how Realism has been the dominant metaphysical stance in the church and university since the fifth century when Augustine proclaimed that ‘what is unchangeable is to be preferred to what is changeable’.<sup>10</sup> Nominalism, meanwhile, when it surfaced in the Middle Ages, was considered a heresy. It is

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, Papers, MS 328, in CP 1.129 [1905], Houghton Library, Harvard University. Quoted here from Mary Keeler, ‘Iconic Indeterminacy and Human Creativity in C.S. Peirce’s Manuscripts’ in *The Iconic Page in Manuscript, Print, and Digital Culture*, eds. George Bornstein and Theresa Tinkle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 157-194; 164.

<sup>10</sup> David Bleich, *The Materiality of Language: Gender, Politics, and the University* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2013), 26. The Augustine line he quotes is from *Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Edward B. Pusey, D.D. (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 7: xvii. ‘Realism’ has various, often contradictory meanings within literature and across the humanities. In philosophy it most commonly refers to the belief that reality exists in the material world and not the mind, what is properly called ‘philosophical Realism’. But in the context of Howe’s oeuvre, which often takes as its subject such nineteenth century American thinkers as C.S. Peirce, Emerson, James, and Dickinson, the term is more related to the Platonic and Scotistic senses of the word. Because of their belief that universals had actual existence in reality, these philosophers called themselves ‘Realists’. In the present study, unless otherwise noted, ‘Realism’ is the anti-Nominalist belief that universals exist.

easy to see why institutions such as the church, government, and universities, which relied on the written word for authority, would privilege Platonic ideals over material particulars that were more apt to display singularities, that is, apt to dissent with the authoritative text and doctrine. Nominalism was therefore often cause for excommunication from the university or church, and in some instances it even led to punishment by death.<sup>11</sup>

In rejecting Platonic Ideals, Nominalism not only insists on the uniqueness of the particular but stands to recover meaningful textual discrepancies from oblivion. In the eighteenth century it enjoyed a renaissance among British Empiricists, and in the nineteenth century in America it informed the thinking of Pragmatist philosophers Emerson, James, and C.S. Peirce.<sup>12</sup> Despite the disregard of metaphysics in the twentieth century, the logic of Nominalism and Realism can still be apprehended in much modern language philosophy. In fact, the struggle between particulars and universals can be understood as the basic relation between the (material) signifier and the transcendental signified and is really the foundation of many structuralist and poststructuralist theories of language. Indeed, insofar as post-structuralist theories intervene on transcendental signifieds and therefore on Realism, there is a sense in which we might be tempted to say that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, theory is Nominalism.<sup>13</sup>

But here we have to be careful. For while theory's 'materiality of the signifier' may have fulfilled the same function as Nominalism in intervening on Realist conceptions of language, the two approaches part in significant ways. Nominalism is, by its own definition, devoted to material particulars; it begins with the study of them and refuses to abstract them

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed account of this see Bleich 25-32.

<sup>12</sup> Peirce eventually rejected Nominalism in favor of a method of inquiry that would eventually lead to the establishment of signs, or fixed concepts, but he nevertheless maintained a belief that particulars were of primary importance to this method. I discuss this in greater detail in chapter 6. I call Emerson a 'Pragmatist' here to the extent that his Nominalist and Realist stance makes him both Pragmatist and Transcendentalist, respectively. I discuss this in greater detail in chapter 4.

<sup>13</sup> Bleich writes that 'Materiality is the twentieth-century form of nominalism' (85), but I have framed this assertion differently since the use of 'materiality' in the twentieth century has been somewhat complicated and often misleading.

to universals. Theory, on the other hand, is interested in ‘the materiality of the signifier’ mostly as a *concept* that intervenes on the concept of universals. This led Jacques Derrida to famously define ‘Materialism’ as ‘a materiality without matter.’<sup>14</sup> While poststructuralist theorists have certainly done us a favor by deconstructing hallowed ideals that were used as instruments of ideology (one thinks of the Foucauldian author-function for example) there is also an extent to which their defense of ‘the materiality of the signifier’ has only succeeded, ironically, in *dematerializing* the printed page. As Jerome McGann has pointed out, while poets during the 1970s and 80s were able to assimilate theory into an imaginative practice of materialized writing, the philosopher and literary academic used theory to ‘turn literature into a mere game, a play of signifiers and signifieds’.<sup>15</sup> Echoing that observation, Michael Davidson noted that ‘The terms of intertextuality, as developed by Barthes and Kristeva, describe only the transposition of signifying systems, not the forms of that transposition, the layering of physical documents and their institutional origins.’<sup>16</sup> If Materialism is the Nominalism of the twentieth century, then it is certainly not the Materialism we associated with high post-structuralist theory, but something else.

One of the easiest misconceptions to make about Susan Howe’s work is that it can easily be characterized as ‘deconstructionist’. Her texts, which have been called difficult or even opaque, as well as her prose arguments that destabilize canonical readings of texts, and finally her affiliation, mostly social, with the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets would seem to suggest as much. But in fact, while she is certainly well versed in poststructuralist theory,

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2) (‘within such limits’), *Material Events: Paul De Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, eds. Tom Cohen, Barbara Cohen, J. Hillis Miller, and Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2001), 277-360; 281

<sup>15</sup> Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: the Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 142

<sup>16</sup> Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1997), 61

there is little mention of these thinkers or their texts in either her work or her scholarship.<sup>17</sup> What we *do* find mention of is medieval and Pragmatist philosophers who participated in the Nominalist vs. Realist debate (Scotus, Ockham, James, Emerson, Peirce), explicit references to their essays and papers, and occurrences of the words ‘Nominalism’ and ‘Realism’.<sup>18</sup> We also find similar philosophical issues at stake in both her art historical contexts and her interests in The Antinomian Controversy.<sup>19</sup> One of the central aims of the present study is to demonstrate the contexts of Howe’s materialism which, unlike much high theory, emphasizes a materiality *with* matter.

But if Howe recovers this ‘history of Materialism’ in Nominalism, then she also—like Emerson before her—acknowledges that this is but one extreme of speculation. In fact, her oeuvre shows repeatedly that she is most interested in a contradictory poetic which embraces both Nominalism *and* Realism, which amounts to a dialectical approach that emphasizes particulars, therefore destabilizing transcendent meaning, at the same time that it acknowledges the pull of universals. For if history has shown Realism to be an instrument of oppression, then Nominalism has also made it more difficult for those persons or variant belief-systems to get their ideas recorded and transmitted. Rather than deconstructionist then, her paradoxical poetics can be most aptly described as the tension between Nominalism and Realism. This is especially true because Nominalism, with all its emphasis on the concrete particular, embraces materiality more so than post-structuralism, which is still apt to regard

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<sup>17</sup> In emphasizing the lineage of Howe’s Materialism I don’t mean to discount her influence by post-structuralist theory altogether, only to clarify this one crucial point about the materiality of language. Indeed, the influence of many post-structuralists, particularly by Barthes, can be sensed in her work. But even so, it is his more meditative works on mourning, such as *Camera Lucida*, that figure into her work. See my discussion of *Sorting Facts* in chapter 5.

<sup>18</sup> These references will be discussed in chapter 4 and 5. Although post-structuralism and philosophical Nominalism part in significant ways it is interesting to observe their common plight in rejecting transcendental signifieds. Derrida notes this in *Of Grammatology*: ‘Pierce goes very far in the direction that I have called the de-construction of the transcendental signified, which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign....’ (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 49).

<sup>19</sup> The Antinomian Controversy, essentially a religious heresy in which dissidents insisted on salvation by faith rather than by works, resulted in the excommunication of Anne Hutchinson in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1638. In *The Birth-mark* Susan Howe argues that a secret history of Antinomian thought can be traced throughout American literature. I discuss this in greater detail in chapter 4.

texts as immaterial. This Nominalist-Realist tension finds a unique expression in the two poles of Pragmatism and Transcendentalism in nineteenth century America, and, if we are to go back further, can be glimpsed in The Antinomian Controversy, in which Anne Hutchinson expressed the heretical view that language was fallible at the same time that she upheld the principle of immediacy and divine revelation.<sup>20</sup> It is this latter tradition that captures Howe's views best, for hers is a poetics that always insists on both Nominalism and Realism—with a slight weight on the former in order to compensate for the ways Realism has dominated print culture.

We can clarify our understanding of Howe's materialism by comparing and contrasting it to other materialisms.<sup>21</sup> The recovering practices of the historical materialism proposed by Benjamin, which aimed to 'blast open the continuum of history', are very much in line with the interventionist materialism of Howe's work.<sup>22</sup> This is true both with regard to her historiographic concerns and her manigraphic ones.<sup>23</sup> But in the context of literary studies, and without the modification 'historical', 'materialism' has come to mean something quite other to Benjamin's aims.<sup>24</sup> In literary studies Materialism has often been conflated with poststructuralist theory. This has often meant aligning materialism with its most radical claims, so that a consideration of a text's visual appearance or material qualities also implied

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<sup>20</sup> In her essay, 'The Antinomian Language Controversy', Patricia Caldwell argues that Hutchinson was essentially prosecuted for 'two fateful declarations: that God had spoken to her by an immediate voice, and that her judgments had always been sound, though her expressions had not' (Patricia Caldwell, 'The Antinomian Language Controversy' (*Harvard Theological Review* 69, 1976), 345-67; 346). Howe mentions Caldwell's essay was important to her when writing *The Birth-mark* (BM ix).

<sup>21</sup> In one sense Howe's materialism parallels the revolutionary spirit of the dialectical materialism proposed by Marx and Engels, though she has stated that she has no background in Marxist theory (*B-M* 159). Furthermore, while their dialectic is found within material culture, Howe's dialectics stem from art historical contexts and are rooted in a struggle between materialism and immaterialism. I discuss this further in chapter 1.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2007), 262

<sup>23</sup> For considerations of intersections of Howe's work with Benjamin see Paul Naylor's 'Writing History Poetically: Walter Benjamin and Susan Howe' in *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture*, 28:3 (Fall 1995): 323-38 and Megan Simpson's chapter on Howe in *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Oriented Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> As with the words 'real' and 'realism' it seems that 'material' and 'materialism' possess a certain authority which thinkers are keen to borrow for their purposes, even and especially when they mean opposite things. Both words, after all, are related to what observably *is*. What could better corroborate an argument than what has been established to exist in the world, in other words, to be true? (See note 10 regarding 'Realism'.)

a renunciation of meaning. Paul De Man's 1982 essay 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant' stands at the forefront of examples of how literary theory has cast the materialist position as one that is radically divorced from the tenets of Nominalism. In this essay De Man cites a passage in Kant in which a person views the ocean 'as the poets do it' [*wie die Dichter es stun*] which De Man tells us means how they appear 'to the eye and not to the mind' or without any cognitive interpretation.<sup>25</sup> De Man also cites another illustration of Kant's in which a savage views a house without knowing what its purpose is. In these passages, Kant is speaking of an experience that is free of prior knowledge. De Man seizes Kant's two examples of the 'nonteleological apprehension of nature' in order to ask what the textual equivalent would be, supposing it would mean 'a dismemberment of language, as meaning-producing tropes are replaced by the fragmentation of sentences and propositions into discrete words or the fragmentation of words into syllables or finally letters.'<sup>26</sup> He concludes that the letter has a 'prosaic materiality' that can never be transformed 'into the phenomenal cognition of aesthetic judgment.'<sup>27</sup>

Despite (or because of) the fact that De Man's essay concludes with a declaration that a pure aesthetic judgment of a text is impossible, critics have continued to use his thought experiment as a reference point for what the extreme of literary materialism might look like. In his introduction to *The Shape of the Signifier*, Walter Benn Michaels sketches De Man's concept of a 'material vision' and equates this to a 'thoroughgoing materialism'.<sup>28</sup> In a powerfully cogent twist of syllogistic all-or-nothing reasoning that follows (where the assertion that a text has multiple meanings is said to be equivalent to the assertion that a text has no meaning at all), Michaels discounts this 'thoroughgoing materialism' for the same

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<sup>25</sup> Paul De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 82

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* 96

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* 97

<sup>28</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: American Writing from 1967 to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5, 6

reason that Materialism throughout history ever surfaced in the first place, that is, to oppose the disappearance of meaning.

*The Shape of the Signifier* opens with an eighteen page Introduction which is largely a critique of Susan Howe's arguments about manuscript editing in *The Birth-mark*. For Michaels, one instance of Howe's more extreme materialism is manifested in her insistence on the significance of the blank pages of Thomas Shepard's autobiography. The original manuscript, on archive at the Houghton Library at Harvard, is a small leather-bound notebook which, when flipped over and upside-down, reveals a second narrative written in the other direction. Between the two sections of writing are eighty-six blank pages of paper. The autobiography was eventually transcribed and printed in two different editions. 'Neither editor,' Howe tells us, 'saw fit to point out the fact that Shepard left two manuscripts in one book separated by many pages and positioned so that to read one you must turn the other upside down' (*B-M* 60).

Michaels, who considers a text to be 'certain words in a certain order' is interested in this insofar as it troubles his textual ontology. But even more disconcerting for his model is Howe's view that Dickinson manuscripts ought to be read as drawings. (See Fig. 1) In this case, he tells us,

The poems, becoming 'drawing,' cease to be text. This is the point of the redescription of text as 'material object' (60). For the very idea of textuality depends upon the discrepancy between the text and its materiality, which is why two different copies of a book (two different material objects) may be said to be the same text.<sup>29</sup>

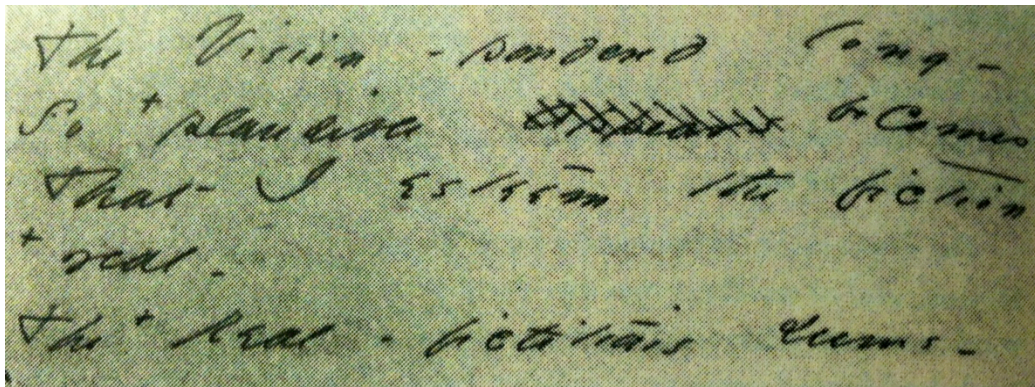
*The Shape of the Signifier* bears the subtitle '1967 to the End of History' because, the author tells us, '1967 was the year in which Michael Fried published "Art and Objecthood," which for many writers marks the event that put the "post" in postmodernism.'<sup>30</sup> In fact, the above

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* 3

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* 12

argument reads like a rehearsal of many of Fried's claims.<sup>31</sup> What is at stake here then, is really the effort to draw a line between text and objecthood. As with Fried's critique of Minimal art, Michaels has trouble accepting any account of text that includes the subjective experience of the viewer (in this case the reader), which is the hallmark of art that presents itself not as painted composition but as material *object*. Fried's dichotomous reading leads Michaels to assume the subjective experience of a text excludes the objective intention of the author.<sup>32</sup> The error here has been to pit theory against intention, and to pair theory with materialism, so that—by extension—materialism is viewed as antithetical to intention.



Snippet from the *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*. Howe includes this image in *The Birth-mark* 146

For this reason, Michaels is perplexed by Howe's simultaneous interest in materiality, such as when she insists that blank pages matter or that Dickinson's manuscripts be read 'as drawings', and intention, such as when she is 'defending the letter—of the poem, if not the law'.<sup>33</sup> At times he seems critical of her inconsistency—at other times he seems admiring. But while he accurately picks up on the paradox in her poetics, he is blind-sided by his own dialectic, which has been wrongly informed by theoretical materialism. 'In literary theory,' Michaels tells us, 'what Howe is interested in was often called the materiality of the

<sup>31</sup> I discuss the nuances of Fried's argument and its art historical context in detail in Chapter 1.

<sup>32</sup> Michaels writes, 'So the argument, in miniature, is that if you think the intention of the author is what counts, then you don't think the subject position of the reader matters, but if you don't think the intention of the author is what counts, then the subject position of the reader will be the only thing that matters' (11). I call intention 'objective' here because in his essay 'Against Theory' written with Steven Knapp, he argues that meaning and intention are one. See *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 3

signifier,' but we already know her to be informed by a different history of materialism, the one that stems from Nominalism and the tradition of philosophers who embraced both it and Realism simultaneously. By way of a straw man, in which the 'material vision' of De Man (which De Man himself said was impossible) is cast as the logical extreme of Howe's materialism, the argument undermines the objecthood Fried opposed, but in literature instead of art.

As a result of arguments like these, literary studies has come, mistakenly, to view the act of materializing a text as an act of negating intention, when in fact materiality has long been used as an intervention on *canonical readings* of a text.<sup>34</sup> In one of the greatest examples of recovering pivotal nuances of authorial intent through rematerializing the text, bibliographer D.F. McKenzie once showed how the epigraph Wimsatt and Beardsley used from Congreve's *Way of the World* in their famous 1946 essay 'The Intentional Fallacy' contained a misquote. The authors (inadvertently we presume) misread and misquoted Congreve's text. McKenzie explains,

By adopting that simple change from 'wrought' to 'wrote', Wimsatt and Beardsley oblige us to make our meaning from their misreading. The epigraph thereby directs us to weaken the emphasis that Congreve placed on his labour of composition: he writes of the 'Pains' it cost him to hammer out *his* meaning. The changed wording destroys the carefully created internal rhyme, the resonance between what, in the first line, Congreve said he 'wrought' and, in the second line, its fate in being reduced to 'naught' by those who misquote, misconstrue, and misjudge him. Congreve's prologue to *The Way of the World* put, in 1700/1710, a point of view exactly opposite to the one which the lines are cited to support.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> There ought to be a distinction between *Intention* (capital I), which corresponds to the Foucauldian author-function and the vehicle for ideology that authors sometimes become, and *intention*, which Nominalists and textual scholars have long used as a way of showing how material records can intervene on readings of and ideas about a text. Certainly Foucault's essay has reminded us of the perils underlying the 'author-function' and the potential for *Intention* to be an instrument of political propaganda. But an 'authorless' text is liable to do the same—especially when it is dematerialized.

<sup>35</sup> Space prohibits me from quoting McKenzie's brilliant close reading in its entirety here, in which he goes on to point out that the authors also omitted Congreve's capitalizations and altered several important appositional commas and one line-break. He also discusses how the change in font in varying additions may have contributed to the misprision. See D.F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the sociology of texts* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), 20.

If we don't care who wrote the text our chances of committing such *textual* fallacies—intentional or not—are much greater. Unless we care about the author, original manuscripts or authorized versions won't interest us—even printed versions won't interest us as much. This is what Howe meant when, in addressing the ways Dickinson's poems were altered by her Editors, she retorted to Foucault's 'What is an Author?', 'I cannot murmur indifferently, "What's it matter who's speaking?" I emphatically insist it does matter who's speaking' (*B-M* 20). This is another way of saying that authorial intention must matter to our reading or else we run the risk of allowing texts to become ideological instruments. Such dematerialized texts become susceptible to Foucauldian author-functions (or indeed authorless-functions) which become a vehicle to whatever meaning power structures wish to put there.

If it seems that the suggestion that authorial intention is compatible with materialism is illogical, it is only because intention has historically been conceived as a single, final reading of the poem. But this isn't true if we conceive of intention as existing in particulars and meaning as always being a co-production that involves the reader. If there are multiple or layered meanings possible, then partial recovery of intention may provide a hint to a reading that parts in important ways from the canonized one.<sup>36</sup> We need only to look at the disciplines of bibliography or textual scholarship to see how the tension between materialism and intention have always been held in check by one another. Materialism and intention are the 'twin dangers of speculation' in these fields, and most recent textual scholars and bibliographers have had to adopt a dialectical approach that accounts for both of them.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> As an example from my own experience of how intention can intervene on established readings of a poem, I investigated a claim in H.D.'s correspondence about her composition of *Helen in Egypt* and found it illuminated the formal aspect of the poem that proved the most difficult for critics. The context of the letter revealed that an audio-recording session generated the final edition's perplexing prose captions and also referenced her translation of Euripides' *Ion* and the *Viking Portable Dante* as important intertexts. Orality, Euripidean drama, and printing conventions of epic poems provided the necessary framework for understanding the function of the captions. See my article 'The Origins of the Prose Captions in H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*', *Review of English Studies*, 63: 260 (June 2012): 466-490.

<sup>37</sup> There are, of course, extreme monological positions in the fields of textual scholarship and bibliography as well. The 'New Bibliography' movement spearheaded by Fredson Bowers would be an example of a school of bibliography that aims to establish a single, final text that is disinterested in variant readings. Meanwhile

Howe apprehended this tension perfectly when, in describing her reaction to finding Edward Almack's *Eikon Basilike or a Bibliography of the King's Book* she said, 'I was struck by the ironies implicit in the very idea of a bibliography, which is a search for origins on paper' (NM 174). Only a dematerialized, that is, theoretical text has a corresponding Intention that corresponds to one fixed meaning. As archived drafts show, the writing process involves what appears to be many revisionary mind-frames in many moments. Intention in practice is multiple, contradictory, and scripted; it is never wholly recoverable because such a whole does not exist, but hints of additional meaning may persist in the manuscripts and print versions that it generates.

One of the central contentions of the present study is that aspects of intention can be located within the particulars of the textual materials themselves—or that these particulars may constitute an intervention on canonical readings of intention—and that to materialize a text is not to discount the author's intention but rather, and in many cases, to recover an endangered sense of it. The result is not a single, final reading but a dialectical approach to literary and textual scholarship that adds depth, complexity, and countervailing evidence to what we thought we knew about a given text. A textual materialism that is compatible with interventional intentionality is one aspect of what I call *Elegaic Materialism*.

If we consider, again, the practice of attending to particulars and parts at the expense of essentialising, we will find that this sensibility corresponds to the activity of elegy. When faced with the loss of a loved one, those left behind often engage in private rituals of imbuing

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dialectical bibliographers like D.F. McKenzie come full circle from a defense of intention to argue that even misprisions become a part of a text's history and that all readings are important. '[F]or better or worse readers inevitably make their own meanings' he tells us, and 'What writers thought they were doing in writing texts, or printers and booksellers in designing and publishing them, or readers in making sense of them are issues which no history of the book can evade' (McKenzie, 19). This constructivist or indeed sociological view of the book parallels the artists I discuss in chapter 1, where Duchamp's 'The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors' shows the various hands who grinded paint color (otherwise thought to be an 'essence') and where Martin's canvases show up-close 'errors' in what was thought to be a graph paper like grid.

significance to ordinary items, such as scraps of paper with jottings they might have otherwise discarded, objects that become material indexical remains. There is a sense in which we could say that all elegiac activity is really a Nominalist pursuit. This preoccupation with particulars, it turns out, is understood in psychoanalytic terms to be integral to the work of mourning. Responding to Freud's comment that there is no substitute following personal loss, Louise O. Fradenburg writes,

if we try to de-essentialize this concept, we might focus instead on the problem of how we become attached to—how we develop bonds and relationships with—*particulars*. What makes grief agonizing is precisely that when someone or something particular has been lost, it cannot recur. Thus in the concept of substitution there continues a defense against the loss of the particular, hence against the advent of the new as well as the end of the old. If the particular cannot be repeated, it remains forever lost; and this is why there can be no final closure to mourning. There can only be *alongside* of mourning, learning to love new particulars.<sup>38</sup>

But if mourning is marked by that preoccupation, then to render the loss in poetry necessarily entails an appeal to symbolic language that others will understand. The best elegies have always represented this struggle between the particular and universal. As Max Cavitch writes in *American Elegy*, 'In their figures of death, elegies seek to apprehend the ultimate, most unknowable conditions of privacy, while pointing, in their language of loss, toward the sheer commonality of human experience.'<sup>39</sup> Successfully negotiating that struggle is difficult, and as a result the genre has historically been the source of embarrassment. Citing the portrayal of Emmeline Grangerfield in *Huckleberry Finn* as an illustration of the cultural fears of elegy, a teen-aged occasional poet who eagerly addresses loss with 'the sweet drapery of verse', Cavitch traces our resistance to the genre and shows how it is resolved only through a struggle with the genre itself.<sup>40</sup> If part of what offends us in elegy is its sentimentality, then

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<sup>38</sup> Louise O. Fradenburg, ' "Voice Memorial": Loss and Reparation in Chaucer's Poetry', *Exemplaria* 2:1 (March 1990): 169-202; 182-3. Fradenburg's essay was particularly helpful in demonstrating some of the subtler aspects of elegy and the literary work of mourning.

<sup>39</sup> Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* 4. In his introduction Cavitch provides an insightful discussion of elegy in relation to genre, arguing that 'The work of genre and the work of mourning are homologous, and thus inspire thoughts of one another, in that

that is probably the result of the too easy appeal to common tropes and forms that subsume the particulars that make mourning meaningful.

Given the interrelation between the Nominalist-Realist struggle and elegy it is not surprising that we should find both themes running throughout Howe's career. The love of particulars in Howe's work can be traced into her earliest experiments as a visual artist, before she transitioned to writing poetry in 1974. And as this thesis will show, the preoccupation with particulars was a common aesthetic concern of many Minimalist artists of the period, artists who were incidentally critiqued by Fried and Michaels for blurring traditional partitions between the arts. But, as I will argue, Howe was distinguished from her peers by her simultaneous admission of the appeal of universals. To reiterate the point: while she always errs on the side of particulars, she also demonstrates the countervailing pulls of both Nominalism and Realism. This 'elegaic Meditation' is the same frame of mind we find in her later poetics of the book and archive, where she recovers intention through material particulars that editors deemed insignificant and therefore suitable for omission. While the bibliographic and historiographic concerns of Howe's writings in *My Emily Dickinson* (1985) and *The Birth-mark* (1993) are well-known, their connection to elegy has to date not been explored—despite the fact that all of her major writings since 'Sorting Facts' (1996) have been elegies, and despite the fact that the 2010 Bollingen Prize announcement described her as 'a fierce elegist'. In addition to demonstrating the singularities of Howe's materialism and situating it within its proper philosophical and art historical contexts, then, one of the aims of the present study is to show her unique contribution to elegy.

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they are both enactments of this "traversal." They are ways of seeking to understand the relation between the singularity of an event (a poem, a death) and its inevitable repetition—a relation that takes contingent forms....' (22). In *The English Elegy*, Peter Sacks had similarly observed 'the elegist's reluctant submission to language itself' noting that 'One of the least well observed elements of the genre is this enforced accommodation between the mourning self on the one hand and the very words of grief and fictions of consolation on the other' (Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, 2).

The beginning of this study investigates the roots of this aesthetic in the visual arts and then segues, chronologically, into Howe's career as a poet. Here the Nominalist and Realist tensions in her work take on the mediums of historical narrative and print culture. 'History is the record of winners,' she has famously argued, and, noting the vehicle by which these records are transmitted, also observed that 'print settles it' (*ET* 11; *NM* 159). Ultimately, any argument that textuality consists of 'certain words in a certain order' betrays a long-standing bias for Platonic Ideals; it is a Realist argument *par excellence*. In fact, this bias can be seen across the humanities and the social sciences. A brief look at contemporary introductions to historical method and praxis shows this pervasive tendency to privilege extractable, reproducible meaning and ready relevance to historical narratives. Consider the following excerpt from *Fashioning History: Current Practices and Principles*:

This basic partitioning of all artifactual survivals into material objects and documents, into unwritten and written materials, reflects a long-held assumption in traditional historical method that *texts contain their own interpretations* in a sense (and thus can be repeated with little or no interpretation by the historian?), while material objects, such as tools, clothing, and landscapes, only yield their meaning through the historian's *active interpretation*. The latter require the historian to infer meaning; the former offer their own through report, record, or testimony, and so on. On one level of understanding, this is a truism. Communication is direct in textual materials, indirect in other things. In a sense, documents are already represented versions of the past, already interpreted by those of the time in light of their categories and perspectives. Thus *they appear to present their information directly*. Other artifacts only offer information indirectly through inference and interpretation by the historian, even in those cases when the existence of the object is taken to correlate with the artistic or technological level of a population or indicate its social organization and cultural values.<sup>41</sup>

In order to grasp the materialist claims made by Howe's work, we have to be able to perceive how this partitioning forms the backbone of how knowledge from the past finds its way to future generations. Howe scholarship has shrewdly picked up on how the visual aspects of

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<sup>41</sup> Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *Fashioning History: Current Practices and Principles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 8; my italics. I include this quote from a historiographer not to indict the discipline but because, unlike literary study, history treats its methodology of editing and textual inference much more directly. There are no manuals in literature. Archival work and textual scholarship are typically discussed in optional library workshops, if at all, and the *practice* of scholarship is therefore relegated to the domain of literary *theory*.

her work are imbricated with the questions of historical transmission. But the scope of her poetics, which has implications across the humanities and social sciences, can only be understood when we look deeply into her art historical contexts and philosophical interests. The trajectory of Howe's career, across mediums, disciplines, and historical topics, connects the missing dots in an important counter-tradition, a 'history of Materialism' that battles the tendency toward transparent text.

Howe's insistence that a text be regarded as a drawing deliberately thwarts the dematerializing tendency of the Realist text. But, curiously, and while Howe's own scholarship is devoted to pointing out the *manugraphic* particulars which have been sacrificed for the sake of printability, her poems are composed (with the exception of the citational facsimiles from other authors that form part of her collage) in *typeface*. This we should find surprising given that many of her artistic role models at the time, Robert Smithson and Carl Andre for example, were composing poetic word-drawings with pencil and paper. Agnes Martin meanwhile crafted canvases whose hand-painted lines were paramount to her aesthetic. The small presses with whom Howe worked regularly printed poetry that was more visual in nature. Why did she choose to work in type? Even in her early 'word-drawings' there is no handwritten or painted language—all is composed on a typewriter or cut from printed textbooks and surrounded by watercolor.

In fact, as one of the primary ways that Realism exerts its influence, print is the best way for Howe to formally stage a Nominalist intervention. By playing with the elements of the printer's art—from orthography to reconstructed typesetting and graphic layout—she is able to reintroduce aspects of the particularity of the handwritten manuscript: illegibility and editorial uncertainty (about what the words are and in what order they should be read) enter the composition, and the text veers once again toward drawing in that they are a holistic rather than strictly linear composition. (See Fig. 2)

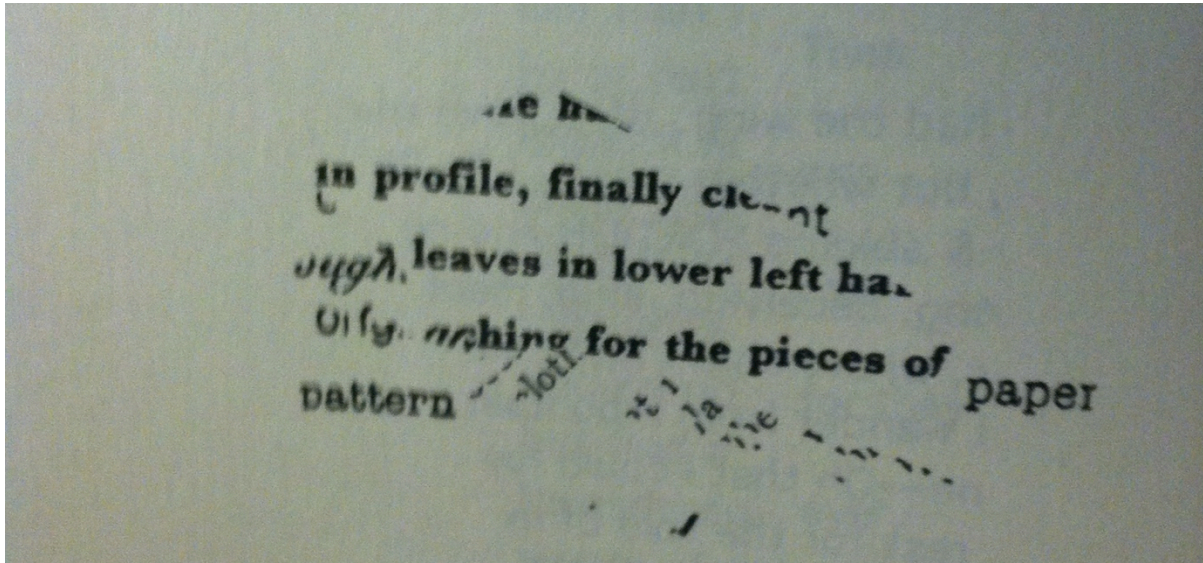


Fig. 2 Collage-poem from *That This* p. 48

In second half of my study I give careful attention to the collage-poems, whose forms have a decidedly different aesthetic context from concrete poetry, and whose experiments coincide with Howe's search to document the lives of lost loved ones. Here we glimpse an effort, through formal means, for loss to not become transparent.

It is for this reason that I begin with an apparent *typo* and not a manigraphic mark to frame my reading of Howe's work and to argue its importance to the way we read and use texts. The graphic loss incurred when manuscripts are transcribed into typeface is rather obvious, and, as Howe's scholarship makes clear, also entails semantic loss. But a typo is one of the most basic incidents of material particulars in what is otherwise a Realist medium of universals. It intervenes on the transparency of the text, or its tendency in the hands of those who produce and receive it, to be regarded as a representation of immaterial ideas whose meaning lies beyond their signifiers. In the typo we encounter material language that points to itself as matter as well as a reminder of the multiple sets of hands involved in reproducing a given text.

In the typo/variant we also confront a crisis of intention and chance. Especially in the context of an oeuvre that plays with alternate spellings, we are encouraged to mine seeming

‘errors’ for intended meaning we may have overlooked. This illustrates one of the prime tasks (or risks) of criticism, which is to separate out the meaningful coincidence from the random. Interpreters of the arts have always had to walk the line between randomness and meaningful coincidence. In offering a critical reading we mix fact with various forms of speculation. Some aspects of a text or its composition can certainly be verifiable, but the interpretation we draw up around it will, hopefully, contain some evidence of our having engaged with it subjectively as well.

The most *probable* explanation for the orthographic shift of ‘elegaic’ mid-way through Howe’s career is that it was an error and that the alternate denotation in Webster’s 1884 dictionary (a version Howe didn’t even use) as well as the correspondence with the context of the poems, is a random coincidence. That is, it seems not to be inherently meaningful; the meaning only came from my reading of it. But one of the many things Howe’s oeuvre teaches us is that the chance coincidence can actually be a gateway to alternate or marginal readings. ‘Trivial curiosities and nonsensical subjects’, she tells us, ‘are kernels to be collated like tunes for a fact while important matters are neglected’ (*FS* 18). To err on the side of particulars is an imaginative modality that creates the opportunity for dissenting facts to will themselves out, in spite of the universalized reading.<sup>42</sup> If the ‘elegaic’ variant is merely a chance particular, a mistake that I’ve made meaningful through my own reading, then it also becomes part of the history of these books. And it also provides a serendipitously apt framework for appreciating Howe’s materialism as well as her elegies. For the words ‘elegaic/elegiac’ not only perform what they denote in the contexts of the above poems and her poetics, but in the unstable literary tradition that they describe as well.

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<sup>42</sup> I discuss James’s and Peirce’s approach to marginal facts in greater detail in chapter 5. This also corresponds with philosopher Pierre Bayle’s comment, which I discuss in chapter 3: ‘I formed a plan to compose a *Critical Dictionary* which would contain a collection of the mistakes which have been made by compilers of dictionaries as well as other writers, and which would summarize under each name of a man or a city the mistakes concerning that man or that city.’ Howe includes the quote in *Frame Structures* (*FS* 18).

The foregrounding of a variant and its fleeting denotation are an analog for the hermeneutics of loss and reparation.

Related to the non-logical assertion that both authorial intention and individual readings matter is Howe's view of reading being a threshold. Meaning does not lie in either the author's mind or in the reader's perspective but rather is produced *between* them; it is a co-creative event in time and space. This middle ground assumes, as a precondition, a *loss* of shared meaning. Readers never realize the full text any more than authors can realize their full reading of it any more than we can realize the full person whom we elegize. What I have just sketched out in these two sets of non-logical assertions, that is, a way of reading that is attuned to both material particulars and the author's intention and which understands reading to be a co-production in the wake of an impossible ideal of meaning, is what I call *elegaic materialism*. It is Howe's method in her poetry and scholarship, and in the present study, it is also mine.

As contrasted to the 'material vision', 'elegaic materialism' is teleological, through its devotion to the author's semantic meaning, but it is *also* aesthetic, through its devotion to graphic meaning and materials. When we read materials with the author in mind, we apprehend new meaning. To return to a somewhat extreme case of materialism discussed earlier and in order to illustrate what I mean, let's consider again Thomas Shepard's autobiography and the eighty-six blank pages. I quote, at length, a passage in *The Birth-mark* where Howe addresses the blank pages between the 'T' and 'S' sections directly:

"T \*{*My Birth & Life*:} S:" is littered with the deaths of mothers. The loss of his own mother when Shepard was a small child could never be settled.

Creation implies separation. The last word of "T\*{*My Birth & Life*:} S:" is "afflictions."

Eighty-six blank manuscript pages emphasize this rupture in the pious vocabulary of order. The reader reads empty paper.

The absence of a definitive conclusion to Shepard's story of his life and struggles is a deviation from the familiar Augustinian pattern of self-revelation used by other English nonconformist Reformers.

*Allegoria* and *historia* should be united in “T \*{My Birth & Life:} S:”  
Doubting Thomas should transcend the empirical events of his times to become the  
figura of the Good Shepard, but the repetitive irruption of death into life is mightier  
than this notion of enclosure (*B-M* 58).

If we read closely, we see that the reason Howe finds the eighty-six blank pages integral to the autobiography is not because she regards the book as material object. She finds them significant because, given their context, they couldn't possibly be any more *meaningful*. Placed between pages that are ‘littered with the deaths of mothers’, including Shepard’s own, the ‘Eighty-six blank manuscript pages emphasize this rupture in the pious vocabulary of order.’ Where Shepard’s chosen genre of confessions would have traditionally called for subsuming *historia* (the particular occurrence) into *Allegoria* (the universalized narrative), we find instead the ‘absence of a definitive conclusion’.<sup>43</sup>

Had we considered a text to be certain words in a certain order and not a material object then we might not have cared about the blank pages. But as Craig Dworkin writes in his book about textual blanks, ‘any particular sign occurring in that system—“silence,” “nothingness,” “absence,” et cetera—is always historicizable.’<sup>44</sup> Part of historicizing, for Howe, is always to care *who* wrote a given piece of writing. Had we thought the notebook to be a piece of writing without an author we might not have cared about his personal context of mourning and loss. Howe is able to read the autobiography in this way because she is devoted to both materiality and intention. Her historicizing in the above passage makes it

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<sup>43</sup> Howe also reveals at the end of this section that the grief over his mother was the basis of Shepard’s faith in the Holy Father. She includes the following quote from his notebook: ‘He is the god who tooke me vp when my own mother dyed who loued me, & wn my stepmother cared not for me, & w<sup>n</sup> lastly my father also dyed & foorsooke me wn I was yong & little & could take no care for my self. (*T* side of MB)’ (*BM* 59).

<sup>44</sup> Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 7. Dworkin observes the differences in attitudes toward the blank canvas in modernist painting as opposed to the blank page in poetry: ‘Where modernism adduced the readymade canvas as a picture before any particular canvas was actually produced, thus initiating a set of irrevocable aesthetic judgments and extending the possibility of continued painterly practice—one spurred by the specter of a blank canvas but never foreclosed by the instantiation of any specific canvas—the readymade page was in fact proffered as poetry before a modernist poetics could fully formulate its potential’ (27).

clear that the sign of the eighty-six blank pages signifies incommunicable sorrow. The blank pages recover meaning about to be lost, and this meaning was loss itself.

It may seem from my analysis that the meditation on particulars keeps turning up the elegaic and that elegaic reading keeps turning up particulars. But this we should not find surprising. Both are hermeneutics of loss and reparation, of a struggle *not* to lose singular meaning to ideals. In fact, insofar as the turn to materials is aesthetic and the turn to the author involves meaning, there is a sense in which this way of reading approximates another vision of materials. Not Michaels's vision of De Man's 'material vision', in this case, but Kant's vision of aesthetic judgement.

Michaels succeeds in pointing out the ways Howe complicates his misprision of De Man's misprision of Kant's vision, but in fact Howe's work is powerfully resonant with Kant's original vision. The error has been to remove Kant's thought experiment (in which a person views the ocean in a purely aesthetic way) from the context of the *Third Critique*. If we look at the passage we will see that Kant begins by referring back to specific claims made in 'Analytic of the Beautiful', the First Book of the 'Analytic of Aesthetic Judgment'. Here Kant tells us that '*Taste* is the faculty of judging an object or a mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion *apart from any interest*. The object of such a delight is called *beautiful*.'<sup>45</sup> Both De Man and Michaels conflate teleology with meaning, but in the *Third Critique* 'teleology' refers specifically to a subject's *interest* and their *ends*. 'For, when it is pure,' Kant tells us, the judgement of taste 'combines delight or aversion immediately with the bare *contemplation* of the object irrespective of its use or of any end.'<sup>46</sup> The 'non-

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<sup>45</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42; 211. Italics in original. In framing Kant's discussion of the nonteleological view of objects, De Man notes that 'Kant adds that he had previously reminded the reader of this necessity, but it is not clear to what passage he alludes. He is rather restating a general principle that underlies the entire enterprise and that was first formulated, with all desirable clarity, at the onset of the analytics of the beautiful under the modality of quality 116; 38)' (De Man 80). But in fact, Kant clearly states in the sentences that follow this comment that 'what has already been averted to' is the 'pure aesthetic judgements' that do not 'presuppose the concept of an end' (Kant 100; 270).

<sup>46</sup> Kant 72; 242

teleological’ does not have to entail a ‘repudiation of meaning’ as Michaels writes or mere seeing as De Man would have it.<sup>47</sup> The non-teleological aesthetic judgement regards an object as an *end in itself*. In other words, it circumvents prior knowledge:

as to the prospect of the ocean, we are not to regard it as we, with our minds stored with knowledge on a variety of matters (which, however, is not contained in the immediate intuition), are accustomed to represent it in *thought*, as, let us say, a spacious realm of aquatic creatures, or as the mighty reservoirs from which are drawn the vapours that fill the air with clouds of moisture for the good of the land, or yet as an element which no doubt divides continent from continent, but at the same time affords the means of the greatest commercial intercourse between them—for in this way we get nothing beyond teleological judgements. Instead of this we must be able to see sublimity in the ocean, regarding it, as the poets do, according to what the impression upon the eye reveals, as, let us say, in its calm, a clear mirror of water bounded only by the heavens, or be it disturbed, as threatening to overwhelm and engulf everything.<sup>48</sup>

Here ‘understanding is at the service of the imagination’ where ordinarily we find ‘the relation is reversed’.<sup>49</sup> Note that meaning is not absent in this example. On the contrary, to ‘see sublimity’ means to see associative meaning and symbolic power. This alternate, nonteleological meaning has been made possible by an initial suspension of teleological judgement, what Kant refers to throughout the *Third Critique* as freedom from concepts.

But this is only the first step in Kant’s Critique of Aesthetic Judgement. Following the first two books is the section ‘Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgement’, in which he argues that taste both is and is not based on concepts.<sup>50</sup> Kant’s project in *Critique of Reason* was to move from the observance of particulars to the rational assignment of universals and so to synthesize intuition with concepts. But in the *Third Critique*, rather than a synthesis, we have an uneasy relation between oppositions that only resolves through *antinomy*. Kant explains that the conflict between the above principles is removed by understanding the ‘double sense’ of the

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<sup>47</sup> Michaels is quoting De Man’s commentator Andrzej Warminski. Michaels also writes, ‘Objects of understanding are objects not yet “severed from any purpose or use.”’ But Kant’s argument clearly shows that we can understand objects severed from our own purposes and our own *ends* (Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 6).

<sup>48</sup> Kant 101; 271

<sup>49</sup> *ibid* 73; 242

<sup>50</sup> *ibid* 166; 338-9

word ‘concept’ which can operate in both ‘determinable’ and ‘indeterminable’ ways.<sup>51</sup> What we have, then, is not a synthesis, but a non-logical resolution (one which defies Aristotle’s law of non-contradiction). The result is that we still arrive at some meaning or understanding of the object being viewed, but it is an alternate meaning or understanding because it was first severed from its purpose or use.

This dialectical framework of aesthetic judgment is not unlike Howe’s own experience of Shepard’s autobiography. Divorced from its customary use (or perceived uselessness), the concept of ‘The Blank Page’ becomes instead *this* blank page. Freed from editorial assumptions about purpose (one’s own ends), Howe is able to see the object as an end to itself. And in so doing she finds a different kind of purpose, an *alternate teleology*, as it were, that hadn’t been presupposed. It is worth pointing out that this apprehension would have been made possible by the haptic, auditory, and visual effects (i.e. the purely aesthetic) in the library when she turned the pages and experienced how ‘the reader reads empty paper’ (*B-M* 58). But such an *experience* of a text does not have to be divorced from meaning. On the contrary, it only frees a text to mean other things and to have other purposes.

With regard to Shepard’s editors, we can now understand that their oversight was on account of presupposed utility for the pages. Reprinting a version with actual blank pages may not have been practical, but as Howe points out, they could have merely made mention of the book’s singular structure. A reading with no oversights may not be possible, but we can certainly come closer if we read both materially and with concern for intention. The mistake has been to assume that materiality and intention are irreconcilable extremes of reading. Theory has not been able to reconcile the two, but the entwined nature of materiality and intention has always been understood as uneasy oppositions by textual scholarship and bibliography. It is perhaps on account of those disciplines performing an antinomic activity

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid* 167; 339

that is at once Nominalist (as its materials render sanctified texts uncertain) and Realist (as its findings often reveal new meaning or intention) that they have been historically ghettoized from mainstream literary analysis.<sup>52</sup> One of the central contentions of this thesis is that bibliographic analysis and materialization of the text *must needs* be a part of all literary analysis—and not just a supplemental discipline. What does it matter that we’re all reading the same words in the same order if the text that we’re reading is only an ideological invention? One whose particulars have been effaced and essentialised by the structures that reproduce and determine them over time? And, similarly, and at the opposite extreme, a text that is materialized without any concern of the author will result in readings that overlook how materials might have been used to mean in a singular way. ‘The mysterious link between beauty and utility,’ Howe has said, ‘is, for me, similar to the tie between poetry and historical documents; although it would take me years to explain what the connection actually is, I know it’s there. Or rather than explain it, I show it in my writing.’ Howe said this in relation to the way she connects writing and drawing in her mind.<sup>53</sup> The ‘link between beauty and utility’ is the dialectic of aesthetic judgement that De Man and Michaels did not have the insight to see, but which Susan Howe did. It is, in other words, to regard something ‘as the poets do’. *Elegaic Materialism* offers a demonstration of what that might mean.

This study follows a chronological order of Howe’s career beginning with her move to New York City in 1961 after studying painting at the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts.

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<sup>52</sup> Although the digital age seems to have spawned a new interest in history of the book studies, it continues to get marginalized. In a recent Lionel Trilling lecture, Toril Moi offered a thoughtful reconsideration of dominant influences on literary criticism, including Paul Ricoeur’s ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ and Stephen Best’s and Sharon Marcus’s ‘surface reading’. But she also framed the talk by limiting her consideration to Realist texts, saying, with regard to bibliography and history of the book studies, ‘I think we can all agree that that’s separate.’ This is indicative of a widespread belief that to read materials is a specific activity that is other to literary criticism and the activity of reading texts (“‘Understanding from Inside,” or Critique and Reading after Wittgenstein and Cavell’, Columbia University, 3 March 2014).

<sup>53</sup> Keller 5. Howe makes this comment in a discussion about her late husband David von Schlegell’s sculpture and sailboats. ‘I guess it was about that time I began to connect writing and drawing in my mind. This is important because if a boat sails fast it usually looks beautiful. As if the eye has some perfect knowledge that is feeling. Some enduring value, some purpose is reflected in the material you use.’

I have organized the chapters around works that are, to my mind, pivotal developments in her poetics. As Marjorie Perloff has noted, Howe had no apprentice period where she wrote in the style of another poet, and her early work demonstrates a mature poetics.<sup>54</sup> Rather than radical departures what we see across her career is an underlying non-logical disposition (where contradiction can be true) that takes on new inflections with each of her new interests. In each new phase of her career, a new context or influence can be sensed that results in new topical explorations or formal features. While I have titled the chapters with pairs of oppositions, it should be clear from this discussion that Howe's work and the present study are devoted to complicating those distinctions and allowing them to blur or clash in productive ways as opposed to enforcing any kind of binary. Indeed, the oppositions I explore often reveal inconsistencies and interchangeabilities at times and don't necessarily, on the whole, correspond to any hierarchical relation. It is ostensibly true that each pair breaks down into terms that can loosely be conceived in an ideal vs. concrete relation, but even that distinction will prove to be false. Jameson declared that 'depth models' such as essence/appearance, latent/manifest, authentic/inauthentic, and signifier/signified have been replaced by 'a conception of practices, discourses, and textual play' and that 'depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth).'<sup>55</sup> To some extent it would seem that Howe's work is, in this regard, an acolyte of Jamesonian postmodernism. But too often, as has been the case with metaphysics, the disrepute of binary oppositions has resulted in our pretending that they don't exist, and merely replacing them with play, thereby allowing them to persist all the more perniciously. One of the important contributions of Howe's oeuvre, and indeed one of the aims of the present study, is to instead foreground several manifestations of such oppositions

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<sup>54</sup> Marjorie Perloff, 'Collision or Collusion with History: the Narrative Lyric of Susan Howe', *Contemporary Literature*, 30:4 (Winter 1989): 518-533; 519

<sup>55</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 12

and to then demonstrate ‘a catastrophe of bifurcation’ between them rather than ‘multiple surfaces’. The outcome is that we better apprehend the covert operations of binary oppositions in the material realm of text-based disciplines.

Chapter 1 investigates the art historical context of Howe’s early career as a painter. This was the late 1960’s in New York City, and the importance of the writings that grew out of Minimalism and its criticism cannot be overestimated. For many, including Michael Fried, it marked the advent of postmodernism. But this period in art history, what I feel was the single most important context of her singular poetics, has often been too neatly summed up by its historians, overlooking some of the nuanced ways in which some minimalist artists were working. This was especially true of the artists to whom Howe responded most, including Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt, and Robert Smithson. Through a careful rereading of some of the key works of the period as well as some of the critical texts which influenced Howe, I trace the development of a countervailing aesthetic that embraced both the mysticism of Malevich’s monochromes and the objecthood of Duchamp’s ready-mades.

In chapter 2, I reproduce and analyze eight of Howe’s collages, what she refers to in interviews as ‘word-drawings’.<sup>56</sup> These collages were only recently put on archive at The Beinecke Library at Yale and so have been unavailable to scholars until now. The word-drawings were all made between 1968 and 1973, just before Howe’s transition to poetry. They demonstrate an already keen preoccupation with rare particulars—both words and images—and the manner in which they can be used to intervene on over-arching classificatory systems. I discuss the influence of Olson’s open field poetics and show how the graphical layout of the collaged text fragments shows the future poet figuring relations of interstanzaic space and learning how to combine visual and verbal logic. Several of the word-

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<sup>56</sup> Howe borrows Carl Andre’s term ‘word drawings’. See Susan Howe, Interview with Janet Ruth Fallon, *The Difficulties*, 3.2 (1989): 28-42; 29. Although Andre doesn’t employ it, I insert a hyphen between word and drawing as a reminder of the interrelation and opposition between the two fields she spans. In this way it also mirrors the tension in the formal structure of her later ‘collage-poems’ as well as in the ‘Nominalist-Realist’ aesthetic I refer to throughout and the ‘mystic-skeptic’ poetics that her early reviewers and critics noted.

drawings appear at first to be Modernist grids, but I argue that close readings of them reveal they are subtle interventions on categories and nomenclature. The drift of color swashes and the figurative language that names them suggests inherent slippage in the way actuality is represented. But these works of art are also, as I show, spectacular poems with urgent messages; the recovery of what's in danger of being lost turns out to be a trope of great human and historical significance as well.

In 1974, Howe published her first book of poetry, *Hinge Picture*. Chapter 3 offers a new reading of this book in light of Howe's early career as an artist and argues that the visual aesthetics of the minimal art she admired and her own word-drawings morph into verbal counterparts in her poetry. I also show how these visual aesthetics are essential to the poetics of history for which she is now known. *Hinge Picture* reveals Howe's preoccupation with the metaphorical hinge that links writing's aural and visual aspects, highlighting the materiality of both, and affording her a kind of trope for how particulars go missing from historical record. Silent letters or stuttering type appear as a kind of verbal refuse that exceeds normal modes of representation and transmission in language. This chapter therefore elucidates Howe's core *historiographic* concerns as they pertain to textual representation.

Chapter 4 demonstrates how the influence of bibliography and Nominalist-Realist aesthetics in Howe's work results in a truly singular materialism. Although this period of her career has received the most critical attention, several aspects have gone underappreciated. I begin with a close reading of a key prose passages in *The Birth-mark* in which Howe incorporates and responds to Emerson's essay 'Nominalist and Realist'. Against this backdrop I offer a fresh reading of *Pythagorean Silence* which, composed alongside Howe's research for *My Emily Dickinson*, was the first book of poetry in which Howe addresses the role that *document* plays in historical narrative. Following this, I provide a new reading of *Eikon Basilike: or a Bibliography of the King's Book* (1989) in which we see Howe's first

treatment of *bibliography*. It was also, significantly, the first appearance of the ‘collage-poem’ of disrupted or overlapping typeface for which she is now known. Here Howe makes a visual analog out of bibliographic and authorial indeterminacy. But, as I argue, while the collage-poem is a radical disruption of lyric subjectivity, there is also simultaneous appeal to lyric intimacy and to a connection between the living and the dead.

In 1996 Howe began researching documentary film for her essay ‘Sorting Facts, or Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker’. Having just suffered the loss of her husband David von Schlegel, she became interested in documentary film because of her ‘wish to find a way to document his life and work’ (*SF* 5). The essay was released as a pamphlet by New Directions in 2013, when it began receiving more critical attention, but it is integral to understanding her work in the nineties. Her engagement with what she calls ‘poetic documentary’ film—including the works and writings of Dziga Vertov, Chris Marker, and Andrei Tarkovsky—had a strong influence on the way she would forge her elegiac compositions going forward. Chapter 5 therefore considers Howe’s engagement with this filmic tradition—particularly the essence of *fact* and the various techniques for incorporating fact into narratives about loss.

In chapter 6, I discuss two of Howe’s late elegies, *The Midnight* (2002) and *That This* (2011), which fixate on particulars in the wake of loss but with very different formal outcomes. *The Midnight* is an elegiac memoir of Howe’s mother, Mary Manning. Here an inherited library is her archive, and the paratexts she incorporates are cross-identified with personal history as opposed to other authors’ archives. I show how the history of lace-making enters as an allegory for textual remembrance as well as Howe’s Nominalist-Realist aesthetic finds a contemporary philosophical model in *dialetheism*, or the simultaneity of contradictory truths. In my reading of *That This*, I discuss how a single archived swatch of fabric from the wedding dress of Jonathan Edwards’s wife, Sarah Pierpont, becomes a site of meditation—

indeed a new particular to love—as Howe grieves her late husband Peter Hare. I also show how the new type of collage-poem she introduces contains ruptures and effacements that heighten the stakes of lyric intimacy and the documentary of loss. When we appreciate the textile analogies and formal elements of both books in the context of Howe’s materialism and metaphysics, we see how they amount to optimal tropes for a memory that remains expansive, undetermined, contradictory but true.

I end by returning to where my argument begins: with Howe in the context of the visual arts. In the coda, I analyze two recent exhibits—the Yale Union in Portland, Oregon in 2013 and the Whitney Biennial in New York City in 2014. Here I investigate what changes when we view her collage-poems not in book format but rather in a museum or gallery vitrine with curation by art historians. The alternate framework allows us to appreciate how her materialism challenges our conception of textual ontology in specific new ways. This framework highlights the necessity of appreciating Howe’s art historical contexts when considering her work. It also, moreover, underscores the importance of Howe’s work. Ultimately, Howe’s oeuvre rethinks the politics of valuing and transmitting cultural memory through the material forms of documents and archives—a subject that is relevant across the humanities and social sciences.

## Chapter 1.

### Monochromes & Readymades: Art Historical Contexts

Most scholarship on Susan Howe begins with a qualification about her aesthetic allegiances.<sup>1</sup> The argument goes like this: Howe was friends with the most dominant practitioners of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry (notably Charles Bernstein, who co-founded the movement) and, while aspects of her poetics resemble theirs—including an effort to historicize or deconstruct language; to bring poetry’s formal procedures to the foreground; to deconstruct lyric subjectivity by way of an impersonal voice; and to make the reader an active participant in the meaning-making of the text—she nevertheless departs from them in significant ways, namely her canonical concerns, her religious themes, and her interest in lyricism. An early *Village Voice* review of *The Defenestration of Prague* by Geoffrey O’Brien is poignant. In situating her work among her language poet contemporaries, O’Brien concludes that ‘Howe’s fragmentation and discontinuity are quite different from anyone else’s[....]I don’t know another poet capable of using the words “passion,” “truth,” “glory,” and “beauty” in four lines and getting them to say something new.’<sup>2</sup> When considering *why* Howe’s poetry diverges in this way, critics generally point to Howe’s being older: she was born in 1937, while her contemporaries were born in the forties or early fifties. Indeed, Howe speaks of her calling to write by invoking her first memory, the day of the Pearl Harbor bombing, and her

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars have characterized Howe’s departure from her literary contemporaries in various ways. In the first book-length monograph on her work in 2002, Rachel Tzvia Back observed that Howe’s poetry combines ‘conflicting forces’ and is ‘located firmly within an age-old tradition of lyrical poetry, even as she subverts many of the premises of that tradition’ (Rachel Tzvia Back, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 15). Will Montgomery, in his 2010 monograph, surmised that Howe’s work resists inclusion with other poets because it ‘contains countervailing investments in mystical thought, American Romanticism, and a reappraisal of lyric’ (Will Montgomery, *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), ix).

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey O’Brien, ‘Meaningless Relationships: Banging Against the Edge of Language’, Rev. of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, eds. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein; *Code of Signals*, ed. Michael Palmer; *Resistance* by Charles Bernstein; *ABC* by Ron Silliman; and *Defenestration of Prague* by Susan Howe, *Village Voice Literary Supplement* (Apr, 1984), 11. O’Brien is talking about the ninth poem in Howe’s sequence ‘Speeches at the Barriers’ in *The Defenestration of Prague* which can be found more readily on p. 115 of *The Europe of Trusts*.

father's subsequent departure for combat. War is, according to Rachel Back, a historical event that for L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, is 'past and gone,' whereas for Howe it remains 'present and reverberating'.<sup>3</sup>

This comparison, however striking or accurate, can be a red herring. It renders Howe a foil to a now established mode of literary experimentation—at the expense of appreciating the self-contradiction that is the crux of her own poetry. It also overlooks the actual genesis of Howe's singular poetics. This chapter will demonstrate how the paradox of mysticism and skepticism that is the most salient feature of Howe's work has its roots *not* in her reaction to her literary contemporaries but rather in her transition from visual artist to poet in the late 1960s and early 1970s in New York City.

### **The lure of the blank canvas**

Susan Howe graduated from the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts in 1961, where she majored in painting. She then moved to New York City where she focused mostly on making installations and artist's books. She published her first book of poetry, *Hinge Picture*, in 1974 and never returned to painting. Howe regularly refers to this transition period in interviews, and it is clear that this aspect of her career is paramount for her poetics. Nearly every scholarly article on Howe begins with a brief acknowledgement that Howe's poetics were affected by her initial career as a visual artist. Nevertheless, there have been only two articles to date that have attempted to address this subject in depth.<sup>4</sup> Their consideration has been limited by one major obstacle, namely the unavailability of her artwork to the public. In 2010, Howe changed this by placing over 100 collages, or what she calls 'word-drawings',

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<sup>3</sup> Back 14. Back is quoting Bernstein's *A Poetics* (Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 197). See also Charles Bernstein, 'Interview with Susan Howe', *Linebreak*, Radio program recorded in summer 1995 and archived as an audio file, <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/LINEbreak.html> [accessed 2 Feb 2010]

<sup>4</sup> See Kaplan Harris, 'Susan Howe's Art and Poetry 1968-1974,' *Contemporary Literature* 47.3 (2006) and Brian Reed, ' "Eden or Ebb of the Sea": Susan Howe's Word Squares and Postlinear Poetics', *Postmodern Culture* 14.2 (2004), <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.104/14.2reed.txt> [accessed 20 November 2010].

on archive at the Beinecke library at Yale. In my second chapter I present a selection of these word-drawings and discuss their significance in relation to her developing poetics. But first I wish to clear up some of the critical assumptions that have persisted as a result of the unavailability of her early artwork. Having no other recourse, articles on Howe and the visual arts have resorted to discussing her stated artistic influences. An initial theoretical discussion about her aesthetic forbears is relevant, to the extent that this context is indispensable to understanding both her art and her poetry. A voracious reader, the future poet-scholar was affected as much by critical and theoretical responses to her favorite artists as she was by their art. Nevertheless, these articles on Howe and her art historical contexts have often overlooked important nuances of the specific artworks and art historical writings to which she responded, thereby eliding some of the singular qualities of her later poetics. Before moving to a presentation and analysis of her artwork then, I wish to offer a thorough analysis of its historical context and to clarify the precise aspects of these aesthetics that proved to be so crucial to her poetics.

The two articles to date that have considered Howe and the visual arts offer a limited sense of what the artwork looked like, based on what was available to them at the time. Kaplan Harris and Brian Reed note that they were unable to find images of the paintings, although they were able to view documents of her exhibits on archive as well as photographs of other works. Reed cites a photo of some of her installations, observing that they

contained a heterogeneous mix of word and image: original verse; extracts from ecological and geological texts; extracts from historical sources; illustrations excised from books and journals; photographs; and Xerox copies. Howe mounted or pinned these diverse objects to paper, wood, or cloth supports according to precisely determined measurements. She also typically added a few lines or rectangles with tape or pigment and, occasionally, blots of thinned paint.<sup>5</sup>

He goes on to make a convincing argument about the influence of these ‘harshly rectilinear’ installations on her later ‘word-squares’. Harris, in his study on Howe’s transition from the

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<sup>5</sup> Reed 26

arts, which focused specifically on her painting, was unable to find any pictures or contemporary reviews and was forced to rely on a second-hand description of her paintings that her then partner, sculptor David von Schlegell, made in an interview. After Howe was ‘out of earshot’, the interviewer noted that von Schlegell waved to indicate ‘three or four stained-in curves of clear color’ on the wall and then commented ‘I’m always amazed at the way she can just lay that color so cleanly.’<sup>6</sup>

But while the available descriptions of Howe’s visual work were meager, they clearly demonstrated a paradoxical aesthetic of collage and transcendentalism—one that Howe has articulated verbally throughout her career. In interviews, articles, and poems Howe provides us with substantial clues to her artistic practices and aesthetic influences. One of the richest sources of insights into this aspect of her career is her first publication, the 1974 article ‘The End of Art’. Here Howe compares the austere black monochrome canvases of the American painter Ad Reinhardt who ‘reduced abstraction to its barest essentials’ to the concrete poems of Ian Hamilton Finlay whose experiments she finds restored words to their ‘primitive simplicity’ (See Fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> A year later, she published a review of Reinhardt’s curiously busy art comics in which she remarks on the ‘enigma’ of a painter ‘who arrived at the spare purity of the black paintings’ while being ‘an image-collector in the omnivorous Victorian style’ (See Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> Her interest in these paradoxes is telling, and it will serve as a crucial focal point for developing a critical understanding of the influences that shaped her poetic sensibilities.

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<sup>6</sup> Harris 441. Harris notes that this brief unnamed appearance of Howe, who features in as a wife who is passing through the house with a daughter on her way out to a walk, ‘ironically anticipates her later recuperation of lost women’s voices’.

<sup>7</sup> Howe, ‘The End of Art’, *Archives of American Art Journal* 14.4 (1974): 2

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, Rev. of *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt*, by Thomas B. Hess, *Art in America* 64.2 (1976): 34

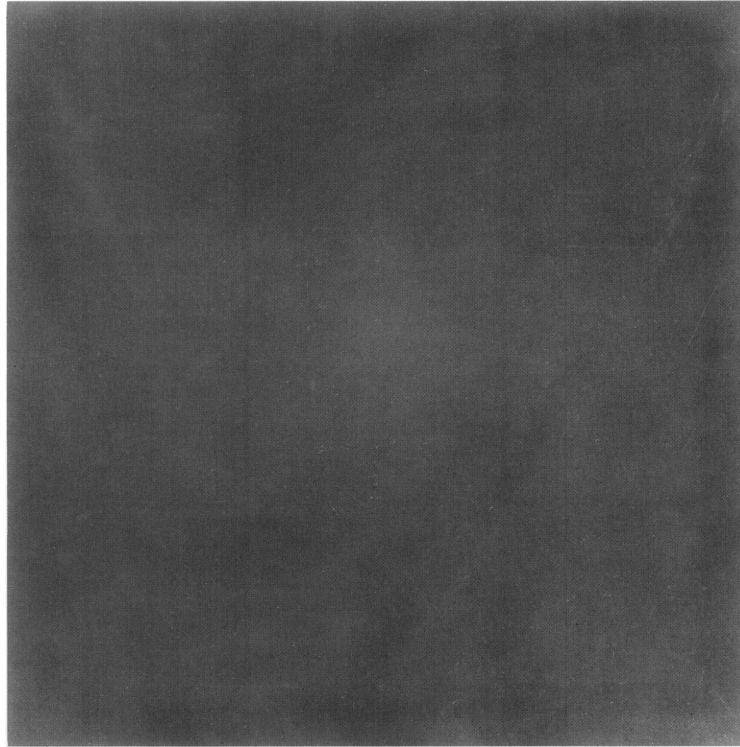


Fig. 1 Ad Reinhardt, Abstract Black Painting, 1966, Courtesy Marlborough Gallery  
The image is also reproduced in Howe's 'The End of Art' p. 4

In interviews, Howe is very explicit about her aesthetic influences and allegiances. She highlights how von Schlegell was involved with the Park Place Gallery in New York City which augmented her exposure to different artistic circles. She then goes on to describe how her interest in collage mirrored a general tendency in her artistic milieu:

I used quotation in my painting in the same way that I use quotation in my writing, in that I always seemed to use collage; sometimes I made a copy in the painting of some part of another painting, another form of quotation. Collage is also a way of mixing disciplines. Those were the early days of pop art, when it was common practice among artists to move around from one medium to another-it was a very exciting time [...] There was lots of really interesting sculpture during those days and lots of interesting writing about the work in Art Forum magazine. Barbara Rose had written some really good pieces on Ad Reinhardt, there was Reinhardt's own writing, Don Judd and Robert Smithson were busily producing manifestos. Richard Serra, Joan Jonas, Don Judd, Eva Hesse, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, John Cage, Agnes Martin . . . the work of these artists influenced what I was doing. There was the most extraordinary energy and willingness to experiment during the sixties. Painters, sculptors, dancers, filmmakers, musicians, conceptual artists were all working together and crossing genre boundaries, sometimes with appalling results, more often wacky and wonderful events.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lynn Keller, 'An Interview with Susan Howe', *Contemporary Literature* 36.1 (Spring 1995): 1-34; 4-5

Howe's own account of 'mixing disciplines' and 'crossing genre boundaries' in the 1960s in New York highlights a singular moment in late twentieth-century American art when abstract painting seemed to reach the ends of its own experiments. The turn to Minimal Art marked in part a move away from the expressive action painting of Jackson Pollock. The attempt of pure painting, Reinhardt insisted, was to 'minimize' action: 'there is no gymnastics or dancings over paintings or spilling or flinging paint around.'<sup>10</sup> In an important essay of the period, Barbara Rose wrote that the 'new, reserved impersonality and self-effacing anonymity' of Minimal Art was a reaction against the 'unbridled subjectivity' of these painters' artistic forebears as well as a formal response to their 'excess of painterliness'.<sup>11</sup> These aesthetics were not free from political implications. Rose goes on to say, 'on the one hand art as a form of free expression is seen as a weapon in the Cold War, yet on the other there appears no hope for any organized role for art in the life of the country.'<sup>12</sup> Reinhardt's quest for purity is, viewed from this context, not merely nostalgia for Classical values but rather an agenda to sever art from ideology.

The traditional reading of the turn to Minimal Art, prompted by Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg, has tended to emphasize spatiality. This is in part due to the fact that their inquiries focus mainly on Donald Judd and Robert Morris. Donald Judd, for example, surmised his position in 1966 when he wrote that working in three dimensions

gets rid of the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colors—which is riddance of one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art. The several limits of painting are no longer present. A work can be as powerful as it can be thought to be. Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ad Reinhardt, *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 13

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Rose, 'ABC Art', *Art in America* (Oct-Nov 1965). Reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 275.

<sup>12</sup> Rose, 'ABC Art', 295

<sup>13</sup> Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects', *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965) Reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 222-35.

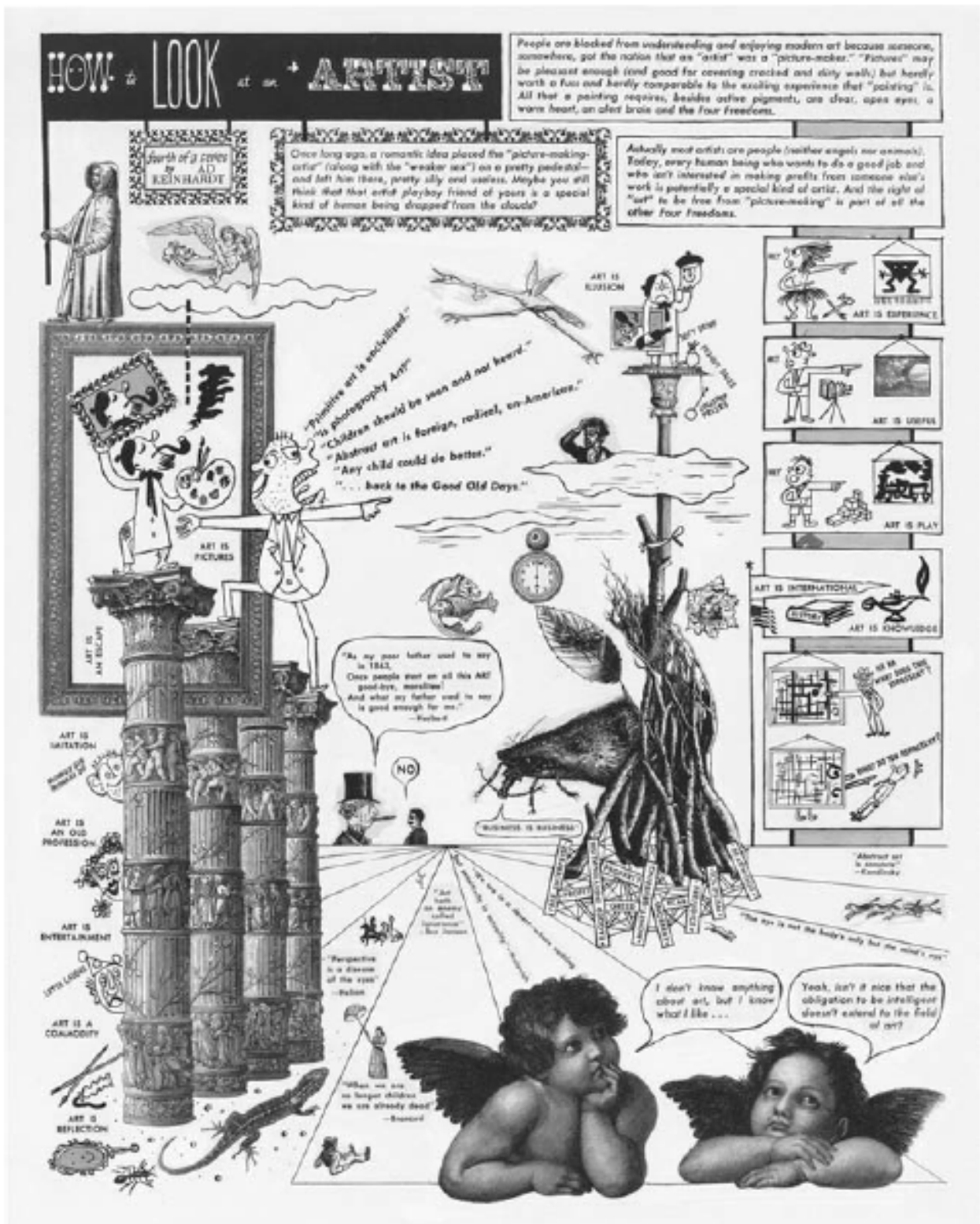


Fig. 2 Ad Reinhardt 'How to Look at an Artist'  
 Estate of Ad Reinhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York

It is the turn from ‘literal space’ to ‘actual space’ that came, for many critics, to define the moment of ‘Minimalism’ or ‘literalism’ in art.<sup>14</sup> In his seminal essay, ‘Art and Objecthood’, Michael Fried surmised that ‘Painting is here seen as an art on the verge of exhaustion, one in which the range of acceptable solutions to a basic problem—how to organize the surface of the picture—is severely restricted.’<sup>15</sup> According to Fried, for most artists, the obvious solution was to blur the distinction between painting and sculpture. ‘The look of non-art was no longer available to painting’ wrote Clement Greenberg in 1967, and so ‘the borderline between art and non-art had to be sought in the three-dimensional’.<sup>16</sup>

But such a reading belies important distinctions between artists. And while all the artists Howe listed may overlap in their aesthetic aims and genealogies, it is vital to note the artists who exercised the greatest influence on her art and writing were Ad Reinhardt and Agnes Martin. These two artists clearly resist categorization in the Morris/Judd nexus since their primary concern was not with hybrid genres or ‘actual space’. Reinhardt’s influence on Howe is evident in ‘The End of Art’ as well as her review of *The Art Comics of Ad Reinhardt*; they constitute a kind of apologetics for his work. It is Martin, however, who seems to have had the greatest influence on Howe. Agnes Martin was known for her large monochrome canvases and drawings consisting of a wash covered by finely drawn or painted vertical and horizontal lines which, when viewed up close, resembled graph paper (Fig. 3). In the above interview, Howe goes on to stress, ‘I can’t express how important Agnes Martin was to me at the point when I was shifting from painting to poetry.’<sup>17</sup> And in a 2005 reading

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Fried prefers the term ‘literalism’ because the movement ‘seeks to declare and occupy a position—one that can be formulated in words and in fact has been so formulated by some of its leading practitioners.’ See Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood’, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148.

<sup>15</sup> Fried 149

<sup>16</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘Recentness of Sculpture’ in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 4., ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 252

<sup>17</sup> Keller 7

at The Drawing Center in New York City, she reaffirmed that Martin's drawings and paintings have been 'an inspiration for all my writing life.'<sup>18</sup>

Telling differences appear when we compare the viewing process that ensues with Martin's paintings to the one that Judd and Morris sought to create. Though the emphasis on this process was a hallmark of all Minimal Art (Fried wrote, for example, that 'the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation—one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*'), there are striking differences with the paintings of Martin and Reinhardt.<sup>19</sup> Fried argues that the point is for the viewer to apprehend how shape persists even when it is perceived differently in varying conditions. In Morris's L-beams, for example, uncertainty dissipates as the gestalt supersedes its object's arrangement in space (Fig. 4). Relativity, perspective, and even space itself are perceptually trumped by an immutable, two-dimensional shape: the 'L'. The key paradox of Judd and Morris's sculptural objects, as Anne Wagner puts it, is that 'the way they look at any one moment is utterly time and space dependent, yet because we understand them as shapes without even trying, they seem to stand outside time's passage even so. They manage to seem both eternal and monumental'.<sup>20</sup> In Martin's and Reinhardt's paintings, conversely, and as we shall see, certainty and immutability are trumped by duration and perspective. Rather than conveying permanence via 'unchanging gestalts', an unknowable infinity is suggested through formlessness.

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<sup>18</sup> Howe, 'Leaf Flower in the Wind Falling Blue The Dark River', *Jacket* 31, <http://jacket-magazine.com/31/re-howe.html> [accessed 10 November 2011]

<sup>19</sup> Fried 163

<sup>20</sup> Anne Wagner, 'Women's Time: Truitt, Martin and the Moment of Minimalism', Ruskin School of the Arts, Oxford, 24 Jan. 2011, Lecture. I am grateful to Anne Wagner for having sent me the paper on which this lecture was based.

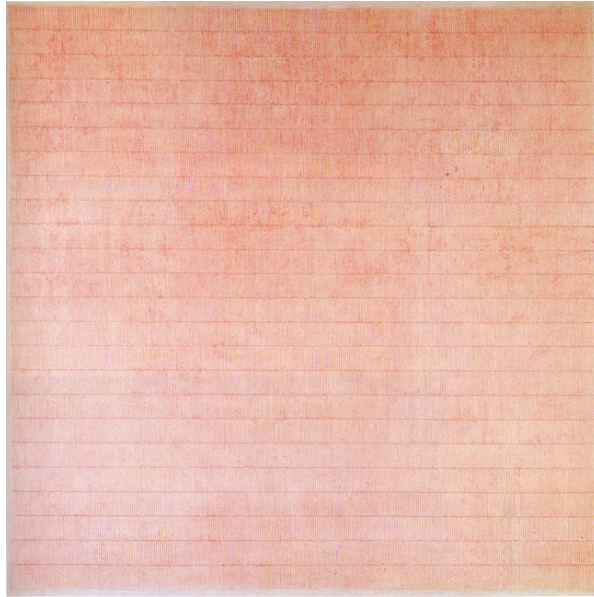


Fig. 3 Agnes Martin, 'Flower in the Wind' (1963)



Fig. 4 Robert Morris 'L-beams' (1965)

What, then, is the significance of Howe's identification with both Minimal Art in its broad sense—including those artists who readily changed or mixed genres—as well as with two painters who would each become self-declared purists? A more nuanced reading of this period than Fried's, one which extends beyond the Morris/Judd nexus to the work of Reinhardt and Martin is Barbara Rose's 1965 essay 'ABC Art'. In this piece, Rose captures the paradoxical qualities of Minimal art that evade Fried's analysis by casting it as a 'curious synthesis' of the work of Kasimir Malevich and Marcel Duchamp that is 'on the one hand,

the search for the transcendent, universal, absolute, and on the other, the blanket denial of the existence of absolute values.’ Rose is talking about Malevich’s first suprematist composition, ‘Black Square’ (1913), which consisted of a black square on a white canvas and Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Hedgehog’ (1914), which was a bottle-rack. (See Figs. 5 and 6) ‘For half a century,’ writes Rose, ‘these two works marked the limits of visual art.’ The work of various artists could be conceived of as falling in different places on this continuum, with some in ‘intermediate positions’ while others lean closer to Malevich’s purism or Duchamp’s negation.<sup>21</sup>

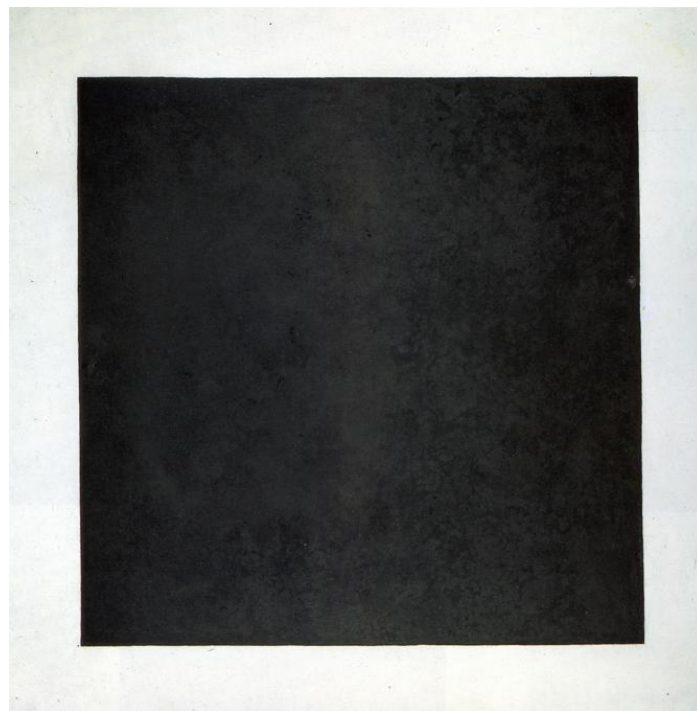


Fig. 5 Kasimir Malevich, ‘Black Square’ (1913)

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<sup>21</sup> Rose, ‘ABC Art’, 275

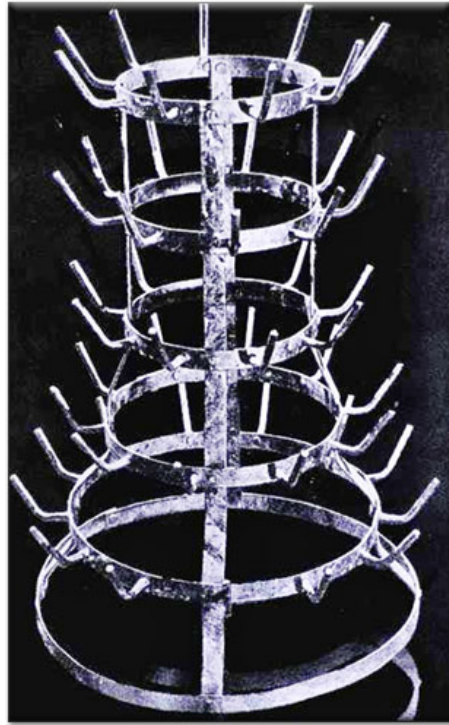


Fig. 6 Marcel Duchamp, 'Bottle Rack or Hedgehog' (1914)

It is difficult to know where to place Howe's influences in this continuum. While spatiality may not be the defining characteristic of Minimal Art, it seems significant that Howe was drawn primarily to two artists who practiced in only two dimensions which—though non-representational and non-illusionistic—still created optical effects of haziness that suggested a missing, third dimension.<sup>22</sup> It might seem, therefore, that Howe falls more toward the Malevich side of monochrome canvases. But Howe states explicitly that she was 'very interested in Duchamp's *Large Glass* and the book that went with it' and adds, 'Duchamp was an inspiration to me when I was beginning to shift from painting to writing.'<sup>23</sup> In fact, Howe's precise affinity might be stated most accurately as belonging to the extremes of *both* aesthetics, to the spiritual implications of the *tabula rasa* implied by the

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<sup>22</sup> The optical effects of these paintings will be discussed at length in the next section.

<sup>23</sup> Keller 9. In an interview with Bruce Glaser, Reinhardt says 'There may be a relation to Malevich and Mondrian but it would be the exact opposite of Duchamp' (Reinhardt 17). Of course as Minimal artists in Rose's sense both Reinhardt and Martin were a 'curious synthesis' of the two schools—as evidenced by their attention to the materiality of the paint and canvas—but they did not exhibit the same fascination with Duchamp's philosophy and ready-mades as Howe did.

monochrome, but simultaneously to the deconstructive impulse of the staunchly materialist view of the blank canvas as a readymade.

Thierry de Duve suggests a similar model to Rose's Malevich-Duchamp continuum when he compares the art historical context of 1917 (when Duchamp presented 'Fountain' under the pseudonym 'R. Mutt') to the appearance of the monochrome canvas in the 1960s. Both moments, he argues, marked a shift from the specific to the generic, from abstract painting to art-at-large. According to de Duve, cubist painters had evolved into abstract painters who were obsessed with revealing the essence of color. Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian sought to express their transcendent properties through non-representational paintings. Duchamp—himself a retired cubist—used the readymades in effect to point at the inherent irony in the quest of abstract painters: the tube of paint was not an essence but a product, ground and manufactured by paint grinders, so any appeal to transcendental essence of color was misguided. The tube of paint was, in other words, *readymade*. According to de Duve, the appeal to the *tabula rasa* as a mode of transcendence in the paintings of the 1960s represented a resurgence of this quest for purity so that for modern painters 'the blank canvas's potential for becoming a painting had an extraordinary appeal.'<sup>24</sup>

As if to pre-empt this from happening, Clement Greenberg famously declared that 'a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture...though not necessarily a successful one.'<sup>25</sup> Michael Fried pointed out that there was 'a superficial similarity between modernist painting and Dada in one important respect: just as modernist painting has enabled one to see a blank canvas, a sequence of random spatters, or a length of colored fabric as a picture, Dada and Neo-Dada have equipped one to treat virtually any object as a work of art.' The result is that 'there is an apparent expansion of the realm of the *artistic* corresponding—ironically, as

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<sup>24</sup> See Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996, 199-202; 252

<sup>25</sup> Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 4, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 131-32

it were—to the expansion of the pictorial achieved by modernist painting.<sup>26</sup> In both Fried’s and de Duve’s arguments the monochrome is portrayed as catalyst that would open the flood gates of mixing genres, giving way not only to hybrid forms but to neo-dada, performance art, and fluxus. It would question the very nature of what constituted art and would be permission, in short, for artists to ‘do whatever’.<sup>27</sup> But these arguments, while they highlight some of the tensions of the art historical milieu that surrounded the lure of the blank canvas, neglect both the ardency for the void that is apprehensible in the work of Reinhardt and Martin as well as their obsession with the painted canvas’s material *nuances*, choosing instead to focus on the brute *fact* of its materiality.

In fact, the inherent paradox of the twentieth-century monochrome, whose origins are both mystical and concrete, seems to reify with new intensity in the works of Reinhardt and Martin. Although some would argue that these painters belong more properly to a late Modernist tradition rather than a Minimal one, this seems to be the case only if we define Minimal Art on Friedian terms.<sup>28</sup> A comparison of ethos here is useful. Consider, for example, the commentary of the soon-to-be minimalist sculptor Carl Andre which ran alongside Frank Stella’s black and aluminum canvases in 1959 (what de Duve suggests is the key turning point in the birth of Minimal art; Fig. 7):

Preface to Stripe Painting

Art excludes the unnecessary. Frank Stella has found it necessary to paint stripes. There is nothing else in his painting. Frank Stella is not interested in expression or sensitivity. He is interested in the necessities of painting. Symbols are counters

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<sup>26</sup> Fried, quoted here from Rose, ‘ABC Art’, 278. Originally printed in the catalogue ‘Three American Painters,’ Fogg Art Museum, 1965.

<sup>27</sup> De Duve acknowledges the lack of an apt translation in English for *n’importe quoi*, which also has an air of implied insolence or disparagement, perhaps most akin to the expression ‘Rubbish!’ (De Duve 327).

<sup>28</sup> In his essay on Howe and Martin, Brian Reed argues that the latter would be considered by Rosalind Krauss to be part of a ‘senescent modernist tradition’ rather than a Minimalist. While relevant to Reed’s inquiry into Howe’s word squares, Krauss’s essay on grids is written from the Friedian legacy which collapses the nuances I seek to examine by returning to a point when Minimalism and Modernism were not divided as such. See Reed, ‘“Eden or Ebb of the Sea”: Susan Howe’s Word Squares and Postlinear Poetics’, 35. See also Christopher Ho, ‘Modernism, Minimalism, and Monochrome: The monochrome’s future and past’, *Monochromes: from Malevich to the Present*, ed. Barbara Rose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 119-41.

passed among people. Frank Stella's painting is not symbolic. His stripes are the paths of brush on canvas. These paths lead only into painting. Carl Andre.<sup>29</sup>

This point-of-view seems decidedly Duchampian in its concern with 'necessities of painting' and, while the stripes may 'lead into painting' the composition is staunchly unconcerned with transcendence or the Ideal in any way that would recall Malevich. Compare the above to Ad Reinhardt's view that

The one standard in art is oneness and fineness, rightness and purity, abstractness and evanescence. The one thing to say about art is its breathlessness, lifelessness, deathlessness, contentlessness, formlessness, spacelessness, and timelessness. This is always the end of art.<sup>30</sup>

While similarly disinterested in 'expression or sensitivity' or the 'symbolic', this view is nevertheless concerned with absolutes and 'purity' in a way that is almost moral (Howe would even say Puritanical).<sup>31</sup> There is certainly a concern with the materials in Reinhardt, but it is through obsession over the material nuances that an overall effect is achieved. According to Rose, Reinhardt's black paintings consisted of a 'methodical application of multiple layers of different shades that trap light and create a haze. In some paintings, Reinhardt applied as many as thirty layers without, however, ever leaving a visible brushstroke.'<sup>32</sup> In Reinhardt, there is a transcendent objective (or 'end') of art, which is not just to renounce painterly illusion but in fact to constitute a void.

We can find a similar devotion to purity and formlessness in Martin's well-known description of her work:

My paintings have neither object nor space nor line nor anything—no forms. They are light, lightness, about merging, about formlessness, breaking down form. You wouldn't think of form by the ocean. You can go in if you don't encounter anything. A world without objects, without interruption, making a work without interruption or obstacle. It is to accept the necessity of the simple direct going into a field of vision as you would cross an empty beach to look at the ocean.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Carl Andre, 'Preface to Stripe Painting', in *Sixteen Americans*, ed. Dorothy C. Miller (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 76. Quoted here from de Duve (200-201).

<sup>30</sup> Reinhardt 56

<sup>31</sup> In the interview with Lynn Keller, Howe says, 'Now I can see minimalist art of the sixties and seventies as an American movement rooted in Puritanism' (Keller 4).

<sup>32</sup> Rose, *Monochromes: from Malevich to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 81

<sup>33</sup> Agnes Martin, quoted in the Introduction to *Writings* (Ostfilden: Cantz Verlag, 1991), 7

Again, along with formlessness, we also find a reverence for the void. We also find ‘a world without objects’ rather than the ‘objecthood’ of an unchanging gestalt. The lure of the blank canvas, therefore, while it may have appealed to a whole array of painters in the 1960s as a Dadaist symbol for the death of painting, was for others a life-long discipline of mystic-skepticism, what Howe has called the ‘search for infinity within simplicity’.<sup>34</sup>



Fig. 7 Frank Stella, ‘The Marriage of Reason and Squalor’ 1959

Howe’s appreciation of these artists shows that she understands them to be mystical as well as concrete. She seems drawn to the spiritual response invoked by the encounter with the void. Rose wrote that the black paintings ‘induce a state of contemplation which may be defined as meditative’ and that they are ‘an effort to retrieve the dimension of the spiritual’.<sup>35</sup> In ‘The End of Art’, Howe writes that Reinhardt had created ‘Paintings that forced the viewer to search for what was offered.’<sup>36</sup> Concerning Martin, Howe wrote (after re-encountering her

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<sup>34</sup> Howe, ‘The End of Art’, 7

<sup>35</sup> Rose, *Art as Art: the Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, 82

<sup>36</sup> Howe, ‘The End of Art’, 2

work in 2006), ‘I was not prepared for the deep aesthetic revelation I can only call mystical, of viewing her work, with its echoes of Taoism and American Transcendental thought.’<sup>37</sup> Again, this facet of the work is something that occurs during the viewing process; in this the spiritual is distinguished from Malevich’s desire to express the essence of color. Martin writes that ‘the abstract response’

is not nothing, because when we give our minds to it we are blissfully aware. It is from our awareness of transcendent reality and our response to concrete reality that our minds command us on our way—not really on a path or to a gate—but to full response. Complete consciousness is present to us at all times, every moment, but we reject in order to maintain our prejudices, our ideas. But sooner or later we will relinquish our ideas in favor of response because the truth prevails.<sup>38</sup>

Instead, the spiritual effect is an expansion of consciousness resulting from a cognitive process that ensues when one encounters the paintings. In what was perhaps her most famous statement, Martin underscored again the fact that her paintings operated to expand consciousness by approaching analogues of something non-existent: ‘Classicists are people that look out with their back to the world/It represents something that isn’t possible in the world/More perfection than is possible in the world/It’s as unsubjective as possible....The point—it doesn’t exist in the world.’<sup>39</sup>

I have begun by suggesting that Howe was an exception whose vision of truth and infinitism, while always deconstructed, made her a mystic among L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. We might say that her artistic forebear Agnes Martin was in a similar position in the 1960s art world among painters. For as Briony Fer points out, ‘Martin’s aesthetic vision is simply incompatible with that of the younger generation’.<sup>40</sup> Although ostensibly she shared the value of simplicity and materiality, it was the particular brand of infinity that made

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, ‘Leaf Flower in the Wind Falling Blue The Dark River’, n.p.

<sup>38</sup> Martin, ‘We are in the midst of reality responding with joy’. The text of a lecture given by Martin at Yale on 5 April 1976. Reprinted in *Agnes Martin Paintings and Drawings 1957-1975*, Arts Council of Great Britain 1977, 25-26.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, *Writings*, 44

<sup>40</sup> Briony Fer, ‘Drawing Drawing: Agnes Martin’s Infinity’, *3 x Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing, Hilma Af Klint, Emma Kunz, Agnes Martin*, eds. Catherine de Zegher and Hendel Teicher (New York: The Drawing Center, 2005), 185

Martin different from most artists of the period. She believed that this perfection was transcendent and existed in the mind. Like Martin, Howe was slightly older than her cohort. And while some may believe this qualifies her as reactionary of a Modernist tradition, her infinitism is always already deconstructed by its own impossibility in reality, in its up-close contradictions—even if the lure of reification remains its signature impulse.

Howe's own preference for the pure potentiality of the blank canvas is evident in her well-known comment that if she had to paint her writing, 'It would be blank. It would be a white canvas. White.'<sup>41</sup> When asked what she meant by this, she pointed to her love for minimalist painting and sculpture and to 'the combination in Martin's work, say, of being spare and infinitely suggestive at the same time...I would say that the most beautiful thing of all is a page before the word interrupts it.' Rather than a conceptual gimmick, the *tabula rasa* of the blank page is an offering of consciousness expansion, a space which Howe says is

Infinitely open and anything possible. Malevich writes, 'Under suprematism I understood the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art.' These days the word 'supreme' is a bad one, but I don't care—I was born in another time. This pure feeling is connected to silence. Any mark or word would be a corruption of that infinite purpose or purposelessness.<sup>42</sup>

Greenberg may have argued in the 1960s that it would not be a 'successful' work of art for a painter to present a blank canvas.<sup>43</sup> Still, that judgment did not stop Howe from heeding the lure of the naked expanse in her poetry some fifty years later, for in her most recent book, *That This*, she incorporated—as her penultimate 'poem'—a single, two-sided *blank page*.<sup>44</sup>

Harris touches upon one aspect of the inherent contradictions in the infinitesimal/infinitist aesthetic when he points to her 1975 review of the *Art Comics of Ad Reinhardt*. Noting the peculiarity of a minimalist deciding to produce crowded, rococo-like

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<sup>41</sup> Howe, Interview with Janet Ruth Fallon, *The Difficulties* vol. 3, no. 2. 28-42; 42

<sup>42</sup> Keller 7

<sup>43</sup> Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', 131. Fried upped the ante by saying it would not even be 'conceivably one' (Fried 169).

<sup>44</sup> *TT* 107-8. The appearance of printed numbers has been omitted on this page only, however it falls between pages 106 and 109.

illustrations of cherubs posing sardonically witty questions about the philosophy of art, Harris wonders if this doesn't provide some kind of bridge between Howe's own professed interest in simplicity and her later poetics of historical collage. Howe writes:

The enigma of Reinhardt and his comics and satires is that while constantly calling for the clarity of abstraction he called for it with a litter of characters and quotations plucked mainly from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: Reinhardt, who arrived at the spare purity of the black paintings, was an image-collector in the omnivorous Victorian style. He cut pictures from old grammars, almanacs, encyclopedias, travel guides, and minor compendia of art history, such as *The History of Our Lord as Exemplified in Works of Art: With That of His Types: St. John the Baptist; and Other Persons of the New and Old Testament* commenced by the late Mrs. Jameson, continued and completed by Lady Eastlake (vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London, 1865). Pictures, people and props were introduced, re-introduced and placed in bizarre and absurd situations, as were the quotations.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps the key word in Howe's description of Reinhardt's comics is 'minor': the indulgent detail she provides for one such example—notably completed by two women—seems to foreshadow her sense of a calling to unearth and bear witness to forgotten figures. Unless we view these historical relics as marginal, interstitial items that have fallen away from a perfect, albeit non-existent history, we may miss the true link between the artwork with the historical poetry. As Howe insists,

Ad Reinhardt used these satires to reach the black paintings. 'Deep, deep, and still deep and deeper we must go, if we would find out the heart of a man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end, and where that endlessness is only concealed by the spiralness of the stair and the blackness of the shaft.' Melville said this in *Pierre*. The black paintings of Reinhardt and the white whale of Melville are perhaps the same.<sup>46</sup>

We can, it seems, include Reinhardt in the sect of artists who were fascinated by the marginal readymade object or text, artists who would turn to find the infinitesimal in the material trace of their genre. Furthermore, the spirals in the above passage also recall Robert Smithson, an artist who was also influential to Howe and whom I will return to in the next chapter.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Howe, Rev. of *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt*, by Thomas B. Hess. *Art in America* 64.2 (1976): 36

<sup>46</sup> Howe, 'The End of Art', 36

<sup>47</sup> As Brian Reed notes, in one of Howe's notebooks archived at the University of California in San Diego, Howe declares herself as Smithson's lineal heir. See his note 19. Harris also includes a reproduction of this diagram in her notebook which displays a flow of arrows going from Melville to Olson and Williams then to Smithson then to herself (Harris 468). While Harris takes this to mean that 'art still exercised a greater pull on

Smithson was perhaps best known for his land art and particularly for his masterpiece ‘Spiral Jetty’. (Fig. 14)



Fig. 14 Robert Smithson ‘Spiral Jetty’ 1970

The spiral is his own formal manifestation of what he called ‘quasi-infinities and the waning of space’. In his commentary on Reinhardt’s paintings, Smithson quotes George Kubler who wrote in *The Shape of Time* (a book Howe mentions was crucial to Reinhardt) that ‘Actuality is...the interchronic pause when nothing is happening. It is the void between events.’<sup>48</sup> As such, we understand these fragments of history to refer not just to the artist or to the time period itself but to fragments of a greater, impossible totality that does not exist, to a void that is purely conceptual. One might say that the monochrome grids, the black paintings, the white whale, Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* and Howe’s verse all reflect the same void center, while the material trace of history spirals endlessly about it.

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her work in the mid-seventies than her poetry,’ I take it to also mean that she viewed herself to be an heir of a tradition of framing American space—both literally, as in Smithson’s land art, and figuratively, as in the poetry of Olson and Williams. In her interview with Lynn Keller, Howe says, ‘What interested me in both Olson and Robert Smithson, was their interest in archaeology and mapping. Space. North American space—how it’s connected to memory, war, and history’ (Keller 5). I also take it to mean a particular view of language which will be the subject of my discussion in chapter 2.

<sup>48</sup> See Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 34 and Howe, ‘The End of Art’, 3.

### The '/Cloud/' and the 'duck-rabbit'

To date the most influential reading of Martin's paintings has been Rosalind Krauss's 1993 essay 'Agnes Martin: The /Cloud/', which re-interpreted a viewing phenomenon first suggested by Kasha Linville in 1971. In this schematic, the viewer moves through three discrete viewing stages. First there is the up-close weave of the canvas where the viewer engages with the materials and their application. Then the viewer backs away to perceive what Krauss calls 'The /Cloud/'—a liminal, stage that 'dematerializes the canvas' so that its surface becomes 'atmospheric', or 'a non-radiating, impenetrable mist'. And in the third and final stage, the viewer steps back again to perceive the canvas shut down to become an opaque wall. The final result, says Linville, is 'to make her paintings impermeable, immovable as stone.'<sup>49</sup> (Fig. 8)

But Krauss's /cloud/ model is ultimately reductive. Turning back to her 1978 analysis of the modernist 'grid', we see that she finds the grid to have a particular agenda:

In the cultist space of modern art, the grid serves not only as emblem but also as myth. For like all myths, it deals with paradox or contradiction not by dissolving the paradox or resolving the contradiction, but by covering them over so that they seem (but only seem) to go away. The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction). The work of Reinhardt or Agnes Martin would be instances of this power.<sup>50</sup>

In Krauss's view, the grid was an invention of twentieth century artists to allow the romantic vision of transcendentalism and religious emotion to recede before a secular society—this time under the guise of materialism. Nevertheless, she argues, the modern grid first appeared to artists in the nineteenth century when it featured in the literature of physiological optics. Krauss concludes that painters were forced to confront the fact that light passed to the human brain through something 'like a filter, involved in a set of specific distortions. For us, as

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<sup>49</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'Agnes Martin: The /Cloud/' in *Bachelors* 79. Krauss is quoting Kasha Linville, 'Agnes Martin: An Appreciation', *Artforum* (June 1971), 73.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.* 12

human perceivers, there is an unbreachable gulf between “real” color and “seen” color.<sup>51</sup> The discourse of optics belonged to science and the mundane which had nothing to do with symbolism. Why then, did they employ it? According to Krauss, grid artists, whose writings are always about ‘Being’ or ‘Spirit’, viewed the grid as ‘a staircase to the Universal, and they are not interested in what happens below in the Concrete’.<sup>52</sup>

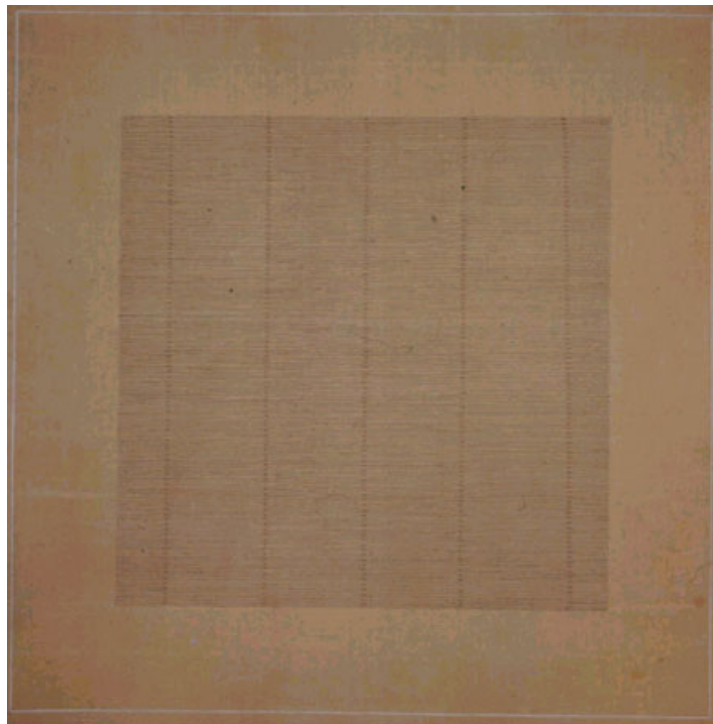


Fig. 8 Agnes Martin, ‘Dark River’

While Krauss acutely observes that in the grid the ‘unmanageable oppositions’ of matter and spirit are ‘held in some kind of para-logical suspension’,<sup>53</sup> she misses a subtle but all-important point when she concludes, ‘I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that behind every twentieth-century grid there lies—like a trauma that must be repressed—a

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* 15

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* 10

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* 13. Krauss’s schematic of logical transgressions draws on Levi-Strauss’s essay ‘The structural analysis of myth’ in *Structural Anthropology*.

symbolist window parading in the guise of a treatise on optics.<sup>54</sup> For in Martin and Reinhardt's paintings, the attention to materials was not a method of repressing the spiritual; it was on the contrary a method of *accessing* it. If, as Krauss argues, the spiritual were a source of shame to the degree that artists had to deny it, they would not have—as she also points out—made the spiritual their primary concern in their writings. How one slips from the material to the metaphysical is not a matter of myth-making through optical effects but more an antinomic (para-logical or non-logical) flip in which awareness is brought to the brink of its own limitations. If the transcendent is married with skepticism in the grids of Martin and Reinhardt, it is not because the shame over the former necessitates (in modern times) masking with the authority of the latter. It is because the transcendent vision offered here in fact relies upon it. In perceiving conflicting optical effects we realize the limits of our perception; the five senses lie to us; they are complicit in forming a narrative about the way things *are*. It is then that an invisible hinge opens to an imagined reality that lies beyond the scope of perceptible experience. Far from burying these artists' penchant for the transcendent, the doubt of the optical effects found within the material trace raises a metaphysical question about what *else* might exist. 'Returning home, after only a day or two away,' writes Howe,

I often have the sense of intruding on infinite and finite local evocations and wonder how things are, in relation to how they appear. This sixth sense of another reality even in simplest objects is what poets set out to show but cannot once and for all. (TT 34)

For Howe, as with Reinhardt and Martin, it is the gap between concrete particulars and mystical ideals that is the reward of their art. These 'infinite and finite local evocations' deepen lived experience of the particular at the same time that they nourish a hunger for the impossible absolute.

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid.* 17

Kasha Linville's original appreciation, though brief, is attuned to the ways in which the materiality of Martin's canvases evoked this phenomenological space. Her emphasis is on the inconsistencies in the painted line when the canvases are experienced up close. Some lines (she cites *Flowers in the Wind*, 1963) are sharp while others (such as *The Beach*) are softened or redrawn. 'Most often,' writes Linville, 'her line respects the canvas grain, skimming its surface without filling the low places in the fabric so it becomes almost a dotted or broken line at close range.'<sup>55</sup> (Fig. 9) Anne Wagner, in a recent talk, also insists that what matters most in the viewing process of Martin's works are 'the multiple moments in the tissue or fabric of marks which declare that the maker's movements were not merely mechanical', moments when the 'marks betray their origin in the actions of a single body wielding pencil or brush: a brief falter, say, or a change in pressure, or a starting again.'<sup>56</sup> The observation illuminates Howe's later interest in hand-written manuscripts and marginalia, in *Pierce-Arrow* or *The Midnight* for example, where markings on the page defy transcription and printing. (Fig. 10)<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Linville 73. The fading out of these particulars into a 'velvety haze' seems to impart an uncertain, spectral aura to the paintings. Linville's review concludes with a reading of Martin's last painting,

<sup>56</sup> We can also see Howe's appreciation of this aspect of Martin's work in her 2006 essay about Martin when she quotes Richard Tuttle who said that the difference between graph paper and Martin's paintings was 'the difference between the loved line and the unloved line.' See Howe, 'Leaf Flower in the Wind Falling Blue The Dark River' *Jacket* 31, <http://jacket-magazine.com/31/re-howe.html>

<sup>57</sup> Will Montgomery has also observed 'the fragility and uncertainty of the penciled lines in Martin's work' and notes that this is 'a feature of the compositional process that Howe recovers in her facsimiles from Peirce and Swinburne' in *Pierce-Arrow* (*The Poetry of Susan Howe* 141).



Fig. 9 Agnes Martin 'Dark River' (detail)

Wagner's essay, entitled 'Women's Time', draws our attention to this very dimension in Martin's work. In considering the perceptual effects of the 'accumulated difference' of Martin's paintings, she concludes that while Judd's and Morris's works seem to 'stand outside time's passage', Martin's fragile record of bodily time—perceptible only up-close—offers something else: *doubt*. Rather than a single, transcendent gestalt, each canvas offers 'a coming-in and going-out of knowledge'.<sup>58</sup> The transcendence that is offered by Martin's paintings functions in part by rendering our perception of the material world unknowable or unstable. Paradoxically, this transcendence occurs as a result of its imperfections: ephemeral, unrepeatable, and barely perceptible variations intervene on what we thought we knew about the work's materiality. Rather than a single, unchanging gestalt we confront mutability and, as a result, 'more perfection than is possible in the world'; the cognizance of the ideal's scope and impossibility is heightened in those who pursue it with the greatest fervor.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Wagner, n.p.

<sup>59</sup> Martin, *Writings*, 31

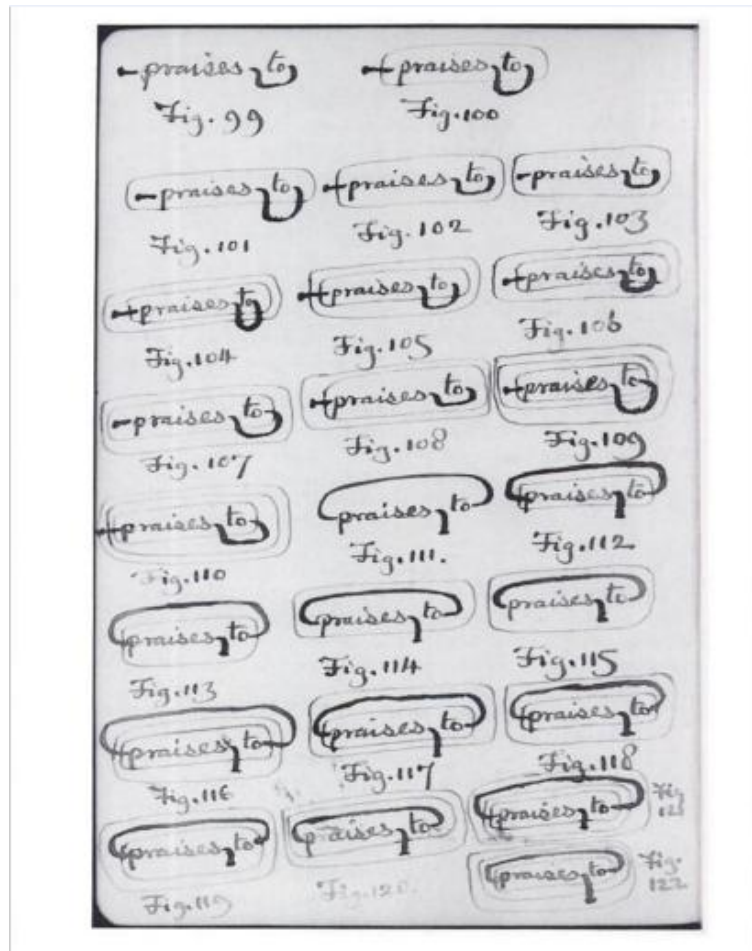


Fig. 10 Pierce-Arrow p. xii

These contraindicating experiences of quietism and skepticism in both Martin and Howe are precisely what Brian Reed discusses in his 2004 article in which he compares Krauss’s ‘grid’ and ‘/cloud/’ hermeneutics to what he calls Howe’s ‘word-squares’.<sup>60</sup> He summarizes by saying,

Krauss’s ‘The /Cloud/’ may have been conceived as an unflattering critique of Martin’s outmoded high modernist aesthetic, but, as with Krauss’s essay ‘Grids,’ ‘The /Cloud/’ is nonetheless most illuminating in the present, literary context. Howe, like Martin, separates out the spiritual and material aspects of her art. Howe, like Martin, makes her audience’s choice between the two a function of point of view, not a question of authorial intent. Thus, insofar as they are modeled on Agnes Martin’s paintings one begins to see how Howe’s own ‘grids,’ her word squares, might

<sup>60</sup> See Reed, ‘“Eden or Ebb of the Sea”’. Reed borrows the term ‘word squares’ from Rachel Blau duPlessis, ‘“Howe”’: On Susan Howe’, *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 123-39; 138.

function as an extension of her duck-rabbit aesthetic. They prove ambivalently materialist *and/or* idealist.<sup>61</sup>

Here it seems to me that Reed prefers, like Krauss, to see the contradictory aspects of the spiritual and material as ‘separated out’, if not mutually exclusive, when in fact it is their mutual dependence that is most striking. Reed calls upon Wittgenstein’s famous consideration of the drawing that can be variably perceived as either a duck or a rabbit. (Fig. 11) This leads Reed to conclude that

Howe grants [readers] the right to *choose* to read her words as revelation. Skeptics and believers can agree that Howe pierces the Veil of the Temple. The question is whether one decides to see nothing, or something, on the Veil’s other side.<sup>62</sup>

But while it may be true that either can be perceived, the crux of the aesthetic is the spiritual gap or potentiality that arises out of rumination on the materiality and as a result of being a skeptic believer. In other words, I believe the vision being offered is a *deliberately bifurcated* one that is greater than the sum of its individual oppositions. The ultimate perspective offered is a non-existent, mentally sculpted vantage point where things can be both contradictory and true, a plane that can exist in the mind but not in known experience. Rather than Reed’s duck-rabbit analogy (which implies an either-or perception), the phenomenon of this material/immaterial aesthetic seems to me most aptly described by what Howe calls ‘dialetheism’ or the possibility of contradictory truths (*TM* 69).<sup>63</sup> In this non-logical model (in which the words ‘and’ and ‘or’ cease to have meaning), the one never negates its opposite and the two are mutually dependent and simultaneously apprehended—even if only in the mind. It is not about the veil’s other side but the veil itself, for within that barrier/portal lies a vision of the invisible: one begins to imagine the disparity between what is perceived and what may actually be. The force of the paradox lies not just in the fact that either perceptions of materiality or immateriality are viable—but in the fact that they are *inextricable*.

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<sup>61</sup> Reed, ‘“Eden or Ebb of the Sea”’, 36

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, 24. The viewpoint he is contesting is that of Linda Hutcheon.

<sup>63</sup> For an in-depth analysis of dialetheism and its various tropes, see my article ‘Spiritual Hyphen’: bibliography and elegy in Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*, *Textual Practice*, Vol. XXV no. 1 (February 2011): 133-55.

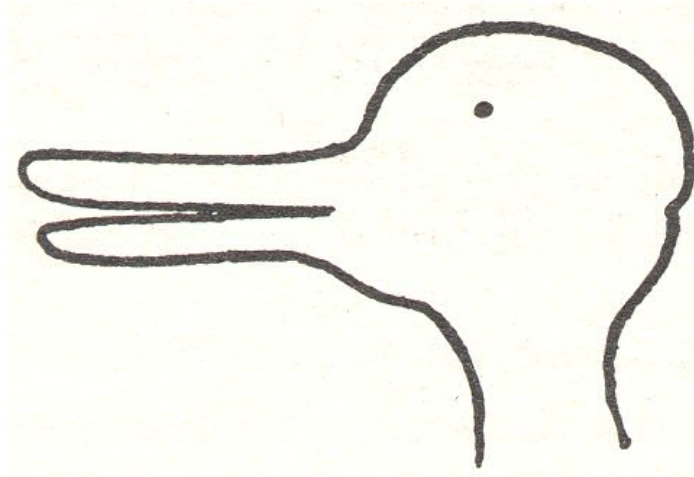


Fig. 11 Wittgenstein's 'Duck-Rabbit'  
*Philosophical Investigations*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1958.

This formal phenomenon in Martin's works, in which contradicting perspectives cause the viewer to brink with the limits of his or her perceptual knowledge, parallels the effect of what Howe will eventually dub a 'singularity' in her own poetry. A singularity is, as Howe defines it, 'a catastrophe of bifurcation. There is a sudden leap into another situation. The ghost (the entrance point of a singularity) is the only thing we have' (*BM* 177). If such singularities exist in visual art, then perhaps they too lend themselves to invocations of the spectral, for Linville's appreciation closes with the observation that in Martin's final painting, *Tundra*, six rectangles encircled by 'halos' faded to leave 'only their white ghosts' and noted that 'even the ghosts disappear eventually'.<sup>64</sup> Howe must have immediately recognized her own poetics in this formulation, for we can detect Linville's description of this dynamic in the below 'word-square':

is notion most open apparition past Halo view border redden possess remote so  
abstract life are lost spatio-temporal hum Maoris empirical Kantian a little lesson  
concatenation up tree fifty shower see step shot Immanence force to Mohegan  
( 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time' 14)

Howe's articulation of the 'notion most open' just 'past Halo view' serves as the entrance point of the singularity or the ghost 'apparition' that we find in Linville's appreciation of

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<sup>64</sup> Linville 73

Martin's paintings. But what Howe would learn from the singularity of Martin's formal/formless portals was that those singularities could be articulated through *sound forms in time*. Whereas Martin forged a spatio-temporal vision on canvas, Howe would learn to translate this on the page into a 'spatio-temporal hum'.<sup>65</sup>

### **Minimalists' Marginalia**

The connection Howe saw in Martin is even more relevant when we consider what Briony Fer has to say about the idiosyncratic genealogy of Martin's aesthetic. Her view helps us to better understand the seeming gap between Howe's quietist vision of 'the supreme' in Minimal Art and the later, deconstructive historical poems. Like Barbara Rose, Fer acknowledges how one might find the 'contemplative' views of Martin to contradict her Literalist views—an observation that also parallels Brian Reed's conception of Martin's 'duck-rabbit combination of skepticism and transcendentalism'.<sup>66</sup> 'But,' writes Fer, 'it is the contradiction that is most revealing about her work—something in the work can somehow be both.' She then looks to an overlooked aspect of Martin's singular art historical context in New York in the late 1950s in order to find the roots of this sensibility:

This was the point when, already in her late forties, she came to what we now think of as her trademark grid format, but she came to it in unexpected ways....The work she began to produce at the end of the 1950s relates to *an aesthetics of the thrown away* that was prevalent in New York at the time. Robert Indiana was incorporating large found objects and materials from the docks, and so, on a rather different scale admittedly, was Martin. Ellsworth Kelly approaches abstraction as if segments of color and shape were 'already made', caught and fixed in perceptual experience.

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<sup>65</sup> Regarding the title of this work, Reed has made the canny insight that 'The wonderfully ambiguous title of her long poem *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (is "forms" a noun or verb? "sound" an adjective or noun? "in time" as in "just in time"?) can be read as a concise expression of her belief that poetry, "sound forms," are articulated within history, "in time," and not outside of it (Reed, "Eden or Ebb of the Sea", 50). See Perloff, 'Collision', 524 for the source of this argument. See too McCorkle, paragraph 7. Reed's final discussion of 'sound forms' 'in time', i.e. 'in history', comes very close to approximating a link between Howe's quietism of the 50's and 60's and her later poems including *history* (52). For there the search for infinity meets with the paradoxical limitations of the grid, of the painted line and of sound 'in time'. To locate the search for infinity within time is to deconstruct history. The admonition is to evade too-easy finality and concretization—for then we miss the other ways besides word squares in which Howe intervenes absence.

<sup>66</sup> Reed, "Eden or Ebb of the Sea", 25

Many of Martin's assemblages from this time were small. She liked to combine found materials like wire and bottlecaps.<sup>67</sup>

Fer cites 'The Laws' (Fig. 12) as an example of this early work. In 'The Laws', boat spikes are fixed into a rough plank of wood that, although painted in neat rectangular sections, is still left partly bare with exposed cracks and scuffed edges. The work poses a striking difference to her later monochrome paintings. This account of the grid is markedly different from the one we observed in Reed and Krauss's arguments, in which 'artist after artist, from Piet Mondrian to Frank Stella to Andy Warhol to Sol LeWitt, discovers in the grid's geometry a way of circumventing the age-old, ever-vexatious split between spirit and matter.'<sup>68</sup> The grid, apart from its Modernist agenda, was a way for artists of this period to organise readymade objects—objects which had been *thrown away* or left fallen to the wayside of society's grid of recorded memory—into a self-standing structure. It is significant that the structure seemed to be falling apart or disappearing, as though it did not trust the imposition of order or the implication of completeness. This grid seemed to imply its own instability. Interestingly, Fer's description of Martin's early readymade assemblages sounds much like the early installation work Howe was doing, in which she 'mounted or pinned diverse objects to paper, wood, or cloth supports according to precisely determined measurements' which nevertheless 'from any distance greater than arm's length' would be experienced as 'fields of whiteness.'<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Fer 187; my italics

<sup>68</sup> Reed, ' "Eden or Ebb of the Sea" ', 33

<sup>69</sup> Cited above in Reed's description of her archives. Reed notes 'the Susan Howe Archive at the University of California, San Diego preserves written instructions, ephemera, photographs, and other materials relating to Howe's installations of 1969-1971, which possessed such evocative names as Long Away Lightly, On the Highest Hill, and Wind Shift / Frost Smoke / Malachite Green / Rushlight.'



Fig. 12 Agnes Martin  
'The Laws'  
1958  
Boat spikes and oil on wood, 93 x 18 x 2

This is an aesthetic Howe maintains throughout her career. In *The Midnight*, for example, she mentions exploring a decaying grain elevator with a visiting French poet in which she found 'Wagons, rusty buckets, tires, tables, shovels, broken bottles, broken glass, cash boxes, plastic cups, old clothes, torn magazines, newspapers, memos, business records.' As with Martin, Howe's concerted focus on the infinitesimal, concrete particular forms an awareness and intervention of the immaterial ideal. The connection between this assemblage of the thrown away and the quietist, transcendental values can be seen when she observes immediately after this litany of concrete objects that 'the status of a spectral self resurfaces' (TM 139).

We also find lists of thrown away objects throughout Howe's work, specifically in her personal narratives about the experience of finding source texts. In her book *Bed Hangings*, for example, Howe recounts her first encounter with *Bed Hangings: A Treatise on Fabrics and Styles in the Curtaining of Beds, 1650-1850*:

One Sunday afternoon in the gift shop at Hartford's Wadsworth Athenaeum, wandering among the postcards, notepaper, ties, scarves, necklaces, keychains, calendars, magic markers, pens, pencils, posters, children's games, paperweights, and art books, displayed to be worshipped or acquired, my attention came to rest on a pedestrian gray paperback (*BH* np).

It is as though the climactic moment of finding is preceded by a kind of found text aura, as it were, in which she is surrounded by a panoply of seemingly insignificant objects just before the soon-to-be source text, whose uncanny significance resonates for still unknown reasons, presents itself. Indeed, the act of finding is itself a charged one for a poet and even more so for a poet who habitually uses *données* in her work: 'Finding is the first act' writes Dickinson, a line Howe chooses to incorporate in her closing of 'The End of Art'.<sup>70</sup> Other lists of readymades in Howe's work take the form not of random objects surrounding books but of snippets of verbiage itself, either oral, as she does in *The Midnight* when obliquely elegizing her mother, 'I am assembling materials for a recurrent return somewhere. Familiar sound textures, deliverances, vagabond quotations, preservations, wilderness shrubs, little resuscitated patterns' (*TM* 85), or textual, as she does when describing her work with the microfilms of the Charles Sanders Peirce manuscripts,

As I scroll a spool of film up and down, forward and back across the mechanical apparatus, various embedded characters, cryptic lists of numbers, erasures, questions, miniscule messages, shifting shapes, excesses and defects, strange survivals, and rhetorical effects can be reeled or rotated each into each (*TM* 137)

In these examples, the objects that have fallen away are the verbal and textual records of human history that have been excluded from the official or authoritative inventory, the details omitted from the published or edited story that is transmitted to posterity.

The domain of the thrown away explains Howe's well-known preoccupation with margins—both figurative and literal. In *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, she recounts the experience of encountering the narrative of Reverend Hope Atherton's spontaneous decision to leave his congregation to join an Indian raid. The source text is George Sheldon's *A*

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<sup>70</sup> Howe, 'The End of Art', 7

*History of Deerfield Massachusetts*. Howe includes, as part of her poetic narrative, a reproduction of one snippet of this text, cropped at each margin so as to make the history's narrative only partly ascertainable. (Fig. 13) Below this text-image she writes 'a sonic grid of homely minutiae fallen away into posterity carries trace filaments. Tumbled syllables are bolts and bullets from the blue' (*SLT* 13). Here we see the 'grid' of her early visual work reappearing only this time, in 'sonic' form. It is no longer buttons, tacks, or wires that have fallen away and been reassembled but syllables. The effect of the compromised text is to suggest that formal histories are always already clipped by a narrator's perspective (typically, Howe tells us, it is the 'record of winners'), with fragments of actuality falling to the wayside.<sup>71</sup> The array of what has fallen out is a major implication in Howe's oeuvre. To pursue it is to approach the 'complete consciousness' or 'transcendent reality' of which Martin speaks.<sup>72</sup>

Hope Atherton desires this congregation and all people that  
 are of the Lord's dealings with him to praise and give thanks  
 for a series of remarkable deliverances wrought for him,  
 as signs of divine providence (being considered together) in  
 complete temporal salvation. I have passed through the  
 shadow of Death, and both the *rod* and *staff* of God de-  
 ceived me. A particular relation of extreme sufferings that I have  
 borne, & signal escapes that the Lord hath made way for, I  
 desire, that glory may be given to him for his works that have  
 been wonderful in themselves and marvelous in mine eyes; & will be  
 the eyes of all whose hearts are prepared to believe what I say.

Fig. 13 Susan Howe, text-image from *Souls of the Labadie Tract* p. 13

As every one of Howe's books (both poetry and scholarship) incorporates materials and anecdotes from archives and libraries, examples of her engagement with textual marginalia abound. But my wish for the time being is to reinforce how this aesthetic of marginalia stems, in fact, from the transcendentalist values of the art to which she responded. Returning to Fer for a moment, we see that Martin's visionary passion for 'the endless

<sup>71</sup> Howe, 'Statement for the New Poetics Colloquium, Vancouver 1985', *Jimmy & Lucy's House of "K"* 5 (1985): 13-17; 15

<sup>72</sup> See note 43

expansiveness of a transcendental subject' was in fact a product of her 'looking for a lost totality'.<sup>73</sup> Fer continues,

The point is less what infinity *is* than the operation that it names—an operation that is always uncertain about its object, that calls infinite what exceeds representation and so has to be abandoned. In Martin's scale of things, it is the play between the infinite and the infinitesimal that heads off and so refuses the idea of a single totality. Infinity precisely breaks the bounds of a totality. You could see Martin's grid as a kind of sieve—worlds fall through it [...] Actuality and infinity end up being something like the same, where that which falls below the threshold of the visible, or the noticeable, is exhaustively, endlessly, rehearsed. Martin's project is a fierce and relentless seeking out of a utopian vision beneath the threshold of the noticeable, in the least likely place, in the least prepossessing of materials. This is work of the highest ambition, on a par with the ambition of Rothko and Newman for the work art could do, but more akin than theirs, always, to an aesthetics of the thrown away or marginal, which was where she formulated her art.<sup>74</sup>

Paradoxically, the transcendentalist's longing for infinity and boundlessness is found at the bounds themselves, or, as Howe says, in 'Names who are strangers out of bounds of the bound margin' (*NM* 92). In an essay entitled 'Submarginalia' she asks, 'Is a poetics of intervening absence an oxymoron?' (*BM* 27) Indeed, marginalia is ultimately a way of 'intervening absence' into the totality of history. Martin writes, 'In *the great process*, in the sum total of the outward being of all living things our work is insignificant, *infinitesimal and insignificant. This must be realized.*'<sup>75</sup> She understood instinctively that it was through rumination on the infinitesimal and insignificant that the infinite was invoked.

Howe dubs these fallen away avenues of poetic discovery 'Lethan tributaries of lost sentiments and found philosophies' and asserts that they had 'a life-giving effect on the *process* of [her] writing' (*SLT* 14). The finding of these marginalized texts typically has an emotional register in Howe's work, for those texts seem to apprehend buried voices. In *The Birthmark*, for example, Howe writes, 'Voices I am following lead me to the margins' and after a long list of marginalized figures asserts that each one

may have been searching for grace in the wilderness of the world. They express to me a sense of unrevealedness. They walk in my imagination and I love them. Somewhere

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<sup>73</sup> Fer 185, 192

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.* 192

<sup>75</sup> Martin, *Writings*, 90

Coleridge says that Love may be a sense of Substance/Being seeking to be self-conscious' (*BM* 4)

This emotional register we observe here shows how the thrown away becomes not just a foil to totality that functions on a conceptual level, but is instead very much an impassioned devotion to forgotten personal histories. It is precisely this sense of duty to deliver marginalized texts and voices from obscurity that Howe speaks of when she says, in what is one of the most quoted lines from all her work, 'I wish that I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate' (*ET* 14).

Fer concludes by asking, 'So, what is it to substitute drawing for the ready-made? It is to use drawing as if it were a material, which is to say that graphite, or ink, or wash can create intense, if understated, material differences.'<sup>76</sup> Here it becomes possible to further appreciate how Martin falls at both extremes of the Malevich-Duchamp continuum. For while she is obsessed with the notion of boundlessness that we find in the former, it is through a 'prepossessing of materials' akin to Duchamp that she arrives. Just as this logic leads Fer to refer to Martin's work as 'drawing drawing', we might say by extension that Howe substitutes writing for the readymade, that in her own poems she is in fact 'writing writing'. It is through the aesthetics of the thrown away that Howe becomes interested in exposing and investigating the materiality of writing. And it is through writing's materiality that she will make her most original claims about textual ontology and the limits of language.

With this understanding, the contradiction in Howe's materialist and contemplative aims as well as the seeming paradox between her early affinity with Minimal Art and her later historical poetics can be viewed as part of the same method. This explains why it is that Howe so frequently refers to her transition from the visual arts to poetry in both interviews and her own writing. It was then that her aesthetic of marginalia developed. The lure of the blank canvas and a fetish for history's trash turn out to be twin impulses in the artists Howe

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<sup>76</sup> Fer 189

admired most. As we shall see in the next chapter, they also propelled her artwork in fascinating ways. These aesthetics and the material experiments of her word drawings will pave the road for a whole new kind of poetry, one that would embed historiographic intervention within its visual vocabulary.

## Chapter 2.

### Names & Things: Howe's Word-Drawings

Concurrent with the lure to exhibit the blank canvas as a painting was another looming threat to Modernist values: the eruption of language into the visual arts. Not only were there manifestos and theoretical essays that accompanied the production or display of artworks, but several artists—notably Robert Smithson and Carl Andre—were composing provocative word-drawings that combined language with visual art, reading with seeing. Howe soon joined them. She abandoned painting at the age of thirty-three and began making artist books and collages. This chapter presents and analyzes a selection of Howe's collages made between 1968 and 1973 and shows how the mystic-skeptic aesthetic she learned from the visual arts translates to a unique vision of language.

#### Language and Objecthood

The combination of verbal and visual effects led Fried to object to Minimal (or what he calls 'Literal') art, faulting it for its 'theatricality'. Fried's aversion to introducing language into the visual arts is symptomatic of a long-standing tradition of partitioning, one that can be traced back through Lessing's 'Laocoön' and further back to Horace's *ut picture poesis* and Aristotle's *Poetics*. The need for partitioning only strengthened in the twentieth century. According to most art-historical accounts, the birth of Modern art in 1900 was incited by a rejection of the *literary* nature of academic art. Most leading critics consequently viewed painterly abstraction to be a means of guarding art from the intrusion of language.<sup>1</sup> But if the abstract painting, the monochrome, and the Minimalist works that followed have shown us

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<sup>1</sup> Clement Greenberg contends that the abstract artist 'insists upon excluding "literature" and subject matter from plastic art' (*The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, Vol.1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 23). Rosalind Krauss also writes that the abstract grid 'announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse ('Grids', *October* Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979): 50-64; 50).

anything it is that these works were increasingly accompanied by an *outpouring* of language—first in the form of the theory and then in the compositions themselves.

But partitioning in the arts is not just a conservative perspective that individual traditions should be kept separate, although it often parades as such. Critics including Craig Owens and W.J.T. Mitchell have pointed to Fried's aversion to language in the visual arts. But I would like to suggest that this aversion and its history betrays a long-standing bias for Platonic Ideals—a vision of language where words are immaterial and stable concepts rather than mutable, material particulars. Language in this view is not open to variation, to singular occurrence in a physical irreproducible medium. More than just thwarting traditions within the arts, then, the intrusion of language into a visual, physical medium marked a destabilization of the signifier.

'My sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas' wrote Robert Smithson in 1972 adding to a press release where he said 'Here language is built, not written.' The touchstone piece of materialized language from this period was Smithson's 'Heap of Language' (See Fig. 1) In this work, individual words both *refer to* and *constitute* language, making its visual and referential meanings imbricate: you cannot read without looking or look without reading. It was also clear that these artists' use of language was in direct response to the critical discourse about their work, seizing that role and mode for themselves. Smithson included a faux press release with 'Heap of Language' entitled 'Language to be Looked at and/or Things to Be Read', signing it 'Eton Corrasable': a pun on erasable bond typing paper. He also takes a jibe at Fried himself when he ends his essay 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art' with a sarcastic footnote calling Fried a 'drama critic'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 61, 94.



Carl Andre's collages which he dubbed 'word-drawings' (a term Howe would borrow for herself) also emphasized language's materiality and the usurpation of its power from critical discourse. In 'Rotor Reflector Review David Novros' (See Fig. 2) for example individual letters are rotated so that their visual quality, rather than their signifying power, is emphasized. The title refers to a mechanical part of the Enigma Machine, a typewriter with three rotors designed to encrypt messages. It also claims to be a review of the paintings of Andre's friend David Novros. We can see here that the artist is usurping the role and the medium of the critic. Its encryption furthermore suggests a comprehension barrier between critic and artist; you'd have to be an artist to understand. As in Smithson's compositions, many of the words Andre employs refer to earthen materials: 'slate', 'clay', 'shale', 'grit', etc. He also includes words that ambiguously apply to mechanical processes of excavating soil, to the mechanics of the enigma machine, and/or to hanging art in a gallery: 'chain', 'cloth', 'freight', 'frame', 'depth', 'torque', etc. For these artists their compositions not only showcased a usurpation of language's power, and the critic's role of commentary, but it materialized and so destabilized language. The effect was to historicize words in a way that revealed their inherent instability. Perhaps the most astonishing move of Literal art was not to move from a two-dimensional canvas to actual space, but to reveal the inherent materiality of language.

One might wonder about the influence of concrete poetry here. We can certainly detect the influence of Ian Hamilton Finlay on Andre's work, especially Finlay's poem 'Homage to Malevich' which Howe praised in her article 'The End of Art'.<sup>3</sup> But it is important to remember that although these artists were exposed to concrete poetry of the Noigandres group, which was established a decade earlier in Brazil, their own word-drawings

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<sup>3</sup> See Susan Howe, 'The End of Art', *Archives of American Art Journal* 14.4 (1974): 2-7.

were organic to a specific context of Minimal art in New York City. Concerning Howe, the concrete poets who influenced her can't be said to be representative of the Noigandres group.

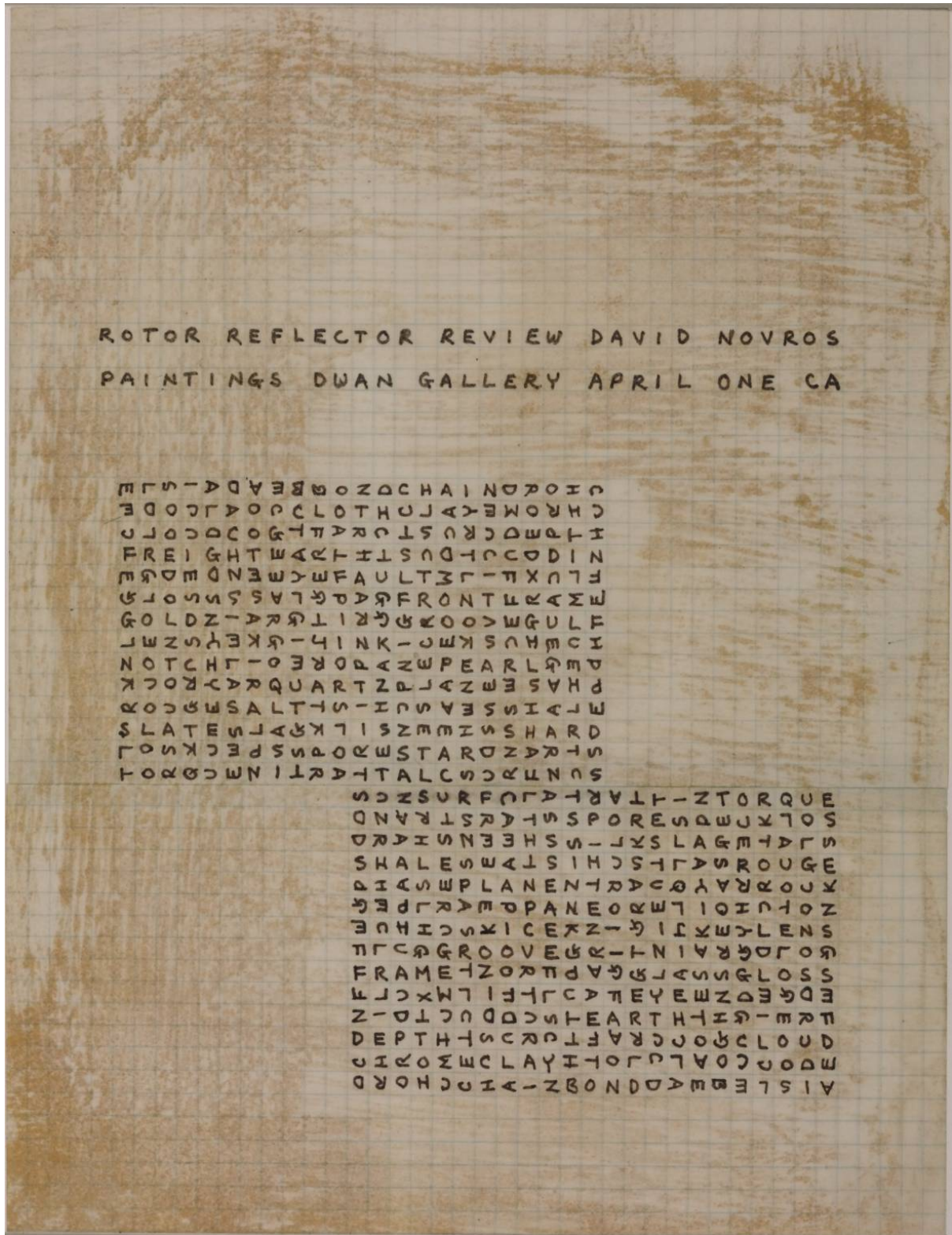


Figure 2. 'Rotor Reflector Review' by Carl Andre, Ink on paper, 1967

As Johanna Drucker notes, both Finlay and Gomringer were formalists and Gomringer especially ‘strove for the “unequivocal resolution” to questions of meaning through formal means’, whereas ‘the Noigandres group are more willing to renounce the struggle for the absolute—or Absolute—that is, the struggle for either linguistic certainty or metaphysical truth.’<sup>4</sup> But it seems to me that these two poets would be better described as mystic-skeptics than absolutists. For their work in a concrete medium necessarily implies a paradox of material particularity with transcendent ideals. Fittingly then, these concrete poets occupy a parallel position to Martin and Reinhardt in relation to Minimalists and Howe in relation to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets.

But if Howe takes on the task of restoring materiality to language in her own word-drawings it is with a simultaneous admission of a pull toward the ideal, the universal, which results in an ingenious awareness of the issues at stake in linguistic representation, issues that cannot be glossed over. This materialization of language can—to the extent that it rejects the existence of universals—also be construed as Nominalism, the medieval belief that universals do not exist and are merely ‘names for things’. In this view, reality consists entirely of particulars. Nominalism is the ‘skeptic’ part of Howe’s paradoxical vision. The ‘mystic’ part is the acknowledgement of the appeal of universals insofar as they promise intellectual communion, in other words Realism. For this reason, while Howe’s word-drawings—like Smithson’s or Andre’s—play with the materiality of language, showing its inherent instability, they also constitute a careful investigation of language’s power to name our world and the possibilities for it to connect us with one another in spite and because of our alienation. Howe extends and expands Smithson’s views of language. Whatever problems he demonstrated through ‘Heap of Language’, Howe tackles more comprehensively—not only

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<sup>4</sup> See Johanna Drucker, ‘The Art of the Written Image’ in *Figuring the Word* (New York City: Granary Books, 1998), 19.

casting words as historicizable artifacts but also investigating their correspondences and the things they name, the things that make up our living world.

Howe abandoned painting in her early thirties. For the next four years, between 1969 and 1973, she focused on making artist books and collages. She describes the process as follows,

These books I made were not books of poetry or prose; they were objects. I would get a sketchbook and inside I would juxtapose a picture with a list of words under it. The words were usually lists of names. Often names of birds, of flowers, of weather patterns, but I relied on some flash association between the words and the picture or charts I used. Later I did a series of water-colours with penciled lines, watercolour washes, and pictures and words—I always left a lot of white space on the page.<sup>5</sup>

The ‘water-colours’ are what Howe refers to elsewhere as her ‘word-drawings’. I have chosen the following six from over one hundred on file at the Beinecke library. They represent an array of verbal-visual experiments she was pursuing at the time. At first glance, they are simple compositions with attractive washes and a keen sense of visual balance. When we peer more closely, however, we see that these word-drawings are profound exploration of the limits of language.

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<sup>5</sup> See Lynn Keller, ‘An Interview with Susan Howe’, *Contemporary Literature* 36.1 (Spring 1995): 1-34; 5. Some of the initial notebooks Howe mentions are on archive at The Beinecke and UCSD. I have chosen not to include them as they are mostly drafts for the word-drawings.

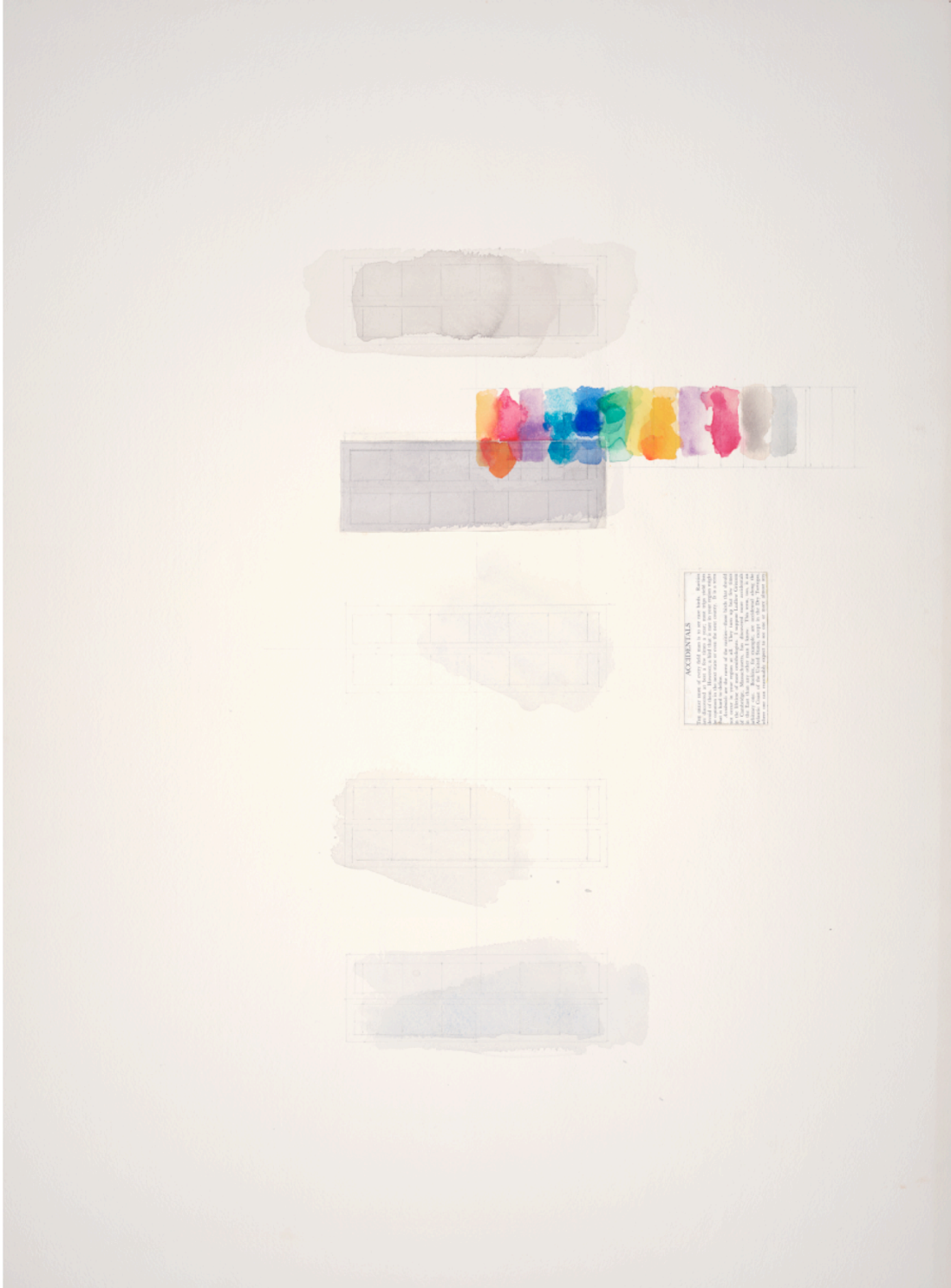


Figure 3. 'Accidentals' by Susan Howe, watercolour collage on paper, 1969-1972

- **‘Accidentals’ and ‘Purple Heron’: ontology of the field guide**

In the first word-drawing (See Fig. 3) there is a pencil sketch of five rectangles, each with two columns of squares framed by a narrow border. The figures are covered by swashes of grey watercolour so that they vaguely resemble window panes on a cloudy day. But the darkest of the rectangles also has, to the right and extending down past the figure line, a brilliant column of coloured rectangles. In the broadside original, which is roughly six times as large as the reproduction, the variegated intensity of the coloured pigment is striking. One can easily appreciate what Howe’s second husband, David von Schlegell, meant when he stated, ‘I’m always amazed at the way she can just lay that colour so cleanly,’ and what Howe meant when she emphasized, ‘I was all caught up in colour.’<sup>6</sup> The position of the one colourful column is significant: the composition frames it as something of lesser importance as it appears to be falling toward the margins. At the bottom center is a scrap of excised text, legible in the broadside, which reads:

THE GREAT HOPE of every field man is to see rare birds. Rarities are discovered at best a few times a year; most trips yield lists devoid of them. However, a bird that is rare in your region might be common in the next state or even the next county. It is a term that is hard to define.

*Accidentals* are the rarest of the rarities—those birds that should not occur in your region at all. They turn up but few times in the lifetime of most ornithologists. I suppose Ludlow Griscom of Cambridge, Massachussets, has discovered more accidentals in the East than any other man I know. This term, too, is an arbitrary one. Boobies, for example, are accidental along the Atlantic Coast of the United States, except in the Dry Tortugas, where one can reasonably expect to see one or more almost any....

The source of this text is R.T. Peterson’s *A field Guide to the Birds of the Eastern United States* (1947).<sup>7</sup> What seems at first a divergent topical interest in ornithology is actually an astonishing trope of Howe’s paradoxical aesthetic. Nothing is more emblematic of classification and appellation than the field guide; it is a modern illustration of Adamic language, of the sanctioned appointment of names to ‘every beast of the field and every fowl

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<sup>6</sup> David von Schlegell, ‘The Artist Speaks’, Interview with Jay Jacobs, *Art in America* (May-June 1968): 50–59 and Keller 7

<sup>7</sup> R.T. Peterson, *A Field Guide to the Birds of the Eastern United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), 185

of the air' (Gen 2:19 KJV). As a mystic-skeptic who is drawn simultaneously to the transcendent and the particular, Howe is devoted to believing in the possibility of a mystical union between name and thing at the same time that she is passionately committed to showing its lapses, to illustrating what Emmanuel Levinas referred to as a 'relaxation of essences', a concept she will return to in *The Birth-mark*.<sup>8</sup> Accidentals intervene on the essences described by the field guide because they acknowledge singularity and contradiction: 'the rarest of rarities' they 'should not occur in your region at all'. Should not, that is, if they abided by their classification and provenance. Accidentals trouble categories and contexts. They are emblems of failed definition and so, not surprisingly, they are 'hard to define'.

But if Howe protests absolute categories in this word-drawing she equally celebrates Peterson's voracious appetite for collecting, experiencing, and cataloguing. After all, an accidental is meaningless without an established taxonomy. And indeed if one looks at the other word-drawings of this period one will discover a whole series of word-drawings inspired by the field guide. Some feature names and corresponding photographs of various birds caught mid-flight in striking poses. In these and others the observer feels a startling appreciation of the image, a feeling that we immediately pin to the corresponding name. And yet the colours around the image suggest the kind of excess that evades these classificatory symbols. These compositions demonstrate Howe's pull toward the field guide's ambition to classify and nominate reality at the same time that they demonstrate what evades representation. (See Fig. 4)

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<sup>8</sup> 'For the little humanity that adorns the earth, a relaxation of essence to the second degree is needed...This weakness is needed. This relaxation of virility without cowardice is needed for the little cruelty our hands repudiate' (Emmanuel Levinas, 'Outside', *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Press, 1991), 185). Howe quotes this passage in *B-M* (103-4).

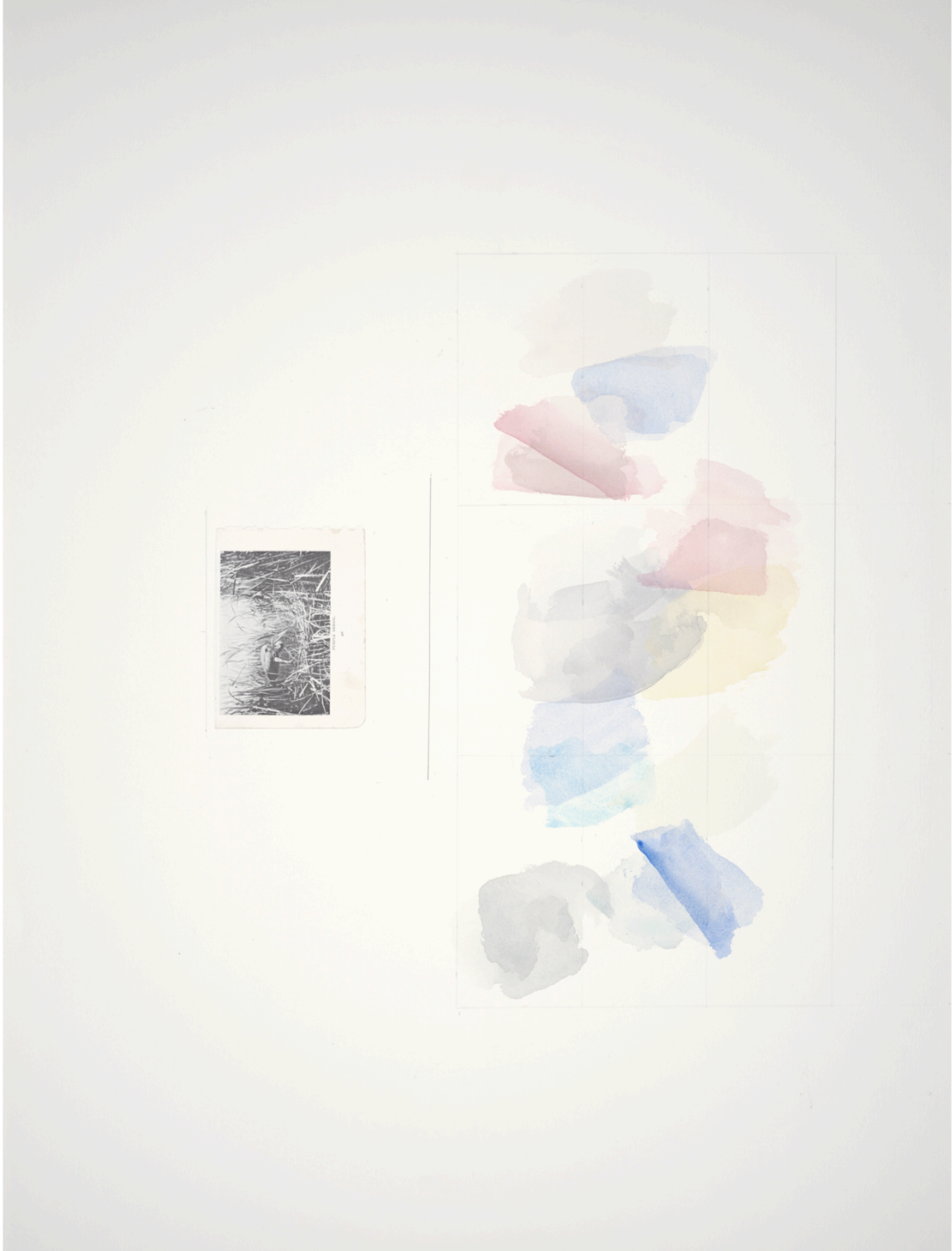


Figure 4. 'Purple Heron' by Susan Howe, watercolour collage on paper, 1969-1973

So what we have is a characteristically bifurcated attitude from Howe toward classification. On the one hand she is devoted to the hardy pragmatism of figures such as Peterson who would go to such lengths to discover and catalog the natural world. And on the other hand she is committed to ‘interventions of absence’ which remind us of the inherent dangers in classificatory systems that aim to essentialize. In the case of the field guide one obvious particular that has been omitted from each example is its *colour*. Howe’s vivid inclusion of it in her abstract panes in both ‘Accidentals’ and ‘Purple Heron’ is not really an indictment of Peterson’s guide (published in 1934, a colour edition for a book of such a small print run would not have been economically feasible); it is simply a reminder that particulars get sacrificed in the material transmission of knowledge. The brilliant colour panes also signify the reward that awaits the person who engages closely with the relation between names and things, who troubles herself to not only study them but to eagerly await for their qualities and provenances to be thwarted. For as Peterson writes, this accidental is ‘the great hope of every field man’.



and the crackle of names -  
crackle of bubble shell and clipper limps  
crackle of restivable and pectis  
and the crackle of mobious like the great clouds pinking

over sweep of that lawn - over twining of crickets  
over mable of tractor - was bare - and sung  
green (was a glass and the garden a guest)  
over gibble of gervansons and green - over it all  
into the slant of morning -  
my voyage past the threat of the trees began  
past the threat of the trees - and no longer time -  
no longer time - and the implacable sliding of green.

Figure 5. 'and the crackle of names' by Susan Howe, watercolour collage on paper, 1969-1973

- **‘and the crackle of names’: intervention on Platonic Ideals**

If the field guide is an apt trope for Howe to explore her interest in singularity, it is also an optimal site for her to work out the tension between Realism and Nominalism. As I argued in my Introduction, the conflict between these two schools of thought relates both to 1) a long-standing bias of Platonic ideals texts over material objects and 2) the critical debate over the ontology of artistic disciplines that happened in the late 1960’s New York art world. Howe’s word-drawing ‘and the crackle of names’ (See Fig. 5) illustrates the former; the following word-drawing will explore the latter.

In ‘a crackle of names’ we have two stanza-like boxes of versified type which Howe has traced around in ruled pencil. They sit on either side of a white horizontal bar of paint, also outlined in pencil. As with Agnes Martin’s compositions the materials are kept simple and the hatch-marks and skips of the hand-drawn line are preserved. The text reads as follows,

and the crackle of names –  
 crackle of bubble shell and slipper limpet  
 crackle of periwinkle and pecten  
 and the crackle of nubilous like the great clouds pushing

[white bar]

over swoop of that lawn – over twinging of crickets  
 over rumble of tractor – wren buzz – and dung  
 green gone a glare and the garden a gnarl  
 over gabble of gravestones and geese – over it all  
 into the slack of morning –  
 my voyage past the threat of the trees begins  
 past the threat of the trees – and no longer time –  
 no longer time – and the implacable sliding of green.

Several things are notable here in the way this artist-turned-poet is conceiving of the visual aspects of poetry. Interestingly Howe has chosen nouns on the upper half. ‘Slipper’, ‘limpet’, ‘Bubble’, and ‘Periwinkle’ are all names of seashells found in Peterson’s *Field Guide to the Atlantic Shore*. So we are still in the domain of names and their power to nominate, partition, and classify. But here, rather than the things themselves and their corresponding images, it is

the *sound* of the names that is in focus. The first line ‘the crackle of names’ where ‘crackle’ (itself an onomatopoeia) means ‘to make small sharp sudden repeated noises’ would suggest as much.

Any student of visual art or graphic design can tell you, the top half of a visual composition is thought to correspond with the ideal, ‘the generalized essence’ and incidentally ‘the more salient part’ while the bottom half is thought to correspond to the viewer’s conception of the real, or specific ‘documentary evidence’.<sup>9</sup> Look at how the bottom half, rather than names for shells, uses ‘rumble’, ‘buzz’, ‘gabble’, and ‘gnarl’—all onomatopoeic words for sounds. All of the names ‘crackle’, but only the lower ones correspond to things that also *are* ‘crackles’ where their meaning resembles the sound their signifier makes. The top ones, being words for shells rather than words for sounds, don’t signify such a sound, although as sea-shells they are apt to make ‘small sharp sudden repeated noises’ when gathered or heaped together.

The composition seems to be saying that the sound of words may take precedence *over* the word’s referent. Look at how the bottom half repeats the word ‘over’. When repeated several times, ‘over’ reifies one of its figurative meanings: it performs what it describes, much like onomatopoeia or its visual equivalent, which we saw in Robert Smithson’s ‘heap of language’ where the words formed a literal, material heap of language at the same time that they referred to one through their denotation. Howe’s composition seems to ask questions here about what happens when the name and ideal possesses sonic materiality that doesn’t resemble its meaning. Again, this is central to the conflict between Realism and Nominalism. Regardless of whether you are a Realist or Nominalist, it is problematic that names have an acoustic materiality which sometimes matters and sometimes

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<sup>9</sup> Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London: Routledge, 1996), 192-202

does not. Could a Nominalist pronounce ‘A crackle does not exist’ without proving himself wrong in the instant of asking?

What at first glance appears to be a discarded draft of a poem or an abandoned visual collage, turns out to be a profound experiment with the materiality of language and its paradoxical signifying powers. Viewed in this light, the white bar across the page symbolizes divisions and partitions of all kinds: the line between particulars and universals, writing and speech, body and soul. Notice how it’s not a line but a rectangle, that is, a *space between*. The division is actually a dimension of its own and takes the center of the composition. Howe’s exploration of these rifts in language and the cleaving of space between them is a theme I will return to in the next chapter when she transitions to poetry and publishes *Hinge Picture* in 1974.

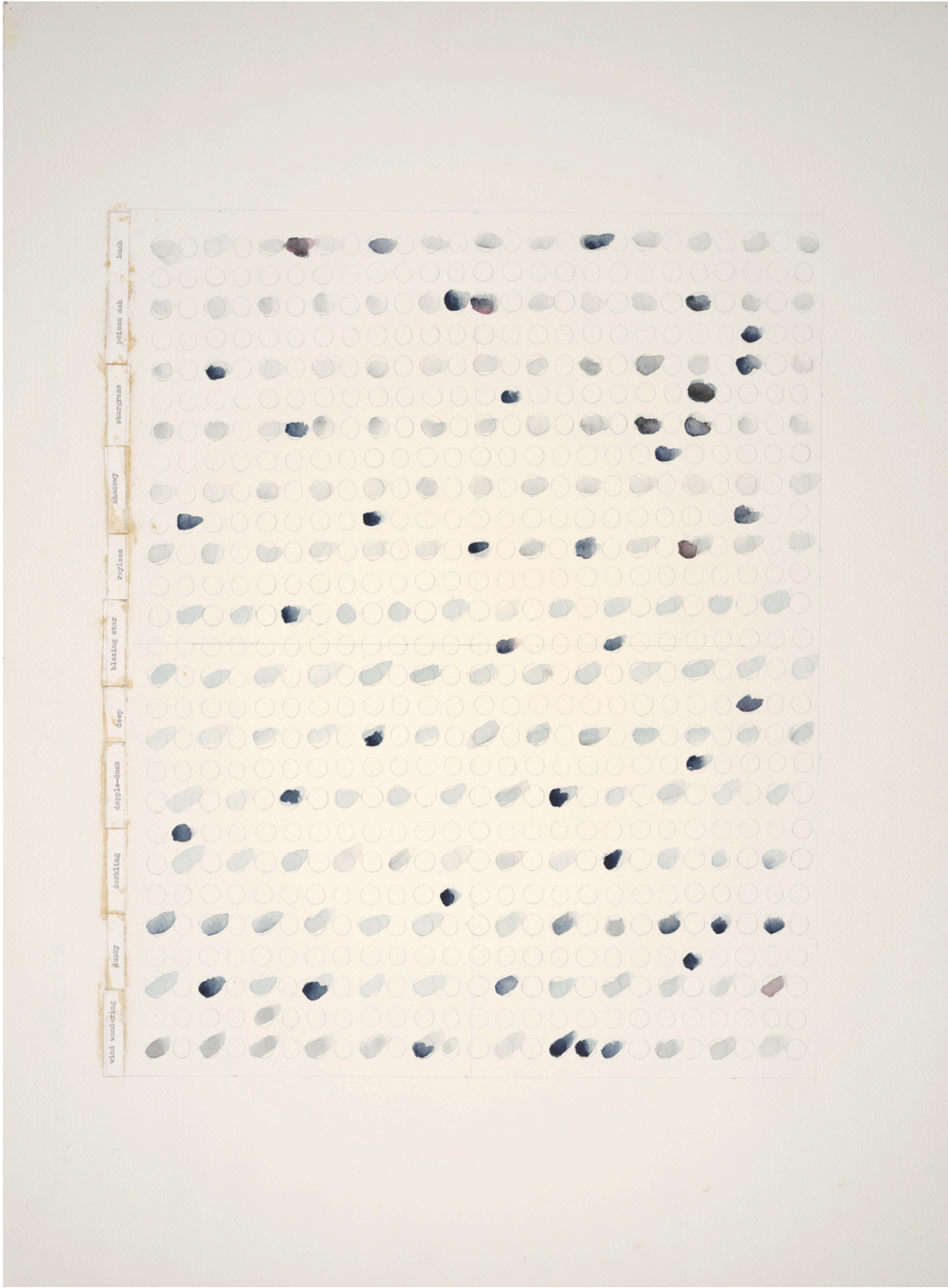


Figure 6. 'wind wandering' by Susan Howe, watercolour collage on paper, 1969-1974

- **‘wind wandering’: realist-nominalist tensions of the colour chart**

In this word-drawing (See Fig. 6) traces of the second Nominalist-Realist tension I mentioned, which took place in the late 1960s in the New York art scene, can be seen. As discussed in the first chapter, Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried were engaged in a mad pursuit to define and protect the boundaries of the various artistic disciplines, dividing painting from sculpture, etc. Minimalist and Conceptualist artists were meanwhile actively and deliberately blurring them. In 1968, for example, the very same time that Howe was composing her word-drawings, Robert Smithson gave a symposium at Yale entitled ‘Against Absolute Categories’ in which he denounced the art critic for attempting to bring about ‘the division of esthetics’ between various artistic disciplines.<sup>10</sup>

For these artists, the critical insistence on partitioning was merely a battle over universals (such as ‘painting’ or ‘sculpture’) which have no substance beyond their conventional appellation. In contrast to these critics, these artists were Nominalists who renounced universals. In this they resembled their artistic forebear Marcel Duchamp. In *Pictorial Nominalism*, Thierry de Duve argues that Duchamp’s readymades were a direct response to the ontological problems specific to painting. While his contemporaries like Malevich bowed to the expression of colour, Duchamp wanted to show that colour had no essence of its own: it was a product constructed by paint grinders. But to unsettle one essence was to unsettle the presumed ‘essence’ of *Art* in general. ‘If Duchamp declared this ambition here with great explicitness,’ writes de Duve,

it is because he was already aware of the nominalist dialectic that drives the history of the avant-gardes. He knew that the task of ambitious artists is to break the pact that seals *the name* of art and to anticipate the moment when history will renew this pact on the basis of their own work.’<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 360

<sup>11</sup> Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: on Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, trans. Dana Polan with the author, *Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 51 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 128

To ‘renew this pact’ is to accommodate an evolution of denotation, or in other words, a ‘relaxation of essences’. So that ‘Art’ now accommodates for the ready-made. And according to de Duve, Duchamp intuited this Nominalist logic of the avant-garde aesthetic by observing the way his contemporaries treated colour as essence whereas he knew them to be only names with no fixed reference.

Howe seems to have intuited the same logic in ‘wind wandering’. In this collage we see hand-traced circles--each about the size of a paper-hole-punch—charted in regular columns beneath a row of typewritten, cut-and-pasted labels that have been outlined in thin pencil:

wind-wandering dusky darkling dapple-dusk deep blazing star rayless shadowy  
stargrass poison ash hush

Roughly a third of the dots below the word-row are filled in with varying tints, shades, and tones of indigo watercolour paint. In a half dozen or so of these dots (below ‘hush’ ‘poison ash’ ‘rayless’ and ‘dusky’), the indigo is tinged with red resulting in shades of mauve. The colour daubs are visibly hand-made, bleeding past the circles and sometimes missing the mark. Some columns fall directly under word labels while others lie at the juncture between two—the difference is the length of the word and the space it takes up, not its meaning. Two columns have no paint daubs to speak of: one beneath ‘rayless’ and one beneath the cusp between ‘poison ash’ and ‘hush’.

The word-drawing resembles numerous other compositions employing a ‘colour swatch’ motif: Ellsworth Kelly’s *Colours for a Large Wall* (1951), Jasper Johns’s *Grey Numbers* (1958) Ed Ruscha’s *Stains* (1969), as well as Duchamp’s *Tu m’* (1918). The composition appears at first glance to be a Modernist grid, but Howe leaves her composition decidedly undone, rejecting the neat authority of an actual colour chart. Traditionally, such a chart would have smooth, flat colour swatches so as to emphasize the quality of the paint and erase the brushstroke of the artist, but in Howe’s composition the brushstrokes are

exaggerated. She also rejects the industry colour names for names her own which she then destabilizes by placing variegated colours below each corresponding label. The colours do not fit where they belong—figuratively or literally. In many instances they lie outside the penciled circle and the tints, shades, and tones that would normally be arranged in gradations are scattered throughout at random. And the brushstrokes themselves are mixed with touches of mauve. Through all these forms of slippage she shows the modernist grid falling apart. A decade later, Krauss would write that the grid

announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse. As such, the grid has done its job with striking efficiency. The barrier it has lowered between the arts of vision and those of language has been almost totally successful in walling the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality and defending them against the intrusion of speech.<sup>12</sup>

In Howe's work, by contrast, it is language that structures the grid rather than being silenced by it. If anything the 'barrier between the arts of vision and those of language' is the theme of this grid. Like the field guide, it is a verbal-visual assemblage that matches names to things and then puts that relationship into question.

Consider the names Howe uses. They appear to be metonymies for the grey colours beneath them. The names vary from abstract (rayless, stargrass) to concrete (shadowy, poison ash) until we are left with a final 'hush'—a synesthetic metonymy that silences the 'crackle of names' before it. Rather than becoming transparent (or indeed silent) signifiers of the colours, the names are shown to have an acoustic materiality. As the first label tells us, the names we use to cut up and refer to our world amount to *wind wandering*. Speech-sounds drift over time by taking on new spellings, new pronunciations, new connotations, and eventually new denotations. Take for example the word 'dusky': we can instantly see how this would, over time, become an apt appellation for grey. But what about 'darkling'? Has anyone ever said 'darkling' and been understood to be talking about the colour grey? It doesn't seem probable, though when we stop to contemplate the possibility we see that the

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<sup>12</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', *October* Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979): 50-64; 50

metonymic shift really isn't all that different from the one that happened between 'dusk' and 'grey' at some point. The difference is one of shared contexts; all of us have seen dusk but how many can claim to have seen a darkling? Names become established not because of their likeness but because of their use-value or production contexts.

But Howe's composition also draws our attention to peculiarities of colour naming specific to the art world. In the classic Winsor and Newton student range of watercolour, for example, known as the Cotman range, paint names include phrases ('sap green', 'burnt umber', 'purple lake', and 'lemon yellow'); metonymies ('emerald', 'ultramarine'); painters ('Vandyke Brown' and 'Hooker's dark green'); and finally pigments themselves ('dioxazine violet', 'cadmium orange hue'). Winsor and Newton designate a particular paint a 'hue' when modern pigments have been used in place of the traditional ones. And it is precisely when the name is seen to *be* the pigment that the question of essences resurfaces. But as de Duve's reading of Duchamp's 'Bride Stripped Bare' makes clear, even so-called pure pigments require grinders and mixers and so are still man-made substances, unstable qualia under a stable name.<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, throughout history the experiments in painting where 'pure' pigments were rejected in favor of commercial paint typically coincided with introductions of language into the composition: Braques, Picasso, Duchamp, and later on Ed Ruscha (who famously began his career as a sign-painter) all incorporated language into their compositions. It would seem that the standardization of colour fulfilled an appetite for the *functions of language*: separation, categorization, taxonomy, correspondences, conventions, denotations, heritage. Krauss contends that the grid supplanted the need for language, but it seems to have equally been *colour*. In the canon of western painting colours were not only conceived by conventions of classification but were allusive. 'Ultramarine' for example was traditionally

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<sup>13</sup> See Cotman Water Colour Chart, Winsor & Newton homepage. n.d. <http://www.winsornewton.com/products/water-colours/cotman-water-colour/colour-chart/> [Accessed 24 Jan 2014].

made from lapis lazuli and historically reserved for painting the robes of the Virgin Mary. Removing canonical colours was tantamount to removing a lexicon, and so new signifiers could then move in.

By the time Howe was making her word-drawings in 1968 and 1969 the illusion of purity in pigment no longer persisted. Nevertheless, monochrome canvases were still flourishing. As I argued in the first chapter, however, the monochromes to which Howe responded most intervened on the mystical qualities of their colour-fields by foregrounding infinitesimal brushstrokes and tick-marks. The absolutes in which artists such as Martin and Reinhardt believed were confined to the abstraction of the mind, not reality, and so their creations were accordingly constructivist monochromes. Much like Duchamp's paint-grinders and Howe's 'wind wandering', they nodded toward their own craftedness and the fiction of universals.

But if Howe's collage is an ingenious and deceptively simple presentation of Nominalist-Realist tensions, it is also an urgent poem with a powerful topical message. The verbiage she uses in fact contains intertextual clues to themes much more ominous than we might imagine. The arcane 'wind-wandering' is used in Hopkins's 'Binsey Poplars' (1879), a poem that mourns the destruction of the natural world, while the equally rare 'rayless' appears in Byron's poem 'Darkness' (1816) which was written following the 1815 volcanic eruption of Mt. Tambora which covered much of the northern hemisphere in a thick black smoke for a whole summer, resulting in the worst famine of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Read from left to right as if a poem, words that at first seem innocuous hint to something far more ominous, the dropping of the atom bomb: a 'wind wandering' 'blazing star' that is 'rayless' produces a 'stargrass' explosion in the sky that then turns 'shadowy', becoming a mushroom cloud of 'poison ash' that results in a final 'hush'. The blots tinged arbitrarily with red, a colour

nowhere indicated by the names, now seem to imply danger and casualty. Behind all of Howe's poems is the reminder of the violence that threatens the extinction of persons and memories. And this reminder is always coupled with a constructivism of the names we rely on to reach one another as well as to read the stories of the past and transmit stories to the future, to describe the world around us and inscribe ourselves within it.

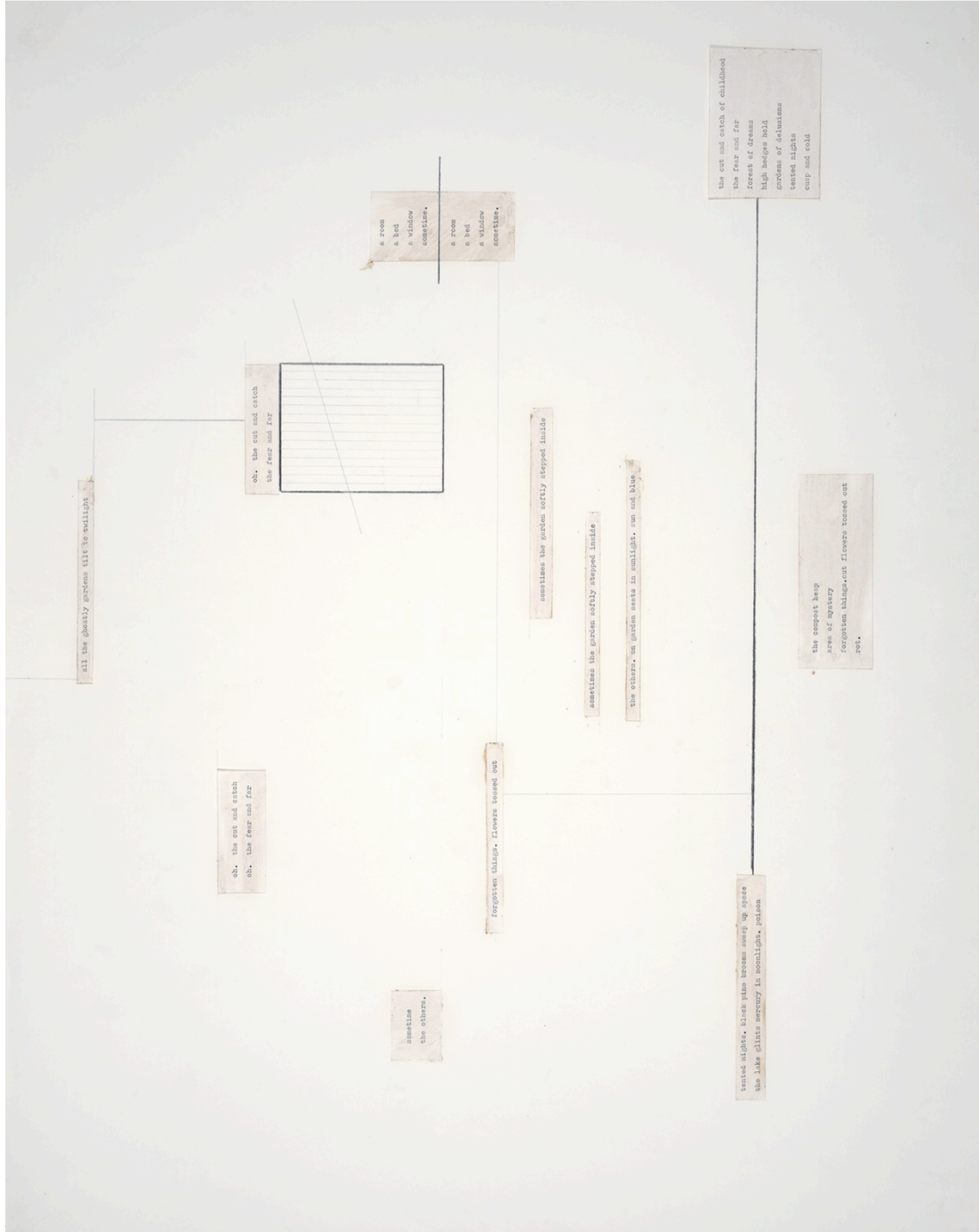


Figure 7. 'all the ghostly gardens' by Susan Howe, watercolour collage on paper, 1969-1973

• **‘all the ghostly gardens’: the open field and the thrown away**

In the next word-drawing (see Fig. 7) we see Howe working out formal problems of the visual arrangement of poetic text. Unlike the previous examples, here there are no colours or graphic images save for one large rectangle and several sharply drawn lines. According to Howe,

Around that time (1968 or '69), through my sister Fanny, I became acquainted with Charles Olson's writing. What interested me in both Olson and Robert Smithson was their interest in archaeology and mapping. Space. North American space—how it's connected to memory, war, and history.<sup>14</sup>

She later comments that Black Mountain poets were more ‘open to collaboration between disciplines’ and that to them ‘the page was an open field—words on it an instant fusion of hearing and seeing.’<sup>15</sup> Howe’s conception of ‘the open field’ is drawn from Olson’s 1950 essay ‘Projective Verse’ and what he called ‘COMPOSITION BY FIELD, as opposed to inherited line, stanza, overall form’.<sup>16</sup> Olson’s essay tends increasingly to focus on breath and the syllable, that is, on the aural aspects of ‘projective verse’, but notice how Howe’s interest in his essay is particularly focused on spatial arrangement and its connection to mapping. The phrase ‘open field’ in fact occurs nowhere in Olson’s essay; Howe’s use of it, however, is indicative of a responsiveness to the visual possibilities of verse that freed itself of inherited form.

But if Howe took from that essay a permission to experiment visually with verse, then she also fused it with her own material experiments. Her decision to have these freestanding lines or stanzas be pasted in as separate components rather than written directly onto the background is significant. It would of course, be impractical to use a typewriter to print on a broadside of this size, but Howe takes additional measures that show a desire to emphasize

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<sup>14</sup> Keller 5

<sup>15</sup> Susan Howe, ‘An Open Field: Susan Howe in Conversation’, Interview with The Academy of American Poets, 2011, <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/open-field-susan-howe-conversation> [accessed 12 March 2014]

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*; Charles Olson, *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), 16

the materiality of the type. Not only are the stanza borders outlined in pencil, but the rubber cement (again an ordinary household material) turns the paper scraps slightly yellow. This gives each stanza a kind of added dimensionality or weight compared with its background. These are clearly not just certain words in a certain order but material words fastened by hand to another material page.

And yet the composition clearly begs comparison to a printed poem. The top center line would appear to be a title and the clippings stanzas. The verbiage (apostrophe, anaphora, etc.) also seems to belong to poetry. I am engaging in this act of classification (Is Howe's composition a text? Is it a drawing?) only to show the ways that Howe deliberately troubles the innate desire to categorize in order that we can perceive and question categorization itself. There is no field guide for texts or manuscripts. And if there were, Howe's works would be accidentals, always alerting us to the ways actuality exceeds classification.

If we were to encounter the composition from afar and without the knowledge that this was made by a poet, we might assume the composition was a blueprint for a Calderesque mobile with text on it. And indeed, when we look at it more closely and see the verbiage, then we both read as well and see how the 'weights' of the relative components are balanced visually and ideologically. We also understand how a flow of reading and of eye movement might be charted. As with Howe's later collage-poems, multiple reading orders are possible. But whereas those create a multiplicity of readings through lines of verse placed at different angles to one another, here the composition works by placing penciled lines and shapes across the composition. The lines establish desired connections and also thwart conventional reading patterns. They are ambiguous enough to suggest that rather than instructing the reader on where to move her eyes, they are exploring possibilities for reading patterns or interpretation. Here is Howe working out the logic of Olson's 'COMPOSITION BY FIELD'. It is as though she had taken a T-square and pencil to a poem in *Maximus* to discover for

herself how the disparate parts functioned as a whole, how looking contributed to reading and vice versa.

Consider how a line drawn from the title goes to the right and then down immediately to ‘oh. The cut and catch/the fear and far’. It visually establishes that this is the ‘first’ stanza even though, according to reading convention, the relative height of the stanza to the left would render it the first. Below this we have a rectangle outlined in bold lines and fine vertical lines inside it. A diagonal through this box makes the space appear solid. Placed beneath these lines, the form embodies the figurative weight we ascribe to important stanzas. The nearly identical lines to the left stand alone, although their placement holds the whole composition together visually.

The next level of lines contains, on the right-hand side a simple scene: ‘a room/a bed/a window/sometime’ repeated twice. How do we read the repetition over the horizontal line? Does it emphasize the starkness of the scenario? A sort of desperation? Or does this indicate something more physical—two adjacent rooms for example? Again the visual components tempt linear (textual) analysis although it is uncertain whether it applies. Shifting to the left, we see a stand-alone stanza whose vertical placement and diction connect it to the previous one: ‘sometime/the others’. Both stanzas are concerned with ‘sometime’ but who are these others? It implies an otherness to the others, namely a subject, although there is no indication of a speaking person here—beyond the apostrophe of the first two stanzas, a kind of image of self-consciousness without a self.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as our eyes wander to take in the visual holistically, bouncing between lines without the surety of having read every one, we have the feeling of searching for something—in this case, perhaps, a speaker.

From this point the eye could go in one of several directions, but a thin horizontal line from the first stanza connects it to ‘forgotten things. flowers tossed out’. Indeed, ‘forgotten

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<sup>17</sup> Apostrophe plays a significant role in Howe’s later work. See my reading of *That This* in chapter 6 for a fuller discussion.

things’ is one of Howe’s primary aesthetic concerns, so it makes sense that it serves as the fulcrum of this composition. And it also makes sense that a barely visible line (apparent in the actual word-drawing when viewed up close) extends out from ‘the others’ toward ‘forgotten things’ but then fades from view. The remainder of the stanzas point toward a separation between a consciousness recollecting childhood and ‘the others. on garden seats in sunlight’. The formal registers—both visual and verbal—show opposition and conflict that reach a kind of anti-resolution in the final centered stanza:

the compost heap  
area of mystery  
forgotten things. cut flowers tossed out  
rot.

In these final lines the emphasis is again on the ‘flowers tossed out’ and the ill fate of things which go disregarded or undervalued. What is interesting about this composition is first and foremost the stunning way it works out a visual logic of an ‘open field’ poetics, one that explores the potential of visual arrangement to contribute to semantic meaning. But secondly, this poem marks the beginnings of Howe articulating the aesthetic of her material practice as an artist, an aesthetic that will develop into a thesis on historiography. The poem speaks of childhood memory, but it also illustrates the logic of Howe’s larger concern with historical narrative: the discarded objects and stories remembered by those who are outside the ‘garden of delusions’ where ‘high hedges hold’ lead Howe to a critical view of history. Here childhood almost seems a metaphor for the past, where narratives are spotty and where memory presents itself through ‘cuts’ or ‘catches’, iterations of Benjamin’s ‘dialectical image’. It’s through the trash of history that we salvage consciousness of what was lost, through which we perceive its gaps and silences.

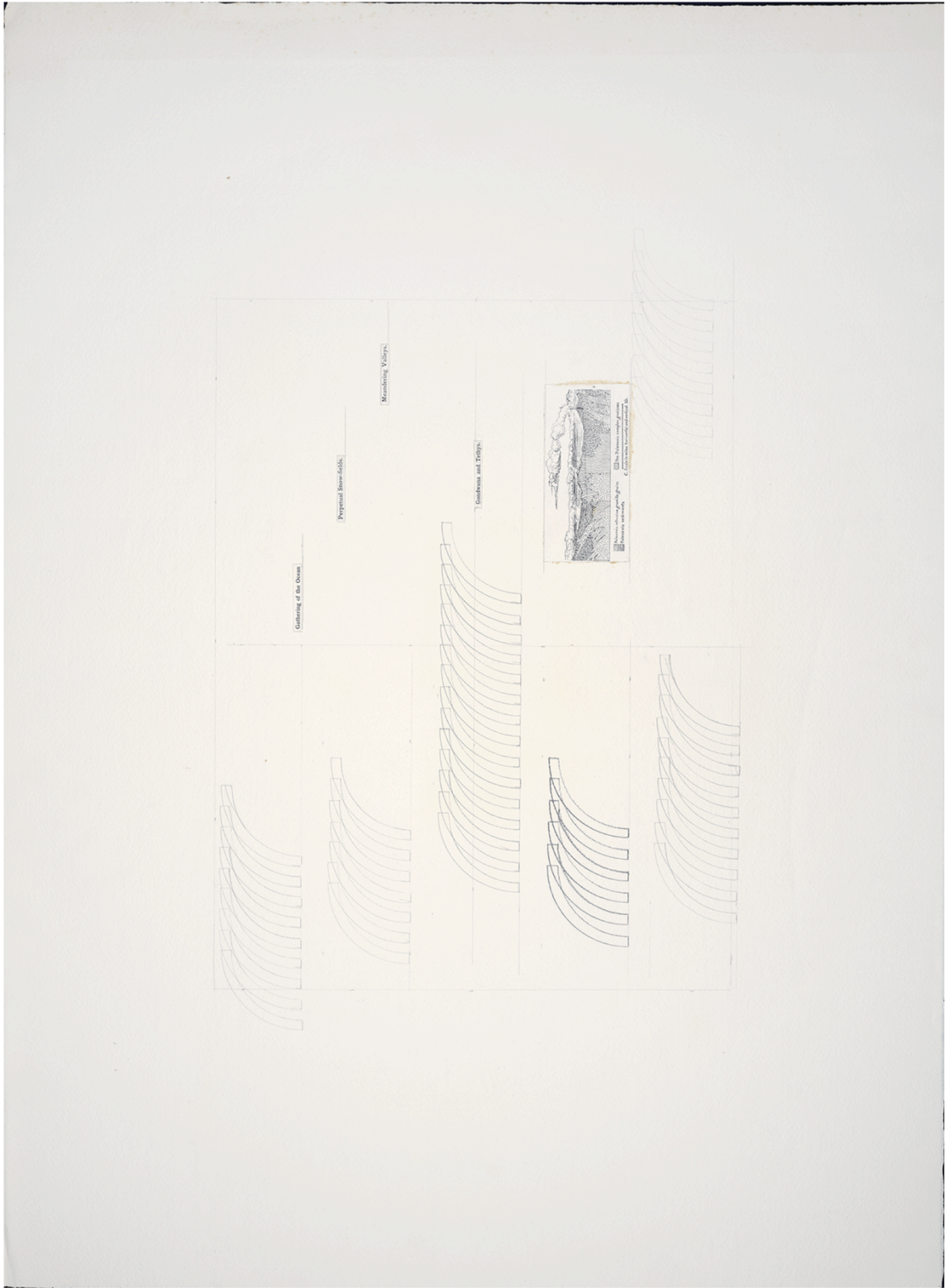
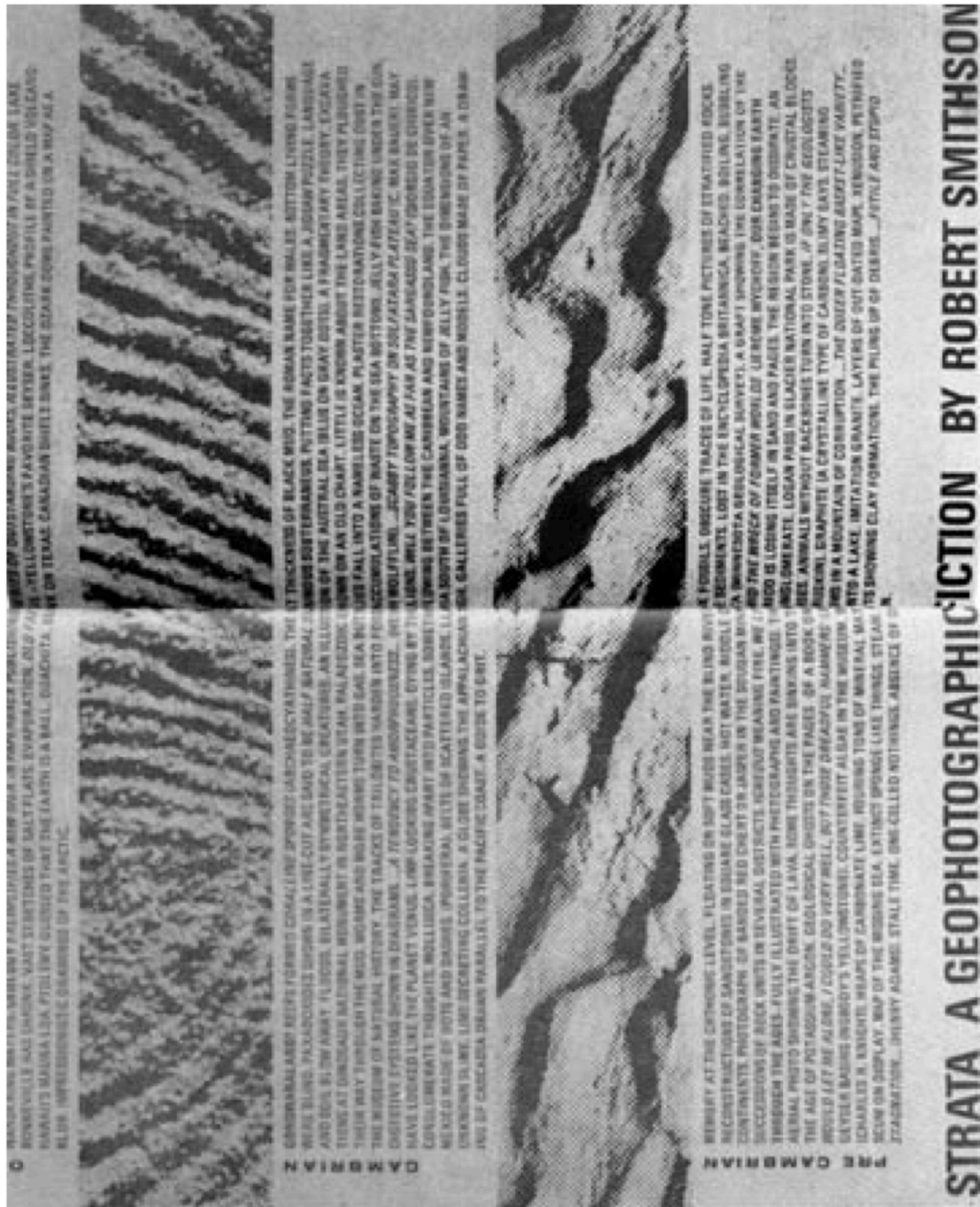


Figure 8. 'Gathering of the Ocean' by Susan Howe, watercolour collage on paper, 1969-1973



**STRATA A GEOPHOTOGRAPHIC FICTION BY ROBERT SMITHSON**

Figure 9. Excerpt from 'STRATA: A GEOPHOTOGRAPHIC FICTION' by Robert Smithson, Fold-out drawing in *Aspen*, 1972

• **‘Gathering of the Ocean’: strata and drift**

Like ‘Accidentals’ and ‘Purple Heron’, ‘Gathering of the Ocean’ (See Fig. 8) is an abstract drawing accompanied by cut-outs from a textbook. There are four cut-out phrases (‘Gathering of the Ocean’, ‘Perpetual Snow-fields.’ ‘Meandering Valleys.’ and ‘Gondwana and Tethys’) as well as a sedimentary map showing Paleozoic and pre-Paleozoic layers. Surrounding the illustration are five rows of curved columns drawn in thin pencil. In this context the shape brings to mind a sea arch, the shoreline rock formation where an opening forms through erosion. Two faintly drawn columns of five rows constitute a grid. In this word-drawing similar issues are at stake involving text and image, names and representation. But there is also evidence of another influence.

Smithson was of course best known for his large-scale ‘non-sites’ involving the displacement of soil, such as *Spiral Jetty* which I discussed in the previous chapter. But in his writings as well as his drawings he often invoked the metaphor of soil. In his 1968 essay ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind’, for example, he writes,

‘The names and minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void. This discomfoting language of fragmentation offers no easy gestalt solution; the certainties of didactic discourse are hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle.’<sup>18</sup>

The comparison reveals a particular philological stance, a sense of language as always being shifting and imperfect, diachronic and uncertain. This stance is akin to Nominalism, but is a particular brand of it where correspondences between names and things are revealed to be illusory. So it is not just a rejection of universals but also a rejection of differentiation. Quoting T.E. Hulme, Smithson writes, ‘What the Nominalists call the grit in the machine, I

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Smithson, ‘A Sedimentation of Mind: Earth Projects’, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 107

call the fundamental element of the machine.’<sup>19</sup> Error, slippage, and uncertainty are real. Matter, as Smithson understood it, is undifferentiated and non-contained by order or language. This is the condition of life he famously identified with entropy. Compare this to Karl Kraus who once observed, ‘The closer you look at a word the more distantly it stares back.’ In other words, where Smithson sees discomfort in language, Kraus sees eros. In considering this line from Kraus, Walter Benjamin writes that ‘Language has never been more perfectly distinguished from mind, never more intimately bound to eros, than by Kraus in [this] observation....This is a Platonic love of language. The only closeness from which the word cannot escape, however, is rhyme. So the prima erotic relationship between nearness and distance is, in his language, given voice as rhyme and name. As rhyme, language rises up from the creaturely world; as name it draws all creatures up to it.’<sup>20</sup> Howe’s own vision of language is, as we shall see in the remaining chapters, somewhere between Smithson’s and Kraus’s.

Howe’s ‘Gathering’ begs specific comparison with Smithson’s ‘Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction’ (see Fig. 9) published in *Aspen* magazine as a fold-out composition in Fall 1970, the same time in which Howe was composing her word-drawings. Both invite comparison between soil and language through verbal and visual means. Both are concerned with layering, sedimentation, and erosion. But a closer examination of their differences reveals telling nuances about Howe’s developing aesthetic.

Firstly, Smithson has incorporated photographs rather than illustrations. Rife with the imprints of fossils, the selected soil samples constitute an uncovering of what actually makes up the earth. They appear to us abstract, but we know from the title that they are photographs. They are images *of originals*. He gives us an actual vehicle for the tenor of language, inviting an extended comparison. In this construction, language behaves as soil and not the other way

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Smithson, ‘A Sedimentation of Mind: Earth Projects’, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 102

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), vol. 2, 453

around. Howe's composition instead includes a figurative representation of soil. In other words, her metaphor doesn't give ontological priority to either image or word: there is instead an equivalency. She then places the names about the grid's layers as they might appear in a text or field guide, where the illustration behaves in accordance with the label or text. If there is a comparison being made here it is unclear whether it is saying that language behaves as sediment or sediment as language. The emphasis is not so much on the condition of language as its behavior. 'Gathering' frames individual correspondences between linguistic materiality and graphic representation. It emphasizes the gap between what we think we know and what actually is—and both language and the graphic image are tied up in this crisis of representation. Put simply, the composition renders reality as an image in the mind and an image in the mind as a reality. Smithson also calls his work a 'geophotographic fiction' which implies that the strata are real i.e. they have a concrete referent while the language layers are fiction.

Secondly, Smithson's piece is composed of densely layered prose while Howe's has only four two-word phrases on a sheet of paper that is six times bigger than his. Smithson is clearly making a comparison between strata and syntax. Including language between the strata of fossils is a way of introducing space depth back into printed lines of prose.<sup>21</sup> Howe meanwhile makes a comparison between names and the things they nominate. The only accompanying text is what appears in the textbook as *labels*. If Smithson uses sediments to draw a provocative and destabilizing comparison to narrative (the title tells us that it is a fiction) then Howe makes an intervention on the correspondences between representations and reality, and between individual names and things. While it would seem that Smithson is interested in taking all words to be inexact, to discounting correspondences between them

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<sup>21</sup> Smithson quoted the paleontologist Edwin Colbert saying, 'Unless the information gained from the collecting and preparing of fossils is made available through the printed page, assemblage specimens is essentially a pile of meaningless junk.' As Rosalind Krauss observes, 'It was the conflict between the "junk" and the "text" that seemed to fascinate him' (Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, 'A User's Guide to Entropy', *October* vol. 78 (Autumn, 1996): 38-88; 74).

and their referent, Howe seems interested in looking at individual cases and in exploring the space of that excess rather than just accepting it as a condition of language and ‘the undifferentiated world’. Consider the use of space here, to which I’ve already alluded. Smithson’s depends on compression. From a distance the composition blurs to stripes of grey: there is scarcely a stretch of paper that isn’t covered by ink. The claustrophobia of the page as well as the capital lettering make the language feel oppressive as though any meaning or reward for reading has literally been buried under heavy lines of print. Howe’s composition, in contrast, has copious white space allowing the connotations of the words to multiply and echo in sound and meaning. Staggered across the page, they encourage substitution rather than contiguity. So that a phrase like ‘Meandering Valleys’ might for a moment seem an anthropomorphized valley that literally meanders rather than the ocean floor formation of a geological fault; the white space encourages us to imagine the words out of context.

The final difference is that where Smithson uses frozen earth, full of fossilized life forms, to stage his comparison to language, Howe uses the dynamics of earth. Instead of accumulation or fossilization, the focus here is on erosion and drift. ‘Gondwana and Tethys’ are two Paleozoic continents that resulted from the splitting of Pangea, on account of continental *drift*. ‘Drift’ is one of the most important words in Howe’s oeuvre. It appears at least thirty-two times throughout her prose, poetry, and interviews—often in dramatic section endings or poignant refrains.<sup>22</sup> It is used variously to refer to the ‘lexical drift’ (*FS* 22) by which different words come to mean different things over time, or to the ‘drifting’ of marginalized individuals from historical record (*ET* 72), or to both as when she writes ‘Drift of human mortality/what is drift of words’ (*NM* 45). If Smithson’s and Andre’s drawings forced us to look at the materiality of language, destabilizing its signifiers so that they are

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<sup>22</sup> See *FS* 22, 27; *ET* 35, 72, 117, 138, 139, 142, 159, 168, 195; *S* 6, 28, 55; *NM* 45, 74, 83, 88, 140; *SF* 41, 60; *BM* 27, 69, 83, 156; *PA* 22; *TM* n.p, 74; *SLT* 88

revealed to be ‘symbolic detritus’, then Howe’s word-drawings beg us to go several steps beyond. They investigate the imprisonment of a world that is named too definitively—and the alienation of a world that cannot be named at all. They commemorate the namelessness, through silence, of those whose lives atomic warfare could claim. And at the same time they continue to demonstrate a belief that if alienation and loss are conditions of the articulated world, then any solace for that loss will also be found in language. Words are temporary. Spellings drift and senses erode. But words also provide the surest bridge to both the future and the past—even and especially through an awareness of their ever-changing forms. The material sense of language Howe developed through her word-drawings was not only her first foray into history, but her first experiments in a material poetics that throughout her career would be used to recover particulars in the face of loss.

### Chapter 3

#### Phonics & Graphics: Howe's Transition to Poetry

While living and working in New York, Howe began assembling word-drawings on the wall of the studio where she worked. Gradually she began to pay more attention to the arrangement of the words. Eventually she left the images out altogether and moved to making installations that she called 'verbal environments'. During this period she took a workshop at the Saint Mark's Poetry Project with the poet Ted Greenwald. Howe recalls that, upon viewing one of her installations, Greenwald said, 'Actually you have a book on the wall. Why don't you just put it into a book?'<sup>1</sup> The result was *Hinge Picture* (1974) and from that point on the book was to be her medium.

Howe's early work has received little critical attention, and it is generally accepted that she did not begin to develop the historiographic poetics for which she is now known until much later, beginning with *Singularities* (1990), and that this marked a departure from her earlier interests. This chapter argues that *Hinge Picture* displays a sophisticated historiographic poetics that was fuelled by the same principles that informed her collages. After exploring the historiographic implications of her visual aesthetic, I examine the formal ways that these themes manifest in her poetry, namely in what she calls 'singularities'. As I will show, this is often figured by the tension between the phonic and graphic aspects of language. I finish with a reading of *Hinge Picture* that shows how she uses poetic singularities to stage 'interventions of absence' into historical narrative.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Lynn Keller, 'An Interview with Susan Howe', *Contemporary Literature* 36.1 (Spring 1995): 1-34; 5-6

<sup>2</sup> In *The Birth-mark* Howe asks, 'Is a poetics of intervening absence an oxymoron?' (*BM* 27)

### Gibbon's Marginalia

As Marjorie Perloff has noted, Howe 'seems to have had no apprentice period during which she wrote "in the style" of X or Y'.<sup>3</sup> It was rather her collages and the minimalist art scene of the late 1960s in New York that served as her poetic apprenticeship. But despite its having such a well-developed poetics, *Hinge Picture* has still received little critical attention compared to her later works. This seems to be the result of initial readings of the book which failed to appreciate the paradoxical nature of her poetics.

In the book's original edition, a publication note indicates that 'the principal source for *Hinge Picture* is Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*'. There is substantial material from *The King James Bible* as well. In an early review, poet Tina Darragh remarked, 'when I first saw this I thought to myself what is this language of the Old World doing in Howe's book....then I realized that she was disrupting language systematically in order to create a space for openness and women's belonging'.<sup>4</sup> Although Darragh's observation is certainly correct, it may mistakenly lead us to believe that Howe is simply antagonistic to the vocabulary of 'the Old World' and to miss the subtlety and paradox in her mystic-skeptic aesthetic.

Kaplan Harris also read *Hinge Picture* as departure from 'classical and spiritual themes'. Harris writes:

The poem is itself a kind of hinge. On one side stands Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and the *King James Bible*, with the quotations pointing an arrow to the combination of classical and spiritual themes that Howe attributes to Finlay and Reinhardt. On the other side is the fact that the language taken from these sources has lost any authoritativeness. The sources come to a breaking point in the bits and pieces of language that problematize access to an 'eternal classical spirit'. *Hinge Picture* concludes by swinging the door shut on classicism, which in fact opens the way to Howe's later historical poetics.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Perloff, 'Collision or Collusion with History: The Narrative Lyric of Susan Howe and Ron Silliman', *Contemporary Literature* 30.4 (Winter 1989): 519

<sup>4</sup> Tina Darragh, 'Howe', *In the American Tree: Language, Realism, Poetry*, ed. Ron Silliman (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1986), 547

<sup>5</sup> Kaplan P. Harris, 'Susan Howe's Art and Poetry 1968-1974', *Contemporary Literature* 47.3 (2006): 440-71; 449-450

Like Darragh, Harris finds that *Hinge Picture* incorporates ‘a vocabulary of the “Old World”’ and notes that its narrative becomes ‘fragmented and discontinuous.’<sup>6</sup> But Howe’s attitude toward Old World sources and vocabularies is far from antagonistic. As recent as 2005, she stated that ‘maybe nothing is better than parts of the King James version of the bible’, and placed it above the last ten pages of *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>7</sup> It is not so much a turning away from classical or spiritual themes, then, as it is a development and continuation of them. Kaplan goes on to say that in *Hinge Picture*, ‘a distant spirit has been tried but found unfeasible in the end’ and argues that Howe’s turn to historical poetry happened in part because she had ‘found the limit of the values she associated with minimalism in her earlier art’.<sup>8</sup> But as we saw in the previous two chapters, it was these minimalist values that led her to accumulate thrown away materials and incorporate them into her collages in the first place. Concerning Gibbon, Harris writes that he ‘is basically disconnected from Howe’s inheritance’ and that he ‘disappears after *Hinge Picture* from the horizon of her poems’.<sup>9</sup> But in her poetic preface to *Frame Structures* (1996), Howe makes two significant references to Gibbon. A closer consideration of them gives us clues as to what he might mean to her ongoing poetics.

The first occurs after she writes that the genesis of the name ‘Buffalo’ (Howe was a professor at SUNY Buffalo at the time) may have been, ‘according to genteel tradition’, a mispronunciation of ‘beau-fleuve’. Howe then breaks off into an oblique meta-discourse about the practice of including such uncertain particulars in historical writing:

In *Gibbon and His Roman Empire*, David P. Jordan shows the ways *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was partially built on the research of skeptics and historical Pyrrhonists outside the universities. Pyrrhonists were usually proud to be called amateurs. Often their research developed out of a need to classify their own collections of coins, statues, vases, inscriptions, emblems, etc.; and the work demanded new tactics. Gibbon calls the literary results of the labors of these

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid*; Darragh 547

<sup>7</sup> John Thompson, ‘Interview with Susan Howe’, *Free Verse* Winter 2005, [http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/freeverse/Archives/Winter\\_2005/interviews/S\\_Howe.html](http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/freeverse/Archives/Winter_2005/interviews/S_Howe.html) [accessed 12 January 2011]

<sup>8</sup> Harris 455

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* 456

dilettante researchers the “subsidiary rays” of history. The best known defender of uncertainty in history, Pierre Bayle, depended heavily on the work of antiquarians. Studies of medals and inscriptions were more reliable less subject to human corruption, he felt. Bayle’s first idea wasn’t to write an encyclopedia of knowledge rather he hoped to produce a record of mistakes. On May 22, 1692, he told a friend: “I formed a plan to compose a *Critical Dictionary* which would contain a collection of the mistakes which have been made by compilers of dictionaries as well as other writers, and which would summarize under each name of a man or a city the mistakes concerning that man or that city.” Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary* follows the spirit of coordination’s lead rather than a definite plan. Trivial curiosities and nonsensical subjects are kernels to be collated like tunes for a fact while important matters are neglected. A perfect history is “unacceptable to all sects and nations; for it is a sign that the writer neither flatters nor spares any of them.” (FS 18)

In this passage we can see Howe’s minimalist conception of the thrown away, here referred to in Gibbon’s terms as the ‘subsidiary rays’ of history. The invocation of Pyrrhonism is also significant. Pyrrho (360-270 BC) is considered to be the first skeptic philosopher in Greece. Doubt becomes a method of approaching an actuality that evades history. Building his *Decline* upon the work of such Pyrrhonists, Gibbon was therefore, like Howe, a skeptic historian for whom marginalia was of central importance. Her segue into the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* as a ‘record of mistakes’ draws Pierre Bayle into this field of skeptic historians and, by association, qualifies them all as ‘defender(s) of uncertainty’. Such ‘amateur’, ‘antiquarian’, or ‘trivial’ research acknowledges the impossibility of ‘a perfect history’.

Instead of disappearing from the horizon, then, it seems that Gibbon remains very much at the heart of Howe’s poetics throughout her entire career. The term ‘classical’ in her essay ‘The End of Art’ refers specifically to the spiritual quietism that she found in minimalist artists.<sup>10</sup> And, as we know, the quietism of these artists’ ‘classical’ values is always intertwined with skepticism or uncertainty. Rather than ‘swinging the door shut on classicism’ and ‘giving way to her later historical poetics’, as Harris argues, I see *Hinge*

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<sup>10</sup> Howe is probably also referring to Agnes Martin’s much quoted line that ‘Classicists are people that look out with their back to the world/It represents something that isn’t possible in the world/More perfection than is possible in the world (Agnes Martin, ‘THE TROUBLED MIND’, First printing: Agnes Martin [Catalog] Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1973, 17-24; the text was transcribed by Ann Wilson after conversations with the artist she had in the summer of 1972 and later reprinted in Agnes Martin, *Writings* (Ostfilden: Cantz Verlag, 1991), 44.)

*Picture* as the first literary exploration of historiographic themes she was already pursuing as a visual artist.

Gibbon's eclectic research methodology also resembles the approach that Howe admired in Cotton Mather (1663-1728), the Puritan minister and author of *Magnalia Christi Americana* who is a key figure in Howe's *The Birthmark*. Howe writes,

*Magnalia* is intended to be a historical account of the settlement and religious history of New England. Although Mather called his *Magnalia* a 'History,' its seven volumes could be called 'Marginalia' *Christi Americana*. The general style is oddly fixed and declamatory; yet the provincial nonconformist author constantly disrupts the forward trajectory of his written 'service...for the Church of God, not only here but abroad in Europe,' with blizzards of anecdotes, anagrams, prefatory poems, dedications, epigrams, memories, lists of ministers and magistrates, puns, paradoxes, 'antiquities,' remarks, laments, furious opinions, recollections, exaggerations, fabrications, 'Examples,' wonders, spontaneous other versions. Short laudatory biographical sketches of the lives of 'stars of the first magnitudes in our heavens' are constructed from miscellaneous documentation and distant recollection and punctuated with sudden self-revealing reverse opinion. (*BM* 30)

The eclectic array of source materials listed shows a historian who is more interested in factual marginalia and self-insertion than in conforming to an authoritative, 'objective' narrative and methodology. Howe's account of Mather's historical methods is very much in line with her description of Gibbon's 'subsidiary rays' and Bayle's 'trivial curiosities'.

The second appearance of Gibbon in *Frame Structures* occurs in a section entitled 'House in glass with steel structure'. The title recalls Marcel Duchamp's 'Large Glass' which was constructed from two panes of glass joined by a steel hinge—even more so because the section before it is titled 'Delay in Glass'—a direct reference to Duchamp's note in *The Green Box* that pictures constitute delays of all sorts. It therefore links the poems to *Hinge Picture* which begins with an epigraph from the same text. (The title 'Delay in Glass' is also a literal reference to Howe's anecdote of an ivory pagoda in a glass case that appears just above it.) Oblique associations and conceptual puns or shifts from figurative to literal registers always signify a rising tension and an incumbent rupture in Howe's work. Here the essay-like style gives way to a full-blown prose poem, rich with cryptic and aphoristic

statements concerning spatial (graphic) qualities and temporal (phonic) ones: ‘A pure past is it speakable?’ writes Howe, ‘Sounds have paper-thin edges’. The tenor and figures of speech move more toward that of verse. The acceleration of coy associative linkages and rising tensions in the narrative (or anti-narrative) continue. At the topical level, the narrative moves from ‘Idealism’ to ‘Realism’ to an anecdote about ‘Etienne Jules Marey’s chronophotography’ to a line about ‘Intuition’ to the opening of ‘The International Peace Bridge’ in 1927 to a childhood reverie about parents and an unsolved riddle about *Hamlet*. As in the preface’s opening poem about her father, the increasingly disrupted syntax soon amounts to disrupted causality. Bishop Berkeley is invoked in the contexts of phenomena and causes (Berkeley believed that spirits were the true cause of any phenomenon), and then it is precisely at this moment, following a series of connections between unconnected things, that a ghost appears: ‘Nor is the ghost allowed to step forward a muffled form the only trace left in order to grip us calling collective retribution after World War I.’ ‘Give him a ladder to do archival research,’ writes Howe, in a wonderfully witty conflation of temporal distance and physical reach, and then the narrative current shifts again to the obliquely autobiographical:

One day after Cold War politics of the postwar world there is a door into the recent past of Modernism. Now draw a trajectory in imagination where logic and mathematics meet the materials of art. Canvas, paper, pencil, color, frame, title—

The above lines, which seem unmistakably to refer to Howe’s own birth as a poet amidst the late 1960’s art scene, are then followed by a stretch of verse:



We pass each other pieces of paper. A sheet of paper, a roll of film, the frame structure. Conceptual projects of the 1960s and 1970s combined windows, mirrors, garbage, photographs, video, dance, tape recordings, rope, steel, yarn, nails, cars, machines just about anything. Some minimalist sculptors started out painters or poets or vice versa. Cold War sadism was in full swing, all at large in the fiery impossibility of Vietnam. According to Pyrrho of Elis since nothing can be known the only proper attitude is imperturbability. Pyrrho of Elis, here is infantile anxiety. While I am writing pieces of childhood come away. How do I put the pieces back?<sup>12</sup> (FS 28)

In this depiction, the reason behind the end of divisionism in the visual arts in the late 1960s was more than just the frustrations with spatial restrictions and painterly illusionism as explained by Judd, Morris, Fried, and Greenberg. Instead, crossing genres embodied the aesthetics of the marginal and the thrown away as a method of repossessing materials. It meant reinterpreting the everyday objects at hand and salvaging that which was soon to be forgotten. Such a practice critiques the very core of a society's values in that it asks why we deem some things worth keeping but not others. In response to the materialism of an expanding American empire, artists decided to experiment with new genres to find new knowledge—or new *unknowing*, as it were, a repossessing of materials that accounted for the actuality of daily life that went unrecorded. Howe's visual arts aesthetics and her historical poetics become one and the same only when we stop selectively choosing which aspect of her dual aesthetic to consider: her genius is to be infinitist and Pyrrhonist at once.

### **Singularities**

*Singularities* was the title of Howe's 1990 collection of poems, and the word has since appeared throughout Howe scholarship in reference to her working method. To date the term has mostly applied to her intertextuality, what Michael Davidson has aptly dubbed 'palimpsests' since they are a 'writing through' and layering of source *materials* and not just

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<sup>12</sup> The inconsistent spacing between prose sections that precede this poem suggest that they were purposely manipulated in order that 'House in glass with steel structure' begin and end on its own page, with two seemingly unrelated lines of prose at the bottom of the poem that mitigate the otherwise authoritative visual effect of a centered verse finale. Such manipulations of page composition are typical in Howe's work.

source texts.<sup>13</sup> Ming-Qian Ma wrote about the topic in his 1995 article ‘Articulating the Inarticulate’. Ma reads Howe’s interest in the singularity as a ‘recourse to the algebraic’ that parallels Michael Serres’ ‘analysis of the Cartesian construct of the real’ and that is ultimately a way to contrive a method of ‘productive violence’ (Kristeva’s term) that serves to break through ‘the language trap’.<sup>14</sup> My interest here will be first to cast new light on Howe’s poetic singularities, especially through its subtle but striking parallels to the aesthetics of the monochrome and the blank canvas; second to look at various formal manifestations of these concepts; and finally to consider more specifically how the concept of the singularity functions on a linguistic level.

According to Merriam-Webster, a ‘singularity’ is defined as ‘something that is singular: as a) a separate unit or b) an unusual or distinctive manner or behavior: peculiarity’. The *OED* also reveals a now obsolete sense of ‘dissent or separation *from* (something)’—the sense to which Howe refers when she says that ‘singularity was a term dear to Puritans for other reasons’ (*BM* 173). Howe makes it clear in an interview that the primary denotation for which she decided to adopt this word as a title for her book was conceptual and derived in fact from the language of mathematics:

It was because of [René] Thom that I named my Wesleyan book *Singularities*. I was having a terrible time trying to come up with a title for that group of works together (*Articulation, Throw, an Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk*, and Thom came to Buffalo and gave a lecture called ‘Singularities.’ In algebra a singularity is the point where plus becomes minus. On a line, if you start at  $x$  point, there is +1, +2, etc. But at the other side of the point is -1, -2, etc. The singularity (I think Thom is saying) is the point where there is a sudden change to something completely else. It’s a chaotic point. It’s the point chaos enters cosmos, the instant articulation. Then there is a leap into something else. *Predation* and *capture* are terms he uses constantly. I thought this was both a metaphor for Europeans arriving on this continent, where a catastrophic change then had to happen—a new sense of things on the part of the original inhabitants and the emigrants, and to the land as well. And 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. (*BM* 173)

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 8-9

<sup>14</sup> Ming-Qian Ma, ‘Articulating the Inarticulate: Singularities and the Counter-method in Susan Howe’, *Contemporary Literature* 36.3 (1995): 466-89; 471-2

Howe remarks that understanding Thom's work 'isn't easy if you never were able to pass algebra! But he writes beautifully, and his diagrams are like poems. Algebraic formulas are also articulations of sound forms in time' (BM 173). Her interest in these matters is both conceptual, in that it responds to his theory, but also figurative, as both his rhetoric and graphic depictions strike Howe as a veritable art.

Before turning to these diagrams to see what she means, I want to briefly lay the groundwork for appreciating the fundamental concept underlying Thom's work. A singularity in mathematical terms is, strictly speaking, a discontinuity, a gap in the continuity of a given function. The simplest singularity, for the sake of example, is  $f(x) = 1/x$ . Because it is impossible to divide a number by zero, the point  $x=0$  will be a discontinuity. As one moves closer to the value  $x=0$  from either the left or the right, the value of the function *approaches infinity*. (Dividing 1 by increasingly smaller fractions  $\pm 1/2, 1/3, 1/4, 1/5$ , etc. will make the value take a sudden leap, upward where  $x$  is negative and downward where  $x$  is positive.) When plotted, the function is traditionally drawn with arrows indicating an approach to positive infinity on the right side of the  $y$ -axis and negative infinity on the left side. The vertical line at  $x=0$ , which is the only point on the  $x$ -axis *not* to be contained in the function, is called the asymptote. As any student of elementary calculus can tell you, this point is formally denoted by the letters DNE: *Does Not Exist* (Fig. 15).

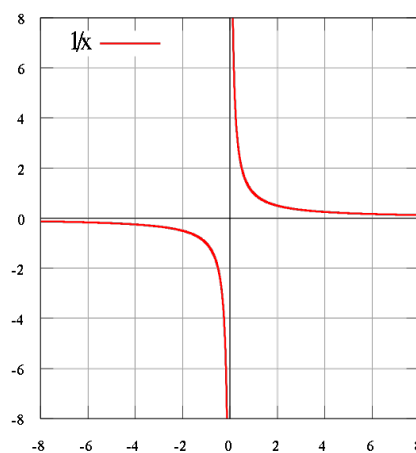


Fig. 15 Graph of a mathematical singularity where  $f(x) = 1/x$

I am indulging the mathematical details of the singularity not only because Howe's fascination with singularities has a mathematical basis, but because I find it to represent an irreducible concept that serves as a driving force of her poetics. Howe underwent an aesthetic apprenticeship with artists who repeatedly spoke of approaching the *infinite* at the same time that they urged it *did not exist*, and so the asymptote becomes a fitting trope.

The concept and representation of the asymptote was also an important trope for some of Howe's contemporaries, albeit in different ways. The first issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* in February 1978 sounded its debut with a poem by Larry Eigner entitled 'Approaching things/Some Calculus'. As the inaugural poem of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* movement, it establishes an aesthetic that is concerned primarily with linguistic horizons: 'Language is a surprising tool [...] But behind words and whatever language comes about are things (language I guess develops mainly by helping cope with them), things and people, and words can't bring people in India or West Virginia above the poverty line, say, and I can't want more.'<sup>15</sup> By Eigner's logic, words fail to represent things, but they are understood to approach them, we might say, asymptotically. But Howe is drawn to discontinuity first and foremost because of the fractured condition of language (it is both sonic and visual) and also because of her interest in the 'chaotic points' of history. This is but one example of how, on the surface, her poetics appear to overlap with the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poets or other post-modern aesthetics but how they actually stem from a different aesthetic.

In terms of rhetorical construction, the asymptote is the mathematical equivalent of antinomy: in one gesture we have fusion and opposition. It is the ability of words to mean themselves and their opposites, the possibility of true contradiction, that matters most to

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<sup>15</sup> Larry Eigner, 'Approaching things/Some Calculus', in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, eds. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1984), 3

Howe's pursuit of the immaterial (absence) via the material (presence). As I mentioned in the introduction, Howe consistently frames and complicates these binary oppositions. But while Jameson proposed that post-modernism abandoned 'depth models', Howe insists that they will recrudescence whether we pay attention to them or not. Her approach is rather to point at the line between them: she pursues the dehiscence itself. We can see this logic represented figuratively in her work, as early as in *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1978) in which a full page is devoted to two lines posed in mirror images across a horizontal line. (See Fig. 16)

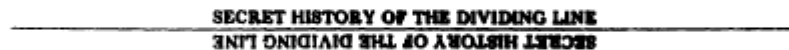


Fig. 16 Susan Howe, *Secret History of the Dividing Line* p.7  
Reprinted in *Frame Structures* p.94

The words on either side are forever united and severed by a kind of asymptote, literally a 'dividing line' which, as we shall see, also has implications for historical demarcations of space at the level of the book's collaged narratives. But here we see that two secret histories flicker in constant, interchangeable play about a single truth: a wordless boundary stretching out on either side and gesturing toward (opposed) infinities.

Mirrored and opposed lines of text often figure into Howe's poetry as textual singularities that signal violence. 'The mirroring impulse in my work goes way back,' says Howe in an interview, relating it to the importance of Duchamp's 'Large Glass' at the time she was transitioning from painting to writing.<sup>16</sup> And in poems like 'Thorow' (1990), which similarly features mirrors and reversals (though without a drawn line between them), she says that 'the reversed text on either side was a kind of break-in, some other thought going in

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<sup>16</sup> See Keller 10-11 for Howe's close reading of the ways the mirroring impulse functions in two pages of 'Thorow'.

some other direction. It also conveys Mary Magdalen's erasure.<sup>17</sup> Given the contexts of these formal singularities, we can appreciate the sense in which they intervene absence into history. One might say it consecrates space reserved for what was thrown out or marginalized.

But there is yet another way in which the singularity figures into Howe's work. *Secret History of the Dividing Line* contains a telling quote from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'Thisbe: I kiss the wall's hole/not your lips at all' (*FS* 107). The invocation of Pyramus and Thisbe illustrates how this 'dividing line' can also apply to boundaries between individuals. This is, perhaps, the most emotionally poignant aspect of the singularity in Howe's work and writing, for it is here that it becomes imbued with elegaic potential. Simone Weil formulates a similar notion in her essay 'Metaxu', which is the Greek word for 'bridge'. 'The *metaxu*,' she writes, 'is the wall between prisoners that separates them but also provides the means to communicate....every separation is a link.'<sup>18</sup> For Weil, the *metaxu* is also the world, it is physical matter which, by being what isn't God, allows one to touch (or attempt to touch) with what is. Understood in this light, it is the relation (the separation-link) that matters and not the actual entities on either side. In her elegy *That This*, which contains two detailed references to the story depicted in Poussin's 'Pyramus and Thisbe', Howe writes, 'I've been reading some of W.H. Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*. One beautiful sentence about the way we all reach and reach but never touch' (*TT* 18). This is reminiscent of observations in earlier works that 'In a chiasitic universe only relations exist—nothing exists absolutely' (*TM* 127) and yet, 'In poetry all things seem to touch so they are' (*P-A* 13). If the split between being and non-being has pervaded Howe's poetry, it seems finally not because of an inside-outside model but because of a skeptical mystic's desire to have communion with the dead.

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* 10

<sup>18</sup> Simone Weil, 'Metaxu', *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: Bison Books, 1997); 200

‘Maybe there is some not yet understood return to people we have loved and lost,’ writes Howe, ‘I need to imagine the possibility even if I don’t believe it’ (*TT* 17).

But the singularity, while in its simplest form is a line drawn between opposing infinities along a vertical or horizontal axis, is also a rupture point of chaos where violence ensues. Thom extrapolates his concepts so as to implicate broad-ranging significance for linguistics and human history, in what became known as ‘catastrophe theory’. In his own words (which Howe repeats during the aforementioned interview), a singularity may be a ‘catastrophe of bifurcation’ at which we find both ‘capture’ and ‘breaking free’ (*BM* 166; 174). Howe goes on to say that ‘catastrophe of bifurcation’ is ‘the perfect decription’ for *The Bibliography of the King’s Book, or Eikon Basilike*:

So I wanted to write something filled with gaps and words tossed, and words touching, words crowding each other, letters mixing and falling away from each other, commands and dreams, verticals and circles. If it was impossible to print, that didn’t matter. Because it’s about impossibility anyway. About the impossibility of putting in print what the mind really sees and the impossibility of finding the original in a bibliography. (*BM* 175)

Here again we find the disparity between ‘what the mind really sees’ and what is there (or will be there when the act of composition is finished). Her comment ‘it’s about impossibility anyway’ underscores that, like a mathematical singularity, the poetic singularity is concerned with the representation of what is discontinuous and does not exist. Speaking about the process of writing the collage-poems of *Eikon Basilike*, Howe says she felt that she was ‘crossing into visual art in some sections and that [she] had unleashed a picture of violence....The end breaks out of all form completely’ (*BM* 165). (See Fig. 17) She explains that

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

subconscious, in that I would start with the lines I wanted to use (which might change somewhat) and I would just arrange them on the page until they satisfied me.<sup>19</sup>

So the poetic singularity is not only a *metaxu* which separates and links the living and the dead via an unknowable barrier; it also signals disrupted actualities in space-time that exceed representation in history. Only by looking at Thom's original diagrams then can we best appreciate the poetic representation of the singularity's violence. (See Fig. 18)

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<sup>19</sup> See Keller 8

crucified by <sup>dominance</sup> sea of blood  
 The malicious author or instigator  
 Tract the treasons  
 throw down  
 Always causes set do  
 for Forts Navy Militia  
 of joy  
 O make me  
 Some passages  
 thrown on this person  
 Was taken  
 through the popularity  
 an intellectual  
 Through popularity  
 Contemporary History  
 The people  
 in a low voice  
 they bowed down his head and said  
 in three words  
 that I hide Security and their  
 Security  
 and wall the brazen wall  
 I am weary of life  
 Pretend Justice to cover Perjury  
 The sentiment sentiment  
 Goes peers ferrets to the last  
 Obligation  
 at times escapes  
 survive against sturdy scruples

Fig. 17 Susan Howe, *Eikon Basilike* p. 64

Name of singularity	Organising centre	Universal unfolding	Distinguished sections	Elementary graphs of interactions	Spatial interpretation (substantives)	Temporal interpretation (Verbs)	
						Destructive sense	Constructive sense
Simple Minimum	$V = x^2$	$V = x^2$		—	To be, object	To be, to endure	
The Fold	$V = x^3$	$V = x^3 + ux$			The boundary The end	The end — to finish	The beginning — to begin
The Cusp (Riemann-Hugoniot catastrophe)	$V = x^4$	$V = x^4 + ux^2 + vx$			A fault (Geology)	To capture To break To snap	To change — To become To unite
The Swallowtail	$V = x^5$	$V = x^5 + ux^3 + vx^2 + wx$			A crack A corner	To tear To cleave	To stitch
The Butterfly	$V = x^6$	$V = x^6 + ux^4 + vx^3 + wx^2 + tx$			A pocket A flake	To peel off To exfoliate To fill a pocket	To give To receive To empty a pocket
The Hyperbolic	$V = x^3 + y^3$	$V = x^3 + y^3 + wx^3 - ux - vy$			The crest (of a wave) A vault	To break (a wave) To collapse	To recover
The Elliptic Umbilic	$V = x^3 - 3xy^2$	$V = x^3 - 3xy^2 + w(x^2 + y^2) - ux - vy$			A needle A pike A hair	To prick To penetrate	To fill (a hole) To destroy
The Parabolic Umbilic	$V = x^2y + y^4$	$V = x^2y + y^4 + wx^2 + ty^2 - ux - vy$			A jet (of water) A mushroom A mouth	To break (for a jet) To eject To throw To pierce To cut To pinch To take	To bind To open To close (the mouth)

Fig. 18 Rene Thom, *Mathematical Models of Morphogenesis* 176-7

Thom's equations, put simply, are mathematical models which attempt to represent the behavior of discontinuous, that is, graphically unrepresentable, functions. Here we see singularities featured by different names. We can appreciate how the shapes and names would have appealed to Howe, whose poems in *Eikon Basilike* resemble the flow and disruption pictured in what Thom calls 'the distinguished section' in 'the cusp' or 'the swallowtail' for example. Also noteworthy is the column he designates to 'Temporal Interpretations (Verbs)'. Here the verb 'to be, to endure', which is present in the simple mechanism (pre chaos, pre-creation), explodes into oppositions of creation and destruction: 'capture', 'cleave', 'stitch', 'collapse'—all words that could be aptly used to describe the visual and semantic features of Howe's poetry. The singularity and its various motifs in Howe's use of materials, specifically in elegaic composition, is a subject I have discussed

previously and to which I will return in chapters four and six.<sup>20</sup> It is also, however, a formal feature which can be traced to the very beginning of Howe's career as a poet.

### *Hinge Picture*

*Hinge Picture*, Howe's first book of poetry, was first published by Telephone Books in 1974. The epigraph is taken from Duchamp's 'The Green Box' (1934), his enigmatic notes on the composition of *The Large Glass* or *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (completed in 1923):

Perhaps make a HINGE PICTURE. (folding yardstick, book....)  
develop in space the PRINCIPLE OF THE HINGE in the displacements 1<sup>st</sup> in the  
plane 2<sup>nd</sup> in space.<sup>21</sup>

Many of the notes in *The Green Box* concern the mechanisms and implications of extrapolated dimensions: they conceptualize hinges and other frameworks that suggest literal expansion. Duchamp seems to have presaged the crisis of painterly illusionism that plagued the minimalist artists of the 1960s. In Duchamp's *Large Glass*, the lead foil separating the two panels forms an obvious hinge in the first plane. The hinge 'in space' could also refer to the axles of the machinery of the nine bachelors in the bottom panel, the spokes of which appear to wind out toward the viewer, thereby occupying an additional (illusory) third dimension made by the artist's foreshortening.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See my article ' "Spiritual Hyphen": bibliography and elegy in Susan Howe's *The Midnight*', *Textual Practice* 25.1 (February 2011): 133-55.

<sup>21</sup> The actual note can be found on p. 27 of *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet (Oxford: DaCapo, 1973), which includes *The Green Box*. Although these notes, first published in 1934, were originally assembled under the title *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* it has traditionally been referred to as *The Green Box* because of its cover and in order to distinguish it from the painting that bears the same name.

<sup>22</sup> As Elizabeth Joyce points out, the 'HINGE PICTURE' was a concept that Duchamp developed in *actual* space as well. Works such as 'Gilder containing a water mill' illustrate this principle. 'The piece hangs on hinges, but always against the wall,' observes Joyce, 'Even so, it retains the potential to take on the third dimension by swinging out into space.' She also includes the wonderful biographical detail that Duchamp had commissioned a carpenter to construct a 'double door' that turned on two perpendicular doorways in his apartment at rue Larrey so that it would swing shut one as it opened on another, making closing and opening complicit in a single operation' ('Hinged, Contingent, Joined: Susan Howe's "Hinged Picture"' *Cahiers Charles V* 34 (2003): 93-117;101; 108).

But what is the significance of Howe's choice of this particular epigraph for her first book of *verse*? In 'the plane' of the page, the seam of the book is akin to the lead foil that separates the two panels of 'Large Glass'. In *Hinge Picture*, there are structural echoes across this seam that create a mirroring effect across facing pages. The 'principle of the hinge' is fairly straightforward here. But what about 'in space'? What would a third dimension of poetry be? For many critics this added dimensionality is figured in the invocation of source material. Ming-Qian Ma finds that there is a 'three-dimensional language experience' that derives from a source text that is written through; the text on the plane of the page gestures toward something outside itself.<sup>23</sup> And Elizabeth Joyce writes that the third dimension is 'the application of perspective to history, to seeing things at a distance, but in their proper sequence, in a depiction that indicates clear and distinct relations between things, events, people.'<sup>24</sup> Finally, Brian Reed suggests that Howe's word arrays are 'depictions of language's decomposition' and relates them to a Necker cube as they plot 'an arrangement of nodes in two dimensions that can ambivalently suggest both protension and recession—that is, on the one hand, a process of maturation into rational discourse or, on the other hand, the decay away from it.'<sup>25</sup> The intertextual and historical aspects of Howe's poetry certainly account for added dimensionality, one that reaches beyond the text. But there is another subtler way in which the principle of the hinge is developed in *Hinge Picture*.

Insofar as visual depth is a missing aspect that western figure painting represents through illusionist techniques, we might conceive of *sound* as the missing element that is represented in western (i.e. non-ideogrammatic) poetry. Poetry employs various techniques (lineation, spacing, etc.) to indicate shifts in volume, rhythm, speed, and tone. These techniques might be thought of as a kind of verbal 'foreshortening' that registers the acoustic

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<sup>23</sup> Ma, 'Articulating the Inarticulate', 478

<sup>24</sup> Joyce 101

<sup>25</sup> Brian Reed, ' "Eden or Ebb of the Sea": Susan Howe's Word Squares and Postlinear Poetics', *Postmodern Culture* 14.2 (2004) <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.104/14.2reed.txt> 1-2 [accessed 20 November 2010]

qualities of the spoken word. In interviews, Howe has said that ‘the strongest element I feel when I am writing something is acoustic’ and also that ‘sound is the element in poetry. A boring sounding poem—no matter what it looks like—is a boring poem. Sound is absolutely crucial.’<sup>26</sup> She also makes references to being a ‘product of the radio days’ and asserts her belief that it is the ‘ethical obligation’ of poets to express whatever they feel is their deepest necessity to express ‘in terms of space, in terms of sound’.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, she insists that ‘the look of a word is part of its meaning’ and that she has ‘never really lost the sense that words, even single letters, are images.’<sup>28</sup>

More than a phonotext, which presumes the written text is secondary to an oral one, Howe’s texts are *phono-graphic*; they insist upon the primacy—and tension between—both elements. This view in fact resembles (contemporaneously) one of Derrida’s early figurations of *différance* as a chiasmic rupture within the sign itself. Under the heading ‘The Hinge [La Brisure]’ in *Of Grammatology* he includes an excerpt from a letter written by Roger Laporte:

You have, I suppose, dreamt of finding a single word for designating difference and articulation. I have perhaps located it by change in Robert[’s Dictionary] if I play on the word, or rather indicate its double meaning. This word is *brisure* [joint, break] ‘—broken, cracked part. Cf. breach, crack, fracture, fault, split, fragment, [*breche, cassure, fracture, faille, fente, fragment.*]—Hinged articulation of two parts of wood—or metal-work. The hinge, the *brisure* [folding-joint] of a shutter. Cf. joint.’<sup>29</sup>

Writing and speaking are linked and separated via this spatio-temporal hinge, which is both the juncture and the breaking point. Derrida continues, ‘This articulation therefore permits a graphic (‘visual’ or ‘tactile,’ ‘spatial’) chain to be adapted, on occasion in a linear fashion, to a spoken (‘phonic,’ ‘temporal’) chain. It is from the primary possibility of this articulation that one must begin. Difference is articulation.’<sup>30</sup> It is this rupture *within* the sign that interests Howe, the cleft between a phoneme or letter’s sound and its respective graphical

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<sup>26</sup> Keller 13, 19

<sup>27</sup> Keller 14, 23

<sup>28</sup> Keller 6-7

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 65-6. The bracketed notes are Spivak’s.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* 66

image. Ultimately Howe's formal conception of language departs from Derrida's, but on this point they agree. Language's *brisure* or hinge of sound and sight allow Howe's poetics to operate by 'slipping/between rupture and rapture' (ET 31).

But while a comparison with Derrida's conception of the *brisure* illuminates a vital aspect of Howe's work, and moreover explains in part why she is so often labeled a deconstructive poet, her overall poetic vision departs from several of his claims in significant ways. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida puts forth the notion that an insidious problem in Western thought since Plato is the presumption that writing is a trace of the spoken word, i.e. that we presume speech to have anteriority and ontological priority to writing. Both in interviews and writing Howe seems to espouse exactly the kind of phonocentric view of language that Derrida critiques, such as when she remarks that 'Sound is a key to the untranslatable hidden cause. It is the cause.'<sup>31</sup> But ultimately Howe's interest is in sound not voice per se: stutters, polyphony, and phonemes with no discernible speakers or meaning all play a pivotal role in Howe's poetic compositions. It would have been far more apt for Derrida to have called phonocentrism 'voice-centrism,' for there is a long legacy of 'sound poetry' in the West which works as a materialist intervention on consciousness and the metaphysics of presence.<sup>32</sup>

In sum, Howe's poetry offers a phonic play that—rather than having ontological priority to the graphic—is simply inextricable from it. And although Howe often means for them to be voiced by the dead, they are often (as I will show) only able to articulate themselves through unintelligible stutter indicated by visual ruptures in words. In chapter one I argued that while Krauss found Martin's and Reinhardt's paintings to be an 'illusion of Materialism' with a 'release into belief', they were in fact a method for suggesting an

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<sup>31</sup> Howe, *Difficulties* Interview, 21

<sup>32</sup> I am thinking particularly of F.T. Marinetti's 'Zang Tumb Tumb' (1914) and the experiments of other Futurists and Dadaists that followed.

*unrepresented* actuality by virtue of the way they showcased materiality.<sup>33</sup> A similar matter is at stake in Howe's writing. Discontinuities in the phono-graphic quality of the word make us aware of gaps in vocalized accounts rather than presenting us with a voice whose speaker is physically absent. In *Hinge Picture*, as we shall see, this intervention of absence is the stutter she envisions in the proverbial first word of the god of the Judeo-Christian tradition. When a word is cleft across lines of verse its sound-sense asymptote is exposed, and rather than a seamless 'record of winners', we meet with the verbal ruins of buried histories and the simultaneous recognition that a silent actuality rests infinite and unrepresentable between these two imbricated yet dehiscent aspects of language.<sup>34</sup>

*Hinge Picture* is divided into two numbered sections and, with the exception of the first and last page of each, the arrangement is structurally mirrored across adjacent pages. As noted above, the source texts for this work were Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and *The King James Bible*. In the second section, Irish Proverbs and fairy tales are woven in, which reminds us of Howe's maternal Irish heritage. Visual and aural disjunctions interrupt religious dogma and historical narrativity.

Gibbon's unorthodox historiographic methods were of interest to Howe throughout her writing career. In his *Memoirs*, he also alludes to a period in his life that seems to have influenced his writing of the *Decline*, a detail that affects our reading of *Hinge Picture*. Gibbon writes extensively about the brief period when he converted to Roman Catholicism while a teenager. Alarmed, his father removed him from Oxford and sent him to Lausanne where he enlisted a tutor to convert him back to his Protestant faith. This gives Gibbon's fascination with the decline of the Roman Empire a curious slant that is anything but disinterested. Gibbon writes,

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<sup>33</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', *October* Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979), 12

<sup>34</sup> Howe, 'Statement', 15

If my childish revolt against the religion of my country had not stripped me in time of my academic gown, the five important years, so liberally improved in the studies and conversation of Lausanne, would have been steeped in port and prejudice among the monks of Oxford. Had the fatigue and idleness compelled me to read, the path of learning would not have been enlightened by a ray of philosophic freedom. I should have grown to manhood ignorant of the life and language of Europe, and my knowledge of the world would have been confined to an English cloister. But my *religious error* fixed me in a state of *banishment* and disgrace.<sup>35</sup>

*The Decline*, it could be argued, was a monumental historical project (one might even go so far as to say an act of contrition) conceived in relation to the abandonment of his national religion for Roman Catholicism.<sup>36</sup> Far from indicating a disparate and incidental interest in the Old World, *Hinge Picture* is very much continuous with the religious and historiographical themes of Howe's mature poetics. It is, for example, consistent with the themes she explores in *The Birth-mark* where she argues that a distinct voice emerged in American literature on account of the suppression of errant religious sects.<sup>37</sup> While neither Antinomian nor American, Gibbon's Catholicism was a birth-mark in its own right, a 'religious error' that was cause for his own 'banishment'.

There is a tendency in the critical writings of avant-garde literature to view old world sources as mere fodder for deconstruction. But Howe's relation to these texts is more complex. As Dan Katz points out, Howe's project differs from conventional historical revisionism in that it depends on critiquing the power dynamic in the texts of both the oppressor *and* the oppressed. Such is why she gives so much consideration in *The Birth-mark* to figures like Thomas Shepard, who was partly responsible for the banishment of Anne Hutchinson.<sup>38</sup> *Hinge Picture*, it turns out, is in part a critical biography of a historian; it

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<sup>35</sup> Gibbon 104 (emphasis mine)

<sup>36</sup> Early Christianity in Rome makes up a large part of Gibbon's analysis. One of his more controversial propositions was that it had in fact contributed to the empire's decline by breeding a loss of civic virtue among citizens; rather than focusing on combating worldly matters, they resigned themselves to the restitution found in the promise of everlasting life.

<sup>37</sup> I discuss this in greater detail in chapter 4.

<sup>38</sup> See Dan Katz, 'Inclosing America: the Heritage of Banishment in Susan Howe', Collection Cahiers du G.R.E.A.M., (University of Maine, 2000), 60. It is also important to point out that in her own literary historical writing, Howe maintains a rigorously dialogical stance. For Howe 'there is no meta-language... This forces her to foreground her own historical position, the conditions of production of her own text, and this is largely the function of the interview which closes *The Birth-mark*' (Katz 68).

reveals his personal motivation and perceived calling as chronicler and interpreter. As the eldest child of the notable Harvard historian Mark deWolfe Howe—and who was furthermore discouraged from studying history herself—it seems fitting that Howe would be interested in problematizing the calling of a historian.<sup>39</sup>

But beyond its thematic undertones, *Hinge Picture* wields a subtle but powerful argument about historiography through its formal features, which are a striking manifestation of the ‘principle of the hinge’ in the epigraph. We can see this in the very first poem:

invisible angel confined  
to a point simpler than  
a soul a lunar sphere a  
demon darkened intelle  
ct mirror clear receiv  
ing the mute vocables  
of God that rained  
a demon daring down in h  
ieroglyph and stuttering

It is impossible, even if we sub-vocalize or visually scan the poem, to read such enjambments as ‘intelle/ct’ without ‘hearing’ the interruption, the *brisure*, within the word. The visual stutter draws our attention to the hinged aural and visual elements of language. Interestingly, the principle is also reflected at the level of the narrative. An ‘invisible angel’ receives the ‘mute vocables/of God’ and mirrors them in a ‘demon darkened intelle/ct’. The ‘demon’ is ‘daring down’ (as opposed to being cast out) ‘in h/’ which suggests ‘hell’, but instead we meet with a surprise completion in ‘h/ieroglyph’. A clear and provocative paradox presents itself when Howe suggests that this hieroglyph, an ideogram with no acoustic notation, is in fact ‘stuttering’, an aural glitch that exceeds visual representation. In the last lines of the

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<sup>39</sup> Mark deWolfe Howe was a noted Historian at Harvard who edited the collected correspondence of Oliver Wendall Holmes. Howe has commented in interviews that she was interested in history from a young age but was discouraged from studying it. See, for example, her interview with Janet Ruth Fallon: ‘I was always going to be an artist though the art form changed. There was the sense, I suppose from my father, that because I was feminine, anything would do except law or history. Those disciplines were for men. Civil rights activist he was, liberal he was, yet he was adamantly opposed to women being admitted to the Harvard Law School’ (*The Difficulties*. 3.2. (1989): 28-42; 29).

opening poem of Howe's first book, we find ourselves spun as if in a verbal centrifuge to the opposite extremes of the phono-graphic continuum of the word.

The poem invokes the first chapter of John: 'In the beginning was the Word and the word was with God and the Word was God'. And here the primal, causal word is cast as 'mute vocables/of God' and stuttering 'h/ieroglyph'. This singularity of language, where it exists in forms at once material and immaterial (since speech is invisible and writing silent) parallels the monochrome's nature of being both mystical and concrete. As such, we can appreciate how she is able to stage 'interventions of absence' into historical narrative. Exposing the inherently antinomic quality of language, which embraces materiality and immateriality at once, she interrupts transparent narrative. By enjambling not only words but also phonemes (e.g. 'h/ieroglyph' as opposed to hie/roglyph), Howe strikes her poetic axe at the basic unit of meaning-making in spoken language. Over a decade later, she would make her famous remarks that it was the 'stutter and stammer in American Literature that interests me' and that she 'wished [she] could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are stuttering, slighted—inarticulate' (*BM* 181, *ET* 14). In *Hinge Picture* we see how that stutter calls attention to 'the dark side of history'. To borrow an analogy from the preface in *Frame Structures*, the effect of this intervention is to reveal the 'dark spaces between film frames' and to break the hegemony of 'the persistence of vision' (*FS* 15). In other words, stutter and stammer are markers for what has been left out.

These split phonemes and stray letters are often brought into visual proximity so that they suggest additional meanings. Mid-way through the first section, for example, Howe writes

a  
zealot naked  
in square  
be running a  
circle a stark  
by buffeted

(sat on a  
porch) numb  
numb covering  
qualm

This enigmatic poem seems to illustrate the persecution of a Christian. There is no direct mention of any reaction to the naked zealot in the square except in the third line where we hear the word ‘din’, perhaps alluding to the crowd’s response. Meanwhile the parenthetical ‘(sat on a/ porch)’ indicates the presence of another figure sitting by. Presumably such a scene would be accompanied by outcries from onlookers, but the ‘numb numb covering qualm’ from the passive observer seems to suggest the apathy and loss of civic virtue that Gibbon’s *Decline* criticized. While such obvious acoustic puns are rare, they happen frequently enough to make the reader pause and search for meaning at each interrupted line and aural hinge. When we fail to find them we notice the reading mind’s attempts to integrate phonemes. The poem forces us to be constructivists of meaning-making. In the following poem on the facing page, the enjambed phonemes fail to make puns in the next line (‘subje/cts forgot’, ‘separ/ated from’, ‘eac/h other’, etc.), although we feel that we want them to. This heightens the acoustic drama in the next poem where we find

a king  
delight  
s in War

‘Sin’ of course forms a rhyme with ‘din’ across the mirror axis of the book’s seam. If in the first poem the word was shown to be both angelic and demonic, presumably on account of its ability to hide aspects of its bivalent phono-graphic nature, then here ‘din’ and ‘sin’ are compared as if to suggest the lesson of Babel: that as a culture we project evil or punishment onto indecipherability. In the interest of preserving the dominant message, we banish stutter.

In his article ‘Waging Political Battle: Susan Howe’s Visual Prosody and the Politics of Noise’, Craig Dworkin draws upon Jacques Attali’s *Bruits* and the political and historical

implications of various registers of decipherability in sonic culture. ‘This potential to disrupt the message, to unsettle the code of the status quo’, writes Dworkin,

is what makes noise more than simply the record of violence. Noise is also, as Attali convincingly argues, the potential for new social and political orders. Accordingly, Howe’s poems can be read as “waging political babble” with their programmatic recovery of the noises of historically stifled voices.<sup>40</sup>

Dworkin proceeds to analyze Attali’s concept of ‘medial noise’ or that which is not meant to be transmitted but is nevertheless an unavoidable by-product of transmission. His reading of Howe’s ‘ex-static’ writing which emphasizes the acoustic ‘parasites’ of her texts reminds us of the aesthetic of the thrown away that Briony Fer observed in Agnes Martin’s work and which I have been arguing also influenced Howe—both in her word-drawings as well as in her poetry.<sup>41</sup> Dworkin also sees ‘medial noise’ in Howe’s own ‘visual prosody’ where ‘stuck and cut type’ foregrounds ‘the printer’s art’ and ‘the illusion of the transparency of the page’.<sup>42</sup> This is especially the case in later works such as *Eikon Basilike* where textual babble becomes a way to disrupt historical narrative and the status quo by recovering marginalized voices.

In *Hinge Picture*, where Howe’s first experiments with type are limited to the effect of justified margins or enjambment, ‘medial noise’ takes another, more subtle form. Rather than a collage-poem with obscured or illegible type, it operates within the word itself. Consider, for example, the following poem near end of the first section:

emperor  
s body u  
nder a  
heap of  
slain  
knew him  
by the  
golden e  
agles e

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<sup>40</sup> Craig Douglas Dworkin, ‘“Waging Political Babble”: Susan Howe’s Visual Prosody and the Politics of Noise’, *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 12.4 (Oct-Dec 1996): 389-405; 397; Howe *NM* 112

<sup>41</sup> Dworkin 404

<sup>42</sup> Dworkin 398-9

mbroidered  
on his sho  
e

The first line is a single, enjambed word ('emperor/s'); the pace of the poem has consequently all but frozen, as though the emperor's reign is coming to a halt. What is astonishing, though, is what happens to the emperor in the last five lines. For here he is reduced to his identifying characteristic, to the golden eagles embroidered on his shoe. Howe's poem figures this visually through the repetition of the letter 'e'. From the eighth line down 'e' functions as a kind of emblem that stands for 'eagle' or 'emperor'. The repetition of the truncated 'e' at the end of this next line is a second flash of the telltale emblem, as though the emperor is twitching as he slowly dies. Finally we are left with 'e' in the end of the poem—only this 'e' has no acoustic value since it is a silent letter belonging to 'sho/e'. Both the poem and the emperor end in silence.

In the next section the themes of decline and Christianity are mingled with Irish proverbs and Germanic fairy tales, as if to show an evolution of Howe's cultural legacy as well as a genealogy of her inheritance of the English language. Both epigraphs from *Hansel and Gretel* and the Irish Proverb refer to a dangerous entrapment. The first poem on this page,

a stark  
Quake

a numb  
Calm

harkens back to a first section where a bystander sat 'on a bench' covering 'qualm' with 'numb' while a zealot ran naked in the square. These lines further illustrate Gibbon's complaint about the loss of civic virtue. The poem is followed by a fragment that recalls Hansel's efforts to find his way back home by leaving a trail of breadcrumbs:

clutching  
my Crumbl

ejumble  
among  
Tombs and  
in Caves  
my  
Dream  
Vision

Taken together, these two fragments form a kind of credo or confession on the part of the author who wishes she could find her way back to a linguistic home that is free of Empire and hegemonic structures or vestiges of oppression. We know, however, from Hansel's fate that the bread crumbs will be eaten by birds, forcing the children to wait in the forest where they've been abandoned until they meet with a cannibalistic witch, and that an escape other than home's false sanctuary must therefore be imagined.

*Hinge Picture* ends with a lyric that mirrors the one on the first page. As with the stuttering 'hieroglyphic' demon in the beginning, we have a voice that is struggling to emerge:

far off in the dread  
blindness I heard light  
eagerly I struck my foot  
against a stone and  
raised a din at the  
sound the blessed Paul  
shut the door which had  
been open and bolted it

Here light cannot be seen but only heard. Harris reads this final poem as the door swinging shut on Classicism, while Joyce reads it as barring the access of women to religion and other institutions of power.<sup>43</sup> But it seems to me the ending is ambiguous. Rather than Peter, whom we might expect to meet at the gates of heaven, we find *Paul*—the Roman who was struck blind at the instance of his conversion. I read the 'I' of this poem as Gibbon, who keeps responding to Rome's call through his scholarship, although he renounced his conversion to its religion. And to the extent that Gibbon, as a collector of the thrown away, is an alter-ego

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<sup>43</sup> See Harris 450 and Joyce 111-12.

for Howe, we also have her ‘clutching [her] crumbl/ejumble’ of childhood narrative, endeavoring to respond to her *own* calling to write poems including history. The door may be ‘bolted’, but such an impasse is only ever generative for Howe’s poetic experiments. In this case, it only prompts her to raise ‘a din’ of medial or thrown-away noise. Howe’s minimalist aesthetics and historiographic interventions are driven by the same desire to gather what has been left out and to make art even and especially when bolted out. Her awareness of the mystical-concrete paradox of the monochrome enabled her to see a similar material and immaterial paradox in language such that she was able to stage that rebellion on the printed page. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, where she explores new themes of banishment, it will help her stage a rebellion with manuscripts and documents as well.

## Chapter 4.

### Nominalist & Realist: Howe's Turn to Document

In October of 1980, while Howe was finishing *Pythagorean Silence* (1982), she wrote to George Butterick saying she was conducting archival research for 'a piece about Emily Dickinson'.<sup>1</sup> That piece was to become *My Emily Dickinson* (1985) which is now a landmark book for Dickinson scholarship, textual scholarship, and literary theory. *Pythagorean Silence* marks a turning point in Howe's career in which her poetry begins to display the influence of her engagement with literary manuscripts.

The three books that followed *Hinge Picture—Chanting at the Crystal Sea* (1975); *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1978), and *Cabbage Gardens* (1979)—all explored historical events or specific groups of people.<sup>2</sup> As with *Hinge Picture*, these books continued to investigate the limits of language's power to represent history. It was in the eighties, however, that we see the next substantial development of Howe's poetics. The subsequent works of Howe's 'middle period'—including *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (1987), *The Europe of Trusts* (1990), *Singularities* (1990), *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (1993), and *The Birth-mark* (1993)—all exhibit the influence of archival work on her poetry and thinking. This chapter addresses the specific ways in which Howe's encounters with manuscripts and bibliography influenced her poetry on both thematic and formal levels. I begin by offering a close reading of a prose passages from *The Birth-mark* which illuminates her contradictory aesthetic of Nominalism and Realism,

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<sup>1</sup> Howe wrote this in a letter to George Butterick on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1980. See the selected correspondence between the two in Stephen Collis, *Through the Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism* (Victoria: ELS Editions, 2006), 83-4. Subsequent letters reveal Howe's increasing interest in the manuscript papers and editorial discrepancies that would become the thrust of her argument in *My Emily Dickinson*.

<sup>2</sup> *Chanting at the Crystal Sea* (1975); *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1978), and *Cabbage Gardens* (1979). Along with *Hinge Picture* (1974), the books are now collected in the 1996 volume *Frame Structures*. There was also one pamphlet, a short sequence called *Western Borders* (Willits: Tuumba Press, 1979). For a reading of these earlier works see Marjorie Perloff's articles 'Collision or Collusion with History': The Narrative Lyric of Susan Howe', *Contemporary Literature* 30.4 (1989): 518-33 and 'Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo', *Critical Inquiry* 25.3 (1999): 405-34.

showing how this contributes to a singular view of textual materialism. I then offer readings of *Pythagorean Silence* (1982), which demonstrates this poetics at the level of its narrative, and of *A Bibliography of the King's Book or Eikon Basilike* (1989), which includes the first instance of the Nominalist-Realist formal trope: the collage-poem.

### **'Promethean Aspirations'**

Before proceeding I wish to clarify a misperception about Howe's textual materialism during this period. In her book *Dickinson's Misery*, Virginia Jackson gives an account of what she calls 'lyric reading', in which she argues that what we think of as 'lyric' has largely been an ideological invention, a construct that was based on misrepresentations of Dickinson's poems and on stereotypes about her life.<sup>3</sup> Jackson finds Howe to be a prime culprit of lyric reading, especially her 'deeply lyrical interpretation of the difference between Dickinson-in-manuscript and Dickinson-in-print.'<sup>4</sup> But this *generic* argument misses the point that Howe is decidedly opposed to the imposition of conventions onto texts that defy them. As noted in the Introduction, Howe's distinctive manner of reading is based on the will to free herself from assumptions about their form or value and to appreciate manuscripts holistically, and as aesthetic objects, free from the categories we rationally impose. She critiques R.W. Franklin, for example, for correcting Dickinson's enjambment because he felt 'the form lurking in the mind is the stanza' (*B-M* 134). Howe wants Dickinson's manuscripts read as drawings not in order to read every mark *lyrically*, but because every mark is free to undermine the pervasive assumptions about what the 'lyric' is.

Jackson might rebut that any 'act of deciphering that is epistemologically incomplete' qualifies as lyric reading, but if that is so then it is hard to imagine what kind of reading

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<sup>3</sup> Hallmarks of lyric reading include a presupposition of an I-you relation where the reader is privy to the poet-speaker's 'private sphere' as well as 'an act of deciphering that is epistemologically incomplete' (Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 129, 171).

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* 37

wouldn't be considered lyric reading.<sup>5</sup> She may be right in observing that *My Emily Dickinson* expresses views that are at times overly defensive about authorial intention (a disposition Howe has since tempered), but she couldn't be more wrong about what shapes Howe's textual materialism.<sup>6</sup> Rather than being derivative of a recent cultural history of lyric reading, Howe's textual materialism is rooted in discourses about minimal art as well as philosophical debates about Nominalism and Realism—debates that can be traced back to Plato.<sup>7</sup>

Howe articulates a vision of Nominalism and Realism in her essay 'These Flames and Generosities of the Heart', first published in *The Birth-mark* in 1993. Although *My Emily Dickinson* revolutionized how we see Dickinson's texts, it is in this later essay that Howe achieves her most provocative claims about her manuscripts in particular and about textual materialism in general. One passage is worth quoting at length and analysing, a prose poem sequence under the heading 'NOMINALIST AND REALIST'. The heading is an allusion to Emerson's essay 'Nominalist and Realist', which discusses the various merits of each philosophical position: the Nominalist rejection of universals and the Realist belief that they exist. Emerson's unwieldy essay (one critic called it 'the most ill-arranged of the whole') is inconclusive.<sup>8</sup> It vacillates, for example, from statements like 'General ideas are essences. They are our gods: they round and ennoble the most partial and sordid way of living. Our proclivity to details cannot quite degrade our life, and divest it of poetry' to 'This preference of the genius to the parts is the secret of that deification of art, which is found in all superior minds'. Ultimately, he seems to choose not choosing: 'We are amphibious creatures,

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<sup>5</sup> In support of her argument that Howe is a deeply lyrical reader, Jackson offers an anecdote in which Howe said, in reference to Dickinson, that she sometimes lay awake at night thinking 'she would be angry with me', which suggests that it is Howe's vestedness in authorial intention that makes her reading lyrical (Jackson 177; Jackson is quoting *BM* 170). But Jackson also calls New Critics and Paul De Man lyric readers, leaving us to wonder if Jackson's term 'lyric' really has any critical meaning at all (Jackson 115).

<sup>6</sup> Howe and David Grubs, Seminar, The Birkbeck Institute, London, U.K., 5 October, 2009. Howe said, regarding Franklin that, 'in fact he did a fantastic job' and 'I'm not angry anymore.'

<sup>7</sup> It is also rooted in Howe's interests in Antinomianism.

<sup>8</sup> Frederic Hedge, quoted here from Joseph Urbas, ' "Bi-Polar" Emerson: "Nominalist and Realist" ', *The Pluralist* 8:2 (Summer 2013) 78-105; 80

weaponed for two elements, having two sets of faculties, the particular and the catholic.’ According to Russell Goodman, the essay is marked by a ‘stunning withdrawal’ from the philosophical debate.<sup>9</sup> It is, after all, not Nominalist versus Realist but ‘Nominalist *and* Realist’.

Whilst the bulk of Emerson’s argument is sympathetic to Howe’s own Antinomian philosophy, there are nevertheless passages that trouble Howe, largely on account of the way they exclude women. Consider Howe’s first line beneath the title:

Into [print] I will grind thee my bride (E2 241) (*B-M* 141)

Howe has mutated a line from Emerson’s essay: ‘Into *paint* I will grind thee my bride’. It is an allusion to a poem by Washington Allston (1779-1842) entitled ‘The Paint King’. The poem suggests that the painter will capture the bride’s essence by rendering it pure and changeless in pictorial form. Howe’s analogy (‘Into [print]’) now compares Dickinson’s manuscripts to the bride and her Editors to the suitors who would render her poetic genius into reproducible, unchangeable print. There is an unmistakable resonance here with Duchamp’s ‘The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors’ which Thierry De Duve reads as a group of paint-grinders pursuing ‘pure’ color—another unchanging essence.<sup>10</sup>

Beneath this line we find a comment about Dickinson’s textual variants:

Franklin’s facsimile edition of *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* shows some poems with so many lists of words or variants that even Johnson, who was nothing if not methodical, couldn’t find numbers for such polyphonic visual complexity.

What if the author went to great care to fit these words onto pages she could have copied over? Left in place, seemingly scattered and random, these words form their own compositional relation. (*B-M* 141)

Here we see Howe illustrating, as she did in *My Emily Dickinson*, that editorial control compromised the complexity of Dickinson’s manuscripts. But what is most striking is what

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<sup>9</sup> Russell Goodman, quoted here from Urbas, 79. Urbas discusses how most recent Emerson scholarship has tended to ignore his metaphysics.

<sup>10</sup> See my discussion of De Duve’s reading in chapter 1.

she includes next. A space down is followed by another quote from ‘R.W. Emerson’ (also taken from ‘Nominalist and Realist’):

R.W. EMERSON: I am very much struck in literature by the appearance that one person wrote all the books; as if the editor of a journal planted his body of reporters in different parts of the field of action, and relieved some by others from time to time; but there is such equality and identity both of judgment and point of view in the narrative that it is plainly the work of one all-seeing, all-hearing gentleman, I looked into Pope’s *Odyssey* yesterday: it is as correct and elegant after our canon of to-day as if it were newly written (E2 232)<sup>11</sup>

Emerson offers this as an example of Realism, and it underscores the notion that, for Howe, Realism is figured by the canon. For that is the domain of shared ideas with which she sometimes longs to have communion, though its principles have always been exclusionary.

Howe follows this with a definition:

*Antinomy.* A conflict of authority. A contradiction between conclusions that seem equally logical reasonable correct sealed natural necessary. (B-M 141)

Here Howe invokes *Antinomianism*, the Christian religious heresy that centered around claims of salvation by faith over works. In the U.S. it caused its biggest stir in the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (1636 – 1638), resulting in the excommunication of Anne Hutchinson because of her religious dissent from the form of Congregationalism maintained by the colony’s elders. Subsequently Antinomianism became a term of abuse in New England for any strong anti-authoritarian opinion. In *The Birth-mark* Howe traces a tendency on the part of the American literary establishment to expunge ‘antinomian’ thought and writing from the canon. For her, antinomianism implies, beyond the specific historical events it inspired, also a loose category of enthusiastic writers, thinkers, and artists whose practices fall outside the mainstream. Dickinson is first among these on Howe’s list. ‘For me, the manuscripts of Emily Dickinson represent a contradiction to

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<sup>11</sup> Howe is quoting from Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Second Series (Boston and New York: Riverside Press, Houghton Mifflin, 1876), 232.

canonical social power, whose predominant purpose seems to have been to render isolate voices devoted to writing as a physical event of immediate revelation' (*B-M* 1).

Howe follows this with a line from the proceedings of the trial of Anne Hutchinson in which colonial magistrate Thomas Dudley says, 'What is the scripture she brings?'<sup>12</sup> Far unlike the Realist tendency Emerson observes in the canon, Hutchinson's scripture is a dissenting vision that causes a conflict with authority.<sup>13</sup> Howe ends the section with a series of phrases that read as criticisms or observations about Dickinson's writings:

An improper poem. Not in respectable use. Another way of reading. Troubled subject-materials like troubled water.' (*B-M* 141)

The implication of these juxtapositions so far has been subtle but unmistakable: editorial control leads to the effacement of singularity (making it possible to conceive that all great books were written by one author). What then happens to the 'improper poem', one with manographic particulars that exist in excess of ideal, reproducible forms?

Three asterisks end the section and are followed by a new prose poem beginning with the line, '*Fire may be raked up in the ashes, though not seen.*' The italicized citation is taken from Puritan writer Richard Sibbes's book *The Bruised Reed* which addresses depressive illness and argues 'We must beware of false reasoning, such as: because our fire does not blaze out as others, therefore we have no fire at all.'<sup>14</sup> Here we find a link to the 'flames' of the essay's title. Howe follows with the lines:

Words are only frames. No comfortable conclusion. Letters are scrawls, turnabouts, astonishments, strokes, cuts, masks.

These poems are representations. These manuscripts should be understood as visual productions.

The physical act of copying is a mysterious sensuous expression.

Wrapped in the mirror of the word. (*B-M* 141)

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<sup>12</sup> Here she is quoting from *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History*, ed. David D. Hall (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), 338.

<sup>13</sup> Hall's book gives a thorough documentary history of the controversy that accounts for dissident scripture and interpretation.

<sup>14</sup> See Richard Sibbes, *The Works of the Reverend Richard Sibbs [sic]: a Short Memoir of the Author's Life*, 3 Volumes (Aberdeen: J. Chalmers & Co., 1809), Vol. 1, 28.

Drawings and texts in one. Nominalist and Realist in one. More than any other scholar or poet writing today, Howe has brought our attention to the discrepancies between ‘authoritative’ texts and their unprinted originals. She has moreover proven this to be reflexive of a larger, more pervasive tendency to reduce concrete particulars to Platonic forms—a mechanism that stands to banish not only variant meanings but also variant histories and lives from printed record.

In a footnote to Howe’s essay we are told that the title ‘These Flames and Generosities of the Heart’ is drawn from the last seven words of Emerson’s 1841 essay ‘Circles’. Here he speaks about ‘oracular genius’ noting that ‘nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm’. Indeed it was enthusiasm, in its sense of great passion as well as religious fervour, that Howe argues was the ‘birth-mark’ of American literature in the first place.<sup>15</sup> Fire is a motif throughout her writing on manuscripts and enthusiasm. And yet she still feels the pull of ideals in that they will help her get her ideas across: ‘Promethean aspiration:’ she writes, ‘To be a woman and a Pythagorean. What *is* the communal vision of poetry if you are curved, odd, indefinite, irregular, feminine. I go in disguise.’ (*MED* 117-18) Howe’s work has been to carry the fire of the genius poet’s visual production to an audience through print, the very system that threatens to extinguish the power of its particulars. Promethean aspirations indeed.

### ***Pythagorean Silence***

The Nominalist-Realist underpinnings of Howe’s textual materialism can be readily seen in *Pythagorean Silence*, which, as I’ve mentioned, she composed while researching Dickinson’s archives. The book has been read variously as ‘a forthright recognition of play’ (Taggart), as a veiled autobiographical account of her father’s departure for the front during WWII (Back),

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<sup>15</sup> According to Caldwell, American conversion narratives ‘are a far cry from the reassuring conclusions of the English conversion stories. Much of this hesitancy can be attributed, of course, to a fear of enthusiasm, especially after the Anne Hutchinson trials of 1637-8’ (Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 34).

as a lyric organized around a motif of metempsychosis (Montgomery), and as ‘an explicit meditation on postmodern writing’ (McGann).<sup>16</sup> All of these formal aspects and thematic interests are present in the poem, and these different readings are a testament to the multi-layered richness that Howe had accomplished by this point in her career. But I would like to suggest that *Pythagorean Silence* is, above all, a literary demonstration of the Nominalist-Realist tensions at play in the documenting of human history, especially concerning grief and war.

The poem opens with the following epigraph:

we that were wood  
when that 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

Right away we are shown the interrelation between ‘wood’ and ‘Word’, suggesting a materialized view of language. As others have noted, the flaunting of spacing in the first two lines is another indication of materialized textuality, and ‘wood’ appears here as a metonymy for paper.<sup>17</sup> But the epigraph also provides a wonderful link to the H.D.-Pound nexus and the history of the modernist book of verse, to Pound’s first book, *Hilda’s Book*, of which there was only one copy: handmade, vellum-bound, and a gift to his then fiancée, H.D.<sup>18</sup> In ‘The Tree’ (the poem in *Hilda’s Book* that later became the first poem of Pound’s *Personae*) Pound writes ‘I stood still and was a tree amid the wood’, and then invokes the Ovidian

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<sup>16</sup> See John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees: Essays on Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 115; Rachel Tzvia Back, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Will Montgomery, ‘Susan Howe’s Renaissance Period: Metamorphosis and Representation in *Pythagorean Silence* and *Defenestration of Prague*’, *Journal of American Studies* 40.3 (2006): 615-633; and Jerome McGann, ‘Composition as Explanation’ in *A Book of the Book: Some Words & Projections about the Book and Writing*, eds. Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay (New York City: Granary, 2000), 240.

<sup>17</sup> See Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 43 and Jerome McGann, ‘Composition as Explanation (of Modern and Postmodern Poetries)’, in *A Book of the Book*, eds. Jerome Rothenberg and Steve Clay (New York: Granary Books, 2000): 228-245; 245.

<sup>18</sup> The text was later reproduced by H.D.’s literary executor, Norman Holmes Pearson, who appended it to H.D.’s *End to Torment* (New York: New Directions Press, 1979).

metamorphosis of 'Daphne and the laurel bow' [sic].<sup>19</sup> This paronomastic slippage between the homonyms *bough* and *bow*—two words etymologically related but distinguished by historical usage—as well as the Daphnean metamorphosis (Pound's nickname for Hilda was 'Dryad') link *Pythagorean Silence* to its modernist precursor—as a printed object, but also as a gift between poets that is crafted out of love.<sup>20</sup>

But if *Pythagorean Silence* opens with this reminder about words and materials being a medium of affection, then one of its central concerns is also to ask whether language can fulfill the task of representing the trauma of war and grief. Daphne and Apollo also emblemize loss and substitution. As Peter Sacks points out in *English Elegy*, a book that was important to Howe, 'The story of Apollo and Daphne itself exemplifies the dramatic relation between loss and figuration'. Stricken by unrequited love, Apollo chased Daphne to the riverbanks where she prayed for deliverance and was changed into a tree, though its beauty was unchanged. As Sacks tells us, the 'embrace of the actual tree will not in itself give comfort, nor will it be accepted: "But even the wood shrank from his kisses" '. The only consolation for Apollo's loss is substitution with 'the fragmentary sign' of the laurel wreath which is of course '*the prize and sign of poethood.*'<sup>21</sup>

The topical content within the book's tripartite structure can be broadly characterized as follows: the first section 'Pearl Harbor' dramatizes grief as Howe's father departed for WWII; the second section, 'pythagorean silence', contains snippets of the poet's imagined journey to accompany him in battle; and the third, untitled section considers the production

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<sup>19</sup> Ezra Pound, *Personae: The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*, eds. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), 3

<sup>20</sup> Invoking *Hilda's Book* earlier in his discussion, McGann posits that 'in truth the history of modernist writing could be written as a history of the modernist book,' and that within that history, 'Ezra Pound would appear... the crucial point of departure.' This volume, in McGann's view, displayed Pound's awareness of 'the late nineteenth century's printing revolution that Pre-Raphaelitism had done so much to inaugurate and advance' ('Composition as Explanation' 228).

<sup>21</sup> See Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 4-5; italics in original. (Sacks includes his own translation of Ovid 1.556.) Will Montgomery cites her citation of Sacks in her working notes (*The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 190).

of historical records. Previous readings of this work have also argued for the ways that ‘silence’ refers to the absence of women from literary history, and throughout the book the absence of women and children from history is certainly emphasized.<sup>22</sup> My reading acknowledges the pertinence of these themes but maintains that ‘silence’ is, above all, a figuration of the effacement of particulars when universal concepts take hold and narratives are transcribed and passed down. This is especially poignant in *Pythagorean Silence* because the primary thematic concern is grief over war.

Pythagoras himself is important to Howe’s book thematically. The title, ‘Pythagorean Silence’, is drawn from the ‘moral discipline’ to remain silent about the philosopher’s teachings and his ‘golden verses’. This was a singular phenomenon in a time when public debate and oral displays of knowledge were a key feature of civic culture.<sup>23</sup> Howe writes,

Sing the golden verses of Pythagoras

(were they ever really written)  
Sweet notes

deaf sea  
Outside at the back of the sky

biography blows away (*ET* 64)

Because so little is known about his life, future historians and storytellers are free to cast a narrative, indeed a myth or legend, about him and his teachings. Indeed, he is the perfect subject for a Foucauldian author-function. It is not surprising that Howe should take an interest in the legend surrounding him at this time, for it was precisely when she was looking into Dickinson’s fascicles, and seeing first-hand how another author about whom very little

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<sup>22</sup> See Will Montgomery, ‘Susan Howe’s Renaissance Period: Metamorphosis and Representation in *Pythagorean Silence* and *Defenestration of Prague*’, *American Studies* 40.3 (2006).

<sup>23</sup> According to Carl Huffman, ‘Various lines of hexameter verse were already circulating in Pythagoras’ name in the third century BCE and were later combined into a compilation known as the *Golden Verses*, which marks the culmination of the tradition of a *Sacred Discourse* assigned to Pythagoras (Burkert 1972a, 219, Thesleff 1965, 158–163; and most recently Thom 1995, although his dating of the compilation before 300 BCE is questionable). The lack of any viable written text which could be reasonably ascribed to Pythagoras is shown most clearly by the tendency of later authors to quote either Empedocles or Plato, when they needed to quote “Pythagoras” (e.g., Sextus Empiricus, *M.* IX. 126–30; Nicomachus, *Introduction to Arithmetic* I. 2) (‘Pythagoras’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2014 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta, forthcoming URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/pythagoras/> [accessed 4 May 2014]).

was known became an author-function.<sup>24</sup> Will Montgomery has also argued that he is also an apt subject for Howe because his metaphysics (he reportedly believed in metempsychosis) imply a belief in the soul's separation from the body and, in turn, the immaterial's separation from the material.<sup>25</sup>

The most important philosopher in Howe's book, however, is one who is not named. Howe mentions in a letter to George Butterick that the inspiration for her book was Nietzsche's *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*.<sup>26</sup> Here Nietzsche mentions Pythagoras several times (he calls him a 'cataclysmic' personality—a description Howe echoes on page 38 when she writes 'cataclysmic Pythagoras'), but usually in reference to his personality (presumably because his teachings were understood to be apocryphal).<sup>27</sup> The real philosopher of importance in *Pythagorean Silence* is Heraclitus. It was Heraclitus who, Nietzsche tells us, famously proclaimed, 'You use names for things as though they rigidly, persistently endured; yet even the stream into which you step a second time is not the one you stepped into before.'<sup>28</sup> This is Nominalism *avant la lettre*; names and ideas are illusions while the matter that makes them up is real. The quote also embraces his idea of 'universal flux' in which things are always changing. But Heraclitus wasn't uniformly consistent in his metaphysics. And in fact, his 'Unity of Opposites', which Nietzsche details, resonates powerfully with Howe's own paradoxical aesthetics. Nearly three decades later, in *That This*, Howe writes: 'Nietzsche says that for Heraclitus all contradictions run into harmony, even if they are invisible to the human eye' (*TT* 24). But there is additional resonance in his monism.

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<sup>24</sup> Howe cites a number of Editors and critics who have portrayed Dickinson in various ways to suit their own purposes. Quoting Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, for example, Howe writes, 'Who is this spider-artist? Not *my* Emily Dickinson' (*MED* 13).

<sup>25</sup> Will Montgomery addresses the theme of metempsychosis, Ovidian metamorphosis, and Renaissance themes at length in 'Susan Howe's Renaissance Period'.

<sup>26</sup> Howe confirmed this in an email to me dated 3 July 2013 in which she mentioned it was Ian Hamilton Finlay who recommended it to her. Montgomery's article also notes that she mentioned the book in her letters to Lyn Hejinian (12 Feb. 1978, MSS 0074) and to John Taggart (7 Mar. 1982, MSS 0011) ('Susan Howe's Renaissance Period', 20).

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Washington DC: Regnery, 1962), 75

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* 52

Heraclitus believed the world was made up of *fire*, the element Howe, via Emerson, relates to enthusiasm and poetic genius, that which only a ‘Promethean aspiration’ would aim to render successfully into print.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout *Pythagorean Silence* we are alerted to the limits of language’s representational power—especially with regard to war and the grief of women and children. In the section titled ‘Pearl Harbor’ for example, immediately after the depicted father figure announces he is leaving for war, we have a paraphrase of Matthew 2.18 (In Rama/Rachel weeping for her children/refuses/to be comforted/because they *are* not) followed by the following fragment:

R  
(her cry  
silences  
whole  
vocabularies  
of *names*  
for  
*things* (ET 22; italics in original)

The reference to Nominalism (*Names/ for things*) couldn’t be clearer. Up until this point vocabularies have been adequate to the task of representation. At the moment of trauma, however, language devolves into its constituent parts. Even Rachel can be indicated only by her initial, underscoring the point that names have lost their representational power. The letter ‘R’ also, as McGann points out, echoes the ‘*are*’ of the line before and could stand for ‘Rama’ or ‘Rachel’.<sup>30</sup> The tension between being and ceasing to be (*are not*) stands in for the unnamable reality of death. ‘I almost never put the word *death* in my poems,’ says Howe in an interview, ‘It would be too easy. I have always felt death to be the unspeakable other.’ (B-M 177) Meanwhile, down and to the left a parenthetical comment reminds us,

(and TALKATIVE  
says we are all in Hell.)

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* 59

<sup>30</sup> McGann 241

In this context ‘TALKATIVE’ refers to *unsilenced* vocabularies, in other words, to language that proliferates in spite and because of unspeakable violence.

This sets the stage for a poetic demonstration of the ‘Promethean aspiration’ of the traumatised subject to articulate its voice within that same system of signs that silences it. This fundamental paradox of Howe’s poetics, the attempt to articulate the inarticulate and lift slighted voices from history, is one of the most studied and admired aspects of her poetry.<sup>31</sup> What hasn’t been observed, however, is the philosophical background by which it is framed (namely the problem of universals and the Nominalist-Realist tension) and its connection to Materialism. Howe seems to have discovered this connection during this period when she was actively engaged with the hand-written, hand-sewn fascicles of Dickinson’s archives. Consider the numbered sequence of the second section, which begins,

age of earth and us all chattering  
  
a sentence or character  
suddenly  
  
steps out to seek for truth fails  
falls  
  
into a stream of ink      Sequence  
trails off  
  
must go on (*ET* 36)

Here we see how the material dimension of textuality is linked to names for things. Like ‘TALKATIVE’, the word ‘chattering’ refers to the onslaught of language even as traumatic events reveal the impossibility of representing grief and war in language. But the poet must

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Rachel Tzvia Back, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Stephen Collis, *Through Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 2000); Craig Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003); Ming-Qian Ma, ‘Articulating the Inarticulate: Singularities and the Counter-method in Susan Howe’, *Contemporary Literature* 36.3 (1995): 466-89; Will Montgomery, *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Peter Nicholls, ‘“The Pastness of Landscape”: Susan Howe’s *Pierce Arrow*’, *Contemporary Literature* 43.3 (Fall 2002): 441-60; and Marjorie Perloff, ‘Collision or Collusion with History: The Narrative Lyric of Susan Howe and Ron Silliman’, *Contemporary Literature* 30.4 (Winter 1989): 518-33.

‘seek for truth’ even if the attempt ‘fails’ by falling ‘into a stream of ink’—in other words, even if it settles eventually into a text—a text that will sacrifice other accounts or particulars. Howe exposes language to be material names (sonic and visual) that are detached from their referents—at the same time that she acknowledges that the linear stream of ink ‘must go on’: a deft demonstration of Nominalist-Realist concerns and their connection with materialism.

In the final, untitled section we see a culmination of the Nominalist-Realist aesthetic, as well as a rare appearance of the first person pronoun. The section begins with a poem discussed briefly in the Introduction:

Some particular place   fleeting  
and fixed   Particulars  
fleeting and frail  
Nature ties a body to my soul  
Conceiving inventing falsifying  
assuming  
I walk through valleys stray  
imagining myself free  
My mind’s eye   elegaic Meditation  
embracing something  
some history of Materialism (*ET* 71)

Here we have an *ars poetica* that articulates *Pythagorean Silence*’s Nominalist attack on universals at the same time that it recognizes their necessity. The appearance of a lyric subject here is important, as it acknowledges her own active participation in the weaving of narrative. It still privileges particulars, however: rather than an abstraction of a particular from the universal (what Howe reminds us is ‘the entrance point into evil’ (*MED* 117), this poetics gathers particulars and links them together. Howe’s word for this imaginative space (‘My mind’s eye’) where endangered particulars are gathered at the margins of historical

record—is ‘elegaic’. As I noted in my introduction, the variant spelling has a curiously antinomic character. Definitions of ‘elegiac’, conversely, only indicate sorrow. In the sense that Howe uses it above, ‘elegaic mediation’ is that which mourns the loss of knowledge about the past at the same time that it celebrates the discovery of its particulars. These particulars change our basic assumptions about history and alert us to the reality that there are many more gaps in our understanding. The turn to typographic or manigraphic particulars as a means of rescuing marginalized voices is really a bibliographic and historiographic counterpart to the aesthetics of the thrown away in Howe’s art. Witness becomes subject to editorial control and to the work of typesetters and printers. But this process, this poetic activity, is by definition never a complete recovery; rather than a solution, it is an orientation toward loss that enables the discovery of fragments of forgotten narratives. Which is why her ‘elegaic Meditation’ leads her to embrace ‘some history of Materialism’ and not just ‘Materialism’ itself. It allows for her to locate her practice within a long counter-tradition of interventions on accounts of progress and the records of winners.

Howe’s poetic of ‘elegaic meditation’ and ‘some history of materialism’ is illustrated in the book’s exquisite final pages. Here we have a series of poems that are stripped of syntax so that they actually become structured groupings of ‘names for things.’ The book ends with the following poem:

wicket-gate  
wicket-gate

cherubim golden swallow  
amulet instruction tribulation  
winged joy parent sackcloth ash  
den sealed ascent flee  
chariot interpret flame  
hot arc chaff meridian

in the extant manuscript SOMEONE  
has lightly scored a pen over

diadem dagger a voyage gibbet  
sheaf

weeds shiver and my clothes spread wide (*ET* 84)

The final line contains a reference to Ophelia's drowning, an image that in this context warns of the consequences of unexpressed trauma and the disappearance of women from record. But what of the rest? The first two stanzas are almost exclusively made up of adjectives and nouns (or words that can be both nouns and verbs like 'flee' or 'arc'). The only unambiguous exception is the verb that lies at the poem's center: *interpret*, which is the reader's central task. Stripped of surrounding syntax, it reads like a dare or command. But interpret *what*? The poem? Or, reading across the line, 'interpret *flame*'? Are we back to the 'Promethean aspirations' of bringing the 'flames and generousities of the [poet's] heart' to readers through printed language?

A little digging reveals another source text. The word 'wicket-gate' appears in verse 17 of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; it is the doorframe that marks the Christian pilgrim's entrance to the King's Highway and the journey to the Celestial City. The word appeared earlier in *Pythagorean Silence*, in a passage following the injunction of talkativeness and an appearance of a ghost, making 'wicket-gate' a kind of threshold for Howe's book as well (*ET* 23). In fact, nearly every word in these first two stanzas is located in Bunyan's text. There are only two exceptions: 'meridian' and 'amulet'. Meridian Books was the publisher of a 1961 edition of Bunyan's collected writings, *God's Knotty Log: selected writings of John Bunyan*.<sup>32</sup> This puts the intertext in its material (in this case publishing and reading) context. The provenance of 'amulet' remains a mystery to me.

Such buried referentiality is typical in Howe's oeuvre. But it should be noted that allusiveness and referentiality in her work are different from modernist citation. Words such as 'wicket-gate', for example, seem slightly alien or anachronistic and so may prod the reader to further research, but they nevertheless remain isolated terms. While Pound's references

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<sup>32</sup> John Bunyan, *God's Knotty Log: selected writings of John Bunyan*, ed. Henri A. Talon (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1961).

call attention to their radial reach through proper nouns or whole lines of other people's poems, Howe's leave only the faintest traces of referentiality through idiosyncratic diction. The sense of radially and incorporation that was so crucial to Pound's Vorticist aesthetic is here inverted to a stealthy layering and erasure of intertexts, a 'writing through' that makes us aware of a text's disappearance than its appearance.<sup>33</sup>

In 'The Author's Apology for His Book' that precedes *Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan writes of how he 'fell suddenly into an Allegory/about their journey and the way to glory'.<sup>34</sup> There is a sense in which Bunyan's text seems to stand for allegory itself. The form is important to Howe's poem because it is an instance of the ideal that is in tension with the material. (Recall from the Introduction her opposition of '*allegoria*' and '*historia*' in *The Birth-mark*.) *Pythagorean Silence* is aware of allegory being a key component of literary representation and yet it remains wary of it. A recurring theme in *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* is that the Greek philosophers were able to make great strides when they 'turned cold against everything mythical and allegorical', privileging the concrete over the abstract.<sup>35</sup> This was not the case with Pythagoras, however, for whom the mythical notion of metamorphosis was a key principle in his cosmology. Allegory is violent to the extent that it renders people into symbols. The slaughtered children for whom Rachel weeps at the beginning of *Pythagorean Silence* which are a reminder of this reality.

But while Howe wishes to unveil allegory, reminding us of the real persons at stake, she also acknowledges her complicity with 'Superstructures of allegory' (ET 42) and 'veiled allegories/deeply veiled' (ET 48).<sup>36</sup> But she never lets the text operate on a purely symbolic

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<sup>33</sup> For a reading of the referentiality of Pound's allusions see Marjorie Perloff, 'The Search for "Prime Words": Pound, Duchamp and the Nominalist Ethos', *Paideuma* 32, 1-3 (2003), 205-28.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* 59

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche 42

<sup>36</sup> The significance of allegory to Howe's work and to post-modernism is huge and lies outside the scope of this book. Michael Golston has a book forthcoming from Columbia University Press in which he discusses the importance of allegory across the work of a number of avant-garde American poets, including a chapter on Howe.

level. In the third and fourth stanzas of the above poem, for example, she calls our attention to the manigraphic details of a text, shifting focus from textual superstructures to material particulars. ‘Diadem’, ‘dagger’, and ‘a voyage’, are all words found in *Hamlet*. ‘Gibbet’ is not in any of the *Hamlet*’s printed versions, but we presume Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may have been hanged on one after their ‘voyage’. And there is added resonance in that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were themselves executed on account of Hamlet’s forged ‘changeling’ letter in Act V, scene ii. The mention that ‘SOMEONE’ scored the above words in ‘the extant manuscript’ accomplishes two startling things. First, it materializes literary texts, undermining their allegorical operation because we are dealing in material forms (forms that are fragile and may exist in competing versions) rather than superstructures. And second, it represents an act of selectively omitting violence from a manuscript, symbolizing the way atrocities get edited out of human history.<sup>37</sup>

Throughout *Pythagorean Silence* we hear of ‘the problem of lost Originals’ (59) and ‘texts torn from their contexts’ (67). Textuality is at heart a metaphysical problem for Howe. The lure of the authentic text, like the lure of Realism, bears the promise of communion, of ideal forms that can unite individual minds. But it also brings with it the price of essentialism and exclusion. Sacrificed manigraphic details form an obvious metaphor with the way some lives will be forgotten by history. But Howe’s composition treads lightly, inviting allegorical readings while reminding us at the poem’s beginning and end that people are not symbols. Her Nominalist interventions, by which she insists that words are material names and

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<sup>37</sup> It is important to remember that in insisting that we make more of manuscripts Howe is not simply saying that authentic editions can be made by recovering the original manuscript. While ‘New Bibliographers’ like Fredson Bowers argue that authentic texts can be arrived at by ‘stripping the veil of print’, Howe’s interest in manuscripts lies in unsettling or multiplying readings rather than settling on a single, final reading. The very title, *My Emily Dickinson*, alerts us to this fact (Fredson Bowers, ‘Today’s Shakespeare Texts, and Tomorrow’s’, *Studies in Bibliography*, 19 (1996): 59-60. Quoted here from Barbara A. Mowat, ‘The Problem of Shakespeare(s) Texts’ in *Textual Formations and Reformations*, eds. Laurie E. Maguire and Thomas L. Berger (Cranbury: Associated University Press, 1999), 132).

histories material texts, remind us that words cannot inscribe actuality, though it is through their power that we become most aware that this unarticulated actuality exists.

### *A Bibliography of the King's Book, or Eikon Basilike*

*A Bibliography of the King's Book, or Eikon Basilike* (1989), marks another major turning point in Howe's literary career: the genesis of the collage-poem. It is here that she first begins experimenting with compositions that blur the line between text and drawing, crafting poems that have overlaid, obscured, and multi-directional type. It is also here that she first starts thinking critically about bibliography. First published as a pamphlet by Paradigm books in 1989 and later collected in *The Nonconformist's Memorial, A Bibliography of the King's Book, or Eikon Basilike* (1989), it draws its title from Edward Almack's 1896 book by the same name. Almack attempted to catalogue the various print editions of the controversial *Eikon Basilike*, the book of prayers and essays purportedly written by King Charles I just before his beheading in 1649. Almack says in his Introduction that he meant to offer an unbiased bibliography but found it too difficult to avoid 'the vexed question of authorship'.<sup>38</sup> He notes that he includes 'the King's Book' in his title because he believed the King to be the true author. Since Milton's *Eikonoklastes* it has generally been accepted that the *Eikon* was forged.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Edward Almack, *A Bibliography of the King's Book or Eikon Basilike* (London: Blades, East & Blades, 1896), 3

<sup>39</sup> The stakes of this battle fought on paper can be better appreciated if we take into consideration the historical context in which the variant editions of the *Eikon Basilike* were circulated. In his book, Almack devotes three pages to reproducing the Act of September 1649, officially titled 'An Act against Unlicensed and Scandalous Books and Pamphlets, and for better regulating of Printing', in which the ruling powers set up various 'material clauses' for authors, printers, and publishers, sellers, and buyers of seditious books and pamphlets. The Act specifies that offending parties were to be fined, jailed, or to have their printing implements 'broken in Pieces'. In the case of 'Hawkers' and 'Ballad-singers' they were to be 'whipt as common Rogues.' Buyers of such pamphlets were required to hand them over to the authorities within 24 hours or else be fined (Almack 25-8; Almack is quoting from *The Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*, Vol. XIX, (1757) 170-76. The full text of the Act can be found online at <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=56369> [accessed 2 May 2013]).

*Eikon Basilike* has been the subject of a number of insightful readings: Kent Lewis wrote of ‘the poetics of the bibliography’; Craig Dworkin unpacked the poem’s ‘visual prosody’; Kathleen Crown addressed the poem’s countervailing iconoclasm and iconicity; Norman Finkelstein investigated the poem as séance; Mandy Bloomfield read it as a visual analog of the iconoclasm and iconicity of the Restoration; and finally Will Montgomery addressed the ways that it figures the ‘dead author’ of literary scholarship in the form of a ghost.<sup>40</sup> Curiously, it often seems the case that when the historical and material aspects of this book are considered, its ghostly and immaterial aspects are not. By reading the book in light of her Nominalist-Realist poetics, however, we see how these aspects are inextricably linked. This is especially pertinent when we read it in the context of Almack’s work, which to date has received little attention. We also, finally, see how the push toward a radically materialized text not only challenges our very notion of reading but also results in tropes that are archly lyrical.

Howe gives a pithy account of the authorship scandal in the prose essay introduction to *Eikon Basilike* entitled ‘MAKING THE GHOST WALK ABOUT AGAIN AND AGAIN’. She tells us that her son, Mark, had found Almack’s book at ‘one of the sales Sterling Memorial Library sometimes holds to get rid of useless books’ (NM 57). The emphasis on the book’s discarded status makes it a perfect source text for Howe’s aesthetic of the thrown away; it also makes a statement about the relative importance of bibliography in the humanities. But Howe includes another important but subtle detail. She points out that Yale’s Sterling Library had kept a copy of the more recent study by Francis F. Madan, *A New*

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<sup>40</sup> See Kent Lewis, ‘The Poetics of the Bibliography in *A Bibliography of the King’s Book; or Eikon Basilike*’, *West Coast Line* 27 (1993): 118-127; Dworkin, ‘Waging Political Babble’: Susan Howe’s Visual Prosody and the Politics of Noise’, *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 12.4 (Oct-Dec 1996): 389-405; Kathleen Crown, ‘“This unstable I-witnessing”: Susan Howe’s Lyric Iconoclasm and the Articulating Ghost’, *Women’s Studies* 27: 483-505; Norman Finkelstein, ‘“MAKING THE GHOST WALK ABOUT AGAIN AND AGAIN”: History as Séance in the Work of Susan Howe’, *Literature Interpretation Theory* 20.3 (2009): 215-240; Mandy Bloomfield, ‘“Aftershock of iconoclasm”: ambivalence of the visual page in Susan Howe’s *Eikon Basilike*’, *Textual Practice* 23.3 (2009): 417-437; and Montgomery’s *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority* (New York: Palgrave, 2010).

*Bibliography of the Eikon Basilike of King Charles the First, with a note on the authorship* (1950), which argued that the author of the *Eikon* was John Gauden, a writer and bishop who claimed to have written it immediately following the Restoration (*B-M* 55). Almack and Charles I are therefore banished to the margins of literary history while the dominant opinion is guarded and maintained. The point is less about whom Howe believes to be the author (she openly states in the essay that ‘The *Eikon* is a forgery’) and more about how judgements of utility dictate historical record.

Howe’s engagement with the discipline of bibliography shifted the stakes of her formal experiments to poems that challenged our understanding of what a book is. As she tells Ed Foster in an interview, she was ‘struck by the ironies implicit in the very idea of a bibliography, which is a search for origins on paper’ (*B-M* 174). Howe’s book opens with a doctored facsimile of Almack’s title page, striking through and substituting the relevant copyright information with her own. Readers begin, therefore, within a frame of forgery and plagiarism, not knowing whether the print they see originates from bibliographer, poet, editor, or printer. Again, much as Duchamp’s ‘Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even’ features paint-grinders who de-essentialise the concept of pure color, Howe’s *Eikon Basilike* de-essentialises the concept of a pure *text* by showing the various hands at play in the making of a book.<sup>41</sup> One way of reading the visually disruptive poems of Howe’s *Eikon Basilike* is that they reflect a collapsing of the conflicting, illicit print versions into one composition. Howe’s collage-poems draw from competing versions and overlay them, often focusing on contested passages. In her prose introduction she points out that a later edition of the *Eikon*, this one sanctioned by King Charles II, ‘subtracted all the prayers’ that Milton revealed were

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<sup>41</sup> See note 11. I discuss Thierry De Duve’s reading of this work in chapter 1.

paraphrases of Sidney's *Arcadia* (NM 56-7). The collage-poem therefore visually recreates the cutting and recombination that were central to the book's history. (See Fig. 1)<sup>42</sup>

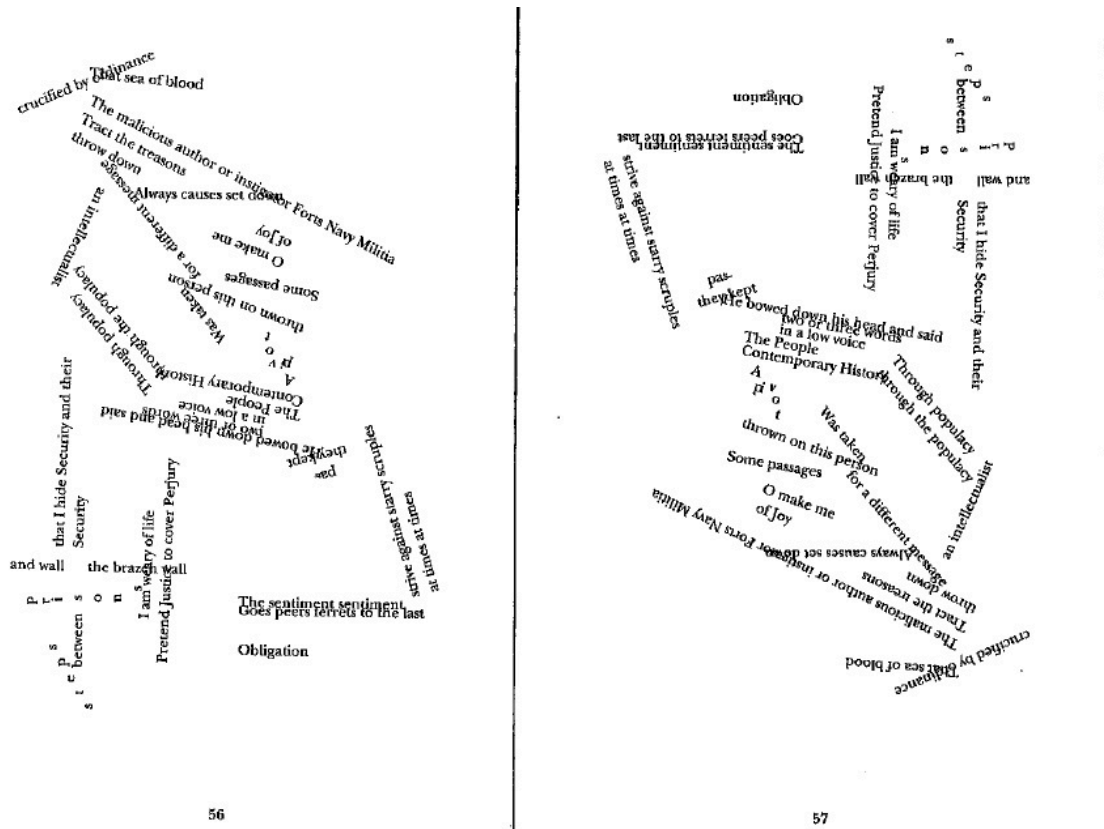


Figure 1. Susan Howe *A Bibliography of the King's Book or Eikon Basilike* 56-7

But there is something else at stake here, and that is in the context of Howe's oeuvre. In her previous two books, *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-mark*, she used material particulars, such as Dickinson's variants at the bottom of her fascicles or Shepard's blank pages in his autobiography, to demonstrate how editorial omission could alter a text's meaning (either an author's intention or some feature in the materials themselves). Though written in poetic prose, these were bibliographic arguments that exposed disparities between originals and transcriptions and challenged editorial practices. The definition of 'bibliographer' she includes in *Eikon Basilike* could apply to her role in her previous books:

<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, while the collage-poem may strike us as radically new, there were precursors that look surprisingly similar to Howe's. In his article on this book, Dworkin points out that the angles of the text resemble a page from Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), though he also points out that Howe claimed at the time not to have read Richardson's book (see 'Babble' 394).

‘one that writes about or is informed about books, their authorship, format, publication, and similar details’ (NM 57). But the encounter with Almack’s book pushes her to refine her conception of this role. A page later she asks, ‘Is he or she supposed to compile a set of authoritative texts that can withstand the charge of forgery, the test of time, the timeliness of libraries?’ (NM 57) If, in *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-mark*, editors like Higginson can be read as foils to Howe’s understanding of textual scholarship because they cared too little about the author (or held their author’s competence in too little esteem) then Almack is a foil in that he cared too much. Consider Almack’s view that

It will generally be found that the person who readily declares an opinion adverse to the King, and in favour of Gauden, has not read the Eikon. A touching pathos and simple dignity pervade every chapter. In reading these meditations, the King's subjects instantly recognised the stamp of the King's own character in every page. Running through every chapter there is a vein of calmness and patience, pre-eminently characteristic of Charles the First.<sup>43</sup>

Almack’s book compiles facsimiles of watermarked editions, in an obsessive search for an original or a trace of the King, but the authorship remains indeterminable. His interpretation is ultimately pure speculation. As Howe notes, ‘Pierre Machery’s description of the discourse in a fiction applies to the discourse in this bibliography: “sealed and interminably completed or endlessly beginning again, diffuse and dense, coiled about an absent centre which it can neither conceal nor reveal. The absent centre is the ghost of a king”’ (NM 58). The key word in Howe’s description is ‘this’, for it is not all bibliography she is critiquing, but this particular one. The *Eikon* is an albatross to any textual ontology or history of the book. Whether we think that it is the author that matters, the text that matters, the material versions that matter, or all of the above, we will meet only with unanswerable questions and innumerable material events.

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<sup>43</sup> Almack 4. Snippets of this text can be found in Howe’s poem. See, for example, ‘Stamp of the King’s/own character’ (NM 72).

Almack is a wonderfully charming writer who shows sympathy not only to King Charles I but to his readers. He wishes to relieve ‘the dull landscape’ of bibliography for the sake of the reader and often includes reflexive commentary such as, ‘the printer is constantly reminding me that this book will be too “fat” to look comely’.<sup>44</sup> But ultimately, Almack’s allegiance to royal authorship (recall the discussion in the Introduction about disinterested reading of materials) compromises his ability to make valuable inferences—or to abstain from making inferences—about this bibliographic puzzle. The only viable solution would seem to be Howe’s *non*-solution offered at the end of the book. Here she includes, on the penultimate page, an anecdote from *David Copperfield* in which ‘Mr. Dick’ covers a kite with manuscripts that have ‘some allusion to King Charles the First’s head’. The passage ends with Mr. Dick explaining, ‘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’ (*NM* 89). This act symbolically recreates the complicated material history of the *Eikon*. And, actually, insofar as the act of diffusing fact leaves things up to chance discovery, it is evocative of Howe’s elegaic materialism as well. While Howe’s work generally shows an allegiance to the author (she retorts to Foucault ‘I cannot murmur indifferently: “What’s it matter who’s speaking?” I emphatically insist it does matter who’s speaking’ (*B-M* 20). ) as well as an insistence that reading is a co-productive event, the *Eikon* renders the question of the author impossible, and so pushes this model of reading to its extremes of chance and subjective interpretation.<sup>45</sup> In this case, intention may always be apocryphal and indeterminable, but new readings can still be produced, or some forgotten aspect of the history brought to light. (Howe’s recovery of

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* 17

<sup>45</sup> Foucault quotes this line of Beckett’s in his essay ‘What is an Author?’ See *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 115, 138.

the book Yale discarded is one example of recovered material history.) As we see on the book's final page, the particulars are not only scattered but gathered anew:

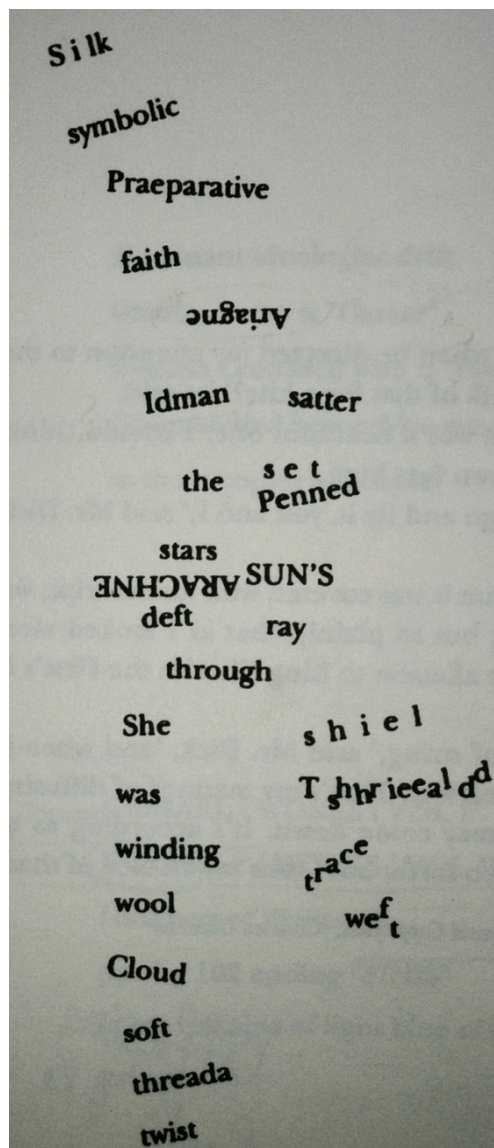


Figure 2. NM 90

By including 'ARACHNE' at the poem's center, Howe acknowledges her own hand at gathering and uniting particulars to her own ends. In Ovid Book VI, Arachne wins a weaving context against Athena, and the latter punishes her by turning her into a spider. If Howe is the better weaver in this competition, then it is because she emphasizes this deliberate craft while Almack views his own narrative to be an objective frame around a pure text, one that he is ultimately unable to find. 'ARACHNE' is also placed at the centre, the space in the collage-

poem that Howe typically reserves for words directed at the reader. We must turn the book 180 degrees to read it properly, thereby enacting our active participation in imposing a reading on the poem.<sup>46</sup> And indeed, other weaving words like ‘weft’ ‘wool’ ‘twist’ and ‘thread’ are present. The upside down word ‘Ariagne’ is a variant of Ariadne, another weaver, and also contains hints of *arraign*, a clear reference to the King’s trial. ‘SUN’s’ meanwhile is right-side-up and forms a homonymous allusion to Charles II, the royal *son* who sanctioned a reprinting of the King’s book—only one that had removed all the prayers (NM 57). The word ‘Praeparative’ indicates preparation, but it also contains hints of ‘prayer’ and ‘reparative’. If Yale’s Sterling Library no longer houses the bibliography that restores the prayers, then what will become of the alternate version of the *Eikon* which, regardless of its authenticity, was nevertheless a part of material history? Its facts will be deemed useless and thrown away—until they fall into the hands of a poet-weaver who gathers them into a new form, indeed, into [*Her*] *Eikon Basilike*.

Howe mentioned that in composing *Eikon Basilike*, she felt she ‘was crossing into visual art in some sections and that [she] had unleashed a picture of violence’ (B-M 165). This ‘crossing over’ thwarts the partitioning that is basic to the logic of Realism. To the extent that her collage-poems render both words and their order uncertain, they challenge our very notion of what constitutes a text. Some words are obfuscated and so appear to be different words to different readers. The lines also progress in different directions, orientations, and angles, so different readers will read them in different orders. And often, there is a kind of iconoclasm in that the image of the word seems ‘smashed’. (See Fig. 1) Words are either partially erased as in ‘pas[?]’ or overlaid as in ‘instigator/down’.

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<sup>46</sup> Dworkin points out the additional political nuances of this textual effect: ‘Howe’s poetry questions received perspectives and centers of power as it attempts to occupy, or at least to approximate, traditionally neglected positions: a point driven home when readers must physically rotate the page or crane their necks to make out exactly what is being said in a visually decentered field’ (‘Babble’ 397).

But once again, Howe's approach is dialectical, and while she questions the value-laden judgements about the utility of a text, she also acknowledges that to reach readers she must also rely on structures (words or narratives) that assent to shared meaning. If Howe's book dramatizes an instability of signs, then it also exhibits a curious faith in names. This gives *Eikon Basilike* a Nominalist-Realist tension of opposites. Kathleen Crown points out that Howe's *iconoclasm* paradoxically restores *iconicity* to the poem.<sup>47</sup> See how the overlapping of the lines above renders the poem a single unit of visual composition. This makes it holistic rather than a sequence of extricable lines. When we *look at* rather than read these compositions, they appear to be images of rupture and chaos. In other words, they appear to be icons of conflict or, as Howe has said, 'a picture of violence' (*B-M* 165). For Howe, who never truly gave up being a visual artist, 'a poem is an icon' (*B-M* 177).

But iconicity also manifests itself in linguistic and rhetorical ways. In Howe's *Eikon Basilike* we see this in words that seem to perform what they describe. In this case, the material signifier can no longer be said to be arbitrary because it appears to actually do or be what it means. See how the facing pages above (See Fig. 1), identical except for a clockwise rotation in 180 degrees, suggest that the poem has literally 'pivoted' around the words 'A pivot'. This phenomenon also recalls the conflation of meaning and materiality in Smithson's 'Heap of Language' as well as Howe's experimentation with onomatopoeia in her word-drawing 'the crackle of names', both of which were discussed in Chapter 2. Such features indicate that immaterial meanings can be inextricable from material signifiers.

The union of opposites is also signaled by the rhetorical figure of apostrophe. Apostrophe performs iconicity and iconoclasm through what Jonathan Culler calls 'the

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<sup>47</sup> Crown writes, 'Just as Howe's poem takes apart the unified lyric subject, opening itself to plural voices in order to radically reconstruct the lyric I-witness, it also shatters orthography, syntax and visual codes in order to *reassign* iconic status to the poem'. She is quick to qualify this claim by adding 'though certainly not as the mute, idealized "verbal icon" of New Criticism, bearing its own truth, independent of reader and writer' (Crown 493). See Bloomfield for an account of how this moment in English history bears striking parallels to The Antinomian Controversy.

apostrophic fiction: that the things of earth function as *thous* when addressed. If they are subjects they seek, like all subjects, to transcend a purely material condition, they aspire to transcendence.<sup>48</sup> He adds that apostrophe's basic structure is 'a reversible alternation between A' and B': a play of presence and absence governed not by time but by poetic power'.<sup>49</sup> Apostrophe transforms the concrete to the mystical and connects the living to the dead. As a 'reversible alternation' between terms, it resembles Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit and the countervailing aesthetic that runs throughout Howe's art and poetry.

And in fact apostrophe was important to Howe even in her early collages. Recall Howe's word-drawing 'all the ghostly gardens' and its refrain 'oh the cut and catch'. The line refers to nearly forgotten particulars from childhood, but it is also reflexive. The words 'cut' and 'catch' seem to describe the activity of collage, of cutting out words and particulars and 'catching' them by pasting them into place. Other occurrences of apostrophe in Howe's poetry show she uses the device to collapse or trouble the relation between referent and signifier. Consider her line, 'O syllable' (*ET* 142). Does the 'syllable' refer to the 'O' itself? What about, 'O sullen Silence' (*FS* 62)? Does the 'O' here negate its addressee's presence by the very act of its (spoken) address? And, perhaps most poignantly if not ominously, what is the effect when she asks, '*O cinders of Eve, what is my quest?*' (*ET* 166) Here the rhetorical figure's failure to animate the subject's image (it's Eve's *cinders* to which she speaks and not 'Eve' the ghost) underscores the reality that history has failed to represent women's lives in transcendent forms.<sup>50</sup>

If apostrophe is an apt device for Howe's poetics in general it is particularly so in *Eikon Basilike*. As 'a reversible alternation' between opposing elements it perfectly figures the search for a dead author's presence on paper. And as the collage-poem is a visual analog

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<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1981), 161

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* 161

<sup>50</sup> I will return to the subject of apostrophe in my discussion of *That This* in chapter 6. Will Montgomery also observes Howe's curious use of 'oh' in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (*The Poetry of Susan Howe*, 162).

of Nominalist-Realist or iconoclastic-iconic tensions, it is fitting that it should feature a rhetorical figure. It assists Howe in dramatizing the material-immaterial contradictions inherent in a bibliography like Almack's. Apostrophe also often addresses the unseen, such as in prayer. As prayer was the most hotly contested element in the *Eikon*, it is fitting that Howe would use apostrophe in this way in this book's first poem. (See Fig. 3)

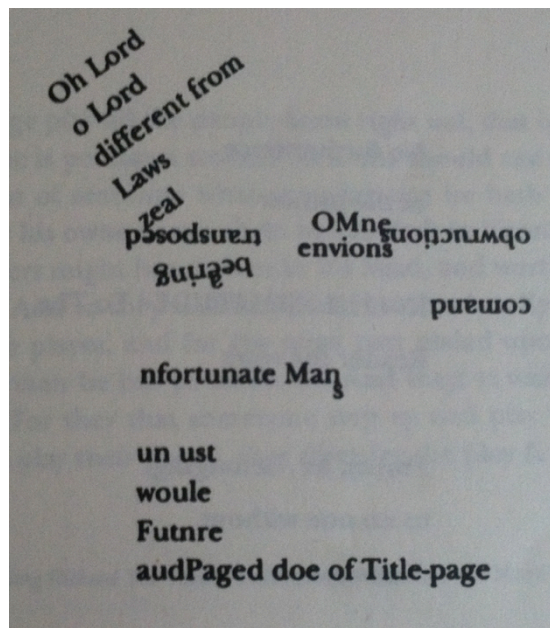


Figure 3. Susan Howe *A Bibliography of the King's Book or Eikon Basilike 59*

Here she writes 'Oh Lord/o Lord' as if to underscore the apostrophic function (by using both 'oh' and 'o') as well as to highlight the materiality of homonyms. Aurally, they are the same word; what if anything is signified by the visual difference? Another capital O is present in the word 'OMne' which is also an anagram of 'omen'.<sup>51</sup> These 'near apostrophes' such as we find in 'OMne', occur often in *Eikon Basilike*. In the first collage-poem above, for example, (refer back to fig. 1) we see 'O make me/of Joy' on each facing page. But then the 'O' of 'Obligation' or equally of the sideways-stacked letters in 'prisons' also seem to call out from the page in lyric address, especially in their reversed or rotated forms. The address is all the

<sup>51</sup> Anagrams are another way that Howe indicates meaning through materiality. She writes in *The Birth-mark* that Cotton Mather was attracted to the idea that they could 'cabalistically reveal God's hidden purpose' (*BM* 31).

more startling given that we assume this to be merely visual, citational collage. The more the poem gets disrupted, the more the ‘o’ wields lyric power. Indeed, ‘o’ is the only letter that can be rotated or reversed and still have the same symbolic function; it is impervious to rearrangement. It also, of course, is a representation of Nothing. The repeated use of apostrophe in this work may be Howe’s way of signaling that the only lyric truth of the *Eikon* is the absence at its centre.

In his conclusion to his essay on apostrophe, Culler writes,

Apostrophe must be repressed precisely because this high calling of poetry must not be seen to depend on a trope, an O. This trope proclaims its artificial character rather too obviously....However, the very brazenness with which apostrophe declares its strangeness is crucial, as indication that what is at issue is not a predictable relation between a signifier and a signified, a form and its meaning, but *the uncalculable force of an event*. Apostrophe is not the representation of an event; if it works, it produces a fictive, discursive event.<sup>52</sup>

Culler’s description of apostrophe sounds surprisingly like Howe’s description of a singularity. And in interviews Howe has called her visual experimentations in *Eikon Basilike* representations of singularities or ‘catastrophes of bifurcation’ (*B-M* 173-4). In nearly every collage-poem in this book, there is at least one incidence of apostrophe or near apostrophe. The context of the collage-poem makes the lyric’s archest trope strange; we confront the apparition of a voice in visual and acoustic chaos. And this discursive event, this ‘sudden leap into another situation’, as so often in Howe’s work, presents us with the figure of simultaneous presence and absence—the figure of a ghost (*B-M* 177).

In the context of bibliography—inherently concerned with materials—Howe’s Nominalist-Realist aesthetic engenders formal singularities of words that blur names and things, apostrophe that links inanimate to animate, and collage-poems that sit uncomfortably between reading and seeing. These vexed questions of authorship and textual ontology continue to be important throughout the rest of Howe’s career. And, as we shall see in the

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<sup>52</sup> Culler 169; my italics

next chapter, one of Howe's central tasks as an elegaic poet will be to document the material trace of an absent spirit, but this time in the wake of personal loss.

## Chapter 5.

### Document & Loss: Howe's Turn to Elegy

Howe's next publication after *The Birth-mark* in 1993 was 'Sorting Facts: or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker'. This long essay, inspired by the French documentary filmmaker, Chris Marker (1921 – 2012), contains some of Howe's most virtuosic writing. Though Howe calls it an essay, it often reads as a concatenated series of prose poems, and though it is ostensibly about Marker, it covers a host of related subjects, including the works of Russian filmmakers Dziga Vertov (1896 – 1954) and Andrei Tarkovsky (1932 – 1986) and, to a lesser extent, Sergei Eisenstein (1898 – 1948). Works by these filmmakers blended fact with fiction and innovated formal techniques such as montage and the incorporation of stills—techniques that became important to Howe as she contemplated the various overlaps with her own poetry. But at heart, 'Sorting Facts' is a philosophical meditation on grief and representation. After an epigraph from Dziga Vertov about facts, Howe tells us she was asked to write the essay 'because of a book I once wrote about Emily Dickinson's poetry' and 'I was drawn to the project because of the fact of my husband's death and my wish to find a way to document his life and work' (*SF* 5). It is therefore her first foray into elegy, and because she does this through a reflection on film techniques, it enables her to think through the tasks of the elegist in ways that lie outside of poetic tradition.

*Sorting Facts* is divided into nineteen sections ranging from half a page to twenty-two pages in length with the occasional incorporation of film stills. Although reissued by New Directions in 2013 as a stand-alone pamphlet, the essay first appeared in a 1996 anthology *Beyond Document: Essays on Non-fiction Film* that had a small print run and so was difficult to find.<sup>1</sup> Since the reissue, a number of reviews and responses discussed the ways that

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<sup>1</sup> *Beyond Document: Essays on Non-fiction Film*, ed. Charles Warren, intro. Stanley Cavell (New Haven: Wesleyan University Press, 1996). In my discussion I refer to the page numbers in the more widely available pamphlet edition by *New Directions*. In the introduction Cavell notes that all the contributors selected were

Howe's poetics parallel Marker's film techniques.<sup>2</sup> But *Sorting Facts* must be understood as a development that happened in the mid nineties, between her middle period and her late elegies. It is here that she first recognizes the importance of fact to her work—a feature that, like her skeptic-mysticism and overt interest in canonical writers, distinguishes her from her contemporaries. 'I work in the poetic documentary form, but didn't realize it until I tried to find a way to write an essay about two films by Chris Marker,' she tells us (*SF* 11). Howe has been characterized as a poet who writes 'poems including history' as Pound did in *The Cantos*, but it would be more apt to call her 'a documentary poet'.<sup>3</sup> Howe's poetry is less concerned with history than with the varieties of facts and the manner in which they are presented. She is especially interested in the kind of facts that are typically excluded from historical narrative. A close reading of key passages in *Sorting Facts*, in the context of her art historical context and textual materialism, illuminates how her encounter with poetic documentary film developed her conception of fiction and facticity as they pertain to document and loss—something that proves instrumental to all of her works to follow, especially as she turns increasingly to elegy.

### **'Factual Telepathy'**

The first section of *Sorting Facts* establishes the personal stakes for Howe's inquiry into documentary film technique. It also sets the stage for Howe to explore the nature of fact and introduces the notion of 'factual telepathy', a crucial imaginative construct for her poetics. Following her comment, quoted above, that she wished 'to find a way to document his life and works,' Howe gives a narrative about David's life in a single, lengthy paragraph. When

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outside the film industry as they wished to elicit a range of epistemological, aesthetic, and political considerations (xxiii).

<sup>2</sup> See for example Drake Stutesman, 'Without Words, What Are Facts?: Looking at Susan Howe Looking at Marker', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 53.2 (Fall 2012): 429-466 or Rebecca Ariel Porte, 'All that is the Case: on Susan Howe's Chris Marker', *LA Review of Books*, Web. 29 (March 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Pound writes 'An epic is a poem including history' ('Date Line', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 86).

we read it closely we appreciate a struggle between an intimate expression of her grief and a desire to authenticate his life through formal language. At first the tone is matter-of-fact: ‘David von Schlegell was a second-generation American with a German name. He was born in St. Louis in 1920.’ But then it shifts a few sentences later, where Howe interjects the observation ‘he was young and healthy enough to be cannon fodder, so from 1943 to 1945 he served as a bomber pilot and armament-systems officer in the Eighth Air Force.’ The sentence begins and ends with such precise historical detail (dates and titles) that it reads as an encyclopedia entry or obituary. There is one exception, however. ‘Cannon fodder’ jumps out as an informal and pejorative phrase, an ironic distancing maneuver perhaps, whereby the narrator, in admitting to the harsh realities of war, wryly trivializes the value of human life. It is a small detail, but it complicates the authenticity and tone of the passage. Is this a series of facts or perceptions?

Further down the page we read indisputable facts such as ‘After the war he studied painting with his father at the Art Students League’ followed by subjective statements like, ‘He was a shy person’. The shifting degrees of objectivity make it difficult to establish the nature of this account. What do we make of statements such as ‘It could be said this wound just above his left hand saved his life, because he was hospitalized for several months and then honorably discharged’? Does the qualification ‘It could be said’ make this deduction a *fact*? Further down, a seemingly objective statement, ‘Toward the end of his life he had to stop sailing because of severe arthritis in his knees, but he could still row’, is followed by an interjection of nostalgia: ‘I liked to watch how he feathered the oars to glide back. Little whirlpools formed where the oar blades tipped under: their entry clean as their exit’ (*SF* 5-6).

How are we to reconcile the nature of these statements, which seem at times objective, at times subjective, at times something between the two. It affects the way we store and process the words we read and our ideas about the person who wrote them. ‘These are

only some facts,' Howe tells us, and immediately follows with, 'He had a stroke and died three days later on Monday, October 5, 1992, at 5.a.m.' Again, the precision of detail and 'matter-of-fact' tone is reminiscent of an encyclopedia entry. But the passage, the series of 'facts', contains interjections of information that is at times hypothetical, subjective, or private. There is, in other words, a discursive tension in the rhetoric where something else seems wanting to be said. These tonal shifts indicate a central paradox in Howe's writing, which is the desire to make words serve as definitive proof that someone or something existed despite her belief that faithful representation is impossible. This paradox has always been a feature of Howe's writing, only now the stakes have shifted to the life of a lost loved one.

'Every photograph is a certificate of presence', wrote Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*.<sup>4</sup> Unlike a photograph, literature cannot prove a person's existence. Howe's encounter with documentary film enabled her to confront the limits of her own medium. Dates, times, names, and locations can be forged or subject to error. What words can do, however, is point to their own lapses. And herein lies Howe's poetics of singularity. This is made poignant by Howe's observation that David, in his last days in the hospital, couldn't speak or write and was confined to making gestures. 'Without words what are facts?' asks Howe, and follows with

In my writing, I have often explored ideas of what constitutes an official version of events as opposed to a former version in imminent danger of being lost.

Sorting word-facts I know only an apparition. Scribble grammar has no neighbor. In the name of reason I need to record something because I am a survivor in this ocean.

That's why I agreed to meddle in a foreign discipline. (*SF* 7)

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<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 87

Howe faces the representational inadequacies of written narrative anew, only this time it conflicts with her need to record a life and to ‘redeem’ her own survival through her art.<sup>5</sup> ‘After the loss of your closest companion there has to be some sort of redemption,’ Howe said later in an interview, ‘I say redemption because you feel guilty for surviving.’ Ultimately, she will find her redemption through new books of poetry and new artifice, from techniques she adapts from poetic documentary film.

But before moving on to discuss these specific techniques, I wish to consider the closing line of this first section, in which Howe makes one of the essay’s most enigmatic and important claims. Howe writes, ‘Surely nonfiction filmmakers sometimes work intuitively by factual telepathy. I call poetry *factual telepathy*.’ (SF 7) Here some clarification and background is needed about what Howe means by ‘telepathy’. An important source text for Howe’s thinking on the subject was Nicholas Royle’s *Telepathy and Literature*.<sup>6</sup> In this study, Royle uses nineteenth-century conceptions of telepathy to discuss, among other texts, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *Daniel Deronda*. He frames his argument by drawing on the original definition of telepathy given by Fredric Myers at a meeting of the Society for Psychical Research in London in December 1882. Here ‘telepathy’ and ‘teleshia’ were said to cover all cases of ‘*impression received at a distance without the normal operation of the recognized sense organs*.’<sup>7</sup> According to Royle, telepathy also overlapped with nineteenth-century notions of sympathy, in the writings of Adam Smith who said ‘we sympathize even with the dead’ or in the Romantic poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth.<sup>8</sup> Building on this, Royle expands his own working definition to include 1) the

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Howe, ‘An Open Field: Susan Howe in Conversation’, Interview with The Academy of American Poets, 2011, <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/open-field-susan-howe-conversation> [Accessed 12 January 2013]

<sup>6</sup> In an interview with Howe in July 2010 she informed me that Royle’s book was a significant influence on her work. She also included the book on her syllabus when teaching a course at SUNY Buffalo in 1992. See <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/howe/syllabi/undergradtrans92.html> [Accessed 12 January 2013]

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 2

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* 128

‘intertextual space in which literary texts uncannily correspond with one another’ and 2) a ‘critical” discourse attendant on the discourse of literature.’<sup>9</sup>

As such, ‘telepathy’ can be understood to be, first, an imaginative construct for transference between a writer and her audience (readers, other writers, and critics), and second, as a construct for transference between the living and the dead. But whereas Royle speaks of ‘impressions’, Howe explicitly states that poetry is *factual* telepathy. Does she mean facts received at a distance? Indeed, the phrase ‘factual telepathy’ seems almost an oxymoron; ‘factual’ connotes objective truth while ‘telepathy’ seems to rely wholly on subjectivity if not mysticism. ‘Telepathy’ appeared once before in Howe’s oeuvre, in ‘Melville’s Marginalia’ where she writes that she ‘knew by shock of poetry telepathy the real James Clarence Mangan is the progenitor of fictional Bartleby’ (NM 115). In other words, her notion of ‘telepathy’ has to do with chance discoveries of facts rather than intentionally sought out ones. To elaborate on this idea, I turn to another nineteenth-century conception of telepathy, only this time from William James.

In *Essays on Psychological Research*, a book that Howe has cited in her poetry, James reports his research on telepathy to the Society for Psychological Research, paying particular attention to the nature and role of fact.<sup>10</sup> In an 1890 essay titled ‘What Psychological Research has Accomplished’, James writes,

Facts are there only for those who have a mental affinity with them. When once they are indisputably ascertained and admitted, the academic and critical minds are by far the best fitted ones to interpret and discuss them—for surely to pass from mystical to scientific speculations is like passing from lunacy to sanity; but on the other hand if there is anything which human history demonstrates, it is the extreme slowness with which the ordinary academic and critical mind acknowledges facts to exist which present themselves as wild facts, with no stall or pigeonhole, or as facts which threaten to break up the accepted system. In psychology, physiology, and medicine, wherever a debate between the mystics and the scientifics has been once for all

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* 25-6

<sup>10</sup> In an interview in January 2012 Howe told me this book was her primary reference for her conception of telepathy. She also names a poem sequence after one of his essays. See ‘Echloalia in Mrs. Piper’, *The Chicago Review* 56.4 (Winter 2012).

decided, it is the mystics who have usually proved to be right about the *facts*, while the scientifics had the better of it in respect to the theories.<sup>11</sup>

According to James, only a mind free of theory can apprehend the ‘wild facts’ that ‘threaten to break up the accepted system’—an apt description of Howe’s singularities (recall especially the passage about ‘Accidentals’ in her word-drawing, where isolated occurrences defy categorization).<sup>12</sup> What James goes on to call ‘facts of the sort dear to mystics’ also recalls Kant’s vision of aesthetic judgement discussed in the introduction, where certain particulars are perceptible only because one views objects as ends in themselves, rather than to the end of a pre-existing concept. ‘Factual telepathy’ then can be understood as the method by which Howe apprehends the facts she uses to stage interruptions in historical narrative. By adopting the hypothesis that something is missing then sifting through materials at random, she—like the documentary filmmakers she discusses—is able to chance upon found materials. And with regard to this moment in her poetic career, such a construct is of utmost importance because she must now find the new particulars that will redeem her as an elegist.

### **Weaving Fact with Fiction**

Sections II - IXX of *Sorting Facts* draw together anecdotes about filmmakers and poets, their respective techniques, and historical events. References to Howe’s loss appear intermittently as reminders of the personal stakes of the project. The second section briefly summarizes Marker’s *Sans Soleil* and *La Jetée*—his best-known films but also the ones that deal most

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<sup>11</sup> William James, *Essays on Psychical Research*, eds. Gardner Murphy and Robert O. Ballou, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), 27-8; italics in original.

<sup>12</sup> See chapter 2. ‘Factual telepathy’ also nicely parallels Benjamin’s description of the ‘dialectical image’ that can ‘blast open the continuum of history’ (Walter Benjamin. *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 262). In a section of the projected *Arcades Project* provisionally labeled ‘N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]’, Walter Benjamin described what he called a ‘dialectical image’: ‘When thinking reaches a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions, the dialectical image appears. The image is the caesura in the movement of thought....The dialectical image is, accordingly, the very object constructed in the materialist presentation of history’ (*Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 43-83, 67). The relevance of this particular contribution of Benjamin’s thought to Susan Howe’s work is detailed in Paul Naylor’s ‘Writing History Poetically: Walter Benjamin and Susan Howe’, *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 28:3 (1995): 323-38; 326.

explicitly with the weaving of fact and fiction. *Sans Soleil* (1983) is a full-length travel documentary, but it is framed by a voiceover of a woman reading letters of a fictional traveller named Sandor Krasna. Sometimes the letters correspond directly to the footage and other times they make more general reflections on history and memory. It is easy to appreciate why Howe was initially told that ‘*Sans Soleil* wasn’t about poetry; it was poetry’.<sup>13</sup> Often the writing resembles Howe’s own essays. The letters evince a kind of aesthetics of the thrown away, for example, as when Krasna writes, ‘Who remembers all that? History throws its empty bottles out the window.’ But the most significant resonance with Howe’s poetry is the treatment of fact and fiction. ‘Memory is a fiction,’ Krasna tells us, and ‘we rewrite memory much as history is rewritten.’ Ultimately Marker, like Howe, wants to draw our attention to fact that aspects of actuality are inevitably forgotten by each narrative representation that claims to represent it.

If *Sans Soleil* is a poetic documentary then *La Jetée* (1962) is, in Howe’s reading, an allegory of the documentary poet. This short, 28-minute film, what Marker called a ‘cinéroman’, is composed almost entirely of stills. The story features a man who was unusually moved by images. After the third World War, in an unspecified time in the future in which much of the world’s population has been annihilated, a group of subterranean-dwelling scientists recruit him to be part of a time travel experiment where he is sent to mine the past’s resources. Although a fictional film, it proves vital to Howe’s understanding of documentary.

She writes,

Marker’s use of photograms and freeze frames in this film that calls itself a fiction is a compelling documentation of the interaction and multiple connections perceived separately and at once between lyric poetry and murderous history. That’s the secret meaning. (*SF* 30)

The normal progression of film footage, where frames move forward at a speed faster than is perceptible to the human eye, gives the illusion of continuum. Such linear visual narrative has

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<sup>13</sup> *SF* 46. Howe mentions in this passage that she initially thought to write about the PBS series on Modern Poetry but that her friend the Canadian filmmaker Mike Cartmell suggested she look at Marker.

no gaps and therefore appears to produce a faithful record of reality; it appears to document it. For this reason Howe calls it ‘murderous’; other versions and other lives are sacrificed by historical narrative and there is no indication of—indeed no *marker* for—that which is lost.<sup>14</sup> The use of stills, on the other hand, interrupts that continuum. In Howe’s reading, stills are akin to lyric poetry because they are non-narrative; freeze-frames, like most lyric, are atemporal and immediate. Time passes yet events go unrecorded. Stills and lyric are murderous in their own way (hence the ‘interaction and multiple connections’), but by interrupting the flow of narrative they form a marker for what is left out.

Throughout her oeuvre, Howe indicates her awareness that she is taking from the past what will serve her art in the present.<sup>15</sup> Howe’s reading of the film, therefore, suggests that this man who is ‘marked by an image from childhood’ and who travels through time to mine the past for the present is himself a documentary poet—perhaps a stand in for Marker and, in turn, a double for Howe. In *La Jetée* the past treats the time traveler as a welcome ghost; the future, however, regards him with distrust. The past is always at our mercy, for us to steal from at will and in so doing to reshape and determine. But poets and image-keepers are at the mercy of the future that tends toward a presentism of its own, wanting only to take from rather than give to the past. Howe then adds a new dimension to this analogy between film and history:

...I knew it by telepathy in 1948 when I was eleven and first saw the movie of *Hamlet*. Andre Bazin says in “Theater and Cinema”: “When a character moves off screen, we accept the fact he is out of sight, but he continues to exist in his own capacity at some other place in the décor which is hidden from us. There are no wings to the screen.” (SF 30)

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<sup>14</sup> The word ‘mark’ is important throughout Howe’s writing and is also the name of her father and her son. In *Sorting Facts* she alludes to her attraction to the work of Chris Marker (a pseudonym) on account of his last name: ‘I had just finished writing *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*. Marker collided with birth-mark; the assumed name struck home’ (SF 46).

<sup>15</sup> In *Singularities*, for example, she identifies with Hope Atherton who accompanied a colonial militia to attack a camp of Indians, citing this event as ‘an emblem foreshadowing a Poet’s abolished limitations in our demythologized fantasy of Manifest Destiny’ (S 4). And in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, she will later write that her art ‘may suggest vampirism because while I like to think I write for the dead, I also take my life as a poet from their lips, their vocalisms, their breath’ (SLT 16). She also includes Marker as someone for whom scapegoating is an inevitable part of their art: ‘Murder is a cipher in the word “Marker”,’ writes Howe (SF 57).

Here we have a ‘factual telepathy’ where a transference of aesthetic meaning occurs across a temporal distance. The significance of the Bazin quote can be best understood if we consider its context. In ‘Theatre and Cinema’ he discusses cinema’s ‘specific illusion, which is to make of a revolver or of a face the very center of the universe.’<sup>16</sup> The young Howe understood this fundamental difference when she saw the movie of *Hamlet*. Cinema introduced its ‘specific illusion’, which meant that there were no off-stage ‘wings’ where actors existed even when they were not part of the narrative in focus. The ‘wings’ for Howe are a metaphor for the margins of historical narrative. They are markers for the aspects of actuality that continue to exist even though they may not be featured in historical narrative.<sup>17</sup>

According to Bazin, when theatre is filmed, one cannot help but notice that ‘something is missing’—not only the wings of the stage, but also the solidity of the characters’ bodies. ‘No matter how slight this difference,’ writes Bazin, ‘it undoubtedly exists, even between the worst charity production in the theater and the most brilliant of Olivier’s film adaptations.’<sup>18</sup> Both mediums have their various illusions and artifice, but his point is that theatre requires more active participation and ‘opposition’ whereas cinema requires passive participation and ‘identification’. The filmmakers Howe has chosen for this essay are all devoted, in different ways, to intervening the illusions of cinematography and transparent narrative, to constructing an experience that requires active participation.

As in Howe’s writing, these poetic documentaries draw their particular strength not from asserting veracity, but from the various ways they make transparent illusions apparent. The weaving of fact with fiction is one of the ways they acknowledge that fact is always subject to interpretation and storytelling. This is the hallmark of Chris Marker, and it is also the point of Howe’s interest in Vertov and Tarkovsky. Poetic documentary simultaneously

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<sup>16</sup> Bazin 105

<sup>17</sup> The theatre has been especially important to Howe as she was an actress in Dublin for a year before going to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. See her interview with Janet Ruth Fallon, *The Difficulties* 3.2 (1989): 28-42.

<sup>18</sup> Bazin 98

incorporates actual footage, ‘real facts’ which are in danger of being forgotten, with larger fictionalized frameworks (such as Krasna’s letters or, as we shall see, the dream-like sequences in Tarkovsky’s autobiography *Mirror*, or Vertov’s highly stylized tribute to Lenin) that are blatantly altered if not fictionalized.

The aesthetic encourages us to contemplate the ontology of fiction and fact. But of course fact in film is different from fact in writing. ‘Compared to facts words are only nets,’ writes Howe (*SF* 45). Facts trump the truth-function of words, but they are also (typically) made up of them. To repeat Howe’s previous question: ‘Without words what are facts?’ Howe’s confrontation with her husband David’s inability to communicate in his final days forces her to consider what a non-verbal fact might be. The meditation on the ontology and typology of fact continues throughout *Sorting Facts*, and is explored most fully in the essay’s third section. Here she tells us that Dziga Vertov

considered Mayakovsky’s aesthetics of poetry to be closely identified with his own aspirations for radical change in film production: change that would emphasize the primacy of the “factual.” The essence of fact was to be found in the poetry of reality; in material objects. (*SF* 9)

*Material* facts are here taken to be the baseline of facticity, an unmediated or purely aesthetic fact. On the one hand, Howe’s citation suggests that the truest facts consist of concrete particulars. But on the other hand, even material facts must still be interpreted if they are to be woven into a cinematic or poetic narrative. Which leads Howe to include, on the very next page, an obsolete definition of ‘document’ that begins ‘TEACH, SCHOOL, INSTRUCT....’ and then to add that under ‘“documentary adj.” the compilers, assemblers, or typographers have set the words “FACTUAL, OBJECTIVE, REPRESENTATIONAL” in caps (*SF* 11). Her observation of the nuance implies that a documentary purports to be objective when it may actually be concocted to school or instruct.<sup>19</sup> Mayakovsky’s and Vertov’s works were of course responding to a specific political context leading up to and following the October

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<sup>19</sup> Howe’s emphasis on the various hands involved (‘compilers, assemblers, or typographers’) recalls the verbal constructivism in her collages and the historicization of print we saw in the previous chapter.

Revolution. But what resonates with Howe's aesthetic is the way Constructivists conceived of the relation between particulars and ideologies. They force us to ask *whose* facts? Or simply to acknowledge that 'Facts are perceptions of surfaces' (*SF* 32).

The incorporation of fictive elements into non-fiction footage makes us keenly aware of the disparity between fact and fiction (or indeed the spectrum between them) so that viewers can be active participants in film. In Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and *Three Songs About Lenin*, shots of real people at work and at play are spliced together, often with dramatic stylistic effects—fast motion, slow motion, reverse motion, montage, stills, and split-screens. Vertov's techniques (about which I will have more to say shortly) impose the fictional subjectivity of the cameraman and editors onto scenes that are otherwise strikingly real. We can easily see how these films, like Marker's *Sans Soleil*, contain aspects of both fact and fiction. What isn't so apparent is why Howe would include Tarkovsky in this group of poetic documentary filmmakers. Marker was very influenced by him (his 1999 film *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich* was an homage to Tarkovsky), but otherwise Tarkovsky is known for making dream-like films with spiritual and metaphysical themes, films like *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) or *Solaris* (1972) which were adaptations of literary works, or his masterpiece, *Mirror* (1975), which is a surreal depiction of memories from his own life.<sup>20</sup> In other words, films which are wholly fictional or fictionalized. He is certainly *poetic* in that regard, but why does Howe include him in this group of poetic *documentarians*?

In fact, as Howe tells us in section XI, the longest and most virtuosic of the nineteen sections, Tarkovsky's *Mirror* include a sequence of newsreel shots. As he recounts in his memoir, he had been feeling that something was missing from his lyrical autobiography and so searched through 'found footage' until he chanced upon something he felt was perfect: a shot of Russian soldiers crossing Lake Sivash in 1943, what he characterizes as 'one of the

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<sup>20</sup> *Ivan's Childhood* is an adaptation of the 1957 short story 'Ivan' by Vladimir Bogomolov and *Solaris* is an adaptation of the 1961 novel by the same name written by Stanislaw Lem.

most dramatic moments of the Soviet advance'.<sup>21</sup> Howe includes the following excerpt from Tarkovsky's memoir, *Sculpting in Time*:

suddenly—quite unheard of for a newsreel—here was a record of one of the most dramatic moments in the history of the Soviet advance of 1943. It was a unique piece; I could hardly believe that such an enormous footage of film should have been spent recording one single event continuously observed. It had clearly been filmed by a gifted camera-man. When, on the screen before me, there appeared, as if coming out of nothing, these people shattered by the fearful, inhuman effort of that tragic moment of history, I knew that this episode had to become the centre, the very essence, heart, nerve of this picture that had started off merely as my intimate lyrical memories (*FS* 32-3; *ST* 130)

Howe tells us that Tarkovsky notes in his memoir that the unnamed cameraman was killed the next day. This imparts an eerie ghostliness onto the footage. Howe places the passage after her observation about Olivier's *Hamlet* and after mentioning that Tarkovsky once directed *Hamlet* in 1967. As we know from *Pythagorean Silence* and *Eikon Basilike*, references to *Hamlet* in Howe's oeuvre signal the entrance of a ghost.

Tarkovsky, Howe tells us, was advised by the Soviet chief of State Cinema to remove the newsreel because 'the scene showed too much suffering' (*SF* 33). And immediately following this detail, Howe includes two captured images from the film footage (See Fig. 1),



Figure 1. Images from *Sorting Facts* 33

then adds,

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<sup>21</sup> Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (London: The Bodley Head, 1966), 130

When, almost halfway through the film, the director begins to introduce the various black-and-white newsreel documentary inserts, they telescope together, binding his memory-time of youth to the actual geopolitical chain of violence, seemingly everywhere during the second half of the twentieth century. The archival inserts are sometimes shown at a slower speed, sometimes with ‘wild recording’ faked later. (*SF* 33-4)

Howe’s inclusion of the footage immediately after the comment that the State advised that it be removed subtly demonstrates a resistance to the censorship of power structures. As Sandor Krasna says in *Sans Soleil*, ‘Censorship is the show.’ Or, put differently, the control of facts is the show. Tarkovsky insisted on keeping the footage—not to inflict uncomfortable scenes onto the audience, but rather to consecrate a space for persons who would otherwise be forgotten and to remind us of the many other unnamed soldiers and persons history will not mourn.

Howe’s passage exhibits a sensitive reading of Tarkovsky’s film, but it can also be read as a projection of her own poetics. *Mirror*, in other words, becomes Howe’s mirror; she sees herself in Tarkovsky’s depiction of his youth. In her exquisite introduction to *Frame Structures*, written the same year as *Sorting Facts*, she recounts her first memory: hearing the news of the Pearl Harbor bombing while with her father, who would soon after depart for battle (*FS* 3). Tarkovsky’s father also left for the war when the filmmaker was a child. Howe quotes from a scene in *Mirror* where the young boy says, ‘I just dreamed of you mama. By the way when did father leave us? (*SF* 36)’ Howe’s choice to call the newsreel footage ‘archival inserts’ also betrays her own poetics and the incorporation of document in her own works. And finally, Howe’s observation that Tarkovsky’s ‘archival inserts’ bind ‘his memory-time of youth with the actual geopolitical chain of violence’ is an apt description of how she weaves history with personal memory in autobiographical works like *Pythagorean Silence* or the Introduction to *Frame Structures*. In both subject matter and method, then, Tarkovsky’s *Mirror* is a mirror for the deepest principles of Howe’s poetics.

To return to the newsreel sequence, Howe follows the description of it (quoted above) with the line ‘Sent-back poems from the invisible side of events’ (*SF* 34). ‘The invisible side of events’ here is the witness of the dead cameraman, unnamed in Tarkovsky’s memoir. His nearly vanished memories, like Howe’s own archival inserts, are ‘poems’ because they are outlying facts transmitted from a distance, echoing Howe’s concept of ‘factual telepathy’. Howe stresses that it was Tarkovsky’s feeling of ‘missing an essential vision or fact or memory’, combined with ‘an improvisational way of working’ that allowed him to chance upon the factual footage that held his works together (*SF* 32). It is the same method that we see in Howe’s elegaic materialism.

As I discussed in chapter 4, it is often through juxtaposition and tacit implication that Howe’s essays make their finest arguments. It is therefore not surprising that she observes a similar operation at work in *Mirror*:

The newsreel filmed by the anonymous cameraman at Lake Sivash acts as an open parenthesis for the tragicomic autobiographical episode in which evacuated boys, at target practice in an icy outdoor rifle-range, play a cruel joke on their shell-shocked military instructor. He has no name either. (*SF* 34)

Tracing a thematic parallel between the two scenes, one historical footage and the other fictionalized autobiography, she figures this juxtaposition as ‘an open parenthesis’.<sup>22</sup> Her observation provides an apt way of looking at her own compositions as verbal scenes linked together by ‘an open parenthesis’ of associative operations or possible causal relation.

But Howe is quick to point out that although the sequence of fact and fiction is grafted and ‘telescoped together’, the ontological difference between them is still important. She makes this distinction clear in the next paragraph which begins:

In fact authentic documentary material blighted the hearts of children all over the world who came to consciousness enveloped by threatened futurity, during the non-nuclear and then nuclear 1940s. We were alert to the subliminal disjunction between

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<sup>22</sup> The phrase also recalls the open parentheses of Charles Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ (‘(projectile (percussive (prospective’) which I’ve mentioned was key for Howe’s understanding of the visual logic of the page (Charles Olson, *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), 16; I discussed the relevance of Olson’s poetics to Howe’s word-drawings in chapter 2).

actual and fictional cinematographic realism shown in theaters (never called cinemas) because no one had television at home. (*SF* 34)

According to Howe, it is really the ‘subliminal disjunction’ between fact and fiction that forms the force of the poetic documentary, the tension that holds the collaged composition together. Earlier in the essay she noted that Vertov had ‘listed among forbidden battle techniques of a documentarist: “Substituting the appearance of truth for truth itself” (*KE* 216)’ (*SF* 24). But one wonders if in works that blend fact and fiction one doesn’t encounter truth that gets mistaken for the appearance of truth. Interestingly, while the delineation between newsreel footage and fiction in *Mirror* was clear for Howe, it was not clear for all viewers. In his memoir, Tarkovsky notes that he received letters from viewers who had thought the newsreel footage was ‘reconstructed’.<sup>23</sup> Howe reads such conflation as a curiosity (if not a malady) of the times, prompting her to wonder if it isn’t due to later generations having ‘television at home’. She and Tarkovsky (a near contemporary) had encountered real war footage during intermissions of feature films; they became attuned to the contrast. All of Howe’s work calls readers to a greater awareness of the fiction within facts and the fact within fiction. And for Howe, the commitment to discerning them also has an elegaic function. Howe tells us that Melanie Klein, in responding to Freud’s classic text ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, wrote that ‘mourning is the pain experienced in the slow process of testing reality’ (*SF* 29). Sorting fact from fiction, and all the types of facts between, Howe learns to face the truth of loss while also embracing the power of artifice to transform it.

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<sup>23</sup> Tarkovsky 130

## Cinematic and Literary Montage

The formal cinematic technique that Howe most frequently discusses in *Sorting Facts* is montage.<sup>24</sup> In the 1920s, Sergei Eisenstein pioneered the use of montage—or the technique of splicing together film shot at different times or locations, often employing jump cuts, stop motion, fast or slow motion, split-screens, and stills. Howe begins section XIII by quoting from his essay ‘The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram’ in which he writes ‘So, montage is conflict’ (*SF* 46). Eisenstein holds that ‘montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots’ and that ‘each sequential element is perceived not *next* to the other, but on *top* of the other’.<sup>25</sup> In his view, juxtaposed oppositions highlight the tensions of material life that bring about cultural production. Eisenstein’s film *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (1928), which was commissioned by the Soviet government to celebrate the Revolution, is a classic reference piece for montage. Montage became important to a number of Soviet filmmakers of the period. Dziga Vertov, for example, wrote that montage

means organizing film fragments (shots) into a film-object. It means “writing” something cinematic with the recorded shots. It does not mean selecting the fragments for “scenes” (the theatrical bias) or for titles (the literary bias).<sup>26</sup>

Although the precise characterization of the technique differed, Soviet montage of the period was a revolutionary aesthetic. According to Annette Michelson, around the time of the October revolution ‘montage thinking became “inseparable from dialectical thinking as a

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<sup>24</sup> In *These Fragments I Have Shored: Collage and Montage in Early Modernist Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), Andrew Clearfield distinguishes between the formal attributes of collage and montage in modern poetry, arguing for differences in logical, temporal, and spatial order (Clearfield 7). In *Sorting Facts* Howe uses the terms ‘collage’ and ‘montage’ interchangeably, and so do I. In so far as Howe’s collages (her word-drawings, essays, and collage-poems) have always focused on *marginal* facts and materials, they share much in common with the political aims of montage and so may be viewed as a hybrid of both. Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* could be viewed similarly: ‘Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them’ (Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 60).

<sup>25</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969), 49

<sup>26</sup> Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: the Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. and intro. by Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 87

whole.”<sup>27</sup> Howe’s own dialectics, which are unique to printed language and the material-immaterial oppositions they imply, are quite different from the dialectical materialism of the Soviet filmmakers. Nevertheless, her aesthetics overlap with Soviet montage insofar as both constitute a materialist assault on totality.

The montage aesthetic is of course resonant with Howe’s early art and her collage-poems. As I discussed in chapter 1, artists like Agnes Martin were assembling collages of discarded items before they turned to painting. Collage was important to modernist painters like Braques, Picasso, and Dadaists like Schwitters who incorporated everyday materials such as newspapers, cardboard, and bottlecaps into their compositions. Important to the collage aesthetic was both the emphasis on the ‘found object’ and the artist’s own arrangement. In Howe’s early collages we saw how visual balance and arrangement created new meaning. The same logic of suggestion through juxtaposition is also present in her prose essays such as *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-mark* as well as in the prose of *Sorting Facts*. Howe pushes this logic to an extreme in her collage-poems that blur the boundary between text and visual art.

Throughout *Sorting Facts* we see Howe thinking through the applications of montage techniques in literature. She argues that many writers and poets throughout history were applying similar techniques without having a name for it. Howe tells us, for example, that she once ‘plucked’ Eisenstein’s quote ‘So, montage is conflict’ to use as an epigraph to an essay about Charles Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael*. Howe writes:

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s sudden death shocked Olson into completing the book he had been unable to pull together for years. Now he started over, cutting, juxtaposing and compressing his material in a radically new way. It was finished ‘before the 1<sup>st</sup> A-bomb, 1<sup>st</sup> week that August.’ (*SF* 47)

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<sup>27</sup> Michelson, Introduction, *Kino-eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xxvi. For an in-depth discussion of Eisenstein’s view of montage see Michelson’s article ‘Camera Lucida/Camera Obscura’, *Artforum* 11.5 (January 1973): 30-37.

According to Howe, it was Olson's grief that gave him renewed energy for his project; it was also because of grief that he turned to montage.<sup>28</sup> Here we see both the redemption through artifice and the gathering of material particulars (in this case facts and quotations) that we know to be important to mourning.<sup>29</sup> Howe also finds literary montage in Olson's subject, Herman Melville. She tells us that he used 'Short cuts, mixed credits, news items, archival material, nonfictitious science, science fiction, pulp fiction, travel narratives, epigraphs, ballads, and passages from the Bible' (*SF* 47). She later ventures, 'Is the Melville who wrote *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Redburn*, "The Encantadas," and "Benito Cereno" a travel writer, a beachcomber, a reporter, or a poet? *Moby-Dick* is a poetic documentary fiction on a grand scale' (*SF* 48). Howe adds Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman to this list of writers who used literary montage, arguing that their writing practices involved 'constantly interweaving traces of the past to overcome restrictions of temporal framing' (*SF* 48). And she later comments 'Often I think of Dickinson's handwritten manuscripts as "Drawings in motion. Blueprints in motion. Plans for the future. The theater of relativity of the screen"', aligning manigraphic detail with Vertov's description of montage (*SF* 48). For Howe, literary montage is not only intertextual and associative, it deliberately works against linear time and crosses literary genres. It also, in the case of Dickinson's manuscripts, crosses over into visual art.

But Howe's instinct for cutting and rearranging literary elements is not limited to just quotations, sentences, or even phrases. Beneath the paragraphs about literary montage, Howe writes,

Seventeenth-and eighteenth-century American Puritan theologians and historians like Roger Williams, Anne Bradstreet, and Cotton Mather were obsessed with anagrams.

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<sup>28</sup> There is a subtle implication here also about the growth of Cold War politics instigated by FDR's death and the turn to montage aesthetics which had its roots in dialectical materialism. Howe has stated that she has no background in Marxist theory (*BM* 159), nevertheless the resistance to 'Cold War sadism' was crucial to the cross-disciplinary experiments of her and her visual art cohort in the '60s and '70s (*FS* 28).

<sup>29</sup> I discussed the connection between grief and particulars in the Introduction. See also Louise O. Fradenburg's article ' "Voice Memorial": Loss and Reparation in Chaucer's Poetry', *Exemplaria* 2:1 (March 1990): 169-202.

Seventeenth-century American Puritans were iconoclasts and animists at once. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, H.D., Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Charles Olson, and John Cage are among many North American writers who inherit this feeling for letters as colliding image-objects and divine messages. (*SF* 49)

Anagrams defy linear, semantic logic by materializing words (it's the letters on the page—not the initial word's meaning—that matter most) and so they resemble the logic of montage.

And Howe goes a step further to suggest, through the words of others, that

“Association, so far as the word stands for an effect, is between THINGS THOUGHT OF—it is THINGS, not ideas, which are associated in the mind. We ought to talk of the association of objects, not the association of ideas”—William James. “If he [the author] make of his volume a mole whereon the waves of Silence may break it is well”—Henry David Thoreau. Needing to translate words into THINGS THOUGHT OF could be the mark of a North American poet (*SF* 49)

Linking the Pragmatist sensibility of James with the Transcendentalist sensibility of Thoreau, Howe shows how even language can be materialized and thought of as particulars rather than ideals, and that this formal predilection has a substantial tradition. But Howe does not punctuate the line. She leaves it open and moves down the page instead, adding

‘if marks of scattered hues in October sunsets geographically here can ever be translated into English’. (*SF* 49)

The trailing sentence above functions like an ‘open parenthesis’. It demonstrates that while (as a North American poet) she wishes to turn words into things not ideas, there may also be ideas she will fail to translate into words. October is, as the opening tells us, the month in which David died (*SF* 6), the month in which she began writing a year later (*SF* 7, 25), and the month his mother had died (*SF* 24). The word ‘October’ can't *but* conjure associations of ideas for Howe. But, in the actual time and space where she writes, ‘October’ has a material actuality whose physical beauty, if not grace, exceeds the representative power of language. Howe's only possible response is to do what she has always done: to chance upon and splice together new materials, to cut and rearrange them. Her work of mourning begins in the sorting through of these particulars. There is an unstated, uncanny coincidence in this leit-

motif; *October* (the film) has become an emblem of the montage aesthetic. In *Sorting Facts* ‘October’ is not only an index of mourning but an index of the artifice that works through it.

Although Howe had already begun experimenting with the collage-poem in ‘Eikon Basilike’ and ‘Melville’s Marginalia’, there is only one in all of *Sorting Facts*, in the nineteenth and final section. This is interesting given that, as noted above, Eisenstein originally defined ‘montage’ as ‘conflict’ and ‘elements being on top of one another’. For the first eighteen sections of *Sorting Facts* Howe adheres to standard lineation, with the occasional interjection of lines that break off early and so become verse. The two formal techniques Howe has focused on which interrupt progression—stills and montage—are combined in the collage-poem: suddenly the flow of narrative is ‘paused’ so that we have a holistic composition; we also perceive sequential elements that are, in this case literally, placed on top of one another.

Before the appearance of the collage-poem, Howe asks, ‘After the Third War was there resistance? What happens in current revolutionary institutions when films and tapes rot?’ The lines refer back to the Third War of Marker’s *La Jetée* and to the found footage used by Eisenstein, Vertov, and Tarkovsky. In materializing film she emphasizes the fragility of historical record and human memory. The next lines jump—in true literary montage fashion—to ‘Ivan has gone to reconnoiter in the “dead, flooded forest.” Mother of dreams come cover your son’s staring photograph’ (*SF* 62). The line seems to refer to Ivan and his mother, but they also obliquely refer to the mother-in-law and husband who are the secret subject of this book and to his ‘staring photograph’ which reminds her of her loss. We then encounter the collage-poem (See Fig. 2). The first line, which is positioned like a title, seems to refer to the chemical process of photography, where ‘invisible’ photons ‘collide’ with the film emulsion. But a closer reading of the individual lines in their immediate and intertextual contexts reveals additional meaning.

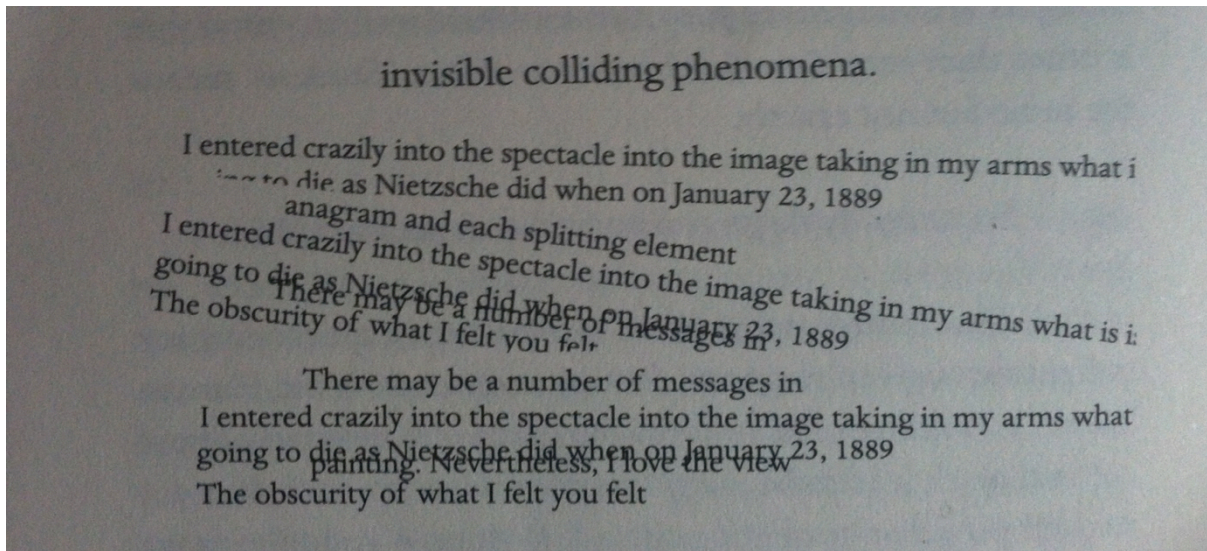


Fig. 2 *Sorting Facts 62*

The source text for this poem is the penultimate essay of Barthes' *Camera Lucida* entitled 'Madness and Pity'.<sup>30</sup> It is worth looking at the context of the original passage as it illuminates the subject of Howe's poem (I have put Howe's borrowed text in bold):

In the love stirred by Photography (by certain photographs), another music is heard, its name oddly old-fashioned: Pity. I collected in a last thought the images which had "pricked" me (since this is the action of the *punctum*), like that of the black woman with the gold necklace and the strapped pumps. In each of them, inescapably, I passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented, **I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die, as Nietzsche did when, as Podach tells us, on January 3, 1889, he threw himself in tears on the neck of a beaten horse: gone mad for Pity's sake.**<sup>31</sup>

Barthes' text refers to the alleged incident in which Nietzsche, supposedly gone mad from syphilis (now thought to have been a brain tumor or dementia), ran to embrace a horse that was being flogged in the streets of Turin, after which he collapsed and was taken custody by the police.<sup>32</sup> But the significance of the Nietzsche anecdote, in both Barthes' and Howe's works, is the utter abandon with which a person throws themselves toward what is dying or about to vanish. Here we perceive Howe's aesthetics of the thrown away inflected with the madness and pity that, according to Barthes, only photography can inspire.

<sup>30</sup> Barthes 116-17

<sup>31</sup> *ibid* 116-17

<sup>32</sup> Walter Kauffman, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 67. For speculation that the syphilis was a posthumous smear campaign see Richard Schain, *The Legend of Nietzsche's Syphilis, Contributions in Medical Studies 46* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001).

Several things are curious about Howe's citation. She has omitted the words 'dead' and 'what' in her transcription, so that the two instances of the line 'taking in my arms what is...' end instead with ' what i' and 'what is i'. Recall from the last chapter that Howe has said, 'I almost never put the word *death* in my poems. It would be too easy. I have always felt death to be the unspeakable other' (*B-M* 177). 'Dead' appears above the collage-poem—but in relation to the forest and in the safety of scare quotes. Here the word disappears, while the phrase 'going to die' (a condition of all life) is included. Howe's verbal truncation creates a pun: the 'i' of this collage-poem recognizes itself in the dying object ('what is i') of its embrace. Other lines are foreign to Barthes' text.<sup>33</sup> The line 'anagram and each splitting element', recalls Howe's discussion of anagrams as lettristic montage. The first significant departure from a horizontal orientation (when the poem is scanned from top to bottom), the line seems to both refer to and perform montage's operations of cutting and rearranging. The line, 'The obscurity of what I felt you felt' harkens back to the opening pages of *Sorting Facts* where Howe tells us of David's inability to speak or write in his final days. In just a few lines, she has invoked the aesthetics of rescuing what is about to vanish, illustrated (both literally and figuratively) the montage technique that is crucial to that aesthetic, and finally, blended human history with an oblique yet intimate personal memory. All in all, a remarkable *ars poetica* in which Howe begins to conclude her essay.

But there is more. There is one other line that is foreign to Barthes' text: '[T]here may be a number of messages in' gets repeated twice. The first instance is partly obscured, and the second is clearly legible. As in so many of Howe's collage-poems, this line that lies at the poem's center functions as a hint or instruction for reading the poem. The line recalls Howe's earlier observation that North American writers inherited a 'feeling for letters as colliding image-objects and divine messages'. Might the collage-poem's 'title', 'invisible colliding

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<sup>33</sup> Howe also leaves out the reported speech of Barthes' allusion ('as Podach tells us'). Friedrich Podach was the author of the 1931 book *The Madness of Nietzsche*.

phenomena’, also refer to anagrams? Possibly (if words are spoken), but it seems that ‘invisible colliding phenomena’ refers to something *actually* invisible. There are the photons of photography I mentioned, but we are told ‘there may be a number of messages’ here. What else could ‘invisible colliding phenomena’ mean? The context of the collage-poem, with its reference to the ‘Third War’ and to images of lost loved ones, as well as the intertext’s emphasis on pity for all that is dead or dying, suggests something else: *a collision of atoms*. And, it turns out, the history of atomic warfare, of ‘invisible collisions’ of ‘each splitting element’, is haunted by the use of anagram. The Maud Committee of 1940, Britain’s initial atomic bomb project before joining the U.S. in The Manhattan Project, was named ‘Maud Ray Kent’ by Niels Bohr and was interpreted by Sir George Paget Thomson as a coded message, an anagram for *radium taken*. Bohr later explained that he had simply chosen the name of his boy’s governess, Maud Ray, who lived in Kent, but the legend persisted.<sup>34</sup> ‘In *La Jetée* and *Mirror*, also in *Sans Soleil*,’ writes Howe,

one finds images associated with, or rising from, Hiroshima. I don’t think you can grasp the hauntedness in all of them without understanding this central surrender of soul, in its nuclear plight forgetting and refusing to forget.’ (*SF* 45)

It is fitting that this collage-poem in the final section addresses the threat of the atomic age as well as her personal grief. Howe’s first memory, as mentioned, was hearing about the bombing of Pearl Harbor while with her father, who subsequently departed for battle. And *Sorting Facts*, as an elegy to another World War II veteran, itself turns about an absent soldier. Poetic documentary and documentary poetics seem to always be enmeshed in war and restoration; there is no subject for which the stakes of fact and fiction could be greater.

‘The reality of chance. A choice of masks’, continues Howe, harkening back to the idea earlier expressed that ‘facts are perceptions of surfaces’ (*SF* 32). She then invokes one of the key historical figures mentioned in *Sans Soleil*: Amílcar Cabral, who led a struggle for

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster: 1996), 340-341. The name of the Committee has since been widely interpreted to mean ‘Military Application of Uranium Detonation’.

independence in Guinea-Bissau and who was assassinated on the eve of their independence, becoming a figure of myth and obscurity afterwards. What is the appropriate way of representing what history has so often misrepresented? 'Blank the crack and mark no language or predator camera can recover,' continues Howe. As in her poetry, it is the intervention of absence (the 'blank', 'crack', and 'mark') paired with recognition of complicity (in narrative 'language' or with 'predator camera'). Like *Sans Soleil*, Howe's poetry consecrates markers for disremembered or misremembered persons. Howe follows with a single word: 'Remember'. 'All people captured on film are ghosts,' Howe tells us, and in her poetics of document and loss one could say the same (*SF* 61).

But the final message of *Sorting Facts* is neither a harrowing legacy nor an admonition about the gaps of history, but rather a message about mourning and melancholia. Howe includes a half-page quote from Vertov's writings in which he recounts how, during one of his screenings, the mother of one of the actresses ran toward a young girl's image on the screen, 'weeping with her arms stretched out before her'. The woman was carried out unconscious. It later was revealed that the girl was the woman's daughter. She had fallen ill and died not long before the screening (*SF* 63). Howe follows with a final line that concludes the essay: 'Refused mourning or melancholia here is the camera the film the projector.'

Howe had written earlier 'Since David died I can look at photographs of him, though I still haven't been able to look at the video copy of a home movie his daughter sent us in 1991' (*SF* 24) and later confessed 'I have pushed the video-cassette box onto the book-shelf near your desk, out of sight' (25). The final line therefore reads as a resolution to confront her beloved's moving image and begin to do the work of mourning. But Howe includes the 'camera' in her antidote and not just the 'film' and 'projector'. It therefore also reads as an admiration for the techniques of poetic documentary filmmaking, and as an address not just to her own refused mourning but to refused mourning in general. In 'The Kinetic Icon in the

Work of Mourning’, a key text for Howe’s essay, Annette Michelson illuminates this function of poetic documentary technique.<sup>35</sup> In analyzing Vertov’s elegaic tribute *3 Songs about Lenin* (1935), she writes,

Vertov’s deployment of the cinematic anomalies, of the optical panoply of slow motion, stretch printing, looping, freeze-frame, reverse motion, originally constituted as an arsenal in the assault upon the conditions and ideology of cinematic representation (in that progress from the magical to epistemological function), are now deployed as an admittedly powerful instrument in the working through, in the obsessive rehearsal of the past, in that labor of repetition, deceleration, distension, arrest, release, and fixation which characterize the work of mourning....<sup>36</sup>

In Michelson’s reading, montage techniques interrupt ideological cinematic representation and also parallel the cognitive patterns necessary to the working-through of grief. In fact, such techniques of interrupting narratives have always been integral to Howe’s poetry in which she ‘explored ideas of what constitutes an official version of events as opposed to a former version in immanent danger of being lost’ (*SF* 7). *Sorting Facts* is Howe’s sustained study of the poetics of poetic documentary filmmaking. The crossing of disciplines and genres has for Howe always proved to be generative of new artistic and poetic practice. And her engagement with film is no exception. As we shall see in the next chapter, it leads her to compose book-length elegies that not only juxtapose poetry, prose, and found text, but that incorporate photographs and facsimiles, too. It results in a documentary poetics with increased and refined use of epigraph, citational collage, archival inserts, more collage-poems, and marginalia, all of which are woven together with personal memory, thereby coaxing the work of mourning to occur.

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<sup>35</sup> Howe discusses Michelson’s essay in section VI (*SF* 29).

<sup>36</sup> Michelson, ‘The Kinetic Icon in the Work of Mourning: Prolegomena to the Analysis of a Textual System’, *October* 52 (Spring 1990): 16-39; 38

## Chapter 6.

### Spirit & Print: Howe's Late Elegies<sup>1</sup>

When Susan Howe was awarded the Bollingen Prize in American Poetry in 2011, the three member judging committee provided Yale with the following statement,

Susan Howe is a fierce elegist. 'THAT THIS,' prompted by the sudden death of the poet's husband, makes manifest the raw edges of elegy through the collision of verse and prose, visionary lyricism and mundane incident, ekphrasis, visual patterning and the reclamation of historical documents. The book culminates in a set of luminous and starkly condensed lyrics moving increasingly toward silence.<sup>2</sup>

The 'collision', 'patterning', and 'reclamation' in the description above indicate that Howe has now mastered the techniques of montage and poetic documentary she studied in *Sorting Facts*. The mention of 'luminous and starkly condensed lyrics' indicates moreover that she has found a distinctly literary way to document loss. Interestingly, although Howe received the Bollingen in part because of her being a 'fierce elegist', and although her major works since the mid nineties have been elegies, scholarly work on Howe's elegy has been relatively sparse. After *Sorting Facts*, Howe's subsequent books turned increasingly to mixing personal memoir with documentary, and to writing book-length works that combined poetry, prose, found text, and images. To the extent that all of these books deal with dis- or misremembered persons or societies, there is a sense in which we could say that all her work since *Sorting Facts* has been elegaic.<sup>3</sup> But two of Howe's works stand out in particular, not only as works made in the memory of a lost family member, but as literary achievements that forged new forms out of her experience of loss and mourning. Following the death of her mother, Mary

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<sup>1</sup> A version of the material in this chapter concerning *The Midnight* was first published in my article ' "Spiritual Hyphen": bibliography and elegy in Susan Howe's *The Midnight*', *Textual Practice* 25.1 (February 2011): 133-55.

<sup>2</sup> Yale News, 'Susan Howe Named 2011 Winner of Yale's Bollingen Prize in American Poetry', 1 March 2011, <http://news.yale.edu/2011/03/01/susan-howe-named-2011-winner-yale-s-bollingen-prize-american-poetry> [accessed 12 June 2011]

<sup>3</sup> *Pierce-Arrow* (1997) could be read as an oblique elegy to David von Schlegel. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to discuss this work in the present study. For readings of *Pierce-Arrow* that consider its themes of mourning see Peter Nicholls ' "The Pastness of Landscape": Susan Howe's *Pierce Arrow*', *Contemporary Literature* 43.3 (Fall 2002): 441-60 and Will Montgomery, *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Manning Howe (1905 – 1999), the Irish actress, writer, and émigrée, Howe composed *The Midnight* (2002) in which she employed the techniques of literary montage to dazzling effect. Then, in 2008, Howe lost Peter H. Hare, her third husband. This sudden death of her closest companion led her to more extreme artistic measures. She invented a new procedure for a more radical sequence of collage-poems, to be placed between a direct personal essay and a final sequence of lyrics. As Howe told the Academy of American Poets,

I was devastated and thought I would never write again. Sometimes I would go to the computer and put down notes as one does in a diary. A couple of months later I printed out these original ramblings and began to think about forming them into a coherent narrative; one that might help others in the way that reading C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* helped me. After the loss of your closest companion there has to be some sort of redemption. I say redemption, because you feel guilty for surviving. I can't rely on religious belief the way Lewis did, but the essential lyricism of faith—for me, the mystery of art or artifice; “contrived, compassed or brought about by constructive skill,”—provides its own sacraments.

Howe's quote is from the *OED* entry for *artificial*.<sup>4</sup> And indeed *THAT THIS*, along with *The Midnight*, is distinguished by its conflicting needs: to insist on a faithful image of the beloved while still acknowledging that any meaningful survival depends on contrivances. Further down in the definition for ‘artifice’ is an additional meaning we could also apply to Howe. ‘Merely made up; factitious; hence, feigned, fictitious.’ As Howe learned from poetic documentary, actuality is most powerfully brought to mind by pointing to absences and fictitious frames. ‘To go forward downward/Search for the dead....’ Howe wrote in an early lyric,

plots and old-plays

A fictive realm  
words and meaning meet in

feigning

without a text and running from  
true-seeming (*ET* 107)

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<sup>4</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition (1989)

The contrivance of the late elegies allows Howe to run from ‘true-seeming’ to the true, the actuality of the beloved’s former existence. The fact of this actual existence comes across most poignantly in the ways Howe consecrates space for absences and invites us into the ‘fictive realm’ of artifice.

### *The Midnight*

In recent years, scholars have explored Howe’s poetic demonstration of bibliographic issues, either as middle-voiced craft of composing from the archives of other poets, or as narrative of the resistance imposed by the institutions that guard, maintain, reproduce, and normalize texts and documents.<sup>5</sup> After the death of her mother, Howe decided to explore bibliographic codes of meaning as a way of documenting her loss. Recent criticism on *The Midnight* has observed and admired its resistance to formal closure as well as its virtuosic incorporation of citation and found text.<sup>6</sup> But the precise method by which Howe crafts this unique song of mourning, namely through collaged meditations on the materiality of the book, has not yet been explored. *The Midnight* is a unique achievement in that it embodies Howe’s ‘duck-rabbit’ aesthetic and oppositional poetics, along with what she identifies here with *dialetheism*, or the simultaneity of contradictory truths.

Published by New Directions Press in 2003, *The Midnight* incorporates several earlier books by Howe including *Bed Hangings* (Granary Books, 2001); *Bedhangings II*; and *Kidnapped* (both Coracle, 2002) in addition to new poetry, prose, illustrations and doctored

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Stephen Collis, *Through Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 2000); Kent Lewis, ‘The Poetics of the Bibliography in *A Bibliography of the King’s Book; or Eikon Basilike*’, *West Coast Line* 27 (1993): 118-127; and Jerome McGann, ‘Composition as Explanation (of Modern and Postmodern Poetries)’, *A Book of the Book*, eds. Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay (New York: Granary Books, 2000): 228-245.

<sup>6</sup> In her 2006 reading of *The Midnight*, Catherine Martin observed that in Howe’s elegy, ‘memorialising risks ossifying’ and that ‘this poem, whose investigation of memory is performative rather than thematic, involves the reader in the obsessive and unfinished work of mourning’ (“‘Double play of double meaning’”: Dreams, Repetition and the Importance of the Noh in Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*’, *Textual Practice* 20:4 (2006): 759-75; 772). For an in-depth reading of the importance of fact to *The Midnight* see Marjorie Perloff, “‘The Rattle of Statistical Traffic: Citation and Found Text in Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*’, *Boundary 2* 36:3 (2009): 205-28.

photographs. In *The Midnight*, the books of Howe's maternally inherited library become fodder for her poetic art. 'Why shouldn't I?', writes Howe,

In all transactions of life we have to take a leap. My mother's close relations treated their books as transitional objects...to be held, loved, carried around, meddled with, abandoned, sometimes mutilated. They contain dedications, private messages, marginal annotations, hints, snapshots, press cuttings, warnings — scissor work...When something in the world is cross-identified, it just is. *They* have made this relation by gathering—airs, reveries, threads, mythologies, nets, oilskins, briars and branches, wishes and needs, intact—into a sort of tent. This is a space children used to play in. The country where they once belonged. A foreign audience will always be foreign. Here I am alone at home—in the middle of an afternoon—snooping. Any amount of probabilities can be ransacked. (*TM* 60)

Paratexts and marginalia are, in this work, a way of observing the lives of her deceased family members. *The Midnight's* engagement with marginalia moreover fulfills Howe's earlier notions that 'margins shelter the inapprehensible Imaginary of poetry' and that they are 'a conversation with the dead' (*NM* 29). The imaginative potential of the margin affords a unique space for elegy: her observation of singular markings becomes a spontaneous rite of remembrance. Because Howe regards books as transitional objects that accrue meaning through ownership, books become a vestibule for factual telepathy. This is particularly the case when the books in question are heirlooms of the deceased. *The Midnight's* demonstration and discussion of the bibliographic features of books in her mother's library therefore transform it into an *open* elegy, that is, they gesture toward a memory that remains expansive, undetermined, contradictory but true.

- **Spectral paratexts**

'In the assemblage that is *The Midnight*', observed Marjorie Perloff, 'everything is at once separate and interwoven.'<sup>7</sup> Its composition clearly fulfills the montage aesthetic Howe explored in *Sorting Facts*. Here, textual interstices are formed by juxtaposing bits of narrative with photographs of letters, books, and people. This interstice finds a physical trope at the

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<sup>7</sup> Perloff, 'The Rattle of Statistical Traffic', 227-8

book's very beginning. A recto and verso in the first signature photographically reproduce both sides of a translucent interleaf, such as was formerly placed in books to separate and protect lithographic images from the print on the opposing page. (See Fig. 1)

The reader is presented with the title-page of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* as seen through the interleaf, and then, on the verso, a reversed image which mimics an apparent transfer of the title-page. Immediately following this page, Howe presents us with the following prose poem:

There was a time when bookbinders placed a tissue interleaf between frontispiece and title page in order to prevent illustration and text from rubbing together. Although a sign is understood to be consubstantial with the thing or being it represents, word and picture are essentially rivals. The transitional space between image and scripture is often a zone of contention. Here we must separate. Even printers and binders drift apart. Tissue paper for wrapping or folding can also be used for tracing. Mist-like transience. Listen, quick rustling. If a piece of sentence left unfinished can act as witness to a question proposed by a suspected ending, the other side is what will happen. Stage snow. Pantomime.

“Give me a sheet. (TM xi)

This poem is then followed on the verso by a second prose poem:

The counterfeit presentment of two papers. After 1914, advances in printing technology rendered an interleaf obsolete. Mischief delights in playing with surfaces. Today each spectral scrap intact in a handed down book has acquired an enchanted aura quite apart from its original utilitarian function. Wonderfully life-like, approaching transparency, not shining; this pale or wanly yellow, tangible intangible murderously gentle exile, mutely begs to be excused. Superstition remains—as spiritual hyphen. Listen, quick rustling. In second character, freed from practical obligation, I'm not asleep, just leafing. Miniature scenery. Etiquette.

On your side, with pleasure.” (TM xii)

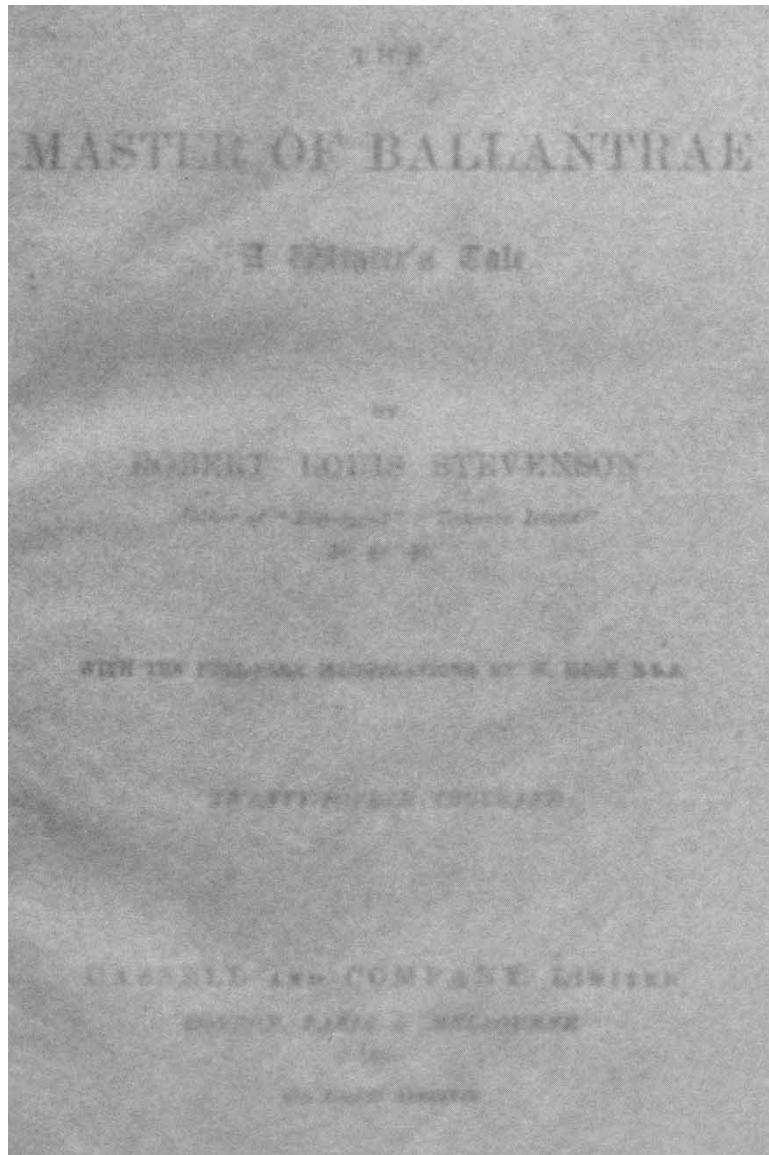


Fig. 1: *The Midnight*, p.x. © New Directions Press 2003

‘The counterfeit presentment of two papers’ refers to the doctored photograph. It is one of many instances in this book of what I call *autobibliography* or a bibliographic discourse that is reflexive; it comments on its own textuality, intertexts, subtexts, pretexts, and contexts. It is a meditation on its own processes as well as a reification of what it describes. ‘I’m not asleep’ designates midnight, the moment which is neither AM nor PM, as a time caught between days, where consciousness slips between wakefulness and dreams and where reading easily becomes ‘leafing’, or semi-lucid page-turning. The use of the deictic ‘*The*’ in the book’s title makes its own contribution to this threshold-play. Whereas the possessive

pronoun of *My Emily Dickinson* suggested a singular experience of a specific author's oeuvre, the title *The Midnight* is a way of nominating and thereby validating a liminal non-space. *The Midnight* is about the pause and the movement, the suspense and the disjuncture, the 'spiritual hyphen' that interrupts and conjoins a narrative continuum.<sup>8</sup> And the 'etiquette' is the grace demanded of the reader to be alert without interpretive intention. 'On your side, with pleasure' reads as a promise from the writer to be on the side of the reader, that is, to be sympathetic to the act of reading as a co-production. But the mysterious scare quotes (in the last line of the first poem and end of the second) indicate a second speaker in dialogue with the first, the voice of the dead, perhaps, who promises, for the duration of this book, to be on the side of the living.

The introductory poem therefore provides instructions not only on how to read this book, but on how to think about the automatized ways in which all books carry and impart meaning. The reproduced interleaf is a skeuomorph, that is, a design feature carried over to one artifact from a similar and prior artifact even though its function is no longer necessary (like the audio 'click' of a mechanical shutter on a digital camera). By forcing contemplation of what was hitherto assumed, automatized, or taken as given, *The Midnight* exposes bibliographic codes that we take for granted. Howe's skeuomorphic doctored photograph encourages us to contemplate the way a book's materiality contributes to the aura that we (consciously or not) assign to a deceased author or book-owner.

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<sup>8</sup> This phrase of Howe's, used in the above prose poem, inspired the title to my article ' "Spiritual Hyphen": bibliography and elegy in Susan Howe's *The Midnight*' in which the phrase is used to describe the tissue interleaf as well as a host of conceptual interstices in her poetry. I discovered afterwards that 'spiritual hyphenation' is a phrase Stephen Gwynne used to describe the Anglo-Irish identity (see Stan Smith, *W.B. Yeats.: A Critical Introduction* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), 21). This would obviously apply to Howe whose maternal Irish heritage and paternal Anglo-American heritage are competing allegiances that shape much of her work (see Will Montgomery's introduction to *The Poetry of Susan Howe*.) This gives the phrase additional nuance in the passage above since *The Midnight* marks a thematic return to her Irish heritage.

- **Textiles and contextures**

In crafting this subtle and oblique elegy of her mother, Howe exhibits the potentiality of the book's particulars, often rendering definitions unstable by historicizing them and showing their evolution. 'Veridical and delusive definitions shade into one another,' she writes, and 'All words run along the margins of their secrets' (*TM* 48). All claims to definitive meaning are really just references to historicized quotations which have become assimilated into language, and denotations of English words—like the dictionaries which contain them—are multiple, evolving, and inextricably linked to a local history. In an early poem in *The Midnight*, Howe writes:

Go too—my savage pattern  
on surface material the line  
in ink if you have curtains  
and a New English Dictionary  
there is nothing to justify a  
claim for linen except a late  
quotation knap warp is flax  
Fathom we without cannot (*TM* 8)

Howe's lyric metaphor argues that if a text presents the finish of 'linen' it is only because its lexical contexture is immediate; if the denotations are in current usage, or drawn from 'a late quotation', they seem transparent. 'New English Dictionary' is a reference to the Philological Society of London's *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, first proposed in 1859 and now known as the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The work bore numerous combinations of the two different names on the title-pages and spines of its various fascicles and volumes well into the twentieth-century, attesting to the sometimes uneasy relationship of academic and commercial interests between the Philological Society and the delegates of the university press.<sup>9</sup> The reference places diction in a context of multiple power structures. Howe's 'savage pattern' is a process of weaving and unweaving that exists to counter the tendency toward

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<sup>9</sup> For an account of the history of the two names for the dictionary, see Charlotte Brewer, *Treasure-House of the Language: The Living OED* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 261.

transparency in language. Nevertheless, the ‘warp’, a gridwork that makes the weaving possible and which consisting of commonly accepted meanings—an idiom of sorts—must be in place somehow in order for us to ‘fathom’, to reach for and relate to perceptions that transcend the language of daily exchange between the living.

Dictionaries, in *The Midnight*, are often subjects of Howe’s bibliographic pastiche. ‘To describe Camlet I will / look into Chambers / and Postlethwayt’, she writes (*TM* 15). In *Chambers’s Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language*, ‘camlet’ is simply defined as ‘a cloth originally made of camel’s hair, but now chiefly of wool and goat’s hair.’<sup>10</sup> The entry in Malachy Postlethwayt’s 1766 *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, however, is nearly an entire (double-columned and close-set) page long, beginning ‘CAMLET, or, as some spell it, CAMBLET, a plain stuff, composed of a warp and woof, which is manufactured on a loom with two treddles, as linnens and stamines are.....’, and proceeding to an extremely detailed account of the historical socio-economic conditions of cloth-making.<sup>11</sup> By citing respectively the commercial publisher and the sole author of the two very different dictionaries to which she refers (and alluding to the disparities of connotations), Howe reminds us that no element of the text—material or symbolic—carries definitive meaning and that every element is tied to history. The texts therefore become both denotatively open but contextually grounded.

Books—especially of verse—rarely exist in one incarnation. Howe herself has made a career out of recombining her texts. *The Europe of Trusts* (1990), *Singularities* (1990), *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (1993), *The Birth-mark* (1993), and *Frame Structures* (1996) each contain works that appeared previously, in different compilations, formats, and editions. *The Midnight* is no exception. Howe calls our attention, both through the content of her verse

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<sup>10</sup> *Chambers’s Twentieth-Century Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Thomas Davison (London and Edinburgh: Chambers, 1914), s.v. ‘camlet’

<sup>11</sup> Malachy Postlethwayt, *The Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2 vols (London: J & P Knapton, 1766), vol. 1, s.v. ‘camlet’

and the textual practices of her book, to this textuality, to the way she weaves together new material with citation, found text, and her own previously published material.

Taking lace-making as her motif, Howe compares physical books to lace, a two-sided openwork of edges which is, in Howe's words, 'hidden but open'.<sup>12</sup> She invites us to consider the history of lace-making, the artists behind the craft, their jargon, and the hands through which these materials passed, as an analogy for the crafts of bookmaking and text-production. The collage of citation, old and new poems, and images in *The Midnight* results in a text that, like the openwork of lace, is an elaborate construction of gaps. The poems in the first section, 'Bed Hangings I', are drawn from an earlier publication of Howe's in collaboration with the artist Susan Bee, entitled *Bed Hangings*.<sup>13</sup> *Bed Hangings* presents Howe's poetic texts in a dense and sophisticated dialogue with Bee's black and white images of illustrations taken from other books as well as line-drawings that often subvert the former's original meanings. In *The Midnight's* section titled 'Bed Hangings I', the texts appear verbatim but condensed as a series of block-sized poems about 2 inches by 1 inch, centered on each page and without illustration. Before the first of these poems we find only one image, taken from Bury Palliser's 1902 *History of Lace*, that provides a snippet of historical detail about the stitch that is pictured. (See Fig. 2) As Howe mentions in a 2007 reading of *The Midnight*, lace differs from embroidery in that there is no underside revealing the knots.<sup>14</sup> It is lace's singular hidden openness that interests Howe; as a composition of both gathering and vanishing it is an optimal trope for her textual collage and 'interventions

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Howe, Poetry Reading, Kelly Writers' House, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 15 February, 2007, available at <http://sriting.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Howe.html> [accessed 4 June 2014]

<sup>13</sup> *Bed Hangings* marked a shift in Howe's attitude toward using textiles as a metaphor for women's writing. In *My Emily Dickinson*, Howe found feminist criticism such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's to limit perceptions of women writers to caricatures of 'spider-artists' or individuals doomed to 'stitching'—either in the form of suicide or clandestine word-weaving (*MED* 14). Howe discusses her subsequent fascination with sewing and lace-making in her reading of *The Midnight* at The Kelly Writers' House, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 15 February, 2007, <http://sriting.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Howe.html> [accessed 2 July 2014]

<sup>14</sup> Susan Howe, Poetry Reading, Kelly Writers' House, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, February 15, 2007, available at <http://sriting.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Howe.html> [accessed 2 July 2014]

of absence' (*BM* 27). The bed-hanging below (see Fig. 2) is a semi-translucent veil that was pulled aside before bedtime. This hand-weaving is, like the tissue interleaf, outmoded but rich with history. Directly above the image is an overlay of typescripts that combines the epigraphic texts on the first two pages of *Bed Hangings* thereby connecting *The Midnight* with its own textual history—optically 'weaving' the lines from the former edition in the new one. (*BH* n.p.)

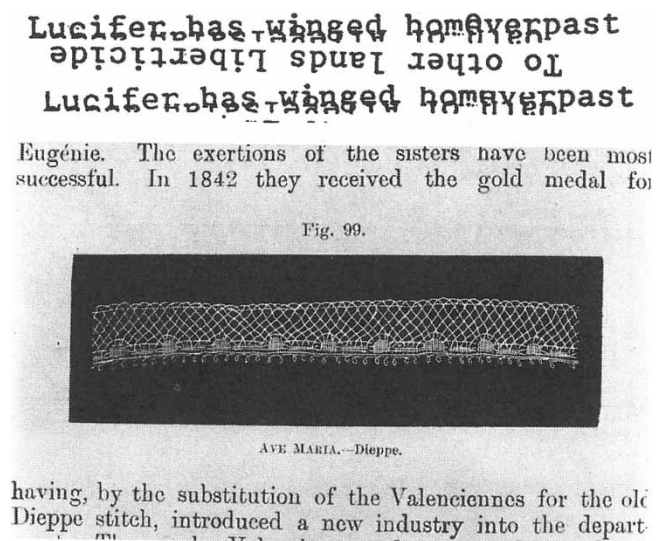


Fig.2: *The Midnight*, p.2 © New Directions Press 2003

Each poem from *Bed Hangings* gains significance in *The Midnight* due to its new contexts. But *The Midnight*, like the lace openwork its text imitates, is also a site for vanishing. The poems in *Bed Hangings* possessed singular image-text relations which are no longer retained. See, for example, how Bee's illustration of one of its poems concretizes and instantiates abstract lines such as 'present present *presentness*', providing a context which is absent in *The Midnight*. (Fig. 3) The text is full of gaps, excisions, and sacrifices. But it also offers alternative sites of semantic reactivity. Howe's compilation therefore demonstrates how the contents of a book can have metaleptic significance, retroactively imparting new frame structures onto previous editions.

Present present *presentness*  
 High mahogany bed roods &  
 rails do ring loop ties back  
 A sets down and C takes up  
 conformity to that uniformity  
 Ownership and ownership it  
 is a maxim of logic the Double  
 of the object is that I desire it



Fig.3: *Bed Hangings*, n.p. © Granary Books and Susan Bee 2001

The selection of Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* for the skeuomorphic interleaf threshold in *The Midnight* is also significant. According to the 'List of Illustrations', the interleaf reproduced here was obtained from the 1894 Cassells edition (*TM* 175). In this edition of the tale, Stevenson includes a preface in which an unnamed editor recounts how the story was handed to him in manuscript form by a friend named Johnstone Thompson, W.S. The manuscript was supposedly found in the papers of an old business partner with the endorsement that it could be put in print one hundred years from its conception, the date of the actual book's first publication, 20 September, 1889. The preface bears no relevance to the story itself, but it includes an important exchange in which Mr. Thompson says, 'Here....is a novel ready to your hand: all you have to do is to work up the scenery, develop the characters, and improve the style.' The editor responds, 'My dear fellow....they are just the three things that I would rather die than set my hand to. It shall be published as it stands.' Mr.

Thompson comments on the manuscript's baldness, and when the editor argues that there is 'nothing so noble as baldness', Mr. Thomson finishes the preface by remarking, 'we shall see.'<sup>15</sup>

The book's complicated publishing history (subsequent editions intermittently included or omitted this preface) demonstrates how texts exist in a multiplicity of versions, all of which are integral to the life of the text and each of which is singular in form and issue. As to Mr. Thompson's remark, we are caught in a 'Liar's Paradox' in which we do not know if the text was printed as found or if the text was edited. Undoubtedly, Stevenson included it to introduce another mystery to his own narrative, this one at the level of its own construction, again an autobiographic gesture. Howe writes, with regard to her own text and under the heading '*The Liar Paradox*', 'why am I so fictitious and active?' to which she responds, 'Simply because there's no one in the world and never has been anyone in the world like you. Not-me—though you and I' (*TM* 61-2). *The Midnight* reminds us that textual content is often an admixture of writing and editing, thereby making authorship multiple and cooperative. It also reminds us that reading itself is a meeting of author and reader and always a singular event.

- **Mourning and marginalia**

In 'Melville's Marginalia' (1993) and *Pierce-Arrow* (1997) Howe explores the elegaic space of book or manuscript margins of their respective subjects. Here, as in her earlier works, she challenges what is known about the authors by working in and against the power structures that oversee archives. *The Midnight* constitutes an autobiographical turn in Howe's poetry in that it examines the marginal markings in her family library, but hints of her exploring her own heirloom marginalia also appear earlier. The chance discovery of marginal markings

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae: A Winter's Tale* (London: Cassell, 1894), ix-xii

could be said to be a form of ‘factual telepathy’ in that it uncovers facts that challenge larger narratives, in this case memory. In her Introduction to *Frame Structures* (1996), Howe included the following anecdote:

My mother says her mother loved another man anyway but he was a Catholic so Susan Bennet married Protestant John Fitzmaurice Manning on the rebound. When she died in her eighties the other man’s picture was beside her bed. If this is true I wonder if anyone has paid attention to the many marginal markings in *Swinburne*, the only book of his I have seen over here. “Yea, hope at highest and all her fruit,/And time at fullest and all his dower,/I had given you surely, and life to boot,/Were we once made one for a single hour./ But now, you are twain, you are cloven apart,/Flesh of his flesh, but heart of my heart;/And deep in one is the bitter root,/And sweet for one is the lifelong flower.” He has underlined ‘flesh’ ‘flesh’ and “heart of my Heart” and drawn a pencil slash down the right hand margin of this stanza from “The Triumph of Time.”

Three lines and a pencil slash in an inherited *Swinburne* convey the startling revelation that her grandmother may have—beknownst to her grandfather—belonged emotionally to another man. Howe uses found objects and chance discoveries as her means of elegizing. It is unmediated, translucent elegy that she seeks, and so we find her, after her mother’s death, turning to ‘dedications, hints, snapshots, press cuttings, warnings—scissor work’ of her maternal uncle’s library in order to find these elegaic singularities, these marginal idiosyncracies that work in and against a locus of memory (*TM* 60).

Howe addresses the unique power of this space directly in a passage in *The Midnight* where she remarks that ‘the relational space is the thing that’s alive with something from somewhere else’ (*TM* 58). She illustrates its reactive potential first by including anecdotes about several of her own literary obsessions, Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Thomas Carlyle, and then by segueing (elliptically) into the autobiographical:

My great-aunt Louie Bennett has written the following admonition on the flyleaf of her copy of *The Irish Song Book with Original Irish Airs*, edited with an Introduction and Notes, by Alfred Percival Graves 1895): To all who read. This book has a value for Louie Bennett that it cannot have for any other human being. Therefore let no other human being keep it in his possession. (*TM* 58-9)

The passage is followed by a photograph of the fly-leaf itself, Aunt Louie’s admonition clearly having been ignored:

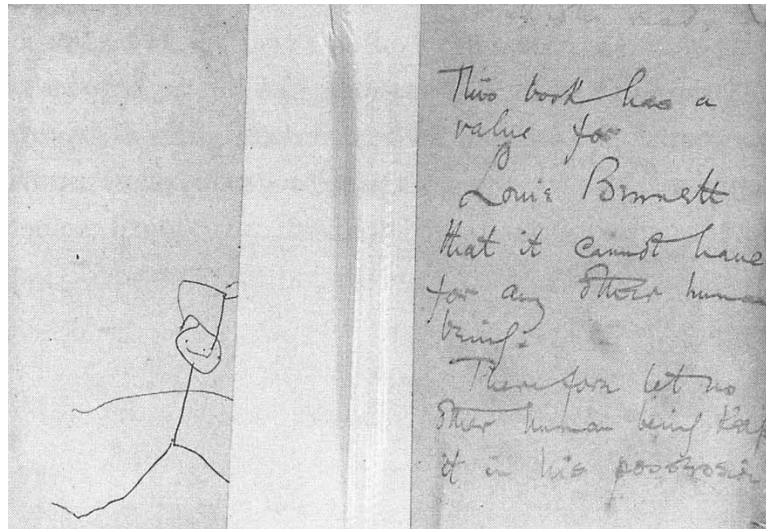


Fig. 4: *The Midnight*, p.59 © New Directions Press 2003

Below the photograph Howe writes, ‘Disobeying Aunt Louie’s predatory withdrawal, or preservative denial, I recently secured the spine of her *Irish Song Book* with duct tape. Damage control—its cover was broken. So your edict flashes daggers—so what’ (*TM* 59). It is the ‘predatory withdrawal’ and ‘preservative denial’ that Howe finds objectionable in bibliographic and archival methods. Here we see the personal hindrances that correspond to the institutional restrictions Howe encountered in her research on Dickinson. But she does what she always does, that is, she carries on in spite of them, incorporating the narrative of her resistance into her poetry.

Meditation on cryptic paratexts and marginalia—by nature extraneous or incomplete—stages an intervention of absence on the expected elegiac function of closure; it has the effect, instead, of rendering memory expansive and undetermined. If critics like Cavitch and Fradenburg are correct in suggesting that all elegy is marked by a substitution of the deceased with a love for new particulars, then Howe specifically chooses particulars that are unfinished or fragmentary.<sup>16</sup> The unexpected juxtapositions of textual singularities in *The Midnight* repeatedly offer a ‘catastrophe of bifurcation’ in the construction of the image of a

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<sup>16</sup> See my discussion in the Introduction.

person (*B-M* 177). This long poem is, finally, our brush with the ghost of Howe's mother; her appearance is always allusive.

- **Dialetheism**

In a poignant prose interlude under the heading '*What there isn't*', Howe includes an anecdote of the architect Frederick Law Olmstead, designer of Central Park, the Niagara Falls reservation, and a staggering number of smaller parks and grounds in America including the legendary MacLean Hospital where Olmstead was hospitalized at the end of his life (Howe refers to him only as the first-born son of his mother, Charlotte Hull Olmstead). He suffered numerous traumas as a child and was of the opinion that rural scenery was, 'in medical phrase, a prophylactic and therapeutic agent of value.'<sup>17</sup> Howe quotes a fragment of Olmstead's in which he recounts that his mother died when he was so young that he 'had only a tradition of memory rather than the faintest recollection of her'; when asked if he could remember her he would respond, 'Yes; I remember playing on the grass and looking up at her while she sat sewing under a tree,' and then confessed, 'I now only remember that I did so remember her, but it has always been a delight to see a woman sitting under a tree, sewing and minding a child' (*TM* 66-7). Howe immediately follows this with a black and white photograph of a woman and three children sitting under a tree. In the 'List of Illustrations' we discover it is a photo of Mary, Susan, Christabel, and John Manning, circa 1912 (*TM* 176). In the subsequent prose anecdote about Olmstead, Howe tells us that he had called to mind an 'autobiographical fragment' or tradition of memory relating to his mother 'as an antidote to insomnia' (*TM* 68).

In the deftly oblique prose poem that follows, entitled 'After AMTRAK what?', Howe permeates *The Midnight*'s poetics of forestalled grief—itsself a kind of textual veil or

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<sup>17</sup> Micheal Sperber, 'Frederick Olmstead: Brief Life of the Psycho-architect: 1822-1903', *Harvard Magazine* (July-August 2007), <http://harvardmagazine.com/2007/07/frederick-law-olmsted.html> [accessed 14 December 2009]. The Olmstead fragment which Howe includes in *The Midnight* is also quoted in Sperber's article.

‘bedhanging’. The poem begins with a photo of the interleaf from *The Master of Ballantrae* curled over the title-page upon which a small magnifying glass is posed. The interleaf curls such that it seems to turn forward and back simultaneously. Howe writes:

June 26, 2001, Guilford, Connecticut. 2 a.m. The train whistle makes sleep impossible. AMTRAK. Simply match the noise to a bona fide physical object. Take notes on ways of overpowering noise, its lights and processes. Leftover light. Whether it spreads easily up and down. If this train stops in Boston it stops in Massachusetts. If I had closed the window you wouldn’t be looking at sound. Land water sand—it’s all in the eye of the mind. June is a month of deep shadows and unkempt thickets of full-blown wild white roses. In the evenings their scent passes over air of heaven and furniture of earth. Just because there is overlap, some neighbors with a realist bias consider them weeds without forethought; nonrational, unconfined. To enter night’s character and moonlight’s character I will scatter arguments here and there half-hidden; premises are omitted this way. We won’t wander again over Divine Choice Theory of Actuality in the Connecticut River Valley, nor history in embryo after exile, when nonnormal worlds come into their own symptoms, namely, nothing—that is Bishop Berkeley’s forest and this is New Quarry Road. June is the month when local hemlocks used to be glorious but in 1985 winds of Hurricane Gloria blew a tree blight from Japan to Eastern Connecticut and now most of them are dead or dying. Other things being equal all transport may break down. Anyway—a plane will get you there quicker. (*TM* 68-9)

‘June 26, 2001’, two hours after midnight: on the second anniversary of her mother’s death (Mary Manning Howe died on June 25, 1999 in Cambridge, Massachusetts), Howe confronts insomnia and the shrill whistle of the train. She must choose whether to accept the conditions of her environment as objectively real (thus ‘matching’ them to a ‘bona fide object’) or to identify them as a mirror of her own grief-afflicted imagination (a metaphysical position which might amount to insanity). In a brief interlude of philosophical discursus that is both dense and evasive, Howe enters ‘night’s character and moonlight’s character’ through half-hidden arguments and omitted premises. Her apophasis (‘we won’t wander over again...’) presents several important philosophical positions. ‘Divine Choice Theory of Actuality’ is a term Robert Merrihew Adams uses to describe Leibnizian notion that God, after surveying an infinite number of worlds, deemed the one we live in the best.<sup>18</sup> In Howe’s emotionally fraught state, such optimistic determinism provides the consolation that regret is irrelevant since the loss was determined by divine choice. ‘History in embryo after exile’ is

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Merrihew Adams, ‘Theories of Actuality’, *Noûs* 8.3 (1974): 211–31

most probably a reference to Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1917) and to his proposition that Western civilization at the turn of the millennium (another midnight of this book) is in the process of exhausting itself and that a few isolated visionaries are beginning, embryonically, to intrude a vision of the next epoch.<sup>19</sup> "Nonnormal worlds" refers to a structure in modal logic where traditional logic fails and contradictions are true.<sup>20</sup> But all of this—actuality, the philosophy of history, nonnormal worlds—is chalked up to 'Bishop Berkeley's forest'. George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne, was an Irish metaphysician who attacked materialism, arguing that ordinary objects are ideas.<sup>21</sup> Are we to assume that Howe abandons any claim to Platonic ideals at this point? Does the distinction from 'Bishop Berkeley's forest' mean she will choose to swerve to the opposite extreme of the dialectic, toward a world of only 'bona fide objects'? From extreme Realism to extreme Nominalism?

In fact, nothing is negated. Howe's position at 'New Quarry Road' indicates literally that she has arrived at her destination in Connecticut. It also, however, shows that rather than choosing either Nominalism or Realism, she maintains a practice of poetic inquiry that appeals to both. In a letter to Paul Metcalf, Howe writes, 'It strikes me as odd that your address is Quarry Road and mine is New Quarry Road—because that's what we both do; *quarry*.'<sup>22</sup> At that point, her focus turns back to her environs, to the dying landscape of blighted roses (an Olmsteadian 'prophylactic'), after which she retracts abruptly, offering a characteristically dry quip about travel logistics: 'Anyway—a plane will get you there quicker'. The irony being, of course, that her existential quandary, which was spawned by the

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<sup>19</sup> Oswald Spengler and Charles Francis Atkinson, *The Decline of the West* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1934)

<sup>20</sup> Graham Priest, 'Editor's Introduction', *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 38.4 (1997): 481-7; 482

<sup>21</sup> Philosophers have debated whether Berkeley could in fact be accurately called a Realist, but his rejection of concrete particulars makes him, so far as Howe and this passage are concerned, an Idealist whose metaphysics are decidedly anti-Nominalist. See Charles McCracken, 'Berkeley's Realism', *New Interpretations of Berkeley's Thought*, ed. Stephen H. Daniel (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> *Modern American Poetry Online*, 'About Susan Howe's Poetry', Comment from Paul Metcalf. [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g\\_l/howe/about.html](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/howe/about.html) [accessed 11 June 2011]

screeching half-light and familiar landscape of the railway, would never have materialized on a plane, which leaves her to ask, ‘*After AMTRAK, what?*’

At this point of retraction, where Howe is at a cognitive standstill saturated with tensions, she introduces a photo of John Manning’s taped-up copy of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* which has been opened to Chapter I, ‘Down the Rabbit-hole’.<sup>23</sup> Now comes the moment where Howe introduces the all-important two-way truth: “I thought *Bed Hangings* was finished,’ she writes, ‘before running across the term, “Dialetheism,” coined by Graham Priest and Richard Routley (aka Sylvan)’ (TM 69-70). Graham Priest, the London-born contemporary analytic philosopher at the CUNY Graduate Center, is a specialist in non-classical logic and has co-authored texts with Richard Routley, who changed his name in 1983 to reflect his commitment to environmentalism. (One notes the wordplay here between ‘Priest’, ‘Sylvan’, and the rhetorical contexts of pontification and landscape architecture.) Priest has summarised Dialetheism as follows: ‘the whole point of the dialethic solution to the semantic paradoxes is to get rid of the distinction between object language and meta-language.’<sup>24</sup> Instead of escaping to the metaphysical where there are no things but in her own ideas, or, conversely, matching internal experience to bona fide objects and materials at the risk of knowing that in that world, things can and will go missing, Howe leaps through a rabbit-hole, a singularity—one which, as a resident of New Quarry Road, it appears she has dug herself.

As a text which concerns itself with the production and history of two-way, translucent textiles, *Bed Hangings* is immediately resonant with Dialetheism’s bivalent nature. But beyond the mention of *Bed Hangings* at this singularity in *The Midnight* is an autobiographic gesture toward versioning and its consequent indeterminacy. Howe reacts to this catastrophe of bifurcation by weaving; she spins the text of *Bed Hangings* into a new

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<sup>23</sup> Howe seems to also be saying, like Alice at the end of the text on the right-hand page that is pictured, ‘and what is the use of a book, without pictures or conversations?’ (TM 69)

<sup>24</sup> Graham Priest, ‘Boolean negation and all that’, *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 19 (1990): 201-15, 208

text called *The Midnight*. The exposure of the book's own construction highlights the contradictions inherent in New Bibliographic searches for authenticity by showing how material and ideological phenomena intersect to form an unstable artifact—an artifact we refer to by the metonymy 'the book'.

Bibliography, like elegy, presents many catastrophes of bifurcation in the Nominalist-Realist dialectic, and Dialetheism allows for the contradictions to co-exist. We see this in *The Midnight*, where Howe remains committed to the materiality of lace and of the page, to 'fair trees wrought with a needle', and at the same time borrows and reassembles sublimated ideas, where 'Thinking is willing you are wild/to the weave and not to material itself' (*TM* 17). Howe continues her explanation:

A di-alethia is a two(-way) truth so it's the view that there are true contradictions. Just the way there can be one local place-name and another name used by strangers. For this logical thicket Meinongians will arrest a particular nonexistent cobweb tract noting its relation to distant objects everywhere. Still—others say nonexistent objects are never particulars. If at the heart of language lies what language can't express, can it be false to say that the golden mountain which exists exists? (*TM* 70)

Alexius Meinong (1853-1929) was an Austrian philosopher known for his Theory of Objects which states that any hypothetical object (a golden mountain is his example of choice) has a kind of being which he calls *absistence*; unlike existence it cannot be negated because it always already is, even though it is only in the mind.<sup>25</sup> The question posed in this passage is central to Howe's poetics: can it be false to say that mental existence is actual existence when language itself turns around absence? Within the interleaf, the scrap of lace, the margin, or the woven text, such immaterial things as ghosts *seem* to exist—in the same way that the tissue interleaf allows for the apprehension—or projection—of otherworldly qualities. But what is the value of such hypothetical postulation? 'O light and dark vowels with your transconsistent hissing and hushing,' writes Howe, 'I know you curtain I sense delusion.'

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<sup>25</sup> Meinong's philosophy is explained in a book co-authored by Graham Priest and Richard Routley (*Exploring Meinong's jungle and beyond: an investigation of noneism and the theory of items* (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publications, 1982)).

Fortunately we can capture for our world some soft object, a fuzzy conditional, a cot cover, an ode, a couplet, a line, a lucky stone—to carry around when camping’ (*TM* 70). In these lines, Howe suggests that we itinerant, earthly inhabitants can find some material or textual relic of another context as consolation for what we have lost in this one. Like the maternally inherited Anglo-Irish songs and lullabies which figure into *The Midnight*, these relics offer solace to those surviving the loved one. Howe’s role as poet and weaver is to integrate the warp of everyday material language with the ‘fathom’ of meta-language so that we perceive its materiality and metaphysics at once. Reading *The Midnight* we have the unmistakable sense that something is veiled from us, paired with an equally strong sense of engagement in another person’s reverie. Howe has the unlocatable perspective of a poet who is actively absenting herself, moving through her thoughts, a memory-in-progress. It is within the fiction of the assembly, finally, of the book’s own materials, where perception achieves its greatest potential for expansion, where contradictions can be true, and where it cannot be false to say that one can brush with ghosts.

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### ***THAT THIS***

If *The Midnight* fixates on marginalia and paratexts as a way of working through her grief, then *THAT THIS*, an elegy to Howe’s late husband Peter H. Hare, uses archived writings of another mourning person in history to construct a new song of loss. Here, Howe continues to explore the elegaic potential of manuscripts, but in a way that is simultaneously more direct and more oblique than in *The Midnight*. *THAT THIS* begins with a direct personal essay entitled ‘The Disappearance Approach’ in which she recounts the experience of discovering Peter dead in his sleep. The next section, ‘Frolic Architecture’, consists of one lyric quatrain followed by 48 collage-poems and a selection of six photograms by James Welling. This is followed by ‘that this’, a series of lyric poems, and a final, untitled collage-poem.

The introductory material tells us that the collage-poems are made from transcriptions of the ‘private writings’ of Hannah Edwards Wetmore, Jonathan Edwards’s sister, which are archived in the Jonathan Edwards papers at the Beinecke Library at Yale.<sup>26</sup> The writings focus on Jonathan Edwards’s unexpected death in March 1758. Made through a new procedure involving scissors, ‘invisible’ Scotch Tape, and a Canon copier, these collage-poems feature striking new aesthetic effects that beg closer consideration. Since its publication there have been a number of thoughtful reviews of *THAT THIS* by noted authors including Charles Bernstein and Susan Stewart, but there has been no scholarly inquiry into the work—despite the fact that it won Howe the Yale Bollingen Prize in Poetry in 2011.<sup>27</sup> *THAT THIS* is a remarkable achievement for Howe. Not only does it draw together her aesthetics of the thrown away with her interests in manigraphic particulars and the documenting of a loved one’s life, but it gets at the philosophical crux of representation itself. Hare was a Philosopher and noted scholar of the works of Charles Sanders Peirce, so throughout the book we see Howe turning to Peircean logic and terminology to contemplate her plight as elegist. The following discussion elucidates some of the philosophical allusions in the opening essay to provide a framework for analyzing the formal evolution of the collage-poems in ‘Frolic Architecture’ and finally to provide a reading for the overall arc of *THAT THIS*.

- **‘The Disappearance Approach’ : semiotic continuity**

Unlike *The Midnight*, which is an oblique elegy (indeed, it is possible to read it without even knowing it is an elegy to Howe’s mother), *THAT THIS* opens with a stark encounter with

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<sup>26</sup> The acknowledgments specify that the material from ‘Frolic Architecture’ was ‘collaged from the “private writings” of Hannah Edwards Wetmore, copied by her daughter Lucy Wetmore Whittelsey, now among the Jonathan Edwards papers at the Beinecke Library.’ Howe adds that ‘In places [she] relied on Kenneth Minkema’s transcription’ (*TT* 6).

<sup>27</sup> See Charles Bernstein, ‘TLS on Susan Howe and Rae Armantrout: David Wheatley, nobody can bear to watch’, *Jacket2* 23 (September 2011) <https://jacket2.org/commentary/tls-susan-howe-and-rae-armantrout> [accessed 4 September 2013] or Susan Stewart, ‘Discandied: On Women and Elegy’, *The Nation* (24 August, 2011) <http://www.thenation.com/article/162953/discandied-women-and-elegy> [accessed 10 November 2012]

loss. ‘Starting from nothing with nothing when everything else has been said’, writes Howe, after she tells us of the morning she found Peter in his bed ‘not sleeping’ (*TT* 11). Here Howe expresses the elegist’s challenge, which Max Cavitch eloquently described as ‘seeking to understand the relation between the singularity of an event (a poem, a death) and its inevitable repetition’.<sup>28</sup> From here Howe jumps immediately to the words of others, to Sarah Edwards’s letter to her daughter Esther Edwards Burr on April 3, 1758 when she heard of Jonathan’s unexpected and premature death: ‘O My Very Dear Child. What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud’ (*TT* 11).

It is interesting that Howe initiates her elegy with borrowed apostrophe. Recall in chapter 4 that the ‘Oh’ performs a discursive event and attempts to link the living with the dead. It is also an important feature in her collage-poems, signaling a link with the formal tropes of lyric poetry in a form that otherwise would seem to exist outside it. In fact, it was apostrophe that galvanized her project in the first place. When asked about her composition of *THAT THIS*, she told the American Academy of Poets,

One day I chanced on a folder titled: Wetmore, Hannah Edwards, 1713-1773, that contains a copy of “the private writings” of Jonathan’s sister, in the hand of her daughter Lucy Wetmore Whittelsey. Lucy’s transcription (much easier to read than her uncle’s or her mother’s handwriting) begins *in medias res* with an excerpt from Psalm 55.6 “Oh that I had wings like a dove! [for then] would I fly away, and be at rest.” Even if manuscripts can only lead to the limit of a voice, the acoustic shock of the first written word “Oh” on paper brown with age not written by the author herself, a copy of her mother’s narrative but also a copy of that ancient plea for comfort—had a telepathic force.<sup>29</sup>

But it was Hannah Edwards’s words that first caught her attention, connecting her across time and space to another person grieving a particular loss. And, as Howe points out, Lucy’s transcription adds a level of mediation to the source text that parallels Howe’s own artistic process in this book. Passing through these various thresholds of reception—first Lucy’s,

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<sup>28</sup> Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 22

<sup>29</sup> Susan Howe, ‘An Open Field: Susan Howe in Conversation’, Interview with The Academy of American Poets (2011) <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/open-field-susan-howe-conversation> [accessed 2 July 2014]

then Howe's—the words accrue a private spiritual utility that for Howe amounts to 'a telepathic force'.

Howe uses Lucy's transcription of Hannah's writings for her collage-poems in the next section, but it is the words of Sarah, the recently widowed wife, that she uses to open her essay. Like *Sorting Facts* the prose here often reads more like poetry. Subjects range from commentary on Howe's engagement with the Edwards family papers to snippets from other books that intrigued Howe at this time to facts surrounding Peter's life and death, and finally to Howe's own meditations on the philosophy of language and representation.

Susan Stewart writes that Howe's elegy 'traces the strange mutuality and division between "that," the unknowable world of the dead, and "this," the world of the living.'<sup>30</sup> She observes a crucial division in this poem, that between 'spiritual' and 'embodied' life, but Howe's title points to other aspects of elegaic artifice that are perhaps even more relevant to this book. The minimal presentation of the New Directions cover makes another sense of the deictic clear: on a plain white background, beneath the words 'THAT THIS' is the image of a single scrap of blue fabric. (See Fig. 5) Readers of Howe's work might recognize that the scrap also figured into one of Howe's earlier works. She featured a black and white version of the same image in the last section of *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007) which was entitled 'FRAGMENT OF THE WEDDING DRESS OF SARAH PIERREPONT EDWARDS'. Taking this into consideration, the phrase 'that this' suggests wonder at how something so small and ordinary could continue to mesmerize her and offer solace following the loss of her husband. Howe writes,

Outside the field of empirically possible knowledge is there a property of blueness in itself that continues to exist when everything else is sold away? I keep going back in my mind to the tiny square remnant of Sarah Pierrepont's wedding dress. This love-relic has lasted over two hundred years in the form of a Prussian blue scrap. It says nothing at all to an outsider who can look at it without being seen. Could it be an illusory correlation that causes my brain to repetitively connect this single swatch with the oblong royal blue plastic throwaway sheath—protecting the early edition of

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<sup>30</sup> Stewart 1

The New York Times as it lay on our driveway on the morning of January 3<sup>rd</sup>, and again with the bright cyan book jacket on the complimentary copy of *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* that arrived for Peter in the mail a month later? (TT 32)

Here Howe's grieving mind not only seeks to document a loved one's life, but also longs to animate (or at least assign uncanny power to) inanimate objects. In the above passage, the fabric scrap functions much like the 'Oh' of Hannah's writing: it fulfills an apostrophic function. The fabric scrap, cut as it is from Sarah's wedding dress, is also of course an emblem of marriage. And, as in *The Midnight*, fabric is also a metaphor for textuality and word-weaving. The frayed scrap, worn by time, is an evocation of the kinds of textual experiment Howe will incorporate in her new collage-poems which, as we will see, are unlike her earlier experiments in that they appear ragged, crumpled, frayed, and cut from larger wholes.<sup>31</sup>



Fig. 5 Close-up image from cover of *THAT THIS* New Directions Press, 2010

But, and as is usually the case with Howe's titles and motifs, 'THAT THIS' is polyvalent. The phrase can also be used as a relative clause, as illustrated by the first lines of verse in this volume '*That this* book is a history of/a shadow that is a shadow of' (TT 39). As such, the phrase imparts a conditional mood. It may read as an expression of disbelief, as when we say 'I never thought *that this* could happen to me again' or as a desperate plea: 'oh *that this* too too solid flesh would melt' (*Hamlet* I.2). Faced with sudden loss, Howe is both

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<sup>31</sup> A similar type of collage-poems (seemingly crumpled, frayed, or torn) to the ones that appear in *THAT THIS* are included in the last section of *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, suggesting that the inspiration for the formal experimentation was very much specific to this particular fragment of fabric.

shocked *that this* could happen to her again and also in awe *that this* scrap of fabric would be what offers solace in ‘as vast a need as at this moment’ (*TT* 16).

The word ‘this’ also corresponds to the Peircean category of ‘secondness’. One of Peirce’s first contributions to philosophy was the proposal of a triadic system of categories of phenomena: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. According to Peirce, Firstness ‘comprises the qualities of phenomena’ and ‘consists in its subject’s being positively such as it is regardless of aught else’. Firstness, in other words, consists in qualities that are independent of experience or perception. Secondness, ‘comprises the actual facts’ and is fundamentally dyadic; it depends on ‘reaction’ and ‘experience’ and is ‘the element of struggle’. And finally, Thirdness ‘consists of what we call....thoughts...they can be produced and grow...no more is it a fact. For a thought is general.’<sup>32</sup>

An overview of Peirce’s categories is relevant because Howe refers to them obliquely and explicitly in her essay, in passages to which I will return shortly.<sup>33</sup> But while this may be his most memorable philosophical contribution (other than coining the term ‘Pragmatism’), there is another, far more relevant aspect of his philosophy in relation to Howe’s poetics, namely his semiotics and the way they are reflected in his unpublished papers. Before I explain, let me underscore the point that Howe was interested in Peirce first and foremost because of his *nachlass*, the body of manuscripts, notes, and correspondence that is left behind after a scholar dies. As she told Jon Thompson in an interview, the book was centered around ‘the tangled history of his manuscripts.’<sup>34</sup> While she clearly evinces a sophisticated

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<sup>32</sup> Peirce first presented the paper ‘On a New List of Categories’ to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on May 14, 1867. My summary of Peirce’s categories is drawn from his later paper, ‘The Principles of Phenomenology’ in which he articulates the categories in greater depth (*The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings*, ed. Justus Buchler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), 74-97).

<sup>33</sup> Readers of Howe’s poetry will be familiar with some of the Peircean terms below from *Pierce-Arrow*. In their readings of the book, both Nicholls and Montgomery discuss Peirce’s categories.

<sup>34</sup> Jon Thompson, ‘Interview with Susan Howe’, *Free Verse*, Winter 2005, [http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/freeverse/Archives/Winter\\_2005/interviews/S\\_Howe.html](http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/freeverse/Archives/Winter_2005/interviews/S_Howe.html) [accessed 12 January 2011]

knowledge of his philosophy itself, we miss the point unless we remember what motivated her long engagement with his work. ‘I need to ground my work in particulars,’ she says,

In my case this usually means a material object such as a book, or a manuscript, most recently lace. Often a historical moment, or a specific person....Esther Johnson, Emily Dickinson, Mary Rowlandson, Hope Atherton, Anne Hutchinson, Thomas Shepard, Clarence Mangan, Herman Melville, Charles and Juliet Peirce—the only way for me to reach them, or for them to reach me, is through the limited perspective of documents.<sup>35</sup>

Peirce only published one book during his lifetime but, as Howe tells us, ‘drew and wrote (according to his own calculations) over 2,000 words, diagrams, algebraic formulas and/or existential graphs a day. His unpublished writings (including his correspondence) come to more than 100,000 pages’ (*PA* 19). In one of his 1903 Pragmatism Lectures Peirce addressed this body of work, saying

But I must tell you that all you can find in print of my work in logic are simply scattered outcroppings here and there of a rich vein which remains unpublished. Most of it I suppose has been written down; but no human being could ever put together the fragments. I could not myself do so.<sup>36</sup>

Peirce’s description of his body of work reads almost like an elegist’s task of assembling an image of a person. And, as we shall see, both his papers and the semiotics that seems to describe the state of his papers shapes the way Howe thinks about elegy.

In *Pierce-Arrow* Howe points us to a 1997 article by Mary Keeler and Christian Kloesel, ‘Communication, Semiotic Continuity, and the Margins of the Peircean Text’, which explores Peirce’s papers in light of his own thinking about the production of meaning.<sup>37</sup> Keeler’s and Kloesel’s study begins by explaining the precise ways in which Peirce’s archives present obstacles to editing and publishing (the material is not only prohibitive in

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Peirce, MS 302, Quoted here from Mary Keeler and Christian Kloesel, ‘Communication, Semiotic Continuity, and the Margins of the Peircean Text’, *Margins of the Text*, ed. David Greetham (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>37</sup> Howe writes, ‘In “Communication, Semiotic Continuity, and The Margins of the Peircian Text’ (1997), Mary Keeler and Christian Kloesel tell us the secondary literature on Peirce demonstrates that only the hardest scholars have made use of his manuscripts and even then only by way of photocopies, and that his work is unpublishable in print form. I wonder why manuscripts are so underestimated in all academic disciplines, including science, mathematics, linguistics, semiology’ (*PA* 22).

quantity and arrangement but is highly graphical in nature) and then argues that his archives were demonstrative of his commitment to ‘semiotic continuity’. According to the authors,

Peirce saw into print somewhat less than he intended not because he had nothing more to say, or nothing more to contribute to the world, but because he regarded none of his work as ever really finished, as continually in need of modification and further development.<sup>38</sup>

Their reading of the ‘unfinished’ and ‘in-progress’ state of his archives is that it reflects his unique semiotics. They explain how Peirce developed a ‘tri-relative’ conception of the sign that included a subject, an object, and a subject’s *experience* of the object over time, so that signs themselves are always unfinished. They explain further that

Traditional dichotomous theories (such as Saussure’s of signifier/signified and those of the logical positivists), without this relation of generation, cannot explain the productivity of thought and communication in creating new signs. Because the conditions conceptualized in these theories are, therefore, timeless (language coded to thought as accomplished fact), they cannot explain the uniqueness of someone’s meaning in a particular time and place or how it can come to be understood by others. Rather than a theory of language, Peirce’s semiotic is a theory of how meaning is produced in experience.<sup>39</sup>

This is important, because it emphasizes the process by which particulars that have meaning for an individual can become, over time, signs that can be ‘understood by others’. The stakes of this semiotic continuity are raised in *THAT THIS* where it is not just any particular that means something unique to Howe, but the life of her closest companion. The task of elegy asks that she make this unique meaning ‘understandable to others’. Peirce’s philosophy offers a consolation to her in this moment—not only because, as the subject of Hare’s lifework Peirce constitutes a link to the beloved—but because his semiotic continuity resists the finality of fixed signs. Easily reproducible signs imply a reductive violence of representation that Howe wishes to avoid. If she is to muster the courage to render him into verbal form, she

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<sup>38</sup> Keeler and Kloesel 19. Peirce also wrote that ‘What has chiefly prevented my publishing much has been, first, that my desire to teach has not been so strong as my desire to learn....’ (Peirce E 3; Quoted here from Keeler and Kloesel 18) Peirce’s preference for dialogical rather than monological writing parallels Howe’s interest in making books that invites a reader’s participation.

<sup>39</sup> Keeler and Kloesel 26

longs to do so in signs that are visibly unfinished and in-progress. Her opening essay can therefore be read as love's protest to finality and a hesitation toward signs.

Peirce is mentioned explicitly three times in Howe's opening essay: once in reference to Peter's work (*TT* 14), a second time in reference to Howe's archival research for *Pierce-Arrow* (*TT* 24), and then a third time in the final passage. But Howe's meditation on signs can be perceived throughout the essay. Early on, for example, Howe writes,

‘Somewhere I read that relations between sounds and objects, feelings and thoughts, develop by association; language attaches to and envelopes its referent without destroying or changing it—the way a cobweb catches a fly.’ (*TT* 13)

This curious statement seems to both assuage and reinforce Howe's hesitation to render her beloved into printed language. On the one hand, the notion that language ‘envelopes its referent without destroying or changing it’ suggests that we can write about our loved ones without altering who they were. But a ‘cobweb’ is by no means innocuous; the passage ironically demonstrates Howe's belief in the power of language to recreate its object. It shows us her cognizance of elegy's inherently predatory aspect; as elegist she must come to terms with that role. ‘History intersects with unanswered questions while life possesses us, so we never realize to the full one loyal one—only an elegiac ideal,’ writes Howe. (*TT* 19) Howe can signal the ‘disloyalty’ of the ‘elegiac ideal’ by incorporating gaps and erasures into her poetic form. But she must still accept that a totally loyal representation is impossible. This recognition is a condition of artifice or indeed of weaving. The ‘cobweb’ reminds us of the final page of Howe's *Eikon Basilike* where, referring to herself as ‘ARACHNE’, she scatters and gathers facts and then weaves them into a new form.

Howe also exhibits hesitation toward semiotic finality (the production of a fixed sign) in the passage, quoted above, about the Prussian blue fabric scrap from Sarah Pierrepont's wedding dress. When Howe observes her mind connecting the ‘Prussian blue scrap’ to other

blue items (a plastic bag and a dust-jacket) that remind her of Peter, she wonders whether this is ‘an illusory connection’ or if there is ‘a property of blueness in itself’. Each particular was part of a unique experience, but in Howe’s mind they are connected by their colour as well as their relation to her grief. The unification illustrates the process by which universals are abstracted from particulars and, in turn, how signs are formed from discrete objects or events.<sup>40</sup> The passage shows an acute awareness of the semiotic process (in the Peircean sense) and a conflicting desire for particularity and symbolic meaning.

This ambivalence is also evident in her references to names. Howe writes that Peter sometimes introduced himself jokingly to people as ‘Peter Hare as in Peter Rabbit.’ Immediately afterward she includes a list of the names of Jonathan Edwards’s children then asks,

If your names are only written and no ‘originals’ exist, do you have a real existence for us? What happens to names when time stops?  
Answer: Nothing happens: There is no when. (*TT* 20)

After death we exist as names only. But the referent becomes an idea rather than a living person. And this idea takes on a symbolic life of its own. ‘Names are signs for ideas settled in the mind,’ writes Howe, ‘Poussin and Edwards are supposed to exist until there is no such thing. No steady name.’ (*TT* 27) Again, she is keenly aware of how the uniqueness of the living, flesh and blood person, is fated to become reduced to the generalities of signs. Howe ends ‘The Disappearance Approach’ with the following lines:

It could have been the instant of balance between silence, seeing, and saying; the moment before speech. Peirce would call this moment, secondness. Peter was returning to the common course of things—our world of signs.’ (*TT* 35)

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<sup>40</sup> Colour is one of the key examples that Peirce addresses in his discussion of metaphysics. In his essay ‘On a New List of Categories’ Peirce argues that ‘the function of conceptions is to reduce the manifold of sensuous impressions to unity, and that the validity of a conception consists in the impossibility of reducing the content of consciousness to unity without the introduction of it’ and that ‘I can dissociate red from blue, but not space from color, color from space, nor red from color’ (*The Essential Peirce*, eds. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1992), 1, 3). Howe uses the essay as source material for a lyric in *Peirce-Arrow*: ‘It is precision we have/to deal with we can pre-/scind space from color if/Thomas was only using a/metaphor and metaphysics/professes to be metaphor’ (*PA* 137).

In the essay's conclusion, we see that Peter, too, is destined to become a name or an 'idea settled in the mind', knowable to others only through narratives composed of signs. But notice that she uses the past continuous, 'was returning'. As an elegist, Howe must allow Peter to return to the world of signs. But as an elegaic materialist, she will not do so until she stages a poetic protest, an innovation of form that includes formlessness.

- **'Frolic Architecture': sermons of chance and experience**

The next section of poems in *THAT THIS* takes its title from the last line of Emerson's poem 'The Snow-storm' (1835). The poem portrays a storm in which the 'fanciful' and 'savage' play of 'the North wind's masonry' results in overnight snowdrift which he calls 'the frolic architecture of the snow'.<sup>41</sup> In this context, 'frolic' emphasizes *play*, something that manifests procedurally in Howe's collage-poems which, as we shall see, incorporate chance. 'The Snow-storm' is an allegory for divining sense out of chaos. It dramatizes 'tumultuous privacy' of witnessing an unforeseen event and argues that what seems 'the wild work' of 'the fierce artificer' can be perceived as 'astonished Art'.

The epigraph, 'Into the beautiful meteor of the snow', imparts further nuance. The phrase is taken from Emerson's 1838 Divinity School Address in which he discusses 'formalist' preachers who omit personal experience from their sermons. Emerson writes:

Whenever the pulpit is usurped by a formalist, then is the worshipper defrauded and disconsolate. We shrink as soon as the prayers begin, which do not uplift, but smite and offend us. We are fain to wrap our cloaks about us, and secure, as best we can, a solitude that hears not. I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more. Men go, thought I, where they are wont to go, else had no soul entered the temple in the afternoon. A snow storm was falling around us. The snow storm was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, *into the beautiful meteor of the snow*.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam Dell, 1990), 379-380

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* 118

Notice that Emerson holds knowledge gained from direct experience and action in high esteem and privileges the ‘real’ (in this case the concrete) over the ‘spectral’ or hypothetical. It is a Pragmatist position that shows Emerson’s Nominalist side. He goes on to describe what he finds offensive in the formalist’s sermon:

He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one *fact* in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine. This man had ploughed, and planted, and talked, and bought, and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches; his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all. Not a line did he draw out of real history. The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life, — life passed through the fire of thought.<sup>43</sup>

Notice here the emphasis on lines drawn from ‘real history’ and the recurrent theme of action. The passage provides an apt description of Howe’s essay: ‘The Disappearance Approach’ recounts personal emotional toil with facts and experiences from daily life. It is also an apt description for what we have seen so far from the Edwards family letters—additional lines ‘draw[n] out of real history’. In sharing her personal grief and drawing lines from the Hannah Edwards’s ‘private writings’, Howe makes her own verbal offering experiential and ‘real’. The title and epigraph together frame the pages that follow as a ‘sermon’ that promises to ‘convert life into truth’.

After the epigraph we have a photogram by James Welling opposite a brief lyric, what we might call the ‘title poem’ of the book:

That this book is a history of  
a shadow that is a shadow of  
  
me mystically one in another  
Another another to subserve (*TT* 39)

The enjambment and metricality of these lines is striking. The poem begins with three stressed syllables and ends in two stresses, with a series of anapests between, creating an acoustic epanalepsis. The symmetry suggests finish and closure, a finitude that we know

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

Howe to be coming to terms with and resisting. The series of amphibrachs (‘another/Another another’) before the poem’s end reads like a hesitation to the inevitable task at hand; it also reminds us that this is not the first time she has had to elegize her closest companion. The final word, ‘subserve’, almost wants to be read as its anagram *subverse*, an obsolete form of the more common ‘subvert’, hinting at the predatory nature of rending the departed into verse.

As I mentioned, these collage-poems are made in a process quite different to those in *Eikon Basilike*, ‘Melville’s Marginalia’, or the last poem in *Sorting Facts*. Here she no longer uses a typewriter. Instead, she transcribes selections of the source text from the library then uses a Canon copier to print the transcriptions out at home. In the Grenfell Press publication notice, as well as in her interviews, Howe consistently emphasizes that the collage-poems were made using ‘multi-purpose copy paper, scissors, ‘invisible’ scotch tape, and a canon copier pc170’.<sup>44</sup> The specification of the materials Howe uses is significant. These everyday personal desk supplies are reminiscent of the minimalist aesthetic of her early collages. It invokes an image of a person at home or in the library, cutting and pasting citations as a kind of antidote to or expression of grief—much in the way a person would rifle through old photographs or put together a scrapbook.

The collage-poems were later made into plates and printed using a letterpress. The poems and photograms in ‘Frolic Architecture’ first appeared in a larger format (8 ½ inches by 11 inches) artist book volume by the same name, published by The Grenfell Press in a limited edition of 26, and priced at \$7,500—an expensive book, but a modest price for a work of visual art. In this version, which I consulted at the Beinecke Library, the larger format and higher quality paper features visual detail in both the photograms and the collage-poems which is compromised in the smaller paperback *THAT THIS*. There is a satisfying

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<sup>44</sup> The Grenfell Press, ‘Susan Howe/James Welling’, <http://www.grenfellpress.com/books/susan-howe-james-welling-frolic-architecture.html> [accessed 3 April 2014]

visual depth in the engraved collage-poems. Encountering *Frolic Architecture* is akin to seeing a sculpture or a work of visual art. I will have more to say about viewing Howe's letterpress as works of art in the Coda, but for now I wish to address the more widely available version of the collage-poems in *THAT THIS* and to discuss the various poetic implications of their more obvious visual effects.

In the first collage-poem we see two sections of text that seem to have been rent apart from one another, figuring the separation that is at the heart of this book. (See Fig. 6) The section on the left consists entirely of word-fragments; 'own', 'ocean', and 'sea' can be made out, but they are all partly effaced at the edges. The effect gives an impression of inarticulateness on the part of the speaker, or, conversely, of obstructed hearing. In the section up and to the right, meanwhile, words come across loud and clear: 'in one. No sun' and 'was dark' express the bleakness of grief; 'her arms' signifies a female presence; 'circumbam-' hints at compulsive worry; 'could tread' shows the promise of carrying on; and, finally, 'all objects' and 'things strov-' show that ideas are irrelevant: it is *things* which are desired, not the signs that name them.

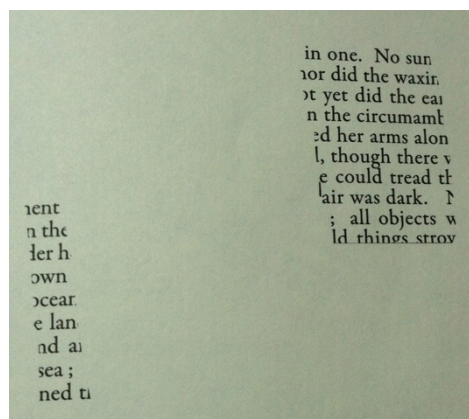


Figure 6. Close-up of first collage-poem (TT 41)

But part of the point of this aesthetic, of course, is that many readings are made possible. Howe's collage-poems recreate an act of reading—not just as cognitive interpretation—but as an aesthetic experience in a moment of great need. Which is to say that, semantically, random fragments may leap out to catch our attention or give the impression of solace while,

visually, the partially effaced type and rough-edged sections give the impression of fragility. Indeed, the sections resemble the scrap of Sarah's wedding dress that Howe placed on the cover of the book, giving a 'frayed' or 'threadbare' appearance in places while being finely 'woven' or wrought in others.

The collage process used in *THAT THIS* creates several new visual effects that produce analogs of potential new meaning. With a few exceptions, the poems here are assembled from overlapping documents rather than overlapping type. While in 'A Bibliography of the King's Book' the overlaid typeface resulted in lines that visually intermingled and obscured one another, here the overlaid documents create a layering effect. At the level of individual words, rather than cropping, we now have erasure. If the collage-poems in *Eikon Basilike* were 'a picture of violence'; then the collage-poems in *THAT THIS* are a picture of loss—loss and separation. In addition to the opening poem where sections of text seem cleft apart, some poems feature lines that have been sliced through horizontally, splitting the halves of the line through the letter. See the below poem (Fig. 7), for example, which achieves a kind of visual analog in the line 'ing body my body slipping' which is vertically cleft into two 'slipping' halves. It recalls the performed Cratylism in chapter 4, where signifiers were shown to be fallible (or, indeed, 'slippery') at the same time that their material forms were made reflexive: the words 'did' what they 'said', much in the manner of a finely wrought Puritan sermon.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Anne Kibbey argued that John Cotton used like sounding words in order to make an acoustic arrangement in his sermons that would give the sense of semantic coherence by virtue of its acoustic coherence (*Interpretation of Material Shapes in Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 13). Howe mentions that Kibbey's book was important to her (*BM* x).

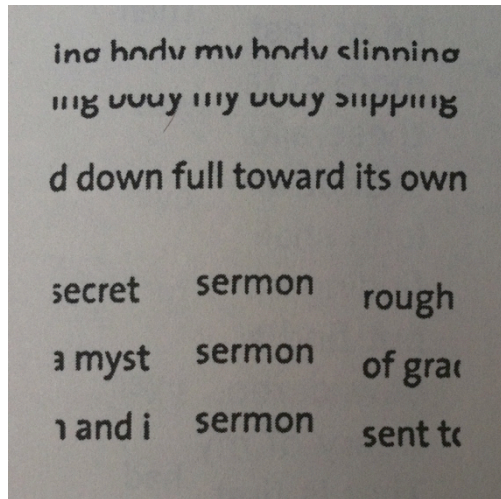


Fig. 7 *THAT THIS* 45

But again, as explained in the introduction, while ‘elegaic materialism’ refers to engaging with material particulars in order to do the work of mourning, it also retains a vestige of its antinomial sense: a celebration of the chance recovery of new particulars. This is the ‘frolic’ in this sequence’s ‘architecture’. And one of the ways that it manifests itself is through a singular material effect of the procedure. It may strike us as curious that in all of Howe’s descriptions of the process (in the press release from Grenfell, on the dust-jacket of the *New Directions* copy, and in interviews) she points out that the Scotch Tape was ‘invisible’. This is significant because the invisible becomes visible by chance, and this unexpected effect gives some of these poems an uncanny symbolic power. In poems like the one below (see fig. 8), the edges of the tape are registered by the copier as black lines. Howe writes,

More and more I have the sense of being present at a point of absence where crossing centuries may prove to be like crossing languages. Soundwaves. It’s the difference between one stillness and another stillness. Even the “invisible” scotch tape I recently used when composing “Frolic Architecture” leaves traces on paper when I run each original sheet through the Canon copier. (*TT* 31)

For Howe, the visible trace of the invisible tape is similar to the ‘soundwaves’ of printed language. But they are also a link between the seen and unseen, and so they become an appropriate trope for the bridge between the living and the dead. We might even say that the

visible trace of the invisible Scotch Tape that holds the poems together performs an apostrophic function—even if only a curiously accidental one.

This visibility of the tape is especially significant here because of the various thresholds of reading and transcribing involved. The ‘private writings’ of Hannah Edwards were first encountered by Lucy, who transcribed them into the more legible version that Howe discovered in the Jonathan Edwards papers, and were later transcribed yet again by Howe in the library. Howe calls our attention to the mediated aspect of these ‘private writings’ in the acknowledgements and in interviews.<sup>46</sup> As such they fulfill the Romantic conception of lyric poetry; they are ‘overheard’ thoughts of a person who appears unconscious of her listeners.<sup>47</sup> Part of Howe’s romance of the archive is this notion that ideas and impressions can be transferred over distances of space and time, reaching attendant readers by telepathy. The collage-poems effect an experience that is neither cognitive (reading) nor aesthetic (looking) but somewhere between both, thereby recreating the primacy of the particular over sense that is the hallmark of grief. But if Howe removes herself from Hannah’s words, we can still see evidence of her hand in the process—not only in how she obscures and rearranges the poems but in the chance manner in which the ‘invisible’ becomes visible again. (See Fig. 8)

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<sup>46</sup> See the Acknowledgements to *THAT THIS* (6), the Grenfell Press press release cited above, and Howe’s interviews with the Academy of American Poets (‘An Open Field’).

<sup>47</sup> In his essay ‘Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties’ John Stuart Mill writes that ‘eloquence is heard; poetry is overheard. Eloquence supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener’ (John Stuart Mill, ‘Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties’, In *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 8 vols. (Indianapolis: liberty fund, 2006), I, 348).

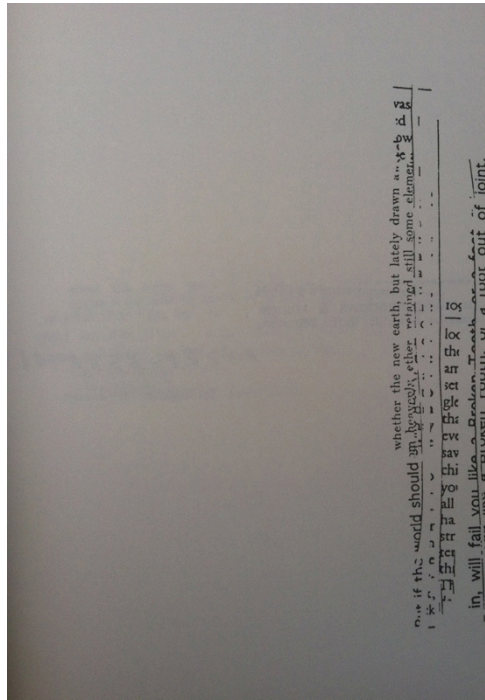


Figure. 8 (TT 61)

The need to view these collage-poems as images (and not just read them as texts) is encouraged by the presence of photograms by James Welling. The collaboration came about when, at her daughter's suggestion, Howe encouraged him to look at the Edwards manuscripts.<sup>48</sup> Welling's early work included photos of books and manuscripts, and while Howe thought initially that he might photograph the Edwards papers themselves, he chose instead to incorporate abstract black and white photograms. According to The Grenfell Press, he took '8 x 10 inch Kodak Polymax Fine Art paper' and

printed on a thin-enough-to-fold sheet of clear mylar and placed this on top of unexposed photographic paper. After exposing and processing the sheet Welling added paint to the mylar to make additional unique photograms. Eventually the mylar became covered in paint and Welling began again with a new sheet of mylar. In *Frolic Architecture* Welling used three mylar sheets. In the photograms Welling acknowledges the collection of Edwards Family material at the Yale Beinecke Library that Susan Howe encouraged him to look at before beginning his work on *Frolic Architecture*.<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, the photograms are made in a fashion similar to Howe's collage-poems. The supposedly 'transparent' materials (invisible scotch tape in Howe's case and clear Mylar in

<sup>48</sup> Howe mentioned this in an email to me dated 11 March 2014.

<sup>49</sup> The Grenfell Press, 'Susan Howe/James Welling', Press release, <http://www.grenfellpress.com/books/susan-howe-james-welling-frolic-architecture.html> [accessed 13 March 2014]

Welling's) are folded over one another, producing visible traces in the process. The title and epigraph furthermore encourage a comparison between the collages (both Howe's and Welling's) with snow. In 'The Disappearance Approach', Howe writes 'Lyric is transparent—as hard to see as black or glare ice. The paved roadway underneath is our search for aesthetic truth. Poetry, false in the tricks of its music, draws harmony from necessity and random play' (*TT* 24). Welling's photograms similarly seem to embrace the chance procedure that sometimes produces traces of structure and other times seems to fall apart in disarray. (See Fig. 5) Together, they ask us to find 'astonished Art' in the 'wild work' much in the way that Emerson did in 'The Snow-storm'.

But while Welling's photograms encourage a comparison with the collage-poems, they also underscore the distinct *verbal* nature of Howe's work. As in Howe's manigraphic scholarship, the point is not so much to argue a position on what constitutes a text or an image, but rather to question the line between them.<sup>50</sup> When we no longer take the partition between text and object for granted, we begin to read and see in more deliberate ways. Howe has always found the greatest potential for her poetry in locating and thwarting these boundaries and classifications. Her poetry restores material perception and subjective experience to reading, so that her texts become much more than just 'certain words in a certain order'. Another way of saying this is that she restores Secondness to the text. And in a moment when she is grieving the loss of her husband to the realm of immaterial signs, this recovery of particularity is all-important.

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<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, Walter Benn Michaels devotes several pages to discussing Welling's work in *The Shape of the Signifier* (the connection is a coincidence; the books were ten years apart and Howe came across Welling's work through her daughter, Rebecca Quaytman, a visual artist who was familiar with his work). Focusing on his close-up photographs of opened diaries, Michaels writes, 'Welling treats the diary, in other words, the way Howe treats the text of Shephard's *Autobiography*, insisting on its materiality and, like de Man, identifying the materiality with a certain illegibility' (Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 102). Michaels fails to see that Howe identifies materiality with *particularity*, not illegibility per se. Her point is to protest abstraction into ideal forms, and illegibility is but one of the aspects of material particularity that will be sacrificed in that process.

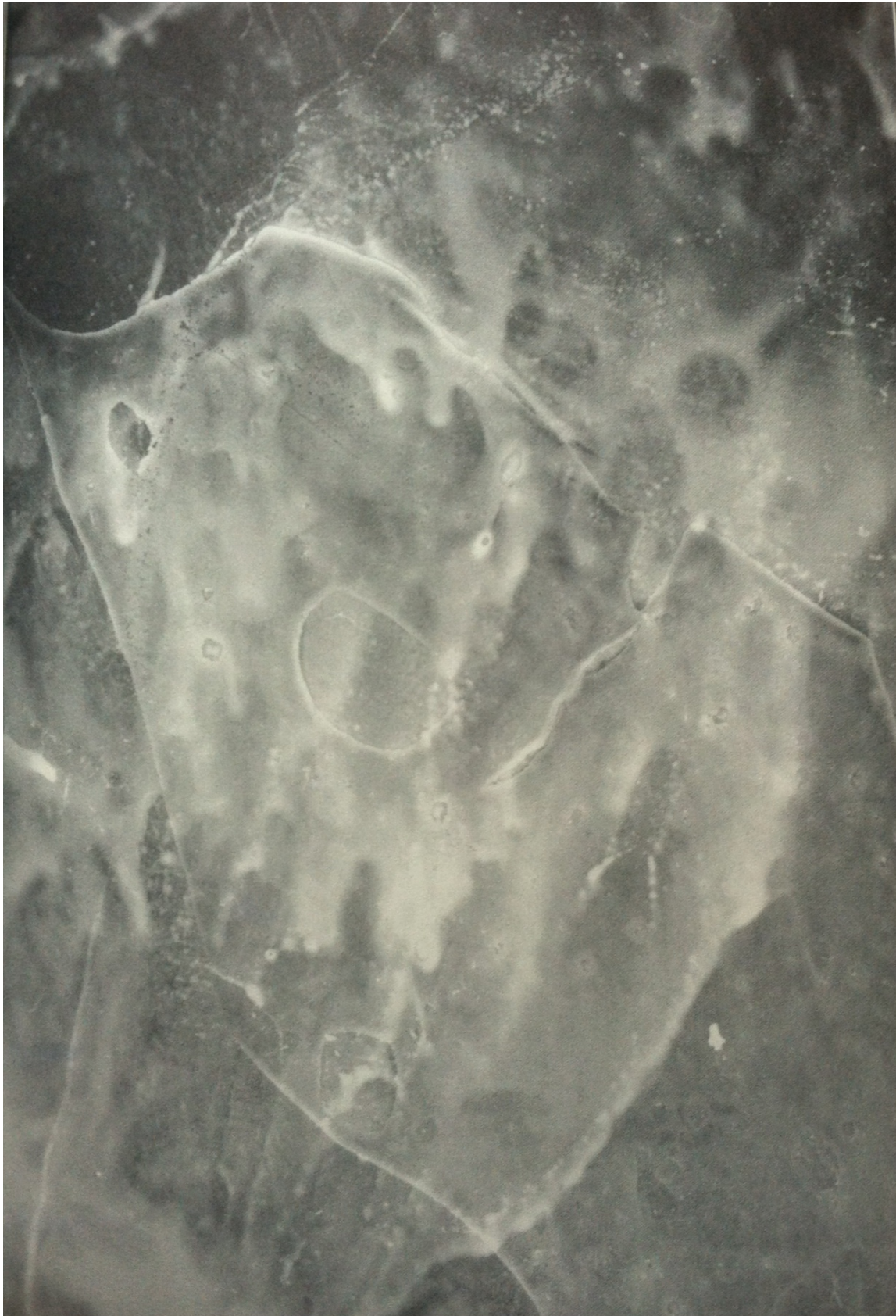


Fig. 9 Photogram by James Welling *TT 95*

The above photogram sits opposite the last collage-poem of the sequence which, like the first collage-poem, is rent in two separate segments of text, this time much smaller. To

the left is a slice of serifs too narrow to give any sense of what's being said, and to the right there is a single word, its edges slightly effaced: 'sudden'. If collaged reflections on the book's materiality allows Howe a new means of documenting mourning in *The Midnight*, then in *THAT THIS* the trauma of the sudden loss of her closest companion calls for a more sublime form of textual expression, which she found in the new collage-poem.

- **'that this': back into to signs**

While in 'Frolic Architecture' Howe restored particularity, experience, subjectivity, and time to the text through erasure, then in this third section we see Howe moving back into more established forms of verse. There are seven lyrics here, formed by split quatrains with the exception of the penultimate poem, which is a single stanza of five lines. Curiously, while the poetic form is more structured (the lines are legible and regular), the referents become less concrete. The themes are evanescent materials ('shadow', 'clouds', 'fire') as well as abstract nouns ('truth', 'mystery'). But while the words themselves are essences, Howe's narrative protests them. In the first poem, for example, Howe writes,

Day is a type when visible  
objects change then put  
  
on form but the anti-type  
That thing not shadowed (99)

Here the idea of 'Day' trumps the actual, numbered days in which she writes or in which Peter once lived. This is the new, timeless, imaginative space into which Howe must go in order to make her meanings understandable to others and in order to meet with the dead. '[O]bjects' which ordinarily may 'change' over time must instead 'put/on form', that is, become fixed concepts. There is no longer 'semiotic continuity' where meaning is shown to be in flux. But, interestingly, this is still her subject on a thematic level even if it isn't

demonstrated on a formal one; she uses determinate forms to talk about indeterminate ones.<sup>51</sup> In the final lines, ‘the anti-type/That thing not shadowed’ harkens back to an observation Howe made in the opening essay: ‘Now—putting bits of memory together, trying to pick out the good while doing away with the bad—I’m left with one overwhelming impression—the unrepresentable violence of a negative double.’ (*TT* 13) Howe must choose which aspects of Peter’s life she will reveal in her verse. ‘Type’ refers to the reduction of an individual to a category (the ‘kind’ of person he is), but the word also puns on *printed* ‘type’, which is the new material form that Peter’s life will take. Because her portrayal selectively omits ‘the bad’ qualities, they constitute ‘the anti-type’ which, spared from the illumination of Howe’s writing, become ‘that thing not shadowed’.

The many senses of the word ‘form’ are also important to this final section. Not only does it refer to the lyrics’ regular quatrains, that is, to the *poetic* form, but also to the double, nearly antinomic senses of ‘form’: to both ‘body’ and ‘idea’. Howe’s poem laments the movement from the former, material sense of ‘form’ to the latter, immaterial one. ‘Is light anything like this/stray pencil commonplace’ she asks, reminding us of the way this dynamic plays out in writing also, where manigraphic particulars are reduced to the ideal forms of print. Life can exist only in particulars and embodied forms, not the disembodied signs that name them.

For Howe, as we see in the fourth lyric, the ‘mystery of art or artifice’ ‘provides its own sacraments’, but this artifice is often employed to lament its own limitations:

A secular arietta variation  
Grass angels perish in this

Harmonic collision because  
Non-being cannot be ‘this’ (*TT* 102)

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<sup>51</sup> Peter Nicholls made a similar observation about Howe’s writing in *Pierce-Arrow*, writing that one of the lyrics in ‘Rukinfigur’ (the book’s final lyric sequence) ‘seems to escape its “confinement” even as its fixing in print is the precondition of its existence and afterlife, and it is this kind of paradox that throughout *Pierce-Arrow* gestures toward some kind of intermediary or liminal language which might allow us to remember people and events from the past while fully reckoning with their absence’ (Nicholls 447).

Lyric poetry, here figured as ‘a secular arietta variation’ and ‘Harmonic collision’ cannot capture actuality. Phenomenal experiences of nature, like ‘Grass angels’ cannot be represented and so ‘perish’. The last line recalls Peirce’s philosophy: ‘this’ belongs to the domain of Secondness and of experience; it cannot exist in signs. Conversely, that which is ‘Non-being cannot be “this”’. Which is what renders the final protest against signs so powerful in the final lyric:

That a solitary person bears  
witness to law in the ark to

an altar of snow and every  
age or century for a day *is* (TT 105)

‘[L]aw in the ark’ evokes the realm of signs. Law also dictates basic partitions like that between drawing and writing. ‘[A] solitary person bears/witness’ to this law but also to ‘an altar of snow’—the domain of secondness we saw in ‘Frolic Architecture’. The poem marvels at the fact ‘That’ a person witnesses forms and formlessness, but it marvels even more at their sheer existence in the first place. Howe’s lyric artifice articulates language’s lack of a ‘certificate of presence’. The message of her song of mourning is a shared fact: that it was once true, but now is no longer true, to have said that this person ‘*is*’.

But, rather than ending here, Howe chooses to go back into the realm of borrowed words and partial erasures for a single, untitled collage-poem:

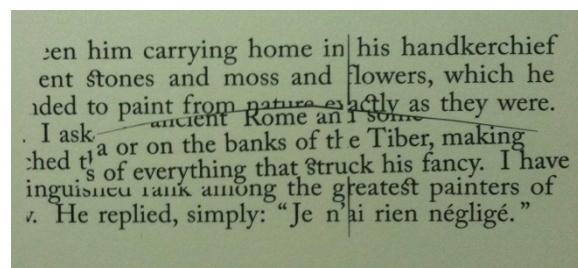


Figure 10. TT 109

The text is taken from the 1923 book *Nichola Poussin* by Esther Sutro, which was the first English study on Poussin.<sup>52</sup> In the opening essay, Howe mentions that she went to an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: *Poussin and Nature: Arcadian Visions* ‘for solace and comfort’. (TT 26) The original passage from Sutro’s text reads as follows,

Bellori tells us what sort of impression Poussin made on the frequenters of the Piazza. The lawyer, Bonaventura d'Argonne, says: “I met him among the debris of ancient Rome and sometimes in the Campagna or on the banks of the Tiber, making drawings of everything that struck his fancy. I have also seen him carrying home in his handkerchief different stones and moss and flowers, which he intended to paint from nature exactly as they were...I asked him, one day, by what means he had reached that high perfection which gave him such distinguished rank among the greater painters of Italy. He replied, simply: ‘Je n'ai rien negligé.’”<sup>53</sup>

Howe’s essay mentions several of his paintings, including the poignant scenes of separation and loss in *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice* (TT 27) and *Pyramus* (TT 28). But she also expresses sympathy at *Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus*. Midas had asked that everything he touch be turned to gold, and, finding he could neither drink nor eat, he asked to be relieved of his gift. In Poussin’s painting we see Midas accompanied by Bacchus, who was sent to help him wash the gift away at the Pactolus River. (See Fig. 11)

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<sup>52</sup> Esther Sutro, *Nicolas Poussin*, Intro. William Rothenstein (Boston and London: The Medici Society, 1923). According to the Introduction, Sutro chose to ‘inform those who, admiring the works, wish to know what manner of man he was who created them, rather than to comment on Poussin's methods or style’ (ii).

<sup>53</sup> Sutro 76

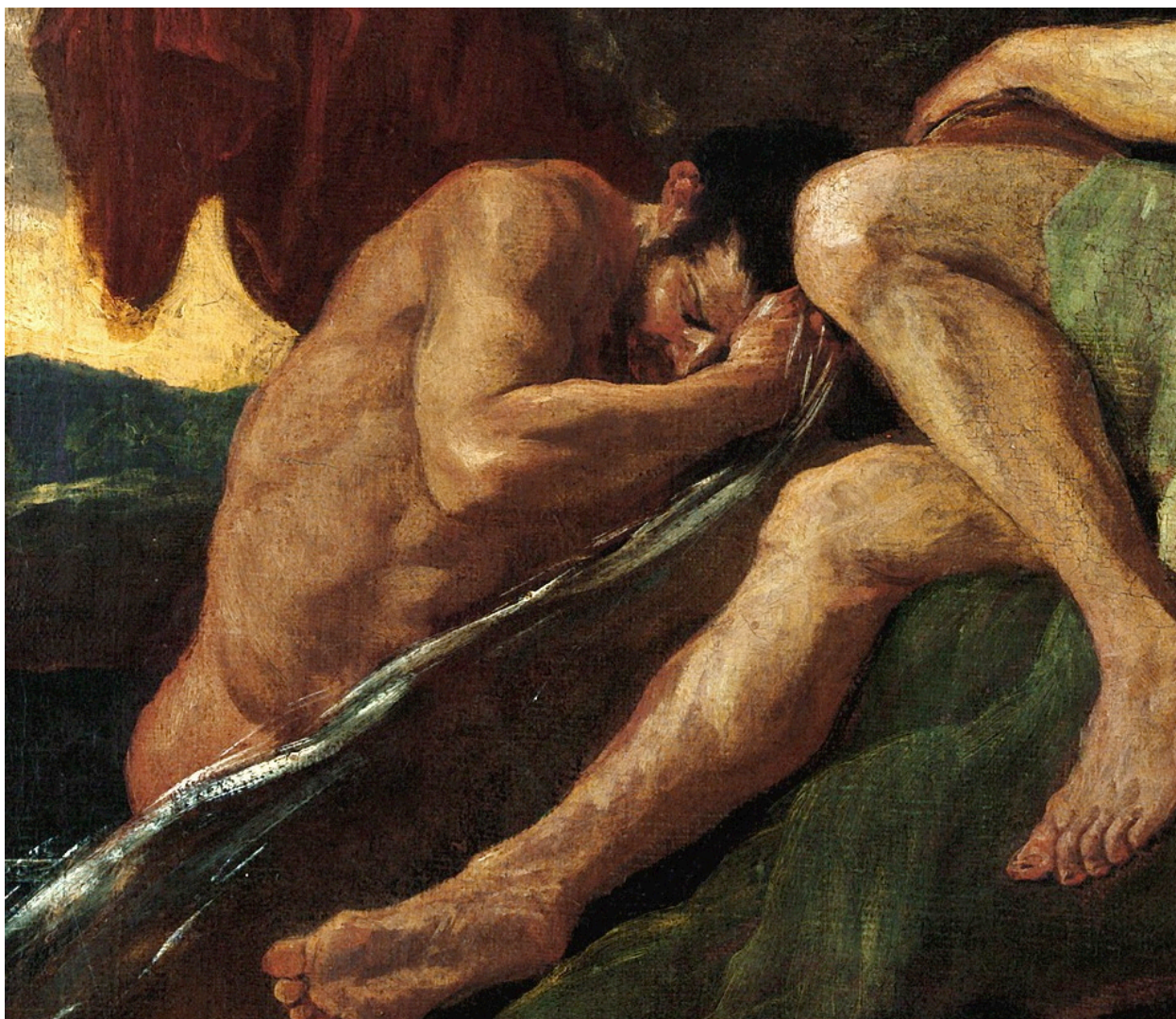


Fig. 11 Nicolas Poussin. *Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus*. ca. 1627.  
Detail of Midas at Bacchus's feet.

Ultimately, Howe's elegy is not so much a portrayal of her beloved as it is a portrayal of her own grief and consolation. But this is especially true of elegies dedicated to personal loss rather than to public figures.<sup>54</sup> In this case, it's the contemplation of memory that matters, the new life we give the departed in our minds and hearts. Howe relates particularly to *Midas*, for though she knows she can turn her subject into proverbial gold through her verse, she wishes to do so without changing him. 'Do we communicate in mirror languages, through some inherent sense of form, in every respect but touch? Do we ever know each other; know who we really are? Midas, King Midas—is the secret we take away with us—

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<sup>54</sup> Stewart, in her review of recent elegies by women, discusses how women elegists are more apt to make a family member their subject and to make 'a public declaration of private emotions' ('Discandied' 1).

touch' (*TT* 34) Poussin provides the lesson that some particular of 'inherent form' may be perceived best from a distance, where alterity is preserved and actuality unchanged.

Through her artifice in *THAT THIS*, Howe comes to terms with the discrepancy between what she lost and the representation of what she lost. Her hesitancy to remake a person in verse or in signs, just like her hesitancy to write history, is figured by gaps and erasures. In this case, 'interventions of absence' allow for her beloved to exceed the signs she would use to describe him. 'This sixth sense of another reality even in simplest objects is what poets set out to show but cannot once and for all,' writes Howe. (*TT* 34) Paradoxically, by using signs to articulate the desire to break free from them, Howe memorializes the *fact* of Peter's actuality and particularity—even if she doesn't create an image of him in her verse (there are rather only fragments of his memory in her prose). The hesitation in the opening essay, the formal invention of the middle section, and the evasive lyricism of the final section acknowledge what was and is no longer and how may go misremembered.

But it also acknowledges, and celebrates, the surprise discovery of chance particulars that were made possible by the delay of imposed form. In the introduction to Sutro's book on Poussin, William Rothenstein writes

No artist copies the appearance of things for the mere pleasure of imitation. This is a heresy shared by Plato and many critics since his time. He pursues contour and mass because he has an intuitive faith that, by subjecting his work to the discipline of appearance, something of the unknowable reality may unconsciously be incorporated into his work.<sup>55</sup>

'The discipline of appearance' is an apt expression for Howe's commitment to manigraphic particulars and the conviction that within them lay 'something of the unknowable reality'. In the beginning of this study I suggested that there was a way of reading that could consider materialism and intention as compatible, and that together with an aesthetic judgment, one could be in a better position to uncover details about a text's meaning that were hitherto unavailable to a reader reading to his own ends. My word for this materialism was 'elegaic'.

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<sup>55</sup> Sutro 12-13

The recovery of that reality comes through the aesthetic experience that does not presume intelligibility about its object. When we adopt the same orientation for the individuals we have lost, we grant alterity even to our memories.

This isn't to refuse mourning but rather to give pause before we turn to nostalgia or other easy forms of closure. And it parallels Howe's epistemology of texts, where their meaning is always at some remove that remains to be apprehended except by some chance discovery of a material particular. In *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* Paul de Man had asked for 'non-elegiac' reading that would 'allow for noncomprehension' of a text. In his view the opposite—elegiac or 'generic reading'—is 'at the furthest remove from the materiality of actual history'.<sup>56</sup> If the variant spelling of 'elegaic' in this study of Howe's work reminds us of anything, it should be that Howe's way of reading, like her way of mourning, is bound to material particulars and devoted to noncomprehension. The collage-poems are, ultimately, true mourning.

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<sup>56</sup> Paul de Man, 'Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric', *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 262. Cavitch also cites de Man in *American Elegy*, pointing out that 'the singularity of any text, and of any object of mourning, can only be approached via its repetitions, transferences, and reiterations' (Cavitch 21-2).

## Coda.

### A Poet Among Painters

Forty years after Howe turned from collages to poetry she is now exhibiting as a visual artist again. Her work was selected for the 2014 Whitney Biennial and she presented her first ever solo exhibition at The Yale Union in Portland, Oregon at the end of 2013. The Yale Union exhibited a selection of collage-poems from 'Frolic Architecture' along with a new series entitled 'Tom Tit Tot' (the work takes its name from Edward Clodd's 1898 book *Tom Tit Tot: An Essay on Savage Philosophy In Folk-Tale*). The Whitney Biennial, which is meant to offer a cross-section of contemporary American art, exhibited 'Tom Tit Tot' alone. The formal structure of the new collage-poems is similar to the collage-poems in *That This*. They are made by the same process, whereby Howe first transcribes her source texts then uses scissors, 'invisible' scotch tape, and a Canon copier to make new, collaged forms that are made into plates and printed using a letterpress. One of the primary differences is the source texts. Instead of the archived letters of one person, we have an array of poetry, non-fiction, philosophy, and criticism that spans several centuries. In addition to canonical sources such as Coleridge, Yeats, and Browning, there are obscure texts like Clodd's *Tom Tit Tot* or Robert MacAlister's 1937 book *The Secret Languages of Ireland: With Special Reference to the Origin and Nature of the Shelta Languages*. Mixed in to these books are several source texts important to her work in the past, William James's *Essays on Psychological Research*, Peirce's *Collected Writings*, and Noah Webster's definition of 'enclose'. There is also a recent book about Paul Thek (1933-1988), a deep-sea diver turned installation artist.<sup>1</sup>

The wide-ranging source material as well as the museum setting prohibit researching each citation's original context. Instead we must react to the fragmentary nature of the

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<sup>1</sup> Howe's sources are listed in a bibliography that accompanied the brochure at The Yale Union exhibit. Howe had previously included the definition of 'enclose' in her essay 'Incluser' which appeared in *The Birth-mark* (BM 44).

composition alone. I will present several of the poems but first wish to discuss the way in which the work was curated, as the museum setting changes the manner in which her work is received.

The exhibit at The Yale Union was curated by Andrea Andersson, a New York-based poetry scholar, and Robert Snowden, the Director of the Yale Union. According to the brochure, this exhibit is a self-declared ‘hesitation toward the imminent fact of publishing’. Although The Yale Union commissioned the work, it was a ‘foregone conclusion that it would later be paginated, printed, and published in quantity.’<sup>2</sup> The vitrines at The Yale Union allow the reader to move about them in no particular order, lit naturally by the sun so as to reveal the texture of the paper and depth of the letterpress. (See Figure below) This was clearly the superior of the two presentations. However, I would like to focus my discussion on the exhibit at The Whitney, not only because it is the more culturally significant of the two (in 2012 the Biennial received over 130,000 visitors), but because the presentation in many ways highlights assumptions about text-image partitioning which Howe wishes to question.

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<sup>2</sup> The latter sequence is currently under contract for publication by MoMA publishing in Fall 2014. The deal was already in place before the Whitney exhibit was curated (email from Susan Howe, Nov. 20, 2013). The book will feature illustrations by Howe’s daughter, artist Rebecca Quaytman.



Susan Howe at The Yale Union in Portland, Fall 2013. Photo courtesy of David Grubbs.

According to the Whitney's brochure, the artists and makers collected at the Biennial are 'pushing boundaries: by collaborating, using the materials of others, digging through archives, returning to supposedly forlorn materials, or refusing to neatly adhere to a particular medium or discipline.' Painters are exhibited next to sculptors, installation artists, sound artists, and so on—often in a very small space. The collaboration and mixed disciplines recalls the moment of minimalism in which Howe began as a visual artist. And yet there still seems to be one aspect of art that the curators have trouble de-essentializing, that is, allowing it to be presented without assumptions about its genre or category. And that aspect is textuality.

Howe was not the only writer to exhibit at the Biennial. The curators also exhibited the manuscripts for the late David Foster Wallace's unfinished novel *Pale King*. Wallace's

manuscripts consist of legal notepads and notebooks containing character descriptions and plot treatments. They were opened flat or partially opened in a vitrine as if to be read. But Howe's compositions were different. Composed on individual, unbound sheets of paper they could have been exhibited on the wall as paintings or drawings, or in an arrangement that showed more 'hesitation toward publishing' as at The Yale Union. They could have, in other words, been displayed as language to be *looked at* rather than read.

Instead the curators put the collage-poems in a small vitrine arranged from left to right. Viewed from afar, the display is quite satisfying. Amidst the chaos of the other exhibits (some of the museum's floors featured eight or more large installations in a space the size of a large schoolroom) stands a freestanding wall that is, like Howe's description of what her poems would look like if they were paintings: *blank*.<sup>3</sup>



Susan Howe exhibit at the 2014 Whitney Biennial. View from center of room.  
Photo courtesy of author.

On the one hand, the blank canvas effect of the empty wall is an ingenious evocation of the monochrome values that inspired Howe's oeuvre and which were discussed in the first

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn Keller, 'An Interview with Susan Howe', *Contemporary Literature* 36.1 (Spring 1995): 1-34; 5

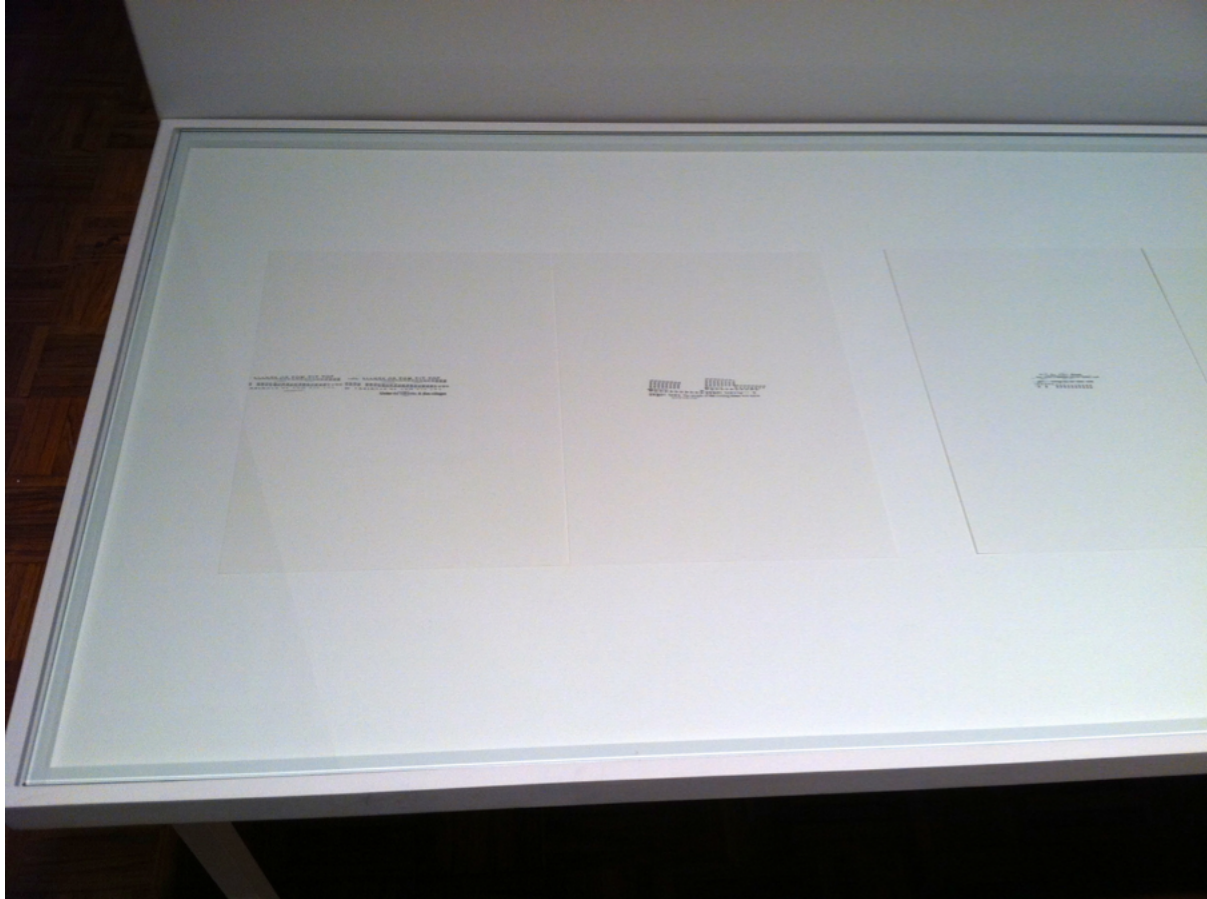
chapter. Like one of Martin's paintings, its appearance shifts as we move closer. From the far end of the room (a few steps back from where I took the photo) the legs of the vitrine disappear so that there is only shadow. As we approach the exhibit, the legs and also the vitrine become apparent (see figure below).



Museum-goer viewing Susan Howe exhibit at the 2014 Whitney Biennial. Photo courtesy of author.

But there is another way in which this display marginalizes Howe's compositions from the other art in the exhibition room. Instead of something to be *looked at* there is a clear sense that these pages are to be read. The small plaque at eye level (above and to the left of the viewer's shoulder in the photo) gives a background of Howe's process followed by an observation that it results in poems are 'at once legible and illegible and which occupy a space between writing and seeing, reading and looking.' For Howe, "the bibliography is the medium." The plaque's rhetoric calls attention to the way the compositions blur the partition between text and drawing, but then it ends on a curious note: 'In the exhibition context,

Howe's letterpress-printed poems are shown in pairs, as they will be in a book, their ultimate destination.'



Susan Howe exhibit at the 2014 Whitney Biennial. View from up close. Photo courtesy of author.

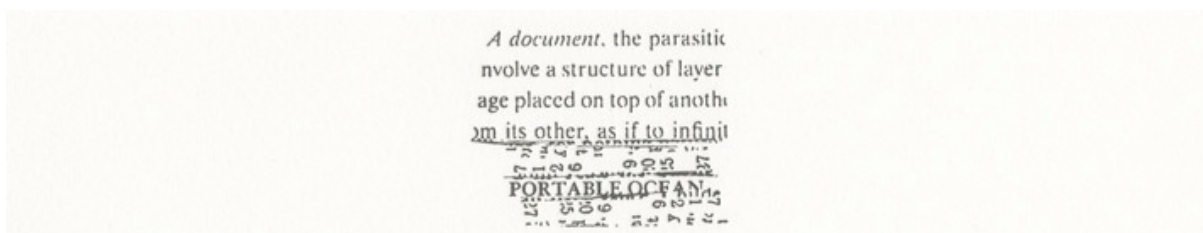
The exhibit asks, in other words, that we imagine the compositions *back into a book*. The effect is slight but significant, for it betrays inherent assumptions we have about documents and about the difference between reading and seeing. In this exhibit, viewers hunch down and move from left to right as though they were at a library looking at a collection of manuscripts. Drawings, paintings, photographs, and collages are often collected into books and even designed for them, but they are usually allowed to be viewed first as visual compositions on the wall or in a context in which looking is emphasized.

Were the compositions on the wall, framed as drawings, (or arranged in a manner other than in a single row that implies they are to be viewed from left to right) we would

experience the uncanny sensation of lexical meaning leaping out to greet us *in spite* of it being a visual composition. The interpretive habits we bring to a museum are different from the ones we bring to a book, and the real force of Howe's work is realized when we are forced to become aware of our own habits of reading and looking. We find sense where we didn't expect to, within a composition that urges us to scan our eyes over it as a whole. This is an opposite but analogous moment to what happens when we *read* Howe in a book. Then we puzzle over the obscurity of any illegible areas because we expect them to make sense.

To some degree the exhibit paradoxically succeeds in how it fails. It succeeds in proving the pervasiveness of the partition between texts and images. Whereas critics and readers want to dub Howe's work visual art, museum curators want to dub it text and place it flat where it can be encountered as if in a book. Nevertheless, the sheer inclusion of Howe in this group of artists shows that she herself has pushed the boundaries of image and text to such a degree as to gain recognition from both communities.

Howe's statement in the brochure also reminds us that the tension here is not just between reading and seeing but also *hearing* and seeing: 'I believed in an American aesthetic of uncertainty that could represent beauty in syllables so scarce and rushed they would appear to expand though they lay half-smothered in local history.'<sup>4</sup> Just as she did in the beginning of her career she highlights the phono-graphic hinge of language, speaking of 'syllables' that 'appear to expand'. The sonic aspects of the composition reach us regardless of the presentation.



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<sup>4</sup> Whitney brochure

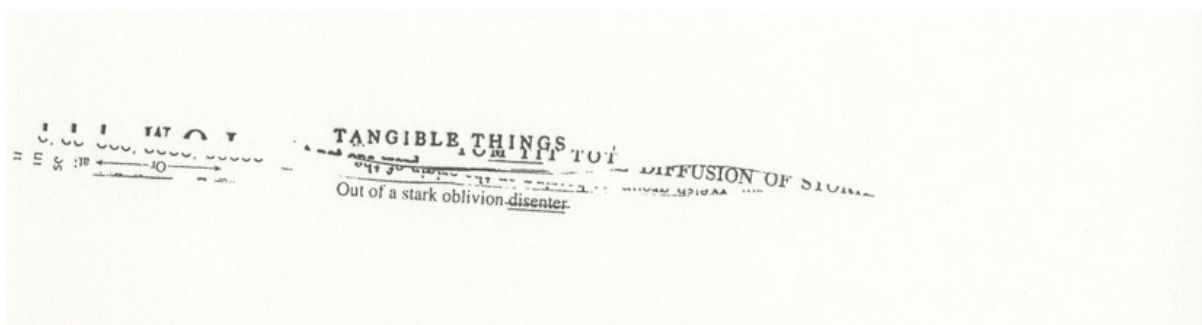


If this aesthetic sounds familiar then it should; it was the one Howe most admired of her era, and the one that most influenced her art and poetry. In ‘The End of Art’ she wrote,

In New York in 1953, Ad Reinhardt had chosen to paint geometrically. A geometry of balance and monochrome that reduced abstraction to its barest essentials. By 1956 he had reduced his materials even further, using only dark colors. Here were truly simple paintings; simplicity was their mystery. Paintings that offered no compromises. Paintings that forced the viewer to search for what was offered.<sup>5</sup>

Howe took her essay title from a quote from Reinhardt, who had punned on the word ‘end’, using it to mean utility or purpose: ‘The end of art is art as art. The end of art is not an end.’<sup>6</sup>

We might say that these collage-poems are ‘The End of Poetry’—poetry as poetry. Not an end but a limit perhaps, one in which matter lies at the brink of semantic meaning. The collage-poems of ‘Tom Tit Tot’ seem perplexing at first. But upon closer look we see they are really abstractions of language stripped to ‘its barest essentials’. In some cases they are only *just* recognizable as language. When we agree to search for what is offered, we find sonic and visual forms at once familiar and strange. Reading and viewing the compositions as both literature and art allows us to see language at the threshold of meaning, and that is the final gift of Howe’s collage-poems.



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<sup>5</sup> ‘End of Art’ 2

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

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*BH* *Bed Hangings*  
*BM* *The Birth-mark*  
*ET* *The Europe of Trusts*  
*FS* *Frame Structures*  
*MED* *My Emily Dickinson*  
*NM* *The Nonconformist's Memorial*  
*PA* *Pierce-Arrow*  
*S* *Singularities*  
*SF* *Sorting Facts, or Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker*  
*SLT* *Souls of the Labadie Tract*  
*TM* *The Midnight*  
*TT* *That This*

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