

TRADITION AND
INNOVATION
IN LITERATURE
FROM ANTIQUITY
TO THE PRESENT

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Historical Reconstruction, Rough Book Poetry, and the Dissolution of the Self

Susan Howe and the Tradition

In *21st-Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics*, Marjorie Perloff discusses the tradition of innovative poetics spanning the period from the early 20th century to the early twenty-first. Instead of the more usual modernism/postmodernism formula, dividing this tradition into Pound’s generation and Olson’s generation, as done, among others, by Donald M. Allen and Warren Tallman (ix), Jerome Rothenberg and George Quasha (xxix), and Allen Ginsberg (*Composed on the Tongue* 12–13; *Allen Verbatim* 162), Perloff posits one continuous trajectory of poetic practice informed by “the notion of *doing something else*” (*21st-Century Modernism* 163).

[T]he avant-garde momentum of the early decades of the twentieth century has found new channels – channels mediated [...] by a succession of avant-gardes from the Objectivists of the 1930s, to the John Cage circle and its intersection with New York poetry/painting and Black Mountain in the 1950s and 1960s, to the performance poetics and ethnopoetics of the 1970s. (Perloff 164)

Perloff’s counter-paradigm of a “succession of avant-gardes” does not only allow the radical modernism of Pound, Williams, and Stein to find its continuation in the Objectivists, the Black Mountain poets, the Beats, and the other post-World War II poetic formations, but also to (re)establish its connections with poetics outside the usual box of modernist innovations, among these, with Eliotian “sound/meaning conjunctions” (159) and Khlebnikov’s *zaum* (170). More importantly, this synthetic paradigm sets the innovators apart from what Charles Bernstein calls “official verse culture” (*Content’s Dream* 246–249), whose discourse, Perloff insists, “is a conventionalized and institutionalized [...] mass discourse” (155). Perloff names several widely held tenets held by “official verse culture” yet rejected by the “succession of avant-gardes.” Among these, we have the insistence that poetry “involves lineated verbal – and only verbal text”; the lineated text consists of “orderly” “text column[s] with white space around the stanzas”; poetry is always lyric, that is, the “expression of a particular subject [...] whose voice provides the cement that keeps individual references and insights together”; its language is “‘natural’ and colloquial”; and finally “a poem conveys its feelings and ideas only by means of indirection – which is to

say, by metaphor and irony” (158). In such poetry, which is really “most poetry currently written,” Perloff continues,

[a] generic “sensitive” lyric speaker contemplates a facet of his or her world and makes observations about it, compares present to past, divulges some hidden emotion, or comes to a new understanding of the situation. The language is usually concrete and colloquial, ironies and metaphors multiple, the syntax straightforward, the rhythms muted and low-key. Generic and media boundaries are rigorously observed: no readymades or word sculptures here, no *zaum* explorations of etymologies, no Steinian syntactic permutations. (161–162)

Such poetry has taken the “path of least resistance” (163), and approaches the “condition” of journalism – a form of writing as harmless as it is ephemeral,” Perloff concludes (164).

I have recapitulated Perloff’s points and arguments at such length because the poet I discuss in the present study, Susan Howe (who is actually Perloff’s first example), fully exemplifies, in her poetic assertions and rejections alike, the avant-garde impulse running to the early 21st century. I explore some of the most significant traits of Howe’s avant-garde practice, reflecting on her ties to the tradition that has involved, as she put it in a discussion, the “breaking of boundaries of all sorts,” while echoing an “undervoice [...] peculiarly American” (“Encloser” 192).

I identify the following areas where Howe’s “breaking of boundaries” ties her not just to the “undervoice” running through the century long avant-garde impulse, but to Olson in particular:

- (i) her poetry of historical reconstruction informed by an urge to a return to origins, closely related to the historical interest of “going back” to points before things went wrong;
- (ii) her rough book or notebook poetry informed by a return to a cognitive state not governed by habitualized patterns of thinking, manifest in a poetic language that disregards the rules of grammar and a page that resists the conventions of poetic typography, while also allows the inclusion of nonverbal materials;
- (iii) her dissolution of the self, whereby the “lyrical I” is suppressed, in particular by two techniques that I discuss as the reversal of topic-comment relations and the use of discursive filters.

The first two areas seem to be informed by the Olsonian idea of *apocatastasis*, while the third by the tenet of objectism. But while I detect Olson’s primary influence in these areas, I also emphasize Howe’s innovative reworkings of these tenets, whereby she has departed from Olson’s “undervoice.” Before presenting the two versions of Howe’s *apocatastasis* mode, I discuss Olson’s original concept briefly.

Olson's *apocatastasis*

Apocatastasis, the idea referring to the reconstitution of an original state in history, knowing, and writing, can be detected in Olson's urge to return to origins as well as to cognitive and linguistic states that precede habitualized patterns of thinking. The poet, he insists, must go back in history, thought, and words, where phenomena show themselves in their actuality and rawness. As he puts it in the short poetic fragment "These days,"

These days
whatever you have to say, leave
the roots on, let them
dangle

And the dirt

just to make clear
where they come from.

Olson is known for his scholarly interest in history, origin, and firstness. In the poem "On first Looking out through Juan de la Cosa's Eyes" he problematizes the possibility of firstness through the figure of Juan de la Cosa, cartographer and early explorer of the West Indies, captain of the *Niña* in 1493 and Columbus' "Chief Chart Maker." His interest in beginnings figures in the insistence on the distinction between *seeing* and *recognizing*, perceiving and interpreting. Indeed, Olson registers what la Cosa sees and not what he might recognize from existing narratives. Since he did not know he landed in the "New World," he did not recognize a cultural concept, but saw waters of cod and lands surrounded by deep mud banks to be sounded. Not using the abstraction of aerial maps but his own eyes only, he remained part of the scene that captured the viewer in a new circumstance. This implies that he still saw the land not as "other" but simply as "different," with an identity of its own.

Olson celebrates *apocatastasis* in several other poems as well, as process and textuality, the interconnectedness of textuality, or the processional textuality of memory and imagination. This is his topic of "The chain of memory is resurrection," attesting to his fascination with his supposedly Hungarian background.¹

¹ There are several other references to his Hungarian background. In a letter to Robert Creeley dated May 27, 1950, he refers to the family name of his grandmother, Lybeck (Lübeck), as being Hungarian (*Correspondence* 1: 51). This supposedly exotic identification appears also in the Berkeley reading: "That's because I am a Hungarian" (*Muthologos* 1: 131). On the same page with this reference in volume one of the *Olson-Creeley Correspondence* he cites the Hungarian mathematician Farkas Bolyai and his famous metaphor of the violet-like coincidence of new thoughts: "It is here again c. 1825 Bolyai Farkas, to Bolyai Janos: "Son, when men are

All that has been
suddenly is: time
is the face
of recognition, Rhoda Straw; or my son
is a Magyar. [...]

apocatastasis

how it occurs, that in this instant I seek to speak
as though the species were a weed-seed a grass a barley corn
in the cup of my palm. [...]

Resurrection

is. It is the avowal. It is the admission. The renewal
is the restoration [...]

The poem ties into the process of remembering, recreating the momentum of the soul's "onslaught," the human capacity for *apocatastasis*, the soul's attack against time and death. It seems that the poet's Hungarian roots also figure in his idea of *apocatastasis*. Even though he could not have known that in Hungarian the words *onslaught* [*támadás*] and *resurrection* [*feltámadás*] have the same root, he connects the two, suggesting no less than the overcoming of death via staying in process.

The pull of the idea of his Hungarian roots seems to be explained by his understanding of Hungarian language as having roots and dirt dangling on words. This is probably why he took such pleasure in having had a grandmother who spoke a non-Indo-European language, a language that was at one time only spoken. As Robert Creeley writes in his "Preface" to the Hungarian collection of Olson's poetry,

Olson wrote me years ago that he had laid a trap for Ezra Pound, as he put it, "abt my Swedish ancestry (very factual; that the family name Lybeck was Lubeck, was, sd my Grandmother, Hungarian [...])" Even so, it is the implicit echoes of "Hungarian" itself, as a language and movement of people, which must have pleased him. It reaches beyond the enclosure of the Indo-European to a world one has only as words spoken, which last would have been his delight. (Olson, *Semmi egyéb a nemzet* 13)

Probably the most important feature of Olson's concept of *apocatasasis* refers to the desire to go back to an original state of perceiving, preceding knowing and

needed they spring up, on all sides, like violets, come the season" (*Correspondence* 1: 51). The original quote reads: "many things have an epoch, in which they are found at the same time in several places, just as the violets appear on every side in spring" (see the notes to *Olson-Creeley Correspondence* 1:164). He refers to this remark in other poems as well, among them "The Story of an Olson, and Bad Thing" and "Apollonius of Tyana."

understanding. This original state means the state that precedes thinking in given concepts and cultural paradigms (as well as in polished full sentences) with the aim that the poet be able to register the processes of perception and experience without the cognitive ordering and totalizing interpretation of cultural paradigms. The idea of projective verse and field composition served exactly this purpose: to not halt the writing process by the fitting of perception into preexisting cognitive, linguistic, and poetic categories, but retain the energy of the creative moment. For if we imagine the process from perception to conceptual recognition – whereby the poet perceives and interprets the world as well as places this interpretation in the cultural matrix of concepts providing recognition – as a scale, then we see that poetry has predominantly occupied the end domain of this scale, where phenomena gain “meaning.” Only very few poets have had the courage to approach the other end of the scale; among these, Emily Dickinson was one to record perceived phenomena in their contingencies, capturing the scene before it became “meaningful” by the interpretive presence of cultural discourse or the eye informed by this discourse. Another such poet was Arthur Rimbaud, Dickinson’s close contemporary, whose ideal poetry was capable of slipping out of the shackles of thinking. This is what he demands in the letter written to Paul Demeny on May 15, 1871, and known as the “visionary letter” (*lettre du voyant*), “a long, immense, and calculated derailment of all the senses” whereby “he attains the unknown” (qtd in Adonis, 6).² This will make it possible to not just feel and think as language has taught us to. Because language is cognition dependent, the perceived objects and processes must be registered before recognition and interpretation; by evading the schemas mediated by paradigms of thinking, experience can be salvaged in the creative process without mediation. If we don’t do this, then, as Goethe told his friend Friedrich von Müller, “we only see what we know and understand” (Müller 31).³ The only way to escape the trap laid by language and the cognitive and cultural paradigms mediated by language is to go back, in the mode of Olson’s *apocatastasis*, to a pre-conceptual, pre-schematic state not regulated by cognitive paradigms – to where dirt still dangles on the roots of words...

Howe’s poetic reconstruction of history

Howe has complied with the imperative of *apocatastasis* in several manners, of which I discuss two: historical and linguistic-visual *apocatastasis*, or rough book or notebook poetry. Urged by a sense of historical *apocatastasis*, she would open poetry to history, writing poems that indeed include history, as Pound defined the epic (and later his

² “un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens [...]. Car il arrive à l’inconnu!”

³ “Man erblickt nur, was man schon weiß und versteht.”

cantos) (*Literary Essays* 86); in particular, her poems carry out evidence-based historical investigations, or Herodotus' mode of history writing, *istorin*, defined by Olson as "finding out for oneself" (*A Special View of History* 20). With history as her favorite subject in school, Howe devoured historical novels, and considered history, fiction, and poetry equally important. As she admits in the *Talisman* interview, "[h]istory and fiction have always been united in my mind [...] it would be hard to think of poetry apart from history" (*The Birth-mark* 158). One reason why Olson has been so important to her is exactly this fusion of poetry and history, she insists, concluding that it's impossible to "divorce poetry from history and culture" (163). Indeed, Howe is following in Olson's footsteps in including little remembered documents into poetry. However, there is a significant difference here: when Olson creates collages out of Gloucester local historical records, documents on Cabeza de Vaca, Mao Tse-tung's speech in French, or William Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* on Montezuma and Cortez, Howe goes to figures of history who have been made unimportant by the official canonizers. For knowledge, she claims, "involves exclusions and repression. National histories hold ruptures and hierarchies [...] literary canons and master narratives" serve "the legitimation of power" ("Encloser" 178).

Howe will write back into history figures who have fallen through the cracks of historiography. She wishes to pursue the kind of revisionist work which she admires in the scholarship of Patricia Caldwell, who, she claims, is "helping to form a fuller reading of American cultural history" ("Encloser" 176). Famously insisting that "[i]f history is a record of survivors, Poetry shelters other voices," (*The Birth-mark* 47), she will give "shelter" to those who have not survived in canonical histories, among them, Anne Hutchinson, Mary Rowlandson, Hope Atherton, Jean de Labadie, and Esther Johnson. In harmony with the spirit of *apocatastasis*, Howe is preoccupied with the issue of originality, whether trying to locate the actual person serving as the model of Melville's Bartleby (*Melville's Marginalia*) or to reconstruct the original manuscript of *Billy Budd* ("Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk"). Defining her own "one voice," her "singularity" as "a search for origins in some sense" ("Encloser" 193), this is how she describes the urge that has propelled her to always go a little further back in history:

I think there is a continuous peculiar and particular voice in American literature. First I thought it originated with Cotton and Increase Mather, then with early Captivity Narrative, most specifically Mary Rowlandson's, but I kept pulled farther and farther back. Now I see you can trace this voice as far back as 1637 [...]. ("Encloser" 189)

Several of her works attest to her conforming to this impetus, whether documenting the history of Buffalo, her own family, or the wilderness state of the English language.

What is common to all is the way Howe uncovers in each the moment that preceded some “crime.” As she puts it in *The Difficulties* interview, “[s]ometimes I think my poetry is only a search by an investigator for the point where the crime began” (Beckett 21). Prominent among the crimes searched is colonization; as such, several of her books are devoted to searching the moment preceding colonization, among them, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (1987), *Thorow* (1990), and *The Birthmark* (1993). In each case she comes to the conclusion, much like Olson, that no absolute point of origin can be identified, whether in the case of the “discovery” of a continent or the founding of a settlement. It is similarly impossible to reach the state of language preceding certain changes, usually for the worse. In vain does she try to reconstruct in the poem “Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk” the state before deletions and corrections Melville made in the manuscript of *Billy Budd*, the “genetic text” is unreachable, or nonexistent even. The most the poet can do is write backward, reaching earlier and earlier points in the hope of arriving at the brute actuality of being; as she writes in the poem sequence *Arisbe*, “Actuality is something brute / Unspelled Firstness is first” (*Pierce-Arrow* 29).

As is the case with other traits of the Williams-Pound-Olson tradition, Howe follows her predecessors as much as she departs from them. For one, Howe investigates the past in order to understand the present. “The past is the present,” she proposes; “We are all part of the background” (“Encloser” 176). She continues,

Of course I can't *really* bring back a particular time. That's true. Or it's true if you think of time as moving in a particular direction – forward you say. But what if then is now. I hope my work here and elsewhere demonstrates something about the mystery of time. (“Encloser” 176)

“[T]he extensive historical documentation in *Frame Structures*,” as Perloff puts it, “thus serves to construct the past that has shaped what Howe takes to be her very palpable present” (“Language Poetry” 428). In other words, the past does not remain past but is understood as one of the forces shaping the present. In other words, when researching the past, Howe actually studies the present. This is why Paul Naylor calls Howe's poetry “investigative,” exploring “the linguistic, historical, and political conditions of contemporary culture” (9), and also why Peter Nicholls identifies “temporal reversibility” as one of the main features of her writing, claiming that “poetry is itself a kind of figure for temporal reversibility” (“The Pastness of Landscape” 428).

Ming-Qian Ma summarizes other departures from the Pound-Olson tradition: fusing history and fiction, and erasing the supposedly artificial distinction between the two; taking on a gender-oriented position of being outside hegemonic discourse; and using history with a particular aim, “to subpoena history for an investigation of

its violent crimes against women” (“Poetry as History Revised” 717–718). Ma concludes by saying that “poetry becomes for Howe counterdiscourse to history” (718). This, I believe, is her most profound departure from the manner the Pound-Olson tradition “includes” history: the overall insistence on creating in poetry a counterdiscourse to history. Her poetic counterdiscourse to history consists in the documentary reconstruction of Puritan and 19th century history, on the one hand, and in the reconstruction of gendered history on the other.

*Documentary counterdiscourse to American history
– Puritan and 19th century*

Howe looks to documents of history, reaching back to Mary Rowlandson, Hope Atherton, and the New English colonizers in *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, to Anne Hutchinson and King Charles I in *Eikon Basilike*, to Jean de Labadie in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*. When discussing the Puritans, her treatment can be considered revisionary in the sense American historiography has recently affirmed that the central experience of Puritan life was not Messianic enthusiasm but loss and mourning, as well as spiritual doubt, allowing ample room for non-conformism (see Cecilia Tichi on this topic). This is the perception conveyed in Howe’s poetry too, insisting that the Puritan era was one of depression and anxiety, while their narratives were, as she puts it, “grief-stricken,” stemming from the “state of doubt and pain” that not only characterized their disposition before conversion but also after (“Encloser” 190). Puritan doubt and pain find expression in the fragmented prose Howe develops when capturing the warring selves Puritans tried to hold together, as expressed in the first line of George Goodwin’s “Auto-Machia,” “I sing my SELF; my *Civil Warrs* within,” for example. Howe implements various language strategies in line with this Puritan wrestling tradition marked by a sense of spiritual paralysis and powerlessness; among these we have hesitancies, false starts and restarts, as well as “avant-garde doubling and dismemberings of words,” as pointed out by Rachel Tsvia Back (19).

Howe has shown a similarly avid interest in 19th century American history and literature. As she claims in a discussion, “[m]y writing has been haunted and inspired by a series of texts, woven in shrouds and cordage of Classic American 19th century works, they are the buried ones” (“Encloser” 178). She located, for example, the Irish poet James Clarence Mangan, the person Melville supposedly modeled his character Bartleby on (see Megan Williams), and made efforts to reconstruct the “genetic text” of Melville’s *Billy Budd* in the poem “Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk” (see Ming-Qian Ma, “Poetry as History Revised”). In all these historical reconstructions the language follows the hesitancies and uncertainties at the heart of her reconstructive work.

“I work in the poetic documentary form,” Howe claims (“Sorting Facts” 385), collecting, as she writes elsewhere, “documentary histories, registers, and catalogues” (*Frame Structures* 18). Indeed, she has incorporated various historical documents into her poetry, for example, in the early volume *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1978) the two accounts of William Byrd, *History of the Dividing Line* (1728) and his personal account not intended for publication, *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1929), whose title Howe borrowed later; these two texts serve as the frame for the body of the poem in between. The third “foundational text,” as Back calls it (23), is the war correspondence and diary of Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Touched with Fire: Civil War Letters and Diary of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, edited by Howe’s Harvard law professor father. Her method is twofold here, adopting the scattered, dismembered voice of the personal document, while also incorporating whole passages broken into verse lines or quoted fully. This is the mode of writing employed in the long poem *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* published in *Singularities* (1990), where, by using historical documents, Howe makes visible the forgotten figure of the ill-fated American minister, Hope Atherton.

This is also the mode employed in the other verse cycle of *Singularities*, *Thorow*, in which already the title contains documents of sorts, referring to word history, as it has embedded three non-words: the misspelling of Thoreau’s name (as used by Hawthorne) and the archaic forms of *through*, and *throw*. As the title indicates, the poet has gone to find traces of the wild in language, carried by misspellings and archaisms, all immanently contained in language. This search for what is hidden in language will allow the poet to uncover the physical and spiritual state of wilderness. The adventure is symbolically led by the author of *Walden*, as not only the title indicates but also the many Thoreauvian nouns (among them, *cove*, *mud*, *shrub*, *cusk*, *cedar*, *grease*, *splint*, *drisk*, *islet*, *bateau*, *arrowhead*, *Messenger* from *The Maine Woods* and *Walden*) scattered across the pages to form a layered catalogue poem. This “twenty-page poetic sequence,” Perloff points out, is not only a poem including history, but by having upstate New York’s Lake George as its locale, “also a poem including geography” (*21st Century Modernism* 164), as is, we might add, *Walden*, too. Perloff emphasizes the complex layering of the poem brought about by its collaging of the journal of William Johnson and Thoreau’s *Ktaadn* and *Walden*, different speech registers, (mis)spellings, and proper names (166). The complexity of the allusions and the ambiguities evoke Eliot’s strategy, were it not for the additional Khlebnikov-like *calligramme* technique, especially as it appears in the “non-linear visual criss-cross composition of the last few pages,” with “clashing diagonal lines and spacing,” and the “focus on the individual word or, more specifically, the morphemes within the word, and what Khlebnikov called the *letter as such*, both as sound and as visual element” (168).

By using actual documents, Howe grounds her poetry in history, while approaching the referential mode. However, referentiality gets diluted here, as Perloff

notes, by the fragmentariness of the collaged text sometimes appearing “in shards and fragments as if retrieved from a fire or flood,” the ambiguous grammar, and the conspicuous deletion of first person reference (*Radical Artifice* 52).

Gendered counterdiscourse to history

A gendered counterdiscourse to history was launched by two early volumes already, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (1987) and *The Birth-mark* (1993), in which figures who had all but fallen through the cracks of history were given shelter in poetry. In the former she treats the conquest of the wilderness, both as *genitivus subjectivus* and *genitivus objectivus*, specifically Hope Atherton and Mary Rowlandson, both wanderers in the wilderness, natural and linguistic alike, whose encounter with the Other transformed them. In the latter, a collection of essays, she is following voices, she claims, that “lead [...] to the margins,” voices that are “barely audible in the scanty second- or thirdhand records” (*The Birth-mark* 4). “Interested,” as she puts it, “in getting women in that pantheon and keeping them there” (“Encloser” 193), she treats Rowlandson again, as well as Anne Hutchinson, and Emily Dickinson. Rowlandson, the author of “the first narrative written by an Anglo-American woman” (195), who has been “blamed for stereotypes of native Americans as ‘savages’” (196), is presented in *The Birth-mark* as the person about whom critics perpetuated “an equally insulting stereotype,” Howe insists, “that of a white woman as passive cipher in a controlled and circulated idea of Progress at whose zenith rides the hero-hunter (Indian or white) who will always rescue her” (196). Howe considers Hutchinson an “enthusiast” of both religion and language, citing Noah Webster’s definition of the word *enthusiast* as “one whose imagination is warmed, one whose mind is highly excited with the love or in the pursuit of an object; a person of ardent zeal” (*The Birth-mark* 11). As an antinomian, as Caldwell points out, she posed “a threat to the very foundations of things,” primarily with her passionate language; this was a language of rapture, full of “ambiguities and arbitrariness,” challenging the rigid authoritarian discourse of Winthrop (359).

Howe’s contributions to the critical reinterpretation of Dickinson constitute a special department within her gendered historical revisionist work, this time literary historical. Three publications are especially significant: the book-length poetic essay *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), the Dickinson chapter in *The Birth-mark* (1993), and the facsimile edition of Dickinson’s envelope poems, *Gorgeous Nothings* (2003). With these poetically inspired critical pieces Howe reinstates Dickinson’s “singularity,” which gradually got “edited out” in later narratives (“Encloser” 191). Howe has contributed to a revisionist understanding of Dickinson by assigning significance to such aspects of poetry as her typographic eccentricities and her use of visuality as a signifying system operative on the physical surface of the pages.

In addition to Hutchinson, Rowlandson, and Dickinson, Howe granted central place to Stella, Cordelia, and Mary Magdalene, singular women again, whose “individual voice” “singularities” get “erased by factions” (“Encloser” 191). These women, who had been overshadowed by strong men, emerge here as representatives of some dark, wild, and unknowable Other, who had been pushed to the margins of history and literature for their foreign and untamable nature. This is the “liquidation process” Howe discusses in the first section of the collage poem *The Liberties* (1983), followed by the books devoted to Jonathan Swift’s lifelong companion Stella (Esther Johnson) and Lear’s daughter Cordelia. These are the women for whom “silence became self;” to adopt the phrase she used in a discussion, and whom she urges to speak (“Silence becomes Self. Open your mouth”; “Encloser” 182). These are the figures whom she will “tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate,” as she puts it in the preface entitled “THERE ARE NOT LEAVES ENOUGH TO CROWN TO COVER TO CROWN TO COVER” (*The Europe of Trusts* 14).

The events of *Book of Stella* take place in Dublin’s The Liberties section, where St. Patrick’s Cathedral stands and where both Swift and Stella are interred, sharing one epitaph that makes no mention of the woman. Approaching the woman, Howe encounters the clock tower of the cathedral in the initial block poem, then moves further to the construction made of “irish granite” [sic] upon the “poddle” [sic] (*The Europe of Trusts* 159). The poet allows language to lead the lines, to apply Howe’s phrase from an interview (“I would want my readers [...] to let language lead them”; [Kelley 31]), by such consonance as “cliff or cleft” and “purlieus wall perilous,” as well as sound constant (as opposed to spelling difference) as “aisle or isle,” alliteration as “walk” and “wall,” and thesaurus-like word lists such as “head of tide poddle inlet pool.” This obedience to language characterizes the whole poem, as do its shape reconstructions as well. In addition to the block poem recreating the tower in its typography, several of the subsequent pieces are also shape poems refashioning the initial S of Stella’s name (161), the movement of the pendulum (163, 165), the lean figure of the young girl (166), and the hesitant broken speech of the woman dominated by a strong man. Howe recreates, in a fragmented voice, the story of the woman whose letters Swift burned after her death, now giving back her voice by citing Irish tales and legends. Freedom and voice are equally granted in the poem “light flickers in the rigging,” rewriting, as Back observes, “a famous passage from an earlier Irish text” (74). But while borrowing the bird imagery from Irish myths, as Will Montgomery succinctly presents (7ff), Howe rids it of its metaphorical depth, and uses it as physical image (giving some poems the shape of birds) and as a context to appropriate Swift’s name and apply it to Stella in the line “known for the swiftness of her soul.” Similarly, the pendulum image, describing the pull of Ireland and England for Swift, is now given shape in the subsequent lines of the poem and applied to Howe herself, who speaks in an interview of a “pull between countries,” Ireland

and the US, describing it as “a civil war in the soul” (Falon 37), which is very much in line with the Puritans’ profound ambivalence towards selfhood, as often expressed in conversion narratives.

Turning from history to fiction in *Book of Cordelia*, Howe treats a woman known for her silence and passivity by placing the story in Irish mythology again and identifying King Lear with the Irish ocean God Lir, “whose children turned into swans” (172). This identification is rooted in the identity of sound again, confirming the validity of the knowledge contained by language. While indeed, as Stephen-Paul Martin puts it, the poet gives “a portrait of our repressed feminine awareness trapped in a patriarchal waste land” (168), she assigns the power of language to Cordelia by the encouragement, “words are bullets” (178). Much like Stella, Cordelia is all language, made up of linguistic collusions as alliteration, assonance, consonance, and semantic associations, while also given shape in typographically meaningful poems such as the one taking the form of the initial C of her name (179). Indeed, in the words of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Cordelia’s “muted voice” is now heard (137), and it is heard exactly because of these linguistic techniques.

Female muteness remedied is the topic of the one act play, *God’s Spies*, of *The Liberties* volume, with the title referring to the messengers Moses sent to spy out the land (Num. 13:17). This is the mission of Stella and Cordelia as well: to speak, in their own voices, of God’s doings. The women become allies, developing a “relationship of mutual familiarity,” as Back puts it, whereby they finish each other’s sentences, as well as experience a “momentary merging into a single speaking subject” (91). Stella repeats what Cordelia said earlier (184/187), and sentences of earlier dialogues are now said by the two together (185/188). Given Swift’s erasures of Stella’s voice, the lines that have survived acquire a broader significance as they are reproduced in the text. Stella here is relegated to a humble schoolgirl reciting her two-page long paean, the poem written to Swift on his birthday in 1721, while Swift’s Ghost keeps mouthing silently, in an effort to appropriate the authorship of Stella’s text. It is no wonder, then, that Stella and Cordelia step out of this landscape, leaving behind “*Darkness. Silence. Gunshot. Silence*,” as the last line of the play indicates. After this, in the final section of *The Liberties*, language breaks down, as Douglas Barbour emphasizes, with “words scattered across the page in painterly blocks” (251). Words and letters take the shapes of S’s and C’s, or fragments of S’s and C’s, as well as block poems, in which female voices hide as if in the clock tower of a cathedral. Howe herself joins Stella and Cordelia, appearing as she is disappearing into language (disappearing into song, as in Mahler’s “Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen”), as the solution of the riddle of nine letters, to which the subsequent lines give no clue whatsoever. As George Butterick succinctly puts it, “it is Howe’s remarkable ability to absent herself, to shed herself from her lines, that allows them to stand with such authority” (314). (I will discuss Howe’s methods of absencing herself in detail later.)

Rough book or notebook poetry⁴

I turn to the second form of *apocatastasis*, a mode of writing characterized by a disregard for normative grammar and typography, which I call rough book poetry or notebook poetry. Howe's poetry is known for its unusual language use and its equally unusual look on the page, derived from a return to a state before grammar and typography came to regulate the poetic text. In the *apocatastasis* spirit, the poet wishes to return to a poetic condition that precedes the state when words are drawn into sentences and lines are regulated into stanzas and block poems. Perception, ideas, and even perceived objects are presented in their rawness – much like in the rough book schoolchildren were at one time required to keep in which to store their thoughts as they were coming to them. A rough book is a most valuable document, recording thinking in its process and actuality. One would have notes and reminders in a rough book, thoughts taking the shape of mind maps, as well as half sentences or half lines jotted down before they were finished. Moreover, one would have memorabilia in a rough book as well, for example, photographs, ticket stubs, or pages from letters. The objects included in a rough book are not selected by any prior perspective; rather, the attention governing their inclusion is similar to William James's wandering attention, assigned to the genius and the child, who – as opposed to ordinary beings who see the world through selective attention (*Psychology* 37) – have the “faculty of perceiving in an unhabitual way” (195), via wandering attention (95). This is exactly what the rough book poetry of Howe presents: thoughts before they would be fitted into polished sentences; perceptions registered before they would “make sense” in a cultural matrix; lines running haphazardly as if in a mind map; and non-verbal objects as memorabilia. And, indeed, writing out of an interest in every document, document fragment, or seemingly irrelevant detail that comes the way of wandering attention.

As such, Howe's rough book reflects the wilderness condition of language, where words are still unregulated; a comparable state in language and nature precedes cultivation and taming, which constitutes one of the “crimes” the poet desires to uncover. This wilderness text is the theme of the volume *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, in which broken sentences, noun and verb phrase fragments, and unfinished words testify to the absence of language's colonizers (for example, in the poems beginning with “Numerous singularities,” “Who / whitewashed epoch,” and “green chaste”). As Butterick emphasizes, the poet “lives out on a frontier of the imagination, along with a family of thought in a wood of words” (319), which she desires to leave in its unorganized and heterogeneous state. The poem “Taking the Forest” explores

⁴ After completing this study, I noticed that Michael Davidson used the term “notebook poetry” for Howe's poetry in the essay which I read over twenty-five years ago (and which I cite in this paper). I am working with both terms, Davidson's “notebook poetry” and my “rough book poetry,” where the latter emphasizes a crudeness and coarseness that has come to characterize some of Howe's poetry of the past decades.

the encounter between the wild forest and the settler, showing the forest to be stronger and the settler to be incapable of “taking” it. As sentences evolve into hesitant sentence fragments, left in half and begun again, with the same uncertainty and diffidence, the wood of words declares its refusal to be curtailed by grammar. The syntactic structures are fragmented, attributes are left off, the subjects are cut off from their predicates, indicating the irony of the situation: it is not the settler who takes the forest, but the other way round, the forest takes the settler.

In her earlier volumes, the preservation of old stories and words provides the primary means for retaining the seemingly disorganized discursive mass that later ages so easily threw out on the scrap-heap of history. This is what she calls the “wilderness of language,” formed, as she puts it, “from old legends, precursor poems, archaic words, industrial and literary detritus” (*My Emily Dickinson* 70). Therefore – much like Olson, who insisted, as I quoted earlier, on using words with “the roots on, let them / dangle / And the dirt” – she will embrace a linguistic form of *apocatastasis*, by going back to a yet unregulated “original state.” As she claims in “*Writing Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*,”

During the 1980s I wanted to transplant words onto paper with soil sticking to their roots – to go to meet a narrative’s fate by immediate access to its concrete totality of singular interjections, crucified spellings, abbreviations, irrational apprehensions, collective identities, palavers, kicks, cordials, comforts. I wanted jerky and tedious details to oratorically bloom and bear fruit as if they had been set at liberty or ransomed by angels. (201–202)

In this vein, Howe will write with great respect about those who, in the spirit of antinomianism, resisted the colonization of spirit and language, especially Dickinson, whose manuscript pages have been adjusted to the controlling norms of publishing, whereby a very meaningful sign system came to be extinguished in her text. Learning from Dickinson’s injuries, Howe retains her poems as broken, fragmented, stuttering. For stutter is meaningful; as she claims in the *Talisman* interview, “It’s the stutter in American literature that interests me. I hear the stutter as a sounding of uncertainty. What is silenced or not quite silenced. All the broken dreams” (*The Birth-mark* 180–181).

Howe’s poetry is permeated by this antinomian spirit in both its language and look; the colonizers of grammar and typography have been evicted, the discourse liberated. The typical method of this eviction can be described by the marking, in the Jakobsonian sense, of these two traditionally unmarked aspects of the text, normative grammar and conventional verse lineation. Howe subverts both of these sign systems, making visible what was earlier invisible. Meaning evolves not through the transparent medium of language and the equally transparent convention of typography, but within grammar and visual composition taking the foreground for

meanings to show themselves. Subverting the rules of grammar and typography offers a way to take away the transparency of language and turning it into a visible medium. Bernstein calls these visibility spots “typographicities” and “syntaxophonies” (*Content’s Dream* 73), as if lumps in wood, places where the material thickens. Everything that is unusual or irregular counts as a lump, making language visible, and depriving it of its medial transparency.

Disregarding the rules of grammar

Resisting the normative control of grammar has a long tradition in American poetry, going back to Dickinson and running through the whole succession of avant-gardes of the past one hundred plus years. As I mentioned earlier, Howe identified it as “detritus” in Dickinson (*My Emily Dickinson* 70), coming in the form of fractured discourse, as she puts it elsewhere,

a stammering even. Interruption and hesitation used as a force. A recognition that there is an other voice, an attempt to hear and speak it. It’s this brokenness that interests me. (“Encloser” 192)

Pound, Stein, Spicer, Olson, Duncan, Bernstein, and Howe, to mention only a few names, have all experimented with creating, out of broken sentences, this sense of fracturing and stammering. As deviations from normative grammar, they will act as lumps in the material of language, defamiliarizing it, making it strange, in the spirit of the Russian Formalists, so that whatever was invisible or unnoticed now becomes visible and noticed.

Much like Mary Magdalene, who submits and subjects to the power of the Word,

It is the Word to whom she turns
True submission and subjection.
(*The Nonconformist’s Memorial* 30)

Howe submits to language, allowing language to lead her. The linguistic compass that she allows herself to be directed by is made up of linguistic anomalies. Some of her favorite anomalies are the following: misspellings and typos (*castl* [*Defenestration of Prague* 91], *forgotn*, *forgetng* [*Debths* 41, 61]); archaic looking spellings (*wilde*, *realme*, *inhabitinge*, *afterwarde*, and *stretching*; *The Europe of Trusts* 94); thesaurus-like semantic lists (“pasture paradise park”, “roe buck and wild boar” [*Frame Structures* 46]; “Ceramic, plaster, laquer, newspaper” [*Debths* 28]; “metal, clay, gauche, glass, glue” [*Debths* 30]); lists of words associated by sound (“thimble thumb”, “rugged

raggedy,” “puppet pattern,” “clock lock” [*Debths* 107, 109, 120]); association of commonplaces, proverbs, and other sayings (“Let’s let bygones be bygones,” “Dust to dust,” “to make a / long story short,” “knock on wood,” [*Debths* 111, 115, 116]); writing separate words as one (“blanksmiling” [*Frame Structures* 53], “Woodslippercounterclatter” [*Debths* 111]). All of these anomalies serve to uncover the knowledge stored in language, and then conveyed by overwhelmingly accidental coincidences convey. The one non-accidental route to knowledge is etymology: it is by a reliance on the etymology of words that historical knowledge stored in words can be brought to the surface. As Butterick points out,

etymology [...] is her true genealogy. Howe favors etymologies in her work perhaps as much as feelings. She instinctively seeks to possess language to its roots, pre-family, pre-historical, even before language semanticizes itself. (Butterick 314)

As a linguistic version of Howe’s interest in origins, etymologies will take the poet to an earlier linguistic state that has not been determined by cultural patterns or cognitive paradigms. Interrogated by the poet through puns, non sequiturs, homonyms, and typos, language will yield meanings that cannot be found in polished sentences.

Howe does not accept an authority that has the power to determine what is right and what is wrong in language, making her kinship with two major women predecessors, Dickinson and Stein, unmistakable. For refusing that any person or principle would have the right to legislate over language, Dickinson and Stein similarly disregarded the rules of syntax and morphology, insisting to uncover a different kind of knowledge in an uncontrolled language. It is this normative controlling principle Howe questions in connection with Dickinson, asking,

Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation?
Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence? What inner articulation releases the coils and complications of Saying’s assertion? (*My Emily Dickinson* 11–12)

Knowledge stored in language and meanings that lie beneath the regulating grid of grammar can only be brought to the surface by using an unregulated language. Not only is it impossible to tell such knowledges and meanings in grammatical sentences, but even to think them. And the poet who wishes to say the unsayable must have recourse to a different language. As Ming Qian puts it,

To articulate the inarticulate, Howe’s poetic praxis pivots on a lyric consciousness upon which impinges a double mission of rescuing and breaking free: rescuing

the “stutter” that Howe hears in American literature. (“Articulating the Inarticulate” 469)

The stutter coming about by the articulation of the inarticulate characterizes the speech of Mary Magdalene in *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (1993). In the passionate testimony of this “love-impelled figure,” “Thought was broken down,” “Translat[ing] the secret / in lair idiom havoc” (*The Nonconformist’s Memorial* 17). Her acts are described in a similarly passionate language, in broken sentences punctuated by unconnected verb or noun phrases only.

Came saw went running told
 Came along
 Solution continuous chaos
 Asked told observed
 Caught sight of said said
 (*The Nonconformist’s Memorial* 12)

In this manner, Howe will allow ample room for the reader to enter the field of language to “make sense” of the indeterminacy embedded in the “stutter” – broken sentences, non sequiturs, homonym homonyms, misspellings, typos, puns, and other linguistic anomalies that bring about, as Quartermain points out, “polyvalent clusters of associations” abandoning not only normative syntax, but “even intelligibility” (19).

Disregarding the conventions of typography

Howe has developed a fine visual prosodic system relying on both sound and sight by using a diverse regimen of lineation from the more traditional stanzas (or stanza looking units) to lines running in all directions all the way to incorporating non-verbal materials into poetry. I will discuss these three modes of visual prosody below.

It is in *Pythagorean Silence* (1982) that Howe develops and brings to perfection her staple typographic practice within the more traditional lineation mode, informed by the simultaneity of a strong caesura and a strong enjambment. In the overwhelming majority of the poems one can find this counterpointing non-coincidence of grammatical break and line break, creating an eerie sense of syncopation, with grammar and typography struggling to take control. I have in mind lines like the following, in which, after a strong caesura, the last word of the line begins a new sentence or phrase that continues in the subsequent line.

power of vision a vast
 zero
 (*The Europe of Trusts* 31)

Only the first of fame passing degrees
 of wilderness
 (*The Europe of Trusts* 32)

a sentence or character
 suddenly

steps out to seek for truth fails
 falls

into a stream of ink Sequence
 trails off
 (*The Europe of Trusts* 36)

cataclysmic Pythagoras Things
 not as they are

for they are not but as they seem
 (as mirror

in mirror to be)
 (*The Europe of Trusts* 38)

In all these lines we encounter the wrestling of two forces, grammar and typography: grammar refuses to yield to typography, while typography refuses to yield to grammar, together creating a voice that seems rushing and rushed, driven by the push of the next grammatical or typographic unit, never coming to a resting point, always out of breath.

Howe subverts the horizontal-vertical grid that has been taken for granted in writing. Such subversions have become the most striking marks of Howe's poetry, consisting in the radicalization of typographic layout conventions. Typographical experimentation begins in the volume *Hinge Picture* (1974) already – with words dropped from sentences and sentences getting chopped up, morphological units losing letters or getting randomly cut in half, all for the sake of typographic idiosyncrasies (see, for example, *Frame Structures* 41, 43, 44, 47, 48, 49) – as well as in *Secret History of the Dividing Line* with its mirroring techniques.

While we have regular stanzaic units in *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* in *Singularities*, in *Thorow* of the same volume lines begin to run in all directions, as the wilderness within breaks language boundaries. There is no one way to hold the page – in fact, in order to read the text, the reader must turn it all around, as if walking around a sculpture to fully take it in.

In *The Nonconformist's Memorial* lineation either reflects the events in an iconic way, when, for example, lines form the cross of “Effectual crucifying knowledge” (*The Nonconformist's Memorial* 8), or start ascending to heaven (9), when line spacing varies (11), or when lines push themselves in between other lines (16). We have a similarly unconventional lineation in *Eikon Basilike* (1989), with sections from the documents of the court trial of King Charles I, his own book, and other historical records, with lines – some crossed out, others deleted – running in all directions, capturing, in one visual space, the fiery passions preparing for the impending regicide. The page is at once a visual and linguistic field of force, in which the semantics of the words is multiplied by their visual meanings.

Likewise, we find a complex signification coming about from the interaction of visual and semantic meanings in *The Liberties* (1983). In both the *Book of Stella* and the *Book of Cordelia* we have shape poems performing the initials of Stella and Cordelia, alternating with long, fragile poems made up of just one phrase, one word, or even part of a word to reenact a hesitant, broken language, associative and hallucinatory rather than logical, following the process of the two women coming to speech. Kathleen Fraser sees the realization of Olson’s “graphic ‘signatures’” (177) here, the visual techniques underlining the silences and voids surrounding the two women, emphasizing especially Stella’s “voice in hiding – a literal cry of isolation – choked off, reduced to encoded speech” (188).

As a poet who began her career as a visual artist, Howe has developed a particular sensitivity of what her pages should look like, attentive of the signifying role of the visual interplay of between white space and letters, words, and lines. “In the precinct of Poetry, a word, the space around a word, each letter, every mark, silence or sound volatilizes an inner law of form,” she writes (*Birth-mark* 145). Her early installations came about from the combination of linguistic materials and photographs; these combinations remained a staple feature of her poetry as well, with innovations consisting exactly in the incorporation of the image of physical objects in the language material.

Treating the printed page as a physical space provides yet another link to the Olson tradition. Howe acknowledges her debt to Olson with regard to composing on the page in an essay written in 1987, emphasizing the predecessor’s “spatial expressiveness,” his “feeling for seeing,” his treating the page as if it were a canvas.

The spatial expressiveness of Olson’s writing is seldom emphasized enough. [...] This feeling for seeing in a poem, is Olson’s innovation. [...] At his best, Olson

lets words and groups of words, even letter arrangements and spelling accidentals shoot suggestions at each other, as if each page were a canvas and the motion of words – reality across surface. Optical effects, seemingly chance encounters of letters, are a bridge. Through a screen of juxtaposition one dynamic image may be visible. [...] In Olson’s poetic diapason, space sounds motion, signs speak vision, and rhythm reads back archaic cries. (*The Quarry* 186–200)

Indeed, refusing to limit the printed page to meaningful verbal clusters (meaningful and verbal only), Howe embraces the mode of writing defined by Olson in the “Projective Verse” essay as “OPEN verse” (239) and “composition by field” (239) or “field composition” (240), allowing the poet to follow the track “the poem under hand declares” (240). This poem will neither be referential to reality, nor allow itself to convey ideas framed by linguistic and cognitive paradigms; instead, it registers an earlier state of seeing and thinking, the state, to quote Butterick again, “before language semanticizes itself” (314).

In such a way, not only will verbal units be meaningful but also the white spaces will contribute to the complex of the “field” of the poem, together creating what Olson calls the “kinetic of the poem” (243). What’s more – and here comes a further innovation radicalizing the innovative spirit of Olson’s poetics – Howe allows the inclusion of purely visual materials in the text. Among these inclusions we could mention the photocopy of the front page of her New Directions *Eikon Basilike* as superimposed upon Charles I’s *The King’s Book or Eikon Basilike* (in *Eikon Basilike*); the manuscript pages from Charles Sanders Peirce’s “Prescott Book” (in *Pierce-Arrow*); the tissue interleaf between the frontispiece and title page of Stevenson’s *The Master of Ballantrae* (in *The Midnight*); family photographs, such as the daguerreotype of the “four Josiah Quincys” as it appeared on Helen Howe’s book cover (in *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*) and the picture of John Manning, and the Irish stamp issued in honor of the suffragette Aunt Louis Bennett (in *The Midnight*). The layering technique used in these volumes incorporating non-verbal materials into language segments employs, as Mandy Bloomfield correctly points out, what Michael Davidson calls “palimtext,” retaining the materiality of the text among the layers of the poem (670). According to Davidson,

palimtext is neither a genre nor an object, but a writing-in-process that may make use of any number of textual sources. As its name implies the palimtext retains vestiges of prior writings out of which it emerges. (78)

Howe has perfected this method of “found language” described in connection of George Oppen by Davidson, showing not just “vestiges of prior writings,” multiplying the layers by incorporating images of non-verbal documents, such that have themselves incorporated earlier documents. We can find such a multiplication in

The Midnight (2003), for example, where the image of a Yeats poem shows only lines that are not covered by a bookmark, a worn copy of a Stevenson novel is scribbled over by the brother, and the great aunt's songbook contains etchings done by a youngster decades later.

The latest volumes employ a mixture of visual prosodic techniques. *Pierce-Arrow* (1999), for example, contains loose sonnets in *Rückenfigur*, next to the radical mixture of verbal and non-verbal materials in other parts. This technique is followed in the latest volume, *Debths* (2017), in which the four sections alternate using more conventional and more radical visual typographies. "Titian Air Vent" contains verses written in blocks verging on stanzas and "Periscope" five to eight line stanzas, while "Tom Tit Tot" and "Debths" takes visual typography to the extreme, with typos verging on the unintelligible, font types and sizes changing, foreign texts or parts thereof appear photocopied, serving as the deeper layers of the palimtexts.

Dissolution of the self

The last feature of Howe's poetry that I discuss consists in the particular manner of handling autobiographical or other personal themes. On the one hand, even when writing poems informed by the most personal topics – such as narratives dealing with family history or the long elegiac poem occasioned by her husband's death – the voice is never confessional, not even personal. On the other, although the poems are not written directly from the position of the speaking subject, this subject is still present as the underlying constant of thematic attention. Denying, as Perloff insists, "the very possibilities of the expressivity one wants from lyric," Howe is constantly shifting perspectives, and the subject, "far from being at the center of discourse," is "located only at its interstices" ("Language Poetry" 426, 432). Thus the dimension of the personal is repeatedly overwritten by the curbing of the lyric subject, the withdrawal of the self from the poem. However, while the Self as a narrative entity is being dissolved in Howe's poetry, a distinctive voice still emerges through her topics and choice of words.

This radical reinterpretation of the role of the lyrical subject is yet another thread that ties Howe to Olson's innovative poetics, in particular to the "stance towards reality" he calls "objectism" in the "Projective Verse" essay.

Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which Western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages [...]. (247)

Of the two meanings of objectism – “a stance toward reality outside the poem” and a “stance toward the reality of a poem itself” (246) – it is the latter that concerns the role of the lyrical subject, “the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego.” In line with Olson, Howe disregards the lyric subject as central perspective and organizing potential, demanding an alternative creative process informed by an attention to the world and language. As such, Howe’s poetic discourse is not centered in the lyric I, nor is it self-expressive in the sense of expressing a self preexisting the poetic utterance. Rather, the subject, moved from the center of discourse to its “interstices,” to cite Perloff again (“Language Poetry” 432), develops in discourse, as a construct of the discourse in the making, bringing about the authority of the impersonal.

I detect two modes whereby Howe has withdrawn the lyric self in poems with a personal or autobiographical focus, opting instead on an attention to the world and discourse: the reversal of topic-comment relations and the planting of a discursive filter. I begin with the former.

Topic-comment reversal

Howe has introduced a particular method for satisfying the Olsonian demand for “getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego” when reversing the topic-comment relations that characterize confessional or otherwise subjective poetry. Here it is not the I, the self that serves as the topic of the poetic enunciation about which certain personal predications are formulated, but rather the events and characters of the world outside, whether of family or history. Put simply, it is not the poet but these events and characters that take center stage in the stories; the poet herself will only appear – if only by way of their family or local ties – in the comment part. This reversal of topic-comment relations explains why we have so very few first person narrators in Howe’s poetry, and why, when the first person grammatical subject does occur, it does not coincide with the speaker but refers to a person in the comment part.

The prose collage sections of *Frame Structures* (1966) offer an illuminative example for topic-comment reversal, with the placement of the subject into the comment part. Here the poet presents her childhood through stories of her ancestors. For example, Fanny Appleton’s little blue parasol provides the occasion (the topic) for telling about the American grandfather, grandmother Fanny Quincy, and the Quincy great-grandparents’ summer house she visited as a child (14). Here the parasol and the Quincy family serve as topic, while the summer visits as comments involving the child. Or, to take another example, instead of the usual biographical presentation of the ancestors, Howe writes about her grandfather via the topic of the antiquarian movement (17–18) and about her father via the topic of the “hot dogs”

of Felix Frankfurter of Harvard Law School, who went on to establish together the Law School at Buffalo. In each case it is the historical facts that provide the topic part of the enunciation, into whose comment part the narrating I is embedded, thereby eliminating the confessionalism of self-centered narrative.

The poetic presentation of family history thus takes the focus of local history, making visible the ways historical processes are intertwined with personal lives. In this vein, the long poem "Pearl Harbor" uses the historical event as topic to narrate how the child felt when her father had been drafted. The personal loss embedded in the comment part is tied to a larger topic independent of the Self, such as the themes of a parent cut off from child, the child's experience of the parent's absence, the pain and mourning felt after losing a loved one, and the sense of void and irreplaceability felt after the death of a loved one.

Similarly, it is 20th century cultural history that serves as the topic for presenting, in the comment part of the poetic utterance, the life of the Irish mother in *The Midnight*. The complex elegy written after Mary Manning's death is centered on the childhood readings of the girl growing up in early 20th-century Dublin. Here the physical copies become parts of the text, among them the books of Lewis Carroll and W. B. Yeats, sections from the critical commentaries written about the performances of the Dublin actress, and pages taken from the poems and letters of Yeats, the mother's favorite poet. All these details enter into an actual physical dialogue with each other in what Howe calls the "relational space" of the text, "the thing that's alive with something from somewhere else," as she writes (*The Midnight* 58). Such relational space comes about not only between the mother and her Irish past, but also between the person remembered and the one doing the remembering, that is, mother and daughter. This daughter will now foreground, within the comment part, the mother's figure through those lines of a Yeats poem, for example, that are not covered by Mary's bookmarks, thereby reversing back the formerly reversed topic-comment relations (78). Perloff identifies the "cold" writing mode practiced by Yeats in *The Autobiographies* in this approach to a person in *The Midnight* (*Unoriginal Genius* 114). This mode agrees, I believe, with the family historiography brought about by the dissolution of the self; when even the autobiographical works lack a continuous narrative, it is only language, the linguistic surface that remains constant.

Discursive filter

In this volume Howe uses another method as well for the withdrawing the Self: she lets down a curtain of sorts, made of cultural narratives, which serves as a filter through which the experience of the subject can be observed. I call this curtain a discursive filter, allowing the Self to encounter, recognize, and interpret the

experience, while at the same time preventing the experiencing Self from the self-revelation and self-pity of confessional poetry.

The discursive filter is a method Howe has used recurrently for over twenty years, whether writing through the mother's childhood readings or the *Rückenfigur* made famous by Caspar David Friedrich, or adopting the language play in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. And although the term "discursive filter" is a metaphor (prompted by the title *Bed Hangings*), the method itself is not metaphorical: the filter or curtain or "bed hanging" does not stand *for* the experience as an interpretive grid, but rather *before* it, allowing the events to be viewed *through* its narrative (somewhat like Perloff describes the "writing through" method of Cage in *Poetry On and Off the Page*). And although the self-reflexive grammatical I is still not present in Howe's poetry, nor do the poems "express" emotional and mental states, they do serve, as Perloff puts it, a "complex process of negotiation" between private feelings and public evidence (*Unoriginal Genius* 101). According to the paraphrase Perloff has given to the assumed self-image of the poet, the self is merely understood to be a link in a cultural matrix: "I m not only what my subconscious tells me but a link – an unwitting one, perhaps – in a cultural matrix" (101).

Here the method of discursive filter meets Howe's rough book or notebook poetry technique. For not only do childhood readings provide links in the cultural matrix of *The Midnight*, but also other prose documents and visual images that are present as material objects; these are, as Perloff lists them, old family photographs, maps, reproductions of paintings, catalogues, tissue interleaves (*Unoriginal Genius* 99–100). As such, the transparency of language is repeatedly blocked by the visual images retained in their full materiality, still "filtering," so to speak, cultural experience, allowing subjective experiences to run through and between them towards clarification – somewhat in a way pebbles halt the water rushing through, while getting cleansed by it. These are the documents both halting and filtering the experience of the poet who insistently claims that she "work[s] in the poetic documentary form" (*Quarry* 94). The volume *The Midnight*, produced, as Howe puts it, by "scissor work" (60), brings about its complex relational space through the inclusion of multiple discursive and material filters negotiating between public and private. Such negotiation occurs, for example, when the (private) inscription written in Aunt Louis Bennett's (public) 1895 *Irish Songbook* is marked by a (private) duct tape mending the broken spine and a (private) drawing, a stick figure sketched by a later generation of "some anonymous American preschooler" (60), most probably one of Howe's children.

The serial elegy *Rückenfigur*, written upon the death of David von Schlegell, Howe's husband, and published in the volume *Pierce-Arrow*, is a supreme example of how a cultural discourse acts as a filter for private experience. While the emotional tone of the whole poem stems from the experience of loss and the feeling of grief felt over loss, this experience and feeling are not presented as subjective but from a

distance, as parts of the image the wanderer sees when turning his back to us. The Rückenfigur was a familiar feature of 19th century German landscape painting, made widely known by Caspar David Friedrich's *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (*The Wanderer above the Mists*, 1818). The Rückenfigur is the observer, who, although standing outside of the scene he looks at, is from our perspective part of it, allowing us viewers to see through his eyes. What we see in the poem is the past, showing its back to us, while the past presents itself as the landscape held by the gaze of the Rückenfigur. As Nicholls succinctly claims, "the past has, as it were, its back turned towards us" ("The Pastness of Landscape" 457), with the Rückenfigur providing perspective for act of remembering and the space-time evoked, making the piece, as Perloff aptly puts it on the dust jacket of the New Directions paperback edition, "a profound memory poem."

Howe's poetic sequence of short, fourteen-line poems, deals with the intense feelings of love, separation, loss, and pain, presenting the private experience through the common cultural knowledge reflected in the narrative of Tristan and Iseult, Orpheus and Eurydice, Theseus and Aegeus, Antigone and Polyneices, as well as Hamlet and Ophelia. This means that the discursive filter provided by the Rückenfigur, further increased by these classic narratives, turns the personal into public and cultural. Implicitly summoning the "lyrist" Orpheus and acknowledging the futility of his turning back in the final poem, "Day binds the wide Sound," the speaker seeks to come to terms with the "retreating" of the loved one by *theomimesis*, or the attempt to acquire God's point of view when accepting death. Although the fourteen-line verse form recalls the classic sonnet, the dominant mode of love lyric since the renaissance, this mode gets simultaneously resisted by the short lines of varying length (six to eight syllables), the vague referentiality of the lyric I, and most emphatically by the broken syntax made up of sentence fragments and words detached from their contexts. Nicholls draws attention to the "jammed, verbless line[s]," the "subjectless verb[s]," the "abrupt internal divisions that pit emphatic caesuras against the forward drive of enjambment" ("The Pastness of Landscape" 457). That is, we have two opposing forces at work in the poem: on the one hand, a most intense elegiac voice evoking the theme of death and loss in their many contexts, and on the other a recurrent flattening of the lyric attained by a dismembered language. As Montgomery aptly puts it, "[t]he lyric potentialities of *Rückenfigur* repeatedly fold into an implicit questioning of lyric as a mask for the tyrannous imperatives of desire" (152), citing Howe's own reflections from the poem, "Assuredly I see division" and "Two thoughts in strife" (*Pierce-Arrow* 134, 135).

Howe's latest volume, *Debths* uses a discursive filter already in its title. *Debths* is not an existing word but a linguistic anomaly coined by Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*, evoking three English words simultaneously: *debts*, *depths*, and *deaths*. One of Howe's "sparkling *trouvailles*," as Dan Chiasson puts it, "the pun suggests the 'debts' Howe owes to her ancestors and their works, the 'depths' of her engagement with material

traces of ideas [...], and the ‘deaths’ of parents and loved ones that have shaped Howe’s elegiac intensities.” A “hybrid animal,” Chiasson continues, the book is a “composite of autobiographical prose, minimalist verse, collaged (and mainly illegible) clippings of old texts, and lots of white space,” as well as the fragments of installations produced by two visual artists, Isabella Stewart Gardner and Paul Thek. Everything has a meaning repeatedly modified by context in this echo chamber of discursive filters, since all these cultural shreds enter into an intensive physical dialogue with each other as well as the surrounding white spaces.

* * *

I have examined three features of Susan Howe’s poetry that contribute to the singularity of her poetry: her overriding interest in history, her unregulated grammar and typography, and her practice of absenting herself from the work. These innovations tie her poetry to the succession of avant-gardes running through the past one hundred plus years, in particular to what she terms as the “undervoice” in American poetry. Of these undervoices, Charles Olson seems to have exerted a most enduring influence on Howe’s writing, as the contexts of the three features discussed above testify. Howe’s revisionist reconstruction of history and her disregard for both grammatical and typographic conventions can be best understood within the context of Olson’s idea of *apocatastasis*, or the reconstitution of an original state in history, thought, and writing. The practice of withdrawing the self also has its ties to Olson, in particular to his objectist stance towards reality, which aims at “the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego.” Although Howe often treats personal topics, she does so without being subjective or confessional; instead she hides the subjective in the comment part of the utterance or distances it behind a cultural narrative.

Two passages quoted earlier may stand side by side for how similarly the two poets considered this urge to capture early moments in the processes of apperception, before perceptions “make sense” and are fitted into polished sentences and regular looking pages. First, from Charles Olson’s “These days”:

These days
whatever you have to say, leave
the roots on, let them
dangle

And the dirt

just to make clear
where they come from.

And from Howe's "Writing *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*": "I wanted to transplant words onto paper with soil sticking to their roots" (201). Indeed, Howe does just that: writes in a wilderness language reflecting the state preceding the "crime" of colonization by grammar and typography. By disregarding the rules of grammar, the poet can better listen to language and unearth knowledge stored beneath the regulating grid of grammar. By the same token, by disregarding the conventions of typography, the poet has a better chance to come to new realizations produced by the unexpected meetings of lines, discharged by never-before crossings and overlappings on the canvas of the poem. Howe's rough book poetry will then allow her – in the spirit of Goethe, Rimbaud, as well as Olson – to write about what she does not know.

It is no wonder, then, that Howe's poetry demands a very different involvement by the reader: one has to comply with her invitation to participate in the creative process. Indeed, in this poetry, as in Bernstein's "imploded sentences," the reader "stays plugged in to the wave-like pulse of the writing" (*Artifice of Absorption*). The reader must resist the search for the lyrical I, as well as some supposedly deeper meaning in poetry. The reader must strip the reading process of the old imperative to make meaning, tolerating not knowing and not understanding. Finally, the reader must learn to disregard referential meaning and recognize instead the voices produced by the visual rhythm of the letters and words.

Howe treats her readers as grown-ups, or "full citizen[s] of the textual terrain," as Back puts it, "with equal rights and obligations in the making of meaning" (6). Moreover, she offers her readers the experience of play and of the encounter with language as a powerful force. As she says in an interview, "I would want my readers to play, to enter the mystery of language, and to follow words where they lead, to let language lead them" (Kelley 31). Ultimately, such submitting to play and language will turn Susan Howe's poetry into a true *texte du plaisir*.

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