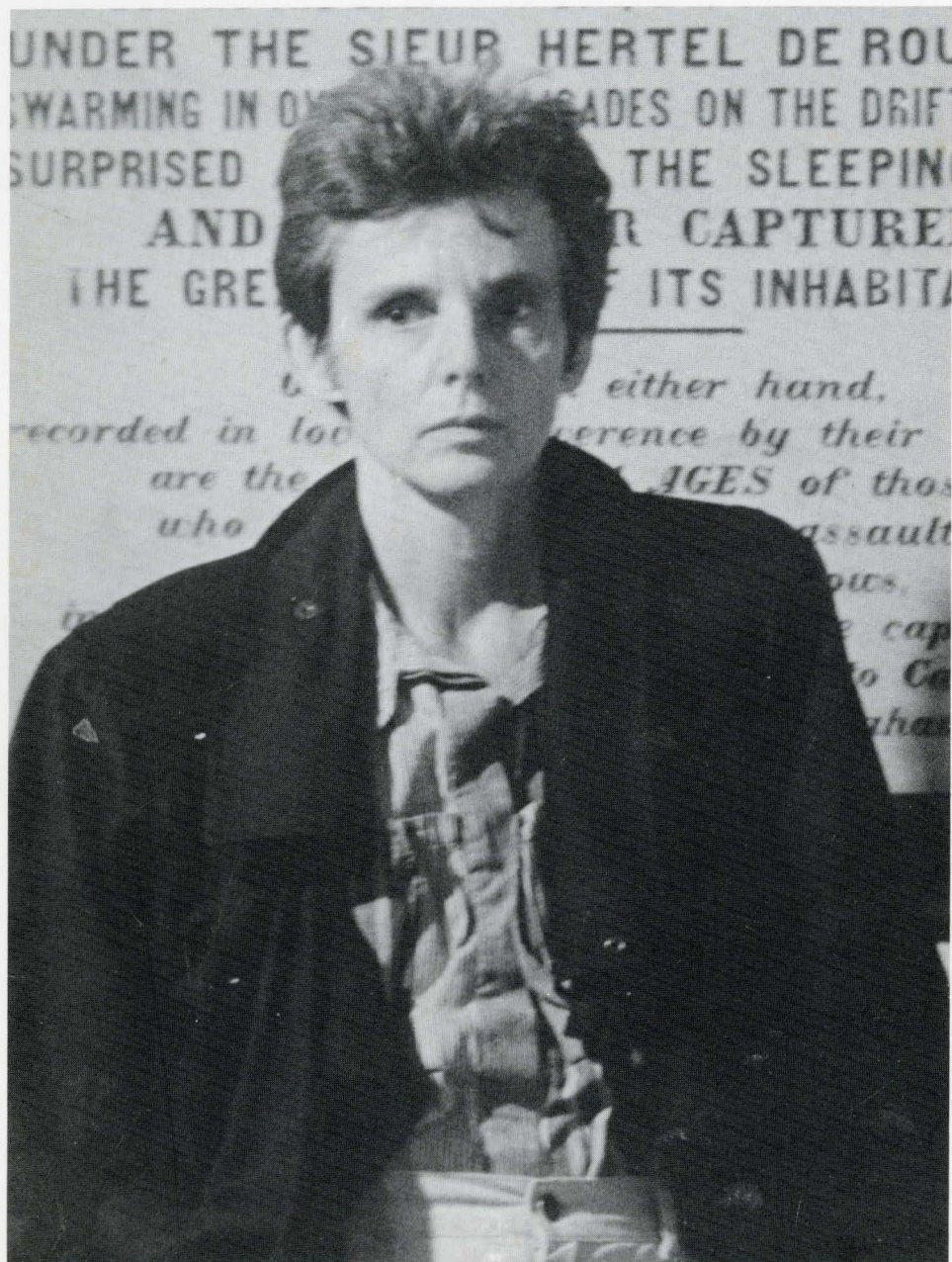




THE DIFFICULTIES

SUSAN HOWE ISSUE

**SUSAN HOWE ISSUE
EDITED BY TOM BECKETT**

Sections from

A Bibliography of

THE KING'S BOOK

or Elkon Basilike

**THE DIFFICULTIES
VOL. 3, NO. 2**

Cover photograph by JANET CHAMBER

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Oh Lord
o Lord
different from
Laws
zeal
transposed
begging

OMne
obvuctions
envions
command

nnfortunate Man_s
un ust
woule
Futnre
audPaged doe of Title-page

No further trace
of the printer

IN | HIS | SOLITUDE | To The

Reader the work

Prayers, &c. belonging

to no one without

Reasons

And in a stage play all the people know right wel, that he that playeth the sowdayne is percase a sowter. Yet if one should can so lyttle good, to shewe out of seasonne what acquaintance he hath with him, and calle him by his owne name whyle he standeth in his magestie, one of his tormentors might hap to breake his head, and worthy for marring of the play. And so they said that these matters bee Kynges games, as it were stage playes, and for the most part plaied vpon scaffoldes. In which pore men be but y^e lokers on. And the; y^t wise be, wil medle no farther. For they that sometyme step vp and playe w^t them, when they cannot play their partes, they disorder the play & do themself no good.

The History of King Richard The Third (unfinished), Sir Thomas More

EIKΩN ΒΑΣΙΛΙΚΗ.
 Language of state secrets
 The pretended Court of Justice
 Upon the picture of His Majesty sitting in his Chair | before
 the High Court of Injustice
 Small trespass to misprison
 now nonexistent dramatis personae
 confront each other
 Heroic Virtue & Fame

Steps between Prison and Grave a Brazen Wall I
 Bradshaw went on in a long harangue misapplying Law and History

crucified by that sea of blood
The malicious author or insensate
Tract the treasons
throw down
Always causes set degenerate Fort Navy Militia

Some passages
O make me
of joy
thrown on this person
Was taken through the poplacy
A pivot

that I hide Security and their
Security

I am weary of life
Pretend Justice to cover Perjury

The sentiment sentiment
Goes peers ferrets to the last
Obligation

at times at times
scruples

He kept
The People
Contemporary History

He bowed down his head and said
The People
Contemporary History

and wall the brazen will
that I hide Security and their
Security
I am weary of life
Pretend Justice to cover Perjury
The sentiment sentiment
Goes peers ferrets to the last
Obligation

He bowed down his head and said
The People
Contemporary History

Through poplacy
Was taken through the poplacy
A pivot
thrown on this person
Some passages
O make me
of joy

crucified by that sea of blood
The malicious author or insensate
Tract the treasons
throw down
Always causes set degenerate Fort Navy Militia

ENGELANDTS MEMORIAEL

Tragicum Theatrum Actorum

Similar (not identical)

unsigned portraits of

Laud Charles I Fairfax

Holland Hamilton Capel

Cromwell

apology

A cleric's forgery
of a pseudo-biographical

Finding the way full of People

Who had placed themselves upon the Theatre

To behold the Tragedy

He desired he might have *Room*

Speech came from his mouth

Historiography of open fields

Signed King in profile

Mend the Printers faults

The place name and field name

as thou doest them espy

Centuries of compulsion and forced holding

For the Author lies in Gaol

All the Civil War Authorities

and knows not why

England's Black Tribunal: Containing The Complete Tryal of King CHARLES the First, by the pretended High Court of Justice in Westminster-Hall, begun Jan. 20, 1648. Together with His Majesty's Speech on the Scaffold, erected at Whitehall-Gate on Tuesday Jan. 30, 1648.

His writings
It passed with the Negative
they kept prisoner

He bowed down his head and said
The People in a low voice
Contemporary History through the poplacy

An intellectual out of submissiveness
A pivot
Some passages thrown on this person
O make me of joy
Was taken for a different message
An intellectual

Dr. Juxon. There is but one Stage more, this Stage is turbuler,
and troublesome, it is a short one; but you may consider, it will
soon carry you a very great Way: It will carry you from Earth to
Heaven, and there you shall find a great deal of cordial Joy and
Comfort.

King. I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible Crown, where no
Disturbance can be, no Disturbance in the World.

Must lie outside the house
Side of space I must cross

To write against the Ghost

England's Black Tribunal: Containing The Complete Trial of
King CHARLES the First, by the pretended High Court of Justice
in Westminster-Hall, begun Jan. 20, 1648. Together with His
Majesty's Speech on the Scaffold at Whitehall-Gate on
Tuesday Jan. 30, 1648.

A First didn't write it

Anguish of the heart
Smart of the cure

Strip furlong field

Feet on someone else's wheat

Easy market access

On-going struggle
abandoned lands

Lost power of expression
Last power of expression

The Battle of Corioli

Obsessive images of Coriolanus

The Author and Finisher
The Author of the Fact

of Gold of Thorn of Glory

Tell you my author

I knew his hand

The book was his

The cloathing *Hands*

I am a seeker

of water-marks

in the Antiquity

The Sovereign stile

in another stile

Left scattered in disguise

to the army

Great Caesar's ghost

Through history

this is the counter-plot

and turns our swords in

The First Revolution

The Foundation of hearsay

Horrible drift errancy

A form and nearby form

THE DIFFICULTIES INTERVIEW

Your work, Susan, seems especially important to me in that it involves the intersection of several different traditions -- in ways, I think, that bear indelibly on the present. How does tradition figure in the making of your art?

I am not sure what intersections and traditions you mean.

Often I think I am an interloper and an imposter.

Something Nietzsche wrote I copied out because it both helps and haunts me. "People still hold the view that what is handed down to us by tradition is what in reality lies behind us -- while it in fact comes towards us because we are its captives and are destined to it."

Because I am a woman I am fated to read his beautiful observation as double-talk of extraordinary wisdom and rejection. *Us* and *we* are disruptions. These two small words refuse to be absorbed into proper rank in the linear sequence of his sentence. Every sentence has its end. Every day is broken by evening. A harrowing reflection is cast on meaning by gaps in grammar, aporias of historic language.

Who?

let the light into the dark? began
the many movements of the passion?

West

from east men push.

The islands are blessed
(cursed) that swim below the sun.

Man upon whom the sun has gone down!

Robert Duncan wrote these lines in "A Poem Beginning with a Line By Pindar." It's a wonderful poem. In the age of the Bomb the sun often seems to have gone down. Now, in Man's nether language of Translation, what is the destiny of untranslated Being? Does midnightly light divide or delineate what we commonly exclude?

How did you get here, Helen,
do you know,
blown by the wind, the snow?

come here, come near:
are you a phantom
will you disappear?

asks Hilda Doolittle Aldington in *Helen in Egypt*. Let me remember let me remember the poem sings. Sounds are a refuge and a bridge. There is the law on the otherside. Do I possess the right of usufruct in the great sloven Tradition if I am without basic trust?

Helen in Egypt became H.D.'s destiny. Nietzsche in his madness wrote to Jacob Burkhardt, "The unpleasant thing, which offends my modesty, is that fundamentally I am every name in history."

I hope that I am working in an eccentric twentieth century American tradition that embraces among others Duncan, Olson, Williams, Stevens, H.D., and Hart Crane. Seven poets move in puzzling ways through the ruins of our violent patriarchal history -- what has been handed down to us -- echoes of memory and myth. Six men and one woman.

"Oh Helena, tangled in thought,"
if it takes a name to make something visible, it makes dangerous sense to see that the woman's name has been reduced, with her approval, to initials.

Well, let me ask you then a question you have asked in My Emily Dickinson:
"What is the communal vision of poetry if you are curved, odd, indefinite, irregular, feminine?"

That question was in response to a quotation I used from Aquinas and it should be quoted in full to make it clear.

"Pythagoras said that all things were divisible into two genera, good and evil; in the genus of good things he classified all perfect things such as light, males, repose, and so forth, whereas in the genus of evil he classed darkness, females and so forth." In reaction to that, I wrote "Promethean aspiration: To be a Pythagorean and a woman." Then I asked the question about a communal vision of poetry.

"Oh! the metempsychosis! Oh! Pythagoras, that in bright Greece, two thousand years ago, did die, so good, so wise, so mild; I sailed with thee along the Peruvian coast last voyage--and, foolish as I am, I taught thee, a green and simple boy, how to splice a rope!" Melville wrote this in *Moby Dick*. I have it pinned on the wall over my desk for luck. I can't get over it. In a certain sense, for me, Melville is Pythagoras. I know this same good, calm, wise, tender and ubiquitous Pythagoras, associated women with evil and darkness. It's a given of Melville studies that he preferred men and almost never wrote women into his books. But for most of his adolescent and adult life, women surrounded and supported him. His mother lived with him for many years. His sister Augusta and his wife Elizabeth laboriously re-copied all those handwritten pages and prepared fair copies for the printers. They were scribes. Like Bartelby. Unpaid scribes. Both his sons died young, and a lot of discussion is given over to them by biographers and critics. He had two daughters. Very little attention is paid to them. There is still a lot of thinking to be done about the role of the feminine in Melville's life and writing. I think about it a lot. Because there is room in his work for everyone and everything. If his were just a masculine World View I wouldn't be so fascinated by it and feel so close to it. But as to those sentences about Pythagoras, friendship, sharing and loneliness -- I feel the pull of Melville's mythical ideal while acknowledging my otherness.

When I call a book *Pythagorean Silence*, the title, for me, is implicitly ambiguous. In the whole wideness of the Literary Constitution of the West I have seldom felt supported by a silence of Fathers.

When Melville wrote *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*, he dedicated his "rural bowl of milk" to a mountain. The strange transgressive language of the text clashes with the heraldic stiffness of the dedication to "his Imperial Purple Majesty (royal-born; Porphyrogenitus) . . . Greylock's Most Excellent Majesty." After the sneering critical and commercial rejection of his seventh novel he must have felt that he was, in the extremist sense of the word, a stranger. He dedicated *Israel Potter, His Fifty Years of Exile*; to "His Highness the Bunker-Hill Monument," another heraldic pile of granite. The dedication also says that Israel's narrative "like the crutch-marks of the cripple at the Beautiful Gate," is a "blurred record now out of print."

Herman Melville's literary ambition was vaulting and Promethean. His writing, after *Omoo*, is increasingly curved, odd, indefinite, irregular (feminine?).

"At sunrise on a first of April, there appeared, suddenly as Manco Capac at the lake Titicaca, a man in cream-colors, at the water-side in the city of St. Louis. . . . His cheek was fair, his chin downy, his hair flaxen, his hat a fur one, with a long fleecy nap. . . . He was unaccompanied by friends. From the shrugged shoulders, titters, whispers, wonderings of the crowd, it was plain that he was, in the extremist sense of the word, a stranger."

This first nameless avatar of the Confidence Man possibly comes from the East. Like Pythagoras he dresses in white and remains apart. Like Billy Budd, and the green and simple incarnation of Pythagoras, he is young and strangely sexless. A mixed person. Absolutely indefinite. Other.

The first American edition of *The Confidence Man, His Masquerade*; had no dedication. Later editions have added one from a note in the author's handwriting -- "to the victims of the auto da fe." But who can be sure it was the author's intention to use it? Who can be sure of anything in this dissection of national Positivism? Written just before the Civil War, *The Confidence Man* may be an affirmation in nihilism, or a bitter satire, or a furious letter to Hawthorne, just gaming, or *The Origin of American Tragic Drama*. On the *Fidèle* I never know who is who or where I am. The Metaphysics of Indian Hating chapter humps hugely off center. Carved out of history, bleak as a stone Fury, is Moredock an Indian hater or an American writer?

As a contradiction or a logical conclusion the author's community punished their member by ignoring his book. Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, a neighbor, was called in by the family to check Melville's sanity.

Poets in the United States, women and men, suffer and have always suffered, when and if they challenge ordinary channels of communication. This is less so in the visual arts. The cultural bourgeoisie generally tolerates and even venerates dis-order and re-valuation in painting and sculpture. I can't explain it. I know it has something to do with the power of language. Poetry is language stripped to its untranslatability. Melville is a poet in that final shattering sense. Real poetry is dangerous. As if a person were author of herself. I seem to have wandered away to the monument of Melville when you asked me about women and the community of Poetry. But how do you come back inside the circle when you have written *Moby Dick*? When Emily Dickinson wrote her three "Master" letters to "a recipient unknown," who did she address them to? Was there a real person to send them to? And what about these variations from what Thomas Johnson calls "one of her most chaotic worksheet drafts"?

Deputed to adore--

~~Contented~~

The ~~Let~~ to be adored

Doom

Created to adore

The Affluence evolved--

conferred--

bestowed--

involved--

(J 1386)

I would hardly call these assemblages and detours "chaotic." Here are complex questions about control and controlling. They point to one another and to the link between author and creation. Wittgenstein said of *Tractatus*; (and I don't find his editors calling his notebooks "chaotic") "My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all I have not written." Maybe Pythagoras was simply saying the same thing differently. Maybe women who are poets are familiar with a hidden Self who riddles the four corners of that nothing need. All we have not said. Wonder stalks the still unspecified "and so forth" of Aquinas.

What is your communal vision of poetry?

The communal vision of poetry is one poem in another we haven't seen or thought. There are breaks in world-historical reason where forms of wildness brought up by memory become desire and multiply. I think a dream of poets is that some day all people will be free from laws of value. Individualism will no longer be an issue.

An open horizon. Withdrawal of my proper name from social Order no clear line. Territorialism is our exile.

"Faith!" shouted Goodman Brown, in a voice of agony and desperation; and the echoes of the forest mocked him, crying 'Faith! Faith!' as if bewildered wretches were seeking her all through the wilderness." 'Faith', a Puritan wife, is locked in a cry by Hawthorne. His name is the name of a tree.

We are the shapes of Faith caught together in the seering nature of indefinite power. We never return home.

"The lyric poet," you have written in My Emily Dickinson, "reads a past that is a huge imagination of one form." And in your "Statement for the New Poetics Colloquium (Vancouver, 1985)": "In my poetry, time and again, questions of assigning the cause of history dictate the sound of what is thought." Concern for the materials of history pervades your oeuvre. Could you try to speak to your senses of historical and present (i.e., lyrical) form with reference to the composition of an actual work -- say, "Federalist 10"?

My poems always seem to be concerned with history. No matter what I thought my original intentions were that's where they go. The past is present when I write.

Recently I spent several months at Lake George where I wrote *Thorow*. If there is a Spirit of Place that Spirit had me in thrall. Day after day

I watched the lake and how weather and light changed it. I think I was trying to paint a landscape in that poem but my vision of the lake was not so much in space as in time. I was very much aware of the commercialization and near ruin at the edge of the water, in the town itself, all around -- but I felt outside of time or in an earlier time and that was what I had to get on paper. For some reason this beautiful body of water has attracted violence and greed ever since the Europeans first saw it. I thought I could feel it when it was pure, enchanted, *nameless*. There never was such a pure place. In all nature there is violence. Still it must have been wonderful at first sight. Uninterrupted nature usually is a dream enjoyed by the spoilers and looters -- my ancestors. Its a first dream of wildness that most of us need in order to breathe; and yet to inhabit a wilderness is to destroy it. An eternal contradiction. Olson's wonderful sentence "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America." I am a woman born in America. I can't take central facts for granted. But then Olson really doesn't either.

Sometimes I think my poetry is only a search by an investigator for the point where the crime began. What is the unforgivable crime? Will I ever capture it in words?

I can't get away from New England. It's in my heart and practice. The older I get the more Calvinist I grow. In spite of all the pettiness and dour formalism of the Puritans, as we have learned to think of them, and it is all certainly there, and more -- I am at home with them.

Hidden under the rigid exterior of a Cotton Mather, under the anger of Mary Rowlandson, under the austerity of Jonathan Edwards, is an idea of grace as part of an infinite mystery in us but beyond us. What we try to do in life is a calling. Carpentry, teaching, mothering, farming, writing, is never an end in itself but is in the service of something out of the world -- God or the Word, a supreme Fiction. This central mystery -- this huge Imagination of one form is both a lyric thing and a great "secresie," on an unbeaten way; the only unbeaten way left. A poet tries to sound every part.

Sound is part of the mystery. But sounds are only the echoes of a place of first love. The Puritans or Calvinists knew that what we see is as nothing to the unseen. I know that if something in a word, or in a line in a poem or in any piece of writing doesn't sound true then I must change it. I am part of one Imagination and the justice of Its ways may seem arbitrary but I have to follow Its voice. Sound is a key to the untranslatable hidden cause. It is the cause. Othello said that. "Othello is uneasy, but then Othellos always are, they hold such mighty stakes." wrote Dickinson. In the same letter she added "The brow is that of Deity -- the eyes, those of the lost, but the power lies in the throat -- pleading, sovereign, savage -- the panther and the dove!"

But this doesn't explain *Federalist 10*. I had been working on that series for a long interrupted time. I couldn't find a way to link the separate parts. Somehow I got on to the early historical writing of Charles A. Beard. In about 1906 he wrote the conclusions to *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. I think he spent the rest of a long career smooting over this outburst:

The first firm steps toward the formation of the Constitution were taken by a small and active group of men immediately interested through

their personal possessions in the outcome of their labors.

The Constitution was essentially an economic document based upon the concept that fundamental private rights of property are anterior to government and beyond the reach of popular majorities.

The Constitution was not created by "the whole people" as the jurists have said; neither was it created by "the states" as Southern nullifiers long contended; but it was the work of a consolidated group whose interests knew no state boundaries and were truly traditional in their scope.

He writes a lot about "Federalist 10." James Madison wrote it and it's the section about controlling factions in a Republic. A great deal of learned discussion has gone on since about "Federalist 10," but the idea of women as a faction never seems to occur to any of these scholars. Women were just too far out of the picture to be considered a faction when our Constitution was written. I mean Native American women, African-American women, Anglo-American women, Irish women, German women; all women in North America at that time. The silence and separation, the voicelessness of such otherness. I can't get over it.

Quite by chance, the way Melville claims to have found Israel Potter's *Narrative*, I found *The Journal of Esther Edwards Burr* as I was browsing in a bookstore. It has recently been edited by Carol Karlsen and Laurie Crumacker, and published by Yale University Press in 1984. I didn't have to rescue the *Journal* written between 1754 and 1757, from ragpickers, because the editors had already rescued it from the catacombs of the Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library -- a ragpicking establishment of sorts. The editors say that they were members of women's history study groups in New Haven and Boston. I am thankful for such groups and grateful to these particular women.

Esther Edwards Burr was Jonathan Edward's daughter and Aaron Burr's mother. She was also the great granddaughter of Solomon Stoddard and Esther Wareham Mather. Her husband was a minister and the President of the College of New Jersey later called Princeton. Aaron Burr senior had first seen Esther when she was fourteen. Six years later, shortly after her father had been ousted from his Northampton pastorate, and the family had moved to Stockbridge, he came to visit. Their courtship lasted five days. Two weeks later she left her family and moved to New Jersey. The *Journal* consists of letters she wrote to a much loved friend, Sarah Prince, the daughter of a minister in Boston.

She had a short life. She was deeply religious in spite of herself. She suffered from migraine headaches, various illnesses and fright. She was afraid of accidents, Indians, the French Wars, entertaining, separation, etc., etc. Her husband was often away. When he was at home the house was full of students, their families, members of her family, and other visitors. She took in boarders. College students met regularly there. She was afraid (with good reason) of dying in childbirth. When she did give birth to her second child, Aaron, her husband was away and she had no family with her. "In what Language shall I address you?" She writes to Sarah Prince, "Or what [strain?] can equal that of my *Fidelias*? Sure you are more your self or anybody else!" And Sarah is quickly estab-

lished as of central importance in her life. She talked to Sarah almost daily in letters that might take weeks to reach her. Sarah wrote poetry. The two women read *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. They called each other Burissa and Fidelia. "Went to hear a preparatory sermon to our sacrament. The Text was Sanctify your selves to day, for to morrow the Lord will do Wonders, a good practical discourse as Mr Brainerds sermons all are, but I want [was not] in a good frame to hear it." She was never at Peace. She spent a good deal of time berating herself. Yet she knew she had what in those days was a good life. Her editors tell us she believed in the Puritan ethic of hard work. I'm not sure that she did. Her husband died in 1757. When Esther Edwards Burr died a year later she was twenty-six.

Just after her husband's death Jonathan Edwards wrote these comforting words to his daughter. 'Tis according to the Course of Things in this World, that after the world smiles, some great affliction soon comes. God has now given you early and seasonable warning, not at all to depend on worldly Prosperity. Therefore I would advise, if it pleases God to restore, you, to lot upon no Happiness here."

She is the link between Jonathan Edwards and Aaron Burr. Great Men in the history books but about as opposite personalities as one could imagine. Yet she links them. Until now her life has been a blank in historical consciousness. You will hardly find her mentioned in Biographies of these two men. Women must rectify what Irigaray calls "this aporia of discourse." We have to try to understand how and why historical domination has put mothers, wives, and daughters in a position of inferiority. We go back through the masculine imaginary, Irigaray also says, to discover a beginning and a future for our own imaginations. It's a very exciting time to be a woman writing. I don't think Esther just dies and that's that. I don't think Indian cultures that are supposed to have been annihilated really are extinct. Esther is in many of us, particularly if we are New Englanders. She is a buried part of Emily Dickinson's consciousness. Her cosmic uneasiness is also Dickinson's. She is everywhere in *Federalist 10*.

In contrast but equally compelling was an anecdote I ran across from the *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania*, by the Moravian Missionary John Heckewelder. He is the man who gave James Fenimore Cooper most of the information about Delaware customs he used in the *Leatherstocking Novels*. This was a short piece about a nameless Indian woman who had taken her son and separated from her people. She lived as a hermit on a little island. She became a legendary figure to the Delaware. They showed Heckewelder traces of the fields she had planted. I couldn't forget her. Why did she voluntarily separate herself from her people? What happened to her? What became of her son?

Esther Edwards Burr and an anonymous Delaware woman are members of that silent faction -- the feminine. They were and somewhere they still are. Traces are here. Outside the central disciplines of Economy, Anthropology, and Historiography is a gap in causal sequence. A knowing excluded from knowing. Sounds of these women thinking found *Federalist 10* when I needed them.

I've been reading James Clifford's book *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. I haven't finished it but already it seems to apply to so much I feel about poetry. The kind of work I write and other writing that interests me. Ethnography wrestles with

authorial control. Because the ethnographic writer hopes to portray what natives think. To portray thoughts of a culture do you suppress individual dialogue under a controlling discourse, or do you depend entirely on direct quotations? Clifford cites Dickens as a novelist who lets other voices speak through and establish their own control on the story. This is what absolutely fascinates me about Melville in *Moby Dick* and above all in *The Confidence Man*. I think that a poet is like an ethnographer. You open your mind and textual space to many voices, to an interplay and contradiction and complexity of voices. These voices are marks and sounds and they form a polyphony that forms lines and often abolishes lines. This is not to deny that quotations are staged by the quoter. Ethnographic data has generally been gathered by men from men telling their visions. So this is a complicated issue for women who sense silenced factions waiting to be part of any expression.

Clifford says, "the writing of ethnography [is] an unruly, multisubjective activity." So is the writing of poetry. And the reading of poetry is beyond the control of any authority. The publishing industry is controlled by money and money establishes false authority. That's why small presses in this country are so crucial.

It's not hard to imagine Barry Manilow singing "I am language . . . I write the poems!" But in a much darker mood you have written in "Speeches at the Barriers" in Defenestration of Prague:

For we are language Lost

in language

We have found the enemy and it is us as we are in language?

I could never have written the poems in *Defenestration of Prague* without the experience of reading Spenser's *Fairie Queene*. I was fascinated by the poem and read everything I could find about Spenser himself, which isn't very much. So Edmund Spenser by a long and crooked route led me to the actual Defenestration in Prague, May 16, 1618. There were other defenestrations there, but that's the one my title refers to. Anyway that's another story. This is an attempt to answer your question about enemies and language.

Spenser was secretary to the lord-deputy of Ireland and in 1580 accompanied Lord Edward Grey to Ireland to aid in the suppression of Desmond's rebellion. He was an invader, an adventurer, and a Protestant zealot whose *View of the State of Ireland*, was so harsh even the Elizabethan government balked at carrying out his recommendations. To solve the Irish problem, he recommended that they send 10,000 foot soldiers and 1,000 horse soldiers, disperse them in garrisons, and give the rebels twenty days to surrender. If they refused they were to be hunted "like wild beasts in winter when the covert is thin." If the hunt was successful there would be less work to do in summer, because famine would complete the work of the sword and the place would be clear for plantation by English colonists including himself. This

plan was later used by Spenser's associates against Native Americans in the colonies of North America. It was Sir Walter Raleigh who encouraged Spenser to write *The Fairie Queene*. It was Sir Walter Raleigh who colonized Virginia.

"But vertues seat is deepe within the mynd,/ And not in outward shows, but inward thoughts defynd" (VI, P7). In Spenser's Allegory symbolic things become real and reality melts into sound outsensing distance. This poem of the Mind is a pastoral free place. In Book II, Canto VIII, the author who is also an invader asks: "And is there care in heauen? And is there love?"

*How oft do they, their siluer bowers leaue,
To come to succour us, that succour want?
How oft do they with golden pineons, cleaue
The flitting skyes, like flying Pursuiuant,
Against foule feends to aide us millitant?
They for us fight, they watch and duly ward,
And their bright Squadrons round about us plant,
And all for loue, and nothing for reward:
O why should heavenly God to men haue such regard?*

There is the book and here is the writer and his biography. We have the same problem with Ezra Pound and Heidegger. I don't know the answer. Blanchot says "Whoever writes is exiled from writing, which is the country -- his own -- where he is not a prophet." If History is a record of survivors, Poetry shelters other voices. Spenser tells Raleigh that his book is a "continued Allegory, or dark conceit." The purpose of the poem is to portray King Arthur, before he was king, when he was a knight perfected in the twelve moral virtues. "An Historiographer discouseth of affayres orderly as they were donne, accounting well the times as the actions, but a Poet thrusteth into the midst, even when it most concerneth him . . ." But Arthur is a shadow-figure. Spenser's poem creates its own meaning. The I-in-time re-discovers and reactivates primeval feminine mysteries, over them he has no power. In *The Fairie Queene* Ireland may be the uncodifiable spirit of Poetry. It's the women he portrays I remember. First Una, but later on and far more compellingly, Britomart, Belphebe, Amoret, and Florimell. These fictive beings lead me beyond the personal to a place where Love, like Nature's self, is always just out of reach. The later Cantos explore the alterity and multiplicity of primeval Beauty. Florimell "long followed but not found," may once have been Helen. Britomart has her vision in Isis Church. Women represent the unforeseeable Other, always free, changing but unchanging -- the center around which Poetry gravitates. The last word in the last Canto, the "unperfite" second Canto of Mutabilitie under the Legende of Constancie, is "sight".

You could think about that forever.

Where do words come from where do they go? The real historical distance is a violence. *The Fairie Queene's* creator is one of the conquerors. But often Spenser appeals to an image of female power, and so did Queen Elizabeth, to a generous mothering life force that transcends place and colonization. The poem is dedicated to another Poet-invader. "To the Right noble, and Valorous, Sir Walter Raleigh, knight." Raleigh brings poetry to America when he names

Virginia. These poets write about Chastitie and Holinesse, God and Justice. They are writing during the reign of Elizabeth. Raleigh was beheaded during the reign of James I. What is the connection between allegory, iconoclasm, colonization, punning, and an idea of the feminine? Duchamp explores such questions in "Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even." Raleigh is endlessly fascinating. I love his poems. "My boddy in the walls captived/ feels not the wounds of spiteful envy. / but my thralde minde, of liberty deprived, / fast fettered in her auntient memory . . . /" he probably wrote in prison. We are all captived by auntient memory. The struggles of dead wills do speak through survivors? How can we approach the dead ones deep in time's silence?

But I can't write sensibly about Spenser or Raleigh. I am always swinging from one opinion to another. I think that recently Stephen Greenblatt has written brilliantly about them.

William Carlos Williams begins his short essay on Raleigh for *In the American Grain*; "Of the pursuit of beauty and the husk that remains, perversions and mistakes, while the true form escapes in the wind, sing O Muse; of Raleigh, beloved by majesty, plunging his lust into the body of a new world -- and the deaths, misfortunes, counter coups, which swelled back to certify that ardor with defeat. Sing!" Why is land always said to be feminine? Why is wilderness called "Virgin". I still have no idea. The answer must be deep in the structure of Language. And the mystery of that structure is a secret of poetry unsettled by history. Poets try to keep Love safe from the enemy. Love, like Florimell, is always fleeing. Poets search through the world for a stranger. Each quest is a discovery and flight. Melville calls Florimell "Truth" in "Hawthorne and His Mosses." Hawthorne calls her "Faith" in "Young Goodman Brown." In Williams' *Paterson* she is "Beautiful Thing." What do women who are poets try to free or to capture in order to keep Love safe? Is she, he, It, Dickinson's "Master"? What are we all after?

I think Williams is right in his essay on Poe, when he says that Americans have had to invent original terms. The local tradition forces our hands. Williams writes "Had he [Poe] lived in a world where love throve, his poems might have grown differently. But living where he did, surrounded as he was by that world of unreality, a formless "population" -- drifting and feeding -- a huge terror possessed him. . . Disarmed in his poetry the place itself comes through. This is the New World. It is this that it does, as if --"

Edmund Spenser lived earlier. Ireland was the New World and the place, specifically Kilcolmin, in the north of the county of Cork, eventually possessed him.

Language is a wild interiority. I am lost in the refuge of its dark life.

Poets are always beginning again. They sail away to a place they hope they can name. Linguistic nature is always foreign. Grammar bales the darkness open. Only a few strike home. They remember and acknowledge each other. Robert Creeley's *For Love, Poems 1950-1960*, begins with a poem called "Hart Crane" for Slater Brown:

. . . And so it was I entered the broken world

Hart Crane.

Hart

What sense of limit do you bring to your poetry?

I hope my sense of limit is never fixed. All roads lead to rooms is an old Irish saying. An aphorism and a pun. In Western Literary Tradition all roads seem to lead to Rome. A poet is a foreigner in her own language. I don't want to stay inside.

JANET RUTH FALON

SPEAKING WITH SUSAN HOWE

Q: If I were reading your work and not knowing who the writer was, do you think that I would know that a woman had written it?

HOWE: I would hope you wouldn't, but some of my work I think you probably would, like *The Liberties*, simply because of its involvement with Stella and Cordelia. But *The Defenestration of Prague* and *Pythagorean Silence*, I would hope, in ways, not.

Q: Why?

HOWE: There's a time of poetry that has nothing to do with chronological time, and a mystery about poetry that transcends gender. Obviously I have a different voice from Wallace Stevens, and he is a poet who means everything to me. I am unable to speak with as sure a voice. I can't be direct the way he can even if his direction is often indirection and for that reason timeless. "Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea/Of this invention, this invented world,/The inconceivable idea of the sun./" An ephebe, the Poet, is a man. So "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" starts with that given. Stevens has the assurance of centuries behind him. An idea of the sun, inconceivable as it may seem, is an idea of the father of figures. Master of metaphor folded in God-fire. I often think when I am overwhelmed by Stevens' achievement as a poet that my own work is doomed to be hesitant -- breathy -- but then I can find many places where his source or his voice divides from itself. "Metaphor as Degeneration" or the two short poems called "Our Stars Come from Ireland" would be good examples of such hesitation. In "Auroras of Autumn," one of my favorite poems ever, I think he is indebted to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Sometime I would like to write a close reading of that poem. Stevens was very fond of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry -- he writes of the force of sound in connection with it. I also love Hopkins, and I'm not sure if one came to his poetry and it was anonymous, you would be able to say a man wrote it. I'm speaking of sound here, not sense. But I am very conflicted over this subject of a feminine or a masculine voice. I hope poetry that is Poetry contains both voices.

Q: When you were doing art, was the gender issue more or less of a consideration?

HOWE: I think it was less of a consideration, partly because it simply wasn't being considered. Let's see, Kate Millet's book *Sexual Politics* had a big effect on me. I remember reading it up in Ithaca, New York. At the time I had a three-year-old son, Mark, and Becky, my daughter, was nine. I was a painter but didn't have a gallery. We had left New York City to go up there for a year where David was the artist-in-residence at Cornell for a year. He had the job, he had a big studio, (I made do with a room in the house we rented), I took care of the children, worried endlessly about their various schools, etc. Yet I was very ambitious. I

felt cut off from my friends who were other women working in New York. I was angry. And there was a rage in Millet's book that galvanized me. I saw that if I didn't apply all my energy to my work, to how I said what I wanted to say, I had no one to blame but myself. I began to think in terms of saying, not seeing. I had been putting words into my paintings for years, but I was thinking a lot about Duchamp at the time, and Carl Andre's word drawings, and John Cage, and gradually words began to take over my painting completely. I came to words through other visual artists, but their work was waiting, and had been from the beginning. I just took years of moving around the edges of what was present for words to penetrate my sight.

How much does this have to do with gender? I don't know. I was born in 1937. I was a teenager in the 1950's. This was not a good time for the intellectual ambitions of young women. Women my daughter's age (25), and others in their thirties now, have been able to start from a position that women like Millet made available to them. They will not read Hemingway and Lawrence in the same way I did, thank goodness. I hope they still read them, but not in the same unquestioning way.

Q: Do you have any idea about why you became an artist rather than a poet? Do you have any sense that maybe, when you were growing, it was more acceptable to become one or the other?

HOWE: 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. He thought standards would plunge immediately if they were. The poor man had three daughters and no sons. My mother wanted me to be an actress and she put a lot of time into this. Instead of college I went to Ireland to apprentice at the Gate Theatre in Dublin. That meant that I helped build sets and acted in small parts. My first part was in a Restoration Comedy called "The Jealous Wife." I played the maid, Toilet. Over there "toilet" meant getting dressed. To me, an American, Toilet meant toilet. I remember how funny it seemed when I wrote home to tell my parents I had been cast as "Toilet." My father was a Puritan of the old school. The next part I got was in a play by the now forgotten Sheridan Le Fanu. I was a young girl who is killed by a vampire in Act I, Scene 1. This was not the glory I had imagined.

When I made the choice not to go to college I was the only girl in my graduation class at Beaver Country Day School who didn't. It was a rebellious act in terms of the school but I wasn't rebelling against my parents. Nevertheless for a person of my background -- genteel child, Boston family -- college was part of the package. After such a gesture, it never occurred to me that I could change my mind. In those days the idea of a year off wasn't even an idea. So when I failed in the theatre -- which I did, two years later, back in New York -- I believed I had made an irrevocable mistake. I was nineteen and I was sure I had thrown my life away. The only place I thought might accept me was an art school. I had done lots of drawing and some paintings and was able to put together a portfolio and the

Boston Museum School let me in. I think anyone could get in there at that time. So I fell into painting in a rather desperate way. Again it wasn't law or history, so it was all right with my father. But the Museum School, the students there, really changed me. And my painting had an effect on my writing so in the long run it was the right path to take. And it did lead me out of Boston.

Q: Your mother was a working artist when you were growing up?

HOWE: She was working between the years I was six and ten, and then after that she was always involved in some theatrical production or another, but it was not a regular job as it had been during the war years. Later she wrote two novels and dramatized *Finnegan's Wake*.

Before she came to the States she had been a young and rising playwright in Dublin, and an actress there. When she was 29 she came to Boston to visit relatives, and she met my father. They were married in about three months. Then my father, who was a lawyer at the time, was made the Dean of the Buffalo University law school and they moved there. When the war broke out my father enlisted and was away in Europe for four years. My mother, Fanny and I moved to Cambridge because I think there was an understanding that my father would come back to teach at Harvard. In Cambridge my mother got a job teaching drama at Radcliffe College. She worked very hard at it. She directed many plays so she was gone a good part of each day and of course nearly every night. Fanny and I had a series of baby sitters. When I was six and Fanny three the schedule was that I walked her to nursery school every morning and then continued on to first grade in a bigger school, myself. We were pretty young to be on our own as much as we were. After the war a theatre was organized in Cambridge called the Brattle. My mother quickly became a part of that. It was a wonderful group of people from all over and the whole thing was great fun. Then there was the Poet's Theatre. So she was always somehow involved in theatre but she never left Cambridge to act or direct, and she was *first* the wife of a professor. I am sure she was constantly scandalizing the Harvard community. Women were to be seen and not heard in those days in Cambridge. My mother loves to be heard.

Q: Were you encouraged to think about a career?

HOWE: Not a career like a doctor, lawyer, historian or philosopher. I was given a genteel education. The understanding was that I might dabble a bit at something but then I would marry a gentleman with money. Not too much money, but money. At the same time these messages were being conveyed, my mother was convinced that I should be an actress. From the time I was ten or so she concentrated a lot of effort on that project. And we were very close because of our shared passion for the theatre. I wanted what she wanted. I think when I gave it up I broke her heart though she was gallant enough not to say it.

Q: You were working when you got married the first time?

HOWE: My first husband, Harvey Quaytman, was a student with me at the

Boston Museum School. He was a year ahead of me. I would say we were both prize-winning students there. He did a fifth year of postgraduate work and won a travelling fellowship. We had Rebecca right away so all three of us went to London for a year on absolutely nothing. We had only the fellowship money which was a little for one, let alone three. Harvey had a studio there, and we lived in the basement flat of a cousin of mine. I stayed in the basement flat and took care of Becky. Then we came back to Cambridge and I got a job teaching art in a girls' school and supported Harvey while he got a studio and painted. I painted in a small room in the house we lived in. I painted on days off and weekends when Becky was napping or something. I never questioned this arrangement. But I can't put it all down to idiocy. I believed then and I do still that if you have children you owe them time. I had been a frightfully homesick child. When my father went away for five years it wounded me, and with my mother away at work I was frightened all the time. I wanted my children to be sure of their mother. I can't bear that little children should be abandoned and it can easily happen. Nothing seems worth that to me.

Q: Do concerns of abandonment, loneliness and isolation figure into your work?

HOWE: Oh, yes.

Q: When you are writing, are you conscious of your 'core issues'?

HOWE: No, but they come on you. *They come on you*. At least when I write, words or phrases come to me. I don't go to them or start with a plan. I start with scraps and pieces and something comes. I never know. I never sit down intentionally to say something. *It comes to me*. But as I work more on a poem a meaning is established and then I must continue until I feel it's done or undone. To an almost alarming extent -- alarming for me -- sound creates meaning. Sound is the core. If a line doesn't sound right, and I do always have single lines or single words in mind, if a line doesn't have some sort of rhythm to it, if my ear tells me it's wrong, I have to get rid of it, or change it, and a new meaning may come then.

Q: What are the five major concerns or issues that present themselves to you on a regular basis in your work?

HOWE: I don't know that there are only five, because I don't like to think that anything is limited. But I always seem to somehow get myself embroiled in ideas of history in my work. And then I am surprised at often a sense of violence intrudes itself, and I am always worried about what "time" it is or is not. Existential issues, you might say, but I come at these issues without any real background in organized thinking. I am always discovering something, then following that lead to something else, with always the sense that there are endless things I don't know that I should. For a long time I thought that this lack of a basic education put me at a disadvantage, but now I think that maybe it's provided me with a certain innocence, and enthusiasm that hasn't been killed. I've been able to follow each path on my own and had I gone to college and majored in something then I would have

had to write papers on people or issues I wasn't interested in. This is a slow, lonely way to go. It places you on the other side, you stumble. It's a weird melange of things you pull on, but you're free.

Q: Given this freedom of expression, do you have a set schedule? Do you sit down at your desk every day from, say, 9 to 12, and say, 'okay, now, I'm ready', or do you wait for inspiration?

HOWE: I work all the time. I like to work in the morning particularly. But if I'm not writing at my desk or working at my job, I am in the library or walking and thinking about work. At night I give up, fall down in front of the television and watch anything. I spend a great deal of time in libraries. One thing David's job has given me is the run of a great library. Families of Yale employees are given a green card and may go into the stacks. Of course you know your card is different, that you are only being tolerated as a gesture on the part of the authorities, but so what? You can get past the guard. I don't know what I would do if I didn't have the run of Sterling Library. I would be a catastrophe. I work out of libraries.

Q: Do you do your poetry writing in libraries?

HOWE: No, but I take out book after book. Some books you can't take out, so then I read them there. When David retires in a couple of years this library business will become a real problem for me. Our town library is in no way adequate because I love going up into the stacks and stumbling on forgotten books; often they have the most interesting things for my writing.

Q: Do you have a goal for what you're trying to do in your work?

HOWE: No.

Q: Why do you do what you do?

HOWE: Because I have to.

Q: What would happen if you didn't?

HOWE: Well, by now I *wouldn't* wouldn't. I have to write. I would organize my life accordingly. Conceivably I could lose access to Sterling Library but by now I have a lot of books of my own. I would just read them more carefully. Maybe it would be good for me. I'm interested now in writing essays. And maybe for a while I would stop poetry to work on those. For me, they are a kind of poetry. I have the same problem with meaning and sound when I write them that I do when I write a poem. I don't like separating things into categories. As to stopping writing, all I can think about is that I haven't got enough time to do what I wish I could do, and I don't yet know what that is.

Q: Do you want people to know your work?

HOWE: I did when I started. Sure I did. In fact, the desire for recognition is what screwed me up in the first place. I wanted to be in the theatre and to me that meant getting the best parts. I didn't become an actress for the right reasons to say the very least. That's why I wasn't any good and very soon fell by the wayside. Then I wanted my paintings to be shown. When I gave up painting I started at square one and I was thirty-three. I was older and wiser and although of course I sent out some poems most of them were rejected and I soon stopped thinking about writing in terms of acceptance. But it would be dishonest to claim that audience doesn't matter at all. These days poets have almost no audience but if you have even six people who really *look* at your work that's a help. Now I have a couple of books in print; they are hard to find, but they are in print. They exist. What if I had no book? I wonder. All the years I spent thinking about Dickinson taught me a lesson about effacement and inscription. Working on that book meant really facing the fact of her extraordinary lack of concern for the opinion of others. Her conscience was her judge and it was a fierce judge. I think she felt her readers were Keats and Shakespeare, among others. She wrote and thought in a structure of ideas. Gerard Manley Hopkins hardly published in his lifetime. I wonder if his language would have reached the lyric pitch it reached -- itself for itself -- had he been writing for a specific audience. What drove him was not a desire for worldly recognition. In fact, there may be a danger in having an audience. It's hard not to want to keep pleasing these enthusiasts. Will you feel forced to please them in some subtle sense? The issue is force, however subtle. What is the extent to which an audience pulls an artist? It's very mysterious.

Q: Do you think you, as a woman, and other women writers might be more susceptible to this pleasing thing?

HOWE: No. An audience is Everyperson. We are all human, all too human. Everyone wants to be loved. Most artists trust that their life's work will be re-discovered. Dickinson carefully saved her poems. Hopkins mailed his writing to Robert Bridges. Nietzsche said, "In applause there is always a kind of noise."

Q: How did you discover Dickinson?

HOWE: It would be hard not to discover Dickinson. She is part of the New England landscape. I have loved many writers who are women: Jane Austen I still read over and over again, George Eliot, and all the Brontës (especially Emily), Willa Cather, Eudora Welty -- but I *cared* about Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf. How they both make words sing! *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, even *Between the Acts*, are poems. Certainly they are not just novels. When I was growing up these two women were accepted into the male pantheon but they had to pay the price of otherness. Virginia Woolf, as we all well know, ended by drowning herself. Emily Dickinson did not go mad but she had to make severe choices. She had to become very "odd" in order to be left alone to write. Now for Holderlin, Nietzsche, even Artaud, madness is part of the story -- horrible, yes, but there are so many other men who wrote and never lost their sanity. They are rare exceptions. And

as exceptions, their letters, poems, all traces from the abyss of madness, are recorded, studied, interpreted by scholars and critics. When Woolf went mad she was shut away and force-fed until she returned to her senses. She was shut up. She was forbidden to write.

I remember the days I was in Ithaca. I was a young mother, alone so much, and I read with horror that Virginia Woolf heard birds talking to her in Greek because she overworked. This was a real and metaphorical punishment for hubris. I remember being afraid that if I worked too hard with words I might start hearing voices. I had this lesson of these two writers whose language was exemplary but whose mastery told the other story that a woman could go too far. When you reach that point where no concessions in art are possible, you face true power, alone. But if you have young children you will make all sorts of concessions. Writing still seems more threatening to me than painting because it becomes so self-absorbing. I saw my desire as a threat to my children. Honestly, I nearly did go mad in Ithaca. I think I kept myself in one piece because I had to for Becky and Mark. But I started writing. I made that break. Those two women were still in there but fear fell away. I wanted to bring from words what they were able to bring. I had to accept that because I was also a mother it might take more time. But necessity is the mother of invention. I probably sound self-indulgent and arrogant. This all really touches on the nature of the sacred. What is accessible to us? Words are like swords. "S" makes word a sword. When you slice into past and future, what abrupt violence may open under you? The stories of Pandora and Psyche must have been told before the Flood.

Well, we returned to New York and then a job came up for David at Yale so we moved to Connecticut. We had to move where the jobs were. Becky went to countless schools before she was eleven. We finally settled in Guilford. Then my aunt who I dearly loved got ill very suddenly. She died within two months from a rare disease with a name so long I can't pronounce it. I think her blood produced too much iron and the iron poisoned her system. Rather like a Hawthorne story. During the last month of her life the Sewell biography of Emily Dickinson was published. I think it's still the best biography of the poet. It was badly needed at the time. If it seems overcautious now, caution was needed. Such a myth had been built up. Aunt Helen was very excited by it and she had a copy when I visited her. I used to read it to her each visit. We only got to the third chapter, the one about Edward Dickinson. She kept asking me to mark passages with her pen, so that she could read them later. We both knew well there wasn't going to be a later, but our awful New England reticence stopped us from saying the word "death." Here was my aunt dying in her apartment in New York, high up, some of the windows looked out over Central Park, and she was telling me about herself, and the cost of a Bostonian upbringing, through the medium of Sewell's Dickinson biography. In my mind it became a tremendously important thing. After she died her husband sent me the two-volume edition as a remembrance, I think. He enclosed a note warning me not to put pen-lines in books because it lowered their value. So much for book collecting.

My father was already dead and I think I tried to keep them both alive in my heart by writing about Dickinson and also about New England. I felt they had showed me the way in. I didn't want to forget them. I needed to

explain those nervous, shy, guilt-ridden, *good* people to myself.

Also I wanted a different kind of book to be written about this woman. I think that a disservice has been done to Dickinson scholarship by much writing about her, even writing that is "feminist." So many books continue to treat her as a "case." So many studies by women are built on earlier studies by men, misreadings of her writing that should have been disqualified long ago. I wanted to show that poetry of the sort Dickinson wrote doesn't just pop out of a disturbed mind. It is achieved through tremendous intellectual daring, energy, clarity of vision and a lot of other things. Not the least of which is courage to go to the brink. At that brink love may save you and bring you joy. Love of language. I was very interested in her reading. I could see what she had read everywhere in her work. I think Sewell is very poor on this. It's silly to just stick to the books she owned or the books in her father's library. This is unrealistic. But better work is being done on this subject among others, largely due to a second wave of scholars, most of them women.

Q: Do you sense that even to this day, women writers are supposed to be off the beam whereas male writers are supposed to be simply eccentric?

HOWE: This interview is certainly centered on women! There is a new biography of Wallace Stevens I have read recently that I think is just as offensive. It's basically a Freudian interpretation. He is approached as a diseased person. A man who is deprived and even depraved when it comes to relationships. I loathe that word "relationships." No, it's not only women who get dealt with in this manner. I think in our culture poets are expected to be eccentric and a little off. They are our Fools. There is no money in poetry, after all. But then again -- I do think that Gertrude Stein, Emily Dickinson and even Virginia Woolf have been rendered caricatures in a way men are not. Gertrude Stein is the fat lesbian always with thin, plain, Alice in tow. Alice is the little wife-woman who cooks pot-brownies and keeps Gertrude in line. Emily Dickinson is the fey spinster always dressed in white. She flits about in shadow, falls in love with a minister, and keeps to her room. She also cooks. There is her recipe for brownies written like a poem. But her brownies are tasteless and hard (the guide says when you visit her house). She lowers trinkets on bits of string from her bedroom window where children catch them. Then there is Virginia Woolf. You can buy a sweatshirt now with a cartoon of her across the breast. Her hair is flying wildly and her eyes staring.

In fact these women were and are great innovators. We haven't yet caught up to them. I can't conceive of twentieth century writing without them. I am surprised that the French feminists never seem to mention them. They have lots to say about Lacan, Bataille, Joyce and Celine, but there is an odd silence when it comes to these three women who were revolutionary, still are revolutionary, to say the very least.

Q: Would you want to be known for having done breakthrough poetry, or breakthrough writing?

HOWE: No, well, I don't know. I would want my writing to keep living. I hope my writing explores issues of power and control and order. Breakthrough, I don't know. Because I don't know that anything can be broken

through. Is there anything left to break?

Q: Is being subversive in your writing like you as a person? Is that an issue for you?

HOWE: If you look at my life I'm well-behaved. I'm not an alcoholic or a drug addict. I don't smoke. I live in a fairly neat house. I don't break traffic rules, but I have never been to a university. I have no degrees. No qualifications. I'm a marginal person who couldn't get a job except for the one I have, punching a cash register, selling books. Eccentric low-paid jobs. So I have been outside the power structure. I know what it is to stand on your feet all day and serve people for a minimum wage. But then this isn't quite fair because my husband *is* in the power structure. His part-time job teaching sculpture at Yale helps to support us. It pays our medical insurance. I was very anxious for my children to have good educations, and they did. We have been able to send them to college. I was determined that they would not end up as unqualified as I am. I was lucky. I had some choice.

Q: Is it by choice that you've remained outside existing institutions?

HOWE: When you reach 49 you have to look back and say that there was free choice in there somewhere. I mean I can blame it on the fact that I had a poor education at the beginning, but I made my own decisions. If I had been born into abject poverty, or with some physical or mental disability, that would be one thing; but given my background or whatever, the gifts I was offered in life, I must have chosen what I got.

Q: Would you consider yourself a professional success at this point?

HOWE: No, I would not consider myself a professional success. What is a "professional poet"? I don't like the sound of it. What I would consider a success is if I wrote something that I thought, between my conscience and me, or God and me, or simply poetry and me, was true. Was my true voice. Once I have written something it's hard to look back on it but sometimes I like to imagine it again. I feel at peace with *Pythagorean Silence*, it was a gift across space to my father. And I feel good about *The Defenestration of Prague*. Happy to have been able to write it. I am cautious about the Dickinson book but again glad for it. That was the hardest. It's my tribute and nothing is more difficult for a Yankee to do than to express love. I am happy those three books exist. So if success is happiness I am happy for those three books.

Q: Are there any topics that you would not write about, not for lack of interest, but for fear, or something along those lines, that you could not quite do it?

HOWE: Well, I don't think I'd not do anything for fear. . .

Q: Is there any censor in your process that says, "Susan, that is one topic you should not broach?"

HOWE: No, no. I would never write a novel because I don't have any desire to, in no way. I know that I will never, ever write a novel, or a short story, so I know that. But that's not because I'm afraid to broach something, it's just that I have no interest in it, and that's not the way my mind moves, so I would never do that.

Q: When you were a child, what did you think you would be when you grew up?

HOWE: An actress, as I have said. From the time I could read I think I wanted to be one. When I was six my mother directed a children's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I was Titania. A six-year-old Titania. I had no idea what I was saying but I loved the sound of the lines. Penelope Parkman, who played Oberon, pronounced it O'Brien and everyone laughed at her. She was probably seven. Her mispronunciation became a family joke. I was careful never to make such mistakes. Then when I was a little older I used to get the leads in productions at school. Later, when the Brattle, or still later, the Poets Theatre needed a child, boy or girl, it was usually me. When I was a teenager I apprenticed at various theatres. I was sure that's what I would do in life.

Q: Do you think this early experience on the stage and in a family where acting was acceptable helped you as a painter and then as a writer, because people were expressing themselves and being public?

HOWE: I wish I could get away from the subject of my career changes because it's very painful to me. But they all played a part. Always being around the theatre gave me a special sensitivity for the spoken word, I guess. When I was a painter I was interested in performance art and artists like Duchamp. I wasn't that interested in painting as colors on a flat surface. I think in some strange sense I have always been making stage sets.

Q: Did you ever think you'd be a musician?

HOWE: No, thank goodness.

Q: Is the Irish part of your being a really big part of you?

HOWE: Yes, a big part. It has had a profound effect on my poetry in quite specific ways. Especially on my earlier work. I've spent a lot of my life in Ireland. One of the problems I have always had has been the pull between countries. A civil war in the soul. I can't express how much I adored Ireland, especially when I was young. But at the same time at that very moment of loving it I felt an outsider and knew there was no way I could ever really be let in. If you can't decide where your allegiance lies you feel permanently out. I had to feel at home somewhere and I *think* that was another reason it was so urgent for me to write the Dickinson book. In fact, I haven't been to Ireland now in five years. Maybe *The Liberties* was my goodbye to Dublin. I'm always sure about that book, that an Irish person would find it laughable. My children have the same love for Ireland as I do. Whenever they have any extra money that's

where they go. It's in our blood, there is no doubt about that.

Q: How does your present husband support you in your work?

HOWE: His name is David von Schlegell and he is a sculptor. "Support" and "professionalism" are both double-edged words. David's sculpture, the way he builds it, the way it looks, has been a support to me because his eye has helped mine. His minimalist sensibility and the pure simplicity of some of his pieces influenced my writing, I'm sure, in a subliminal way. He is seventeen years older than I am and that has meant that we weren't two young egos fighting each other. Yes, I followed him from place to place because he was the one who could get the jobs. Yes, he is from a generation where the wife does the cooking and cleaning and takes care of the children. Now I am beginning to get jobs and be on the move. David has always given me intellectual freedom. He never nagged me about money. When I changed from painting to poetry he went along with me and said he was proud of what I was writing. So David has created a space for me in which I feel protected and at peace as much as I am able. Even if we have lived the risky existence of two artists, something in him has made me feel safe.

Q: What, if any, is the greatest impediment to your doing what you want to accomplish as a writer?

HOWE: Quite simply, money. If you are working at a full-time or even part-time job of the menial sort I have had, your energy just gets used up. To say nothing of your time. Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams had jobs that took all their time and they did an incredible amount of writing. But then they had wives who just did everything else for them. So I think you must have health and a certain amount of financial security. I have seen women, friends of mine, just suffer terribly when they have hit hard times through divorces. The husbands vanish or come on occasion, when they feel like it, to see the children and suddenly these women are left nearly penniless. It's awful. Just a tragic thing. When you put yourself outside as I have done by having no marketable skills, no qualifications for anything but a service job and you are middle-aged, well if anything goes wrong like health, why you have had it. And that could easily happen. Nothing is sure and as you get older you get more tired and more frightened. It's this American system. Within a couple of months you can be destitute. We all know it. There is nothing in this society that helps you then. There's nothing to pick you up.

Q: The fact that you are living a risk-taking kind of existence, insecure, does that play into the creative process for you? Is it part of your psychic makeup that allows you to write?

HOWE: There is risk in writing and risk in living and the two are quite different. Stein was rich and could enjoy risk-taking in writing. Look at Dickinson. She had no risk at all when it came to money. But she did extremely risky writing. But if we are talking about writing and I would rather talk about that, I do believe you can't have your cake and eat it,

too. You can't do writing that is a challenge to authority and have the authorities welcome you into their ranks. If you want to be free, if you really want to be free to go on, to be really, truly free, you must accept risk -- in fact, you will go to meet it. You have to take the problems that go along with being "difficult" and in this culture there are a lot of problems.

Q: How do you feel about the fact that feminists have embraced you?

HOWE: They haven't embraced me.

Q: Why is that?

HOWE: They don't know about me. If you are not doing hardcore political writing, and you are not in the confessional school embraced by so many women's studies programs or departments in universities you are not. What encouragement I have had of my poetry has come from other experimental writers. I don't like that word "experimental," but I can't think of another right now. But women did publish me first. Maureen Owen published a very eccentric manuscript I sent her for Telephone Books. Some people actually read it and Lyn Hejinian must have been one, because she wrote me warm and generous letters about my writing and published a book of mine when she was just beginning Tuumba. I think she and Maureen gave me the push forward I needed. But they are both writers who have not been particularly embraced by feminists.

Q: Would you prefer to be kept away from "isms"?

HOWE: Yes.

Q: If you had 10 words to write on your tombstone, what would you write?

HOWE: I guess just my name, and dates, I can't think of anything. Maybe a line from one of my poems or something, but I'm not sure what it would be yet because I haven't stopped writing.

Q: It sounds like your mother's work was the dominant factor in the house?

HOWE: Oh, no, that wasn't the case at all. It's just that my father has been dead for twenty years and my mother is still alive and she is a very powerful presence indeed. But I don't think that my two sisters and I will ever get used to the shock of our father's sudden death. My youngest sister, Helen, was only seventeen at the time. We have all seen life differently ever since. It's terribly sad when someone just vanishes one night. A sadness that is never completely assuaged. When we were growing up he was the breadwinner. And he knew that. He tired himself out. His biography of Justice Holmes hung over us all like lead. We didn't pay enough attention to the work he did but we knew he was working terribly hard over something -- a Life of someone none of us particularly liked, we should have paid more attention because he was working himself quietly to death. At least Fanny and Helen can look back and know they gave him enjoyment. I was the oldest and after he came home from the war he didn't like me much. I was difficult.

I don't blame him.

I was fascinated by his office at the Law School. Part of the law school library had an opaque glass floor. There was a hush and a musty smell about the place and you walked across glass. After crossing the glass, and passing lecture rooms like theatres, you came to his office and it was just a wild disorder of books. At home he was fussy about order, but in his office books had taken over. You would look in and just see books, books, books, books, and then you would see my thin little father in the middle. All these years later my room is the same. Books and disorder. The other thing about our house was my father's Study. We all used it and hardly ever went into the living room. The Study was lined with books. My mother is a voracious reader, too. On one wall were shelves with all the Irish books and on two other walls were shelves with the American ones and the classics and dictionaries. My father's books and books written by his family were on that side and my mother's books were on the Irish side. I remember that the Irish books represented freedom and magic. The others represented authority and reality. I used to spend hours in there. My parents were out a lot and the books stood in for them. They seemed warm. I used to come into the study not to read them so much as to be soothed by their presence as if they were my parents and one was Irish, half was Irish, so it was strange.

Q: Your father was American?

HOWE: He certainly was. After the war was over he never once went back to Europe. He never went with us to Ireland. He hardly ever left Cambridge.

Q: I'm sensing that you've come to some kind of resolution about your Irish-American split, and the Emily Dickinson has perhaps brought an end to that branch of concern and you're at the beginning of new work. Is that true for your work, that there's something you have to work out, you get to a conclusion and you're done and you move on?

HOWE: Yes.

Q: Do you sense what the next branch is?

HOWE: I'm working on a new series of poems. A lot of my writing I did in Ireland or did here, thinking of Ireland, and it's a split. It's not only that I break words and phrases, but the works are split. Right now I'm writing work I would consider American. *Defenestration* is Irish. *Secret History* is American. Most people don't think of their writing in such a weird way, but it's what I do.

Q: Is there a sadness in the loss of this conflict now that it's finally resolved?

HOWE: I don't think conflicts are ever dissolved. You just learn to abide them.

Q: Being so attuned to sound, when you're walking down the street, going to the supermarket, going to the dry cleaner, whatever, are you hearing sound?

Do you hear the way people speak?

HOWE: Yes. I'm sensitive to noise, too. I say I like sound but really I like silence. Of course I know there is no silence but there are noises and noises.

Having an Irish mother and an American father, I have a special feeling for the English language. Each spoke it differently and well. They loved to read aloud and so do I. My Uncle Quincy was a well-known newscaster during World War II and after; his Yankee voice on the radio was something I will never forget. And the great old actress Sarah Algood was a friend of my mother's. She spoke the heart of Irish. We all listened to voices and that was something quite special, I think. But then you go to Ireland! Cork people speak completely differently from Mayo people, then there is Dublin, and the North, and everyone does imitations of everyone else. On top of this my mother and most of her friends are and were Anglo-Irish and that's different again. Naturally Ireland produced Joyce and *Finnegan's Wake*. That's something else, too, because there are so many scholarly tomes written about the *Wake* and my mother just reads it and knows it because she *thinks* like that.

Q: It's almost like there's a language, but it's fragmented, and yet kept together by the fact that it's the same language. Which brings me to your writing, which is "fragmented," and yet there's a whole, drawing it all together.

HOWE: I suppose that's true. When I was in the theatre there not only did you have the Gate, which was Anglo-Irish generally, but before that there was the Abbey. To be an actor at the Abbey you have to be able to speak Gaelic; I don't know if this still holds true. The Gate, when I was there, was run by the most extraordinary character called Lord Longford. They did Shaw over and over. So even an Anglo-Irish Dubliner would have to put on an English accent to do Shaw, though Shaw himself was Irish. The same with Oscar Wilde. When I was seventeen this whole thing just fascinated me. What those actors could do with their voices and what they loved to do! It's as if words were the only thing that was real and they could be changed constantly and that was the reality. Everything that could be said was true just by saying. This had a dark side but all I could think of then was laughter. I laughed so much that year I was there. I was enthralled, happy, and at the same time not really Irish. I knew there was no way I could be so clever, I knew I was a foreigner. I couldn't change my voice.

Q: Does it bother you when people say your writing is fragmented?

HOWE: No.

Q: Does it bother you when people say your work is inaccessible?

HOWE: Well, I hear it so often sometimes it gets to me. But I think it's accessible to whoever really wants access to it. I have heard plenty of people say that Wallace Stevens's late poetry is inaccessible and it's not to me. If work is really inaccessible then it will vanish. But I have no

control over that.

Q: What would bother you more than anything else if someone said it about your work?

HOWE: The one thing that would bother me would be if it were called elitist or precious. I would be hurt by that. I have been hurt by that.

Q: Who would be your ideal reader?

HOWE: I am my ideal reader. This may sound elitist but it's not.

Q: If you had to paint your writing, if you had one canvas on which to paint your writing, what might it look like?

HOWE: Blank. It would be blank. It would be a white canvas. White.

--December 3, 1986

STEPHEN RATCLIFFE

IDEA'S MIRROR

Words for Susan Howe are what count when the pulse that fills the body fails. Her world is distant, a *coherent rational system* save that it would be discovered in the space articulation makes for it, on the page, between lines *same and not the same*, tracing history's revenge. Something here speaks *Peru* quickly as shifting turns toward the sun *gossamer* (abyss) *kinsmen trespass*. One looks back to one's place in the rooted *escaping conclusion*, Amherst millstones/*Sleep* rounded with a little of something taken in focus turned backward, up a notch to an aperture fixed at ASA 400 even the woman in the dark would read: this no mere feminine *theoreticians of the modern* claiming themes of silence and speech, but *rational and supernatural* calls to power at the center of the room.

What this writing adds to and up to *depends on memory*, the poet idea's *mirror*, a transcriber of the real known to be moving across the screen of vision, not only voice but sight sound taste smell touches in the brain *emblematical* of the girl on the porch dressed in black who is flying backward into her fantasy of what was and is the imagined life. A pencil might hold 'Farewell' left in a sentence were it not otherwise humanistic, the discipline violently *Antecedent terror stretched to a whisper* organicism hears twitching its paw on the table. Not that someone *raised in a strict evangelical household* could for a moment not think, not notice the scant juncture each precept leads perception to fill an instant ahead of such time *story* sees to be told *beyond any book* thus written, this writing *hierarchies* suggest will take its place in a discourse sentiment takes to the field, feeling that whenever the candle burns another can be found asking the light, mock light?

That will be silence *we that were wood*, active in work to make sense a *hunter's gun*, seriousness from what she thought was a *panther*, was a note the tune played once, wasn't forgotten exactly equivalent to how a syntax forced the relation of part to part, part to whole *Posit gaze* when measure could say be there in the rhythm of words forward *step shot Immanence force* and back *sideup upside* turning attention *essentially anonymous*, not an author to display self at any cost, prize, hers if one were to choose *Master, Hope* programs the circle the arrows back against, hand drawn figure jamming *wanton meteor ensign streaming* through the galaxy behind our eyes to make sure what we think thinks itself too.

As Susan Howe speaks the language *grasps its subject/ stumbling phenomenology* what we find when the gun, loaded, goes off. Hers in the silence the space between words and lines announces whenever *I lay down and conceive*, the sound (*her cry// silences// whole// vocabularies// of names// for things*). Say we do live in the finite world of Boston, say, that place good as any *ticked perfectly* to those our predecessors called theirs, these words making way *into the immediate* feeling of understanding. Sometimes as usual adjective preceding the noun, *deaf evening* hears the cement contract in the joints of words, *mother heaved higher* to see her one child the one of many who cross the porch into the dark, the *infinite miscalculation of history* not merely what criticism can hope to call its own but more, the ghost of the one -- *beneath the hill --/ whose service* -- we take to heart aiming the gun *linked time and again* to looking to where the patterns meet. *rhymed order* carries it through the sound the

words meet *blowing Edgar's mad song*. We keep up pretext of her text, knowing as much as fast as she alouds.

The connections meet as soon as letters across the expanse between words collide. Collage isn't only part, the whole of it bound by what *root casket tangled scrawl* makes us perceive as we read the message these words encode, breaking silence. What is left after that contact *More than language can express* stands for all she knows the reader knows. To meet her there at the point of *sense into empty// Thread gone* will be of a sufficiency beyond simple perusal of type set in a book in Windsor, say, Vermont *shrinking back to dark*. If the universe is physical to us, as indeed we only must guess it, then this is a body as *time in the center of a room/ doubt is spun* only every day in taking the next step after the last, lost.

Silence as a theme arcs across the gap sound leaves, moving away. *sense gathers moss* the longer it goes untended, he whose foot would tread the measure a gate suggests limited to access in so far as orthography changes to *faint slaughter story so*. The surface scission is deceptive, as it was for talis(wo)mans Dickinson and Stein, who meet each other *along paths of the Self* one finds here *tense/ as an outsider*. (Re)Arrangement of the past(time) is not in her view idle play but a pleasure whose end means the present won't go without notice. *Out of America's text free past, sounds spelled Kain-tuck-kee are an Indian place*. So she names the heroes Boone, Finley, Cooper, Mather, Edwards, Webster, Thoreau. Later and elsewhere othes called Beach, Weaver, Zukofsky near the end of Bottom: on Shakespeare.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiffe twin compasses are two,

how A lyric poet hunts after some still unmutilated musical wild of the *Mind's world*. Because it isn't as if we won't get it if she doesn't give it up, or over, through the notes the words note, but that if one can say exactly the version she herself maintains along lines extending toward the horizon, from beyond which the front whose clouds now pass over us has approached. Later the *time of sleep memory dreams* will turn upon itself, and find in this direction its own way, the one *awake guarding the Distance*.

Once the frontier, now words map a way into what we only thought we knew, discovering territory bounded by *Ridges of sand rising on one another// Mathematics of Continua* like the cup of hot milk she takes before bed as ritual, *Rhythm and Pedestal// Room of dim*. Whoever comes to the door may knock, ring, stamp her presence altogether certain -- *under the old misappellation* -- that what can be said will now be. As if once the tree among others falls no one who isn't there hears a thing cry a *cause/ (no lie)*. Spacing themselves the words *interpret flame*. She writes belief as if what the potential a reader will find there matters, counts itself chosen to stay. Those referred to articulate the history that even now presides, making present know the way it came to be herein state. *alone, in her clearing of Becoming*, Howe proves what has been contemporaneous to what is, given what follows springs from roots as *milk runs in the breast of each mother* close enough to hear the sound forms.

And so we take the book to heart, *Out among haphazard children// sunny investigations of Permanence* marking a trial whose judge and witness constitute the mind so engaged it sees itself in the other, hear what calls *Time comprehended in Thought* as lines in columns of words becoming a *figure moving in color*, fainting the fragments poetry would keep the world whole by. Her conviction stuns an audience unused to knowing how serious turns of thinking might go, yet nearly all delight inhabits here. We come from this changed, having taken in that which invites the interpenetration of fixed frames of sense heretofore known if at all as one's *face of blank force*, the name you carry after the tape stops. Setting forward then into the field, where *coveys nestle and settle// Meditation of a world's vast Memory* proves the aim as much as any can be to take, this writing test indeed of the rock words can build upon and have, *pitched across history*, inventing the world *skiff feather glide house*.

Italicized passages come from Susan Howe's *Articulation of Sound Forms In Time* (Awede, 1987), *My Emily Dickinson* (North Atlantic Books, 1985), and *Pythagorean Silence* (Montemora, 1982).

LANGUAGE AND SUSAN

Susan is concerned with the passionate act of writing, with Language. A voice that is voices portrays a mind's movement. Tone and mood of the dark side of American, specifically American, History. Subversion. Identity and memory of place. Language is the medium through which Her revelation of the nature of meaning/s evolve/s. Her ways of generating meaning require a change in reading habits. I can no longer expect to be told something. I have to discover it, that something, in the telling. I have to work my way through a system of relationships between words, push back their branches in order to discover their interpenetration, then allow them to bend again toward each other, or to swing away. As I look at each word anew, I think, these are the parts, now what is the greater whole? -- A living text with a life of its own, ever transforming in the mind of each reader. This is my response as Reader to Susan. OUR text as it evolves through a series of readings of her work.

Her passion is a mirroring. Her soul reflecting/being reflected by another soul, another author/s. Complete union -- and separation -- from the act of writing. Suffering. Abandon/ment. Sacrifice. Like Emily Dickinson, Susan "requires each reader to leap from a place of certain signification, to a new situation, undiscovered and sovereign. She carries intelligence of the past into future of our thought by reverence and revolt." (MED85) The boundaries between author and author are down. This is true of all of the authors who come to life, transformed in Susan's work:

*You are of me & I of you
I cannot tell
Where you leave off and I begin (TH20)*

Where you leave off as author and I begin as reader/author. Shedding identity. Shedding ego in order to discover the Original Self. Shedding her poet's skin in order to become the Poet. Shedding ordinary assumptions about reality to reveal/conceal Reality, its fleeting, mutable, Impermanence. Often, Her/My/Your Emily Dickinson becomes persona to whom are addressed myriad statements about Susan and writing. "She knows Originality is the discovery of how to shed identity before the magic mirror of Antiquity's sovereign power." (MED105) Influence subsumed to conText. Flows in. Transforming, transformed. Flows out. Because the old codes are dead, with due process. Recognition, Gratitude, Reverence, New Life. The greatest Tribute.

This attention to the past shows up multidimensionally. It is the poet's connection with the larger context. "The lyric poet reads a past that is a huge imagination of one form." (MED106) Indeed. Robert Duncan said, "As poet I am only an instance and instrument of the Poet that I imagine -- that is, Who is real, and Whose work is immortal Poetry, is Reality."

Behind history, out there (in there) lies the forest. Its time is

always present. It is a world without control, without known authority. Each reader/writer must find her/his own way. Each poem, past or present, is a new discovery with each reading/writing. It is a journey back beyond Culture.

Mind itself or life

quicker than thought

slipping back to primordial

We go through the word Forest (TH11)

On the way, there is contact with, recognition of, a culture that had/has its existence there. Sounds of strife, clash of arms. A way of life trampled and then, many years later, conquest in reverse: the intrusion of Indian Present into the historical past of the poem, into the present of each reading, palpable retribution. Not patronizing -- "The literature of Savagism/under a spell of savagism" -- (TH11) but a Presence, "In bodies of bushes stray voices/Stray voices without bodies / Stray sense and sentences" (HEL54). Somehow to set it right, rectify the "Infinite miscalculation of history," "Names passed over in silence/Names that remain unknown." Even now.

Text itself is history, is people. Palpable. Pulling text from text. Pulling past into future. Making it Present. "I live as if Centuries are nothing" (WK27) Past and present fuse and give depth to the present. The Presence of History. Coming from her choice of text, "language formed from old legends, precursor poems, archaic words, industrial and literary detritus." (MED70) For Emily Dickinson, Susan says, the past, "that sovereign source must break poetic structure open for future absorption of words and definition." (MED116).

The poem and its making are always set squarely in the world. Not seeking a way out of, or beyond. Their engagement therein. Dialectic between Old World and New.

*Great men of the New World
walk on water after winter*

Evergreens screen the earth

*They are denying the Dark
after dark will ever gather*

*Inside the language of names
they stretch out their arms*

Here is blank reason

Realm of thought ruin of things

*What hierarchy of furious intention
lies here in ruins*

(HEL50)

Mary Rowlandson is still a blend of old and new world. "The trick of her text is the mix." (MR120) For Mary Rowlandson, "Each Remove is a forced march away from western rationalism deep and deeper into Limitlessness where all illusion of volition, all individual identity may be transformed..." (MR116) And her discoveries need be disguised, subverted by a running counterpoint of biblical allusion. Limitlessness, illusion of volition, individual identity transforming, are the unknown forest. They are also the text of the future. Women who represent male values of the culture are the ones who survive, in history, or who are acclaimed. But what if you are, as Susan says, "curved, odd, indefinite, irregular, feminine?" What if you are a female with Promethean Aspiration? How is it "To be a woman and a Pythagorean?" There are different voices for women and men. Different Sound Forms in Time, different Articulations:

*How do I, choosing messages from the code of others in order
to participate in the universal theme of Language, pull SHE
from all the myriad symbols and sightings of HE. (MED17-18)*

Somehow to set it right, rectify past damages, resurrect, restore, go on. Shake off servitude, step down off the pedestal, break The Deadlock of women treated as servant and superior, old patterns, bondage. *Exhuming* woman from the past, from a blurred collective. And being energized by that encounter as the features become sharper: Rowlandson, Dickinson, Stein.

Language is the weapon.

Emily Dickinson is a sharpshooter in the forest of words. Hers is a story of clarity and denial. There is no question as to her target. There is no question of dislocating her aim with "hierarchical discourse of purpose and possession." (MR116)

Releasing verbal as well as historical events from old, literal relationships, Susan is only secondarily concerned with subjective experience of ordinary life. Only if "this" and "that" are seen precisely and sharply, in a world of change. Disentangling from the personal. Without betrayal, without cause. Then bringing the personal back in, stripped of the usual identities and configurations. "My strange act my text/my strange book" (HEL49)

Always, there is the *Body* of language, the "five senses of syntax", (ART) eyes ears nose tongue fingers, Our responsibility to its care:

*Our duty how we should be bound
to do
Such phrases and such phrases
All those hands feet figures of speech (HEL46)*

That language respond to deeper levels of meaning, Reality in its broadest sense, human and psychological,

*Dear Unconscious scatter syntax
Sythe mower surrender hereafter (ART)*

That level of text which has to do with instinct -- a moreorless abrupt

psychic occurrence -- responding to an inner necessity reflected in syntactical arrangements. Allowing thus a clarity and above all, life objectified, the personal universal. Only through Language can we hope to know ourselves.

For we are language Lost

in language (DP9)

Past is also the use of archaic language and spelling, or making words look archaic. "Soe young mayde in March or April laught" (ART); "anthen upliispth enend/ adamap blue wov thefthe" (TH21). Shifting values. "Words set free from a cage." Chance meeting of sounds, images. A restructuring of meaning by chance meeting of words. Making new words. Sounds, images dispersed around the canvas. Animate, shifting life, as life is full. Shifting values of meaning by a rearrangement in space. Words sprawl across the page, upside down, diagonally, swirling. Words are figment, pigment on a canvas.

The backward-forward movement of a sequence has the effect of mirroring: looking backward, past; looking forward, future. It is that undetermined point in the middle which constitutes *Here and Now*.

is notion most open apparition past Halo view border redder

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 (ART)

MoheganToForceImmanenceShotStepSeeShowerFiftyTree

UpConcatenationLessonlittleAKantianEmpiricalMaoris

HumTemporal-spatioLostAreLifeAbstractSoRemotePossess

ReddenBorderViewHaloPastApparitionOpenMostNotionis (ART)

Similarly, up and down. Which is real, up or down?

*blue glare (essence) cow bed leg extinct draw scribe upside
even blue (A) ash-tree fleece comfort(B)draw scribe sideup (ART)*

Or: *Traverse canon night seige Constant firing
guirg turt Constant seige canon night seige (HEL18)*

At a certain point the stream of thought flows upward instead of downward; backward instead of forward. Eisenstein, Tarkovsky, especially, did this with a movie camera.

There is a change in relationship: synchronous instead of causal. Parallels reflecting each other. But they never meet. And they are not the same. The Question of Relation. Chance meeting of words. Thoughts and half-thought. Even Random. Challenging always reality,

splitting nature's shadow
splitting the world (ART)

Words/Sounds are arranged/rearranged in space, to affect meaning/tone/mood. A constant shifting of perspectives so that each word, like sculpture in the round, can be viewed from all sides. To give each one space that it may be viewed at various distances. To give or take away light from it (energy from other words) (otherwords in relationship)

in the gray dawn
In the grey dawn (PS8)

Or: Young pine in a stand of oak
Young oak in a stand of pine (TH12)

Or: Original of the Otherside
Understory of anotherword (TH12)

History.
Women.
Language.

Into Silence/space words fall, create, destroy dramatic sequence. Meaning sent into exile. Sometimes no sequence is seen. Meaning brought home by Absence and Presence.

a sentence or character
suddenly

steps out to seek for truth fails
falls

into a stream of ink equence
trails off (PS1)

Susan is Possibility. Something might or might not occur. There is no final interpretation. What she provides, above all, is Language Engendering.

What I put into words is no longer my possession. Possibility has opened. The future will forget, erase, or recollect and deconstruct every poem. There is a mystic separation between poetic vision and ordinary living. The conditions for poetry rest outside each life at a miraculous reach indifferent to worldly chronology. (MED13)

Pythagorean Silence (PS) Montemora Foundation, NY 1982

Defenestration of Prague (DP) Kulchur Foundation, NY 1983

"Heliopathy" (HEL) (Temblor 4) 1986

"Thorow" (TH) (Temblor 6) 1987

Articulation of Sound Forms in Time (ART) Awede, Windsor, Vermont, 1987

"The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson" (MR) (Temblor 2) 1985

My Emily Dickinson (MED) (North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA) 1985

"Work in Progress" (WK) (Temblor 3) 1986

PAUL METCALF

THE REAL SUSAN HOWE

In a letter to me some months ago, Susan 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."

She then goes on to claim that wherever she digs, I have preceded her; which, for all its commendable modesty, is an error. Susan Howe has quarried large areas of human geography that would be altogether difficult for me. In fact, if she and I form a mutual admiration society - which I think we do - it is unfairly tilted towards her. She seems to understand the books of mine that she has read; and I'm not sure I have a comparable grasp on all of hers.

The challenge to the reader, it seems to me, is to locate Susan Howe. The real Susan Howe. And the task is made difficult by the multiplicity of roles she plays. At once, I wince at that word "role." "Role," "persona," "voice," "guise," "mask" - all are cliché, or suggestive of something overly theatrical or meretricious, which is not what I intend. Nevertheless:

Is she a poet of history? ("Often I hear Romans murmuring / I think of them lying dead in their graves.")

Is she a Yankee eccentric?

An Irish free spirit?

A Language Poet? ("For we are language Lost / in language"). That is, are the poems non-referential? or simply oblique?

Is she a vocabulary poet? (Robert Duncan once warned a friend that that's what I am).

A feminist militant?

An alien immigrant? ("Across the Atlantic, I / inherit myself / semblance / of Irish susans / dispersed / and narrowed to / home").

Well, I think she is at least several if not all of these. And it is not role-playing: these are Susan Howe. To try to fit her into one or two categories is like trying to body-English a pinball machine, psyching the ball into a slot it has no intention of entering.

She is uneasy in any single slot. And I gather that the tenants of the various slots on which she touches tend to be uneasy with her. This is not surprising.

* * *

I should point out that I have not read all of Susan Howe's books, and that this essay is based only on readings of the following:

Secret History of the Dividing Line (A Telephone Book)

Cabbage Gardens (Fathom Press)

The Liberties (loon books)

Pythagorean Silence (The Montemora Foundation)

Defenestration of Prague (The Kulchur Foundation)

Articulation of Sound Forms in Time (Awede)

Mention should be made, too, of George Butterick's admirable assessment, "The Mysterious Vision of Susan Howe" (*North Dakota Quarterly*, Fall, 1987).

* * *

Cabbage Gardens opens with a number of quotations, including this, from Edward Lear: "And he wore over all, as a screen from bad weather, / A cloak of green cabbage leaves stitched all together."

Susan Howe's poems are indeed cabbage leaves, in which she adventures into changing weather.

But this is only one of their shapes or forms. Witness the Architectural Poet, as Howe builds a cathedral (from *The Liberties*): "dilapidation at erected original / irish granite south was added / effected attempted wintering / struck the bay's walls mathemati / cal indicating perfect choir", etc.

And there are repeated examples of the Language Poet, where language or vocabulary appear to have taken over, become the subject of the poem:

From *Pythagorean Silence*: "timid satyr vesper winnow / snow chastity berry-blood(secretcy) / rosemary popular / holm-oak juniper / holly casket cud"

From *Secret History of the Dividing Line*: "sh dispel iris sh snow sward wide ha / forest l a boundary manic a land sh", etc.

* * *

In *Pythagorean Silence*, she defines a dream as a "mimic presentation stained with mortality."

Is the human spirit, for Howe, like a dream? Is it a timeless entity, whose mortal incarnation is a darkening?

"Nature ties a body to my soul / Conceiving inventing falsifying / assuming"

Elsewhere, she refers, in a backhand way, to the fullness of mortal life: "(Plato had a thin voice)"

And finally, the Puritan theme is subverted: "national anthem of my love Lucifer"

* * *

There are many references, running through the poems, to military matters:

The Irish strivings against England.
 The burning of the ancient town of SWORDS.
 Battles with the Indians.
 "Arthur's thousand soldiers sleeping"
 "Speeches at the Barriers"
 "Allegorical Tristram / his knights are at war"
 "(The enemy is always riding by)"
 Yet another Susan Howe. Military Poet.

* * *

Butterick refers to "Howe's remarkable ability to absent herself, to shed herself, from her lines that allows them to stand with such authority."

And yet, in *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, one wonders if the poems of the Civil War - the fratricidal Civil War - are themselves alone, or if they are a metaphor for something personal. And this leads to yet another quandry: Would she incline toward metaphor, would she allow something to stand for anything other than itself? Is she, in fact, an Objectivist Poet?

* * *

"sound sounde) of soun / amend unto / bowrougholder
 borrougolder borsolder bar / soldier burrow holder Him /
 bring into Awe / stranglers stragglers no / nightstealer",
 etc. Yet another Susan Howe: the Irish bard, the Joyce of
Finnegan's Wake.

* * *

Always, there are more questions than answers:
 "absence / fold in one hand / what / a few / fragments /
 holds us to / what"
 "if only this or that would happen"
 "(Do this / or that)"
 "Possibility of discovering / anything / anything"
 "To see through all things clearly / is to see through
 all things dimly" - there are no simple solutions.
 And finally: "Best plays are secret plays"

* * *

Articulation of Sound Forms in Time opens with a somewhat conventional historical root. She quotes the story of one Hope Atherton who, in a battle against the Indians on the west side of the Connecticut River, became separated from his company, wandered for several days, and showed up in Hadley, east of the river, having crossed by some unexplained means.

The tale is ripe with ambiguities. First of all, Hope is a woman's name, and yet this is a man. Gender ambiguity. Then, how did he arrive east of the river? ("Deep water" he must have crossed over") He says he offered to surrender to the enemy, but they would not receive him. His story is held suspect - truth and fiction are tossed together like dice - and it is suggested that "he was beside himself," i.e., crazy.

He says that the Indians fled from him, thinking him the Englishman's God. Is that what craziness is? The origin of religion?

With this grounding in history, but given at once a variety of paradoxes and liberties, the poems take off, like a "wanton meteor ensign streaming":

"Cries open to the words inside them / Cries hurled through the Woods"

"archaic hallucinatory laughter"

"kneel to intellect in our work / Chaos cast cold intellect back"

If one wishes, the whole poem may be taken as the internal ramblings of Hope Atherton: male/female, "beside himself," etc.

More than once a friend or critic has suggested to me that, in order to write some of the things I have written, I must have experienced "dissociated states." I don't follow this logic. Did Shakespeare have to be crazy to write *Lear*. An assassin, to write *MacBeth*? By the same token, however wild and abandoned some of the language in *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, Howe is never wholly out of touch. She rambles and adventures on a long, loose tether, but it is there, one end tied to the ambiguous Hope Atherton, while the other she tosses playfully from hand to hand.

Perhaps one of the difficulties she may offer her readers - and it is a difficulty I think I share with her - is pointed out by Butterick: "... her technique was always of interest for how one might accomplish a narrative without a narrator, or with a minimum of intrusive narrator asking for one's trust."

Her technique is almost absence of technique. Inventive and innovative as she is, she is not artful. And this brings us back to the suggestion of Objectivism, the mistrust of metaphor, the shedding of herself from her lines. Here, we do not have roles, voices, personae, etc. Rather, the summation of all of these - is Susan Howe.

* * *

At the end of Part 1 of *Articulation*, in the midst of all the density and adventuring in the poem, stands as lovely a lyric as one would care to read:

"Loving Friends and Kindred: - / When I look back / So short in charity and good works / We are a small remnant / of signal

escapes wonderful in themselves / We march from our camp a little
 / and come home / Lost the beaten track and so / River section
 dark all this time / We must not worry / how few we are and fall
 from each other / More than language can express / Hope for the
 artist in America & etc / This is my birthday / These are the old
 home trees"

Yes.

MAUREEN OWEN

SUSAN HOWE'S POETRY

An idea in vogue has it that the artist must necessarily
 be in opposition to his/her language, that she/he has to
 force it, constrain it, and twist its syntax in order to mold
 it to his/her own design. However, another definition of art
 is perhaps not only possible but more accurate - that the real
 artist is someone who has been able, through patient work or
 with immediate insight, to discover the profound nature of the
 language she/he has chosen and its laws, and to fully exploit
 its forms of expression, from the most obvious to the most
 hidden.

- Danièle Sallenave
 from the introduction to the photographs
 of Andre Kertész
 translated by Sheila Chevallier
 and Marianne Tinnell-Faure

for her the glove of the beast floated by
 she watched it from where? somewhere above
 the sea I thought my whole life was ringing

damp slate wet grey slate wet granite

an errie longing for the vanishing figure
 stones of an empty street but the feeling
 the feeling that someone or something moving very fast
 has just turned the corner at the end of the block

Listening to her read is like staring into a lake
 enchanted mesmerized drawn closer and closer until
 the tip of the nose touches water & then swiftly
 one senses danger danger a warning a voice
 saying No, no wrong way not the lake not the lake
 over here & yes she's over there now & the magnetic
 pull begins again

Having the power to cause to rivet the power to be shadow
 power to appear perfectly the power to say something
 unintelligible that everyone wants to figure out power to
 utter gibberish as in *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*
 gibberish - the signal of madness the historic figure pushed
 too far lost in between the cracks of defined groups lost
 where there is no room for error no hesitating on the bridge
 no time for indecision Women lost like that in historic cracks
 gone mad gibbering talking a blue streak desperate

gibberish of madness forerunner of another explanation a language left to women women abandoned fallen through the angles of patriarchy's rhetoric Speaking in a New Voice

She is not "the fulfillment of Olson's dream of the historical process" that Joel Lewis points to in his inspiring article on *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* in the March-April '88 issue of the *American Book Review*, but a different dream from a different origin in a new voice. Not a concrete tongue but a mystery. To get to the core one must dismantle the structure. But it is a dismantling of discovery of the undefinable, not an archeological find to be dusted off and catalogued. To arrive in the midst of a Susan Howe poem is to be drawn into the realm of supernatural power.

To be swept up and carried off in a cyclone calm where moments spent in a sacred time reclaim you. Where you are not the reader of a text, or the receiver of a production, or the recipient of a theory. Where there is neither discourse nor criticism. Where there is only the air of the poem. And you breathe it in.

August 1988

GRAPPLING BIGMAN: THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE DIVIDING LINE

Susan Howe's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (NY: Telephone, 1978) is primarily an engagement with the formidable shade of Charles Olson -- perhaps the most patriarchal of recent poetic patriarchs. Howe and Olson: both New Englanders, both with Irish antecedents, both taking until their thirties to find poetry. Olson first gave up a promising career as a scholar and professor and, later, quit the stepping-stone post of a late inning New Deal functionary. Howe, from a distinguished New England literary family, initially pursued an acting career and then spent a decade as a visual artist. The decision to pursue poetry comes to both as the result of an intellectual crisis: for Olson it was the party hacks who swarm back into the Democratic Party in the wake of Roosevelt's death, shattering the poet's belief in the rightness of a political career. Howe's poetry arose out of her involvement with the burgeoning feminist movement of the late 60's. As suggested by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, the effect of reading such seminal books as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* galvanized a desire to write -- "anger is an energy" (John Lydon) -- and an abandonment of painting. Here, however, is where the similarities stop. Olson's crisis involved his loss of power (& future power as a potential Postmaster General) with the arrival of a new political regime, despite the recollection of his decision to leave politics as primarily a moral one. His first "real" poem, *The K*, casts those events in this light. Howe's arrival into feminism was a recognition of a state of women's fundamental powerlessness in a patriarchal society. Her strategic retrenchment into poetry becomes an undertaking to investigate the underpinnings of public and private discourse -- to root out the substructure that forms our language; despite that our words seem so isolated & lonely confined within the walls of the dictionary warehouse.

I learned things

fighting off various wolves that hung around the door.

(S.H.D.L., p.17)

The title of Howe's book-length work derives from William Byrd's (1674-1744) *History of the Dividing Line*, a volume based upon Byrd's journals of explorations in the American wilderness. Byrd, the founder of Richmond, Virginia and one of the great Colonial writers, trekked into the American interior as part of his career as a surveyor. The word "mark", a common surveyor's term used in delineating the boundary of the land one is surveying, recurs throughout in the book through a series of permutations and expositions. In addition, as gleaned from its five page entry in the O.E.D., the word "mark" can be defined as a monetary unit (German), an archaic term for a banner, an English term of weight,

the illiterate's signature ("X") and the quarry of a hawk -- among some seventeen definitions offered. For Howe, "mark" carries the personal connotative meaning as it is the names of both her father and her son, the dedicatees of the volume. Her father, a scholar, published a study of Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Touched With Fire*, in 1939. Howe incorporates text from this study of the "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table" -- one of the dominant figures of American literature during the lifetime of Emily Dickinson, a major figure in Howe's personal literary canon.

In adding the word "secret" to Byrd's narrative, Howe takes aim at all the "dividing lines" of hierarchical society -- gender, class, the inter-familial. "I know the war-whoop in each dusty narrative" (p.15) -- throughout Howe's work there is a continual, obsessive concern with history, but, as the above passage implies, it is not the immensity of Olson's reconstruction of Gowandaland's Atlantic rip; it is more an Althusserian inquiry into the structuring of ideology into all aspects of language.

Until the fragmented style of the poetry in the last volume of *Maximus* poems, Olson maintains faith in the ability of language to convey his poetry. He envisions a personalist "special view of history" as part of the blueprint of a new post-Holocaust/A-Bomb, humanism -- a culture which, despite its visionary quality, still can find no place for women. In extending Olson's "Special View of History", Howe's history goes beyond the basically patriarchal world of law and tangible objects and sets sight on the psychic landscape of our inner lives. Rather than the merchant's books or navigational charts that is the groundwater of *Maximus*, Howe is more often drawn to the journal, letter or captivity narrative:

Dear Parents

I am writing by candlelight.
All right so far

after a long series of collisions
had a good night's rest.

Belief in the right of our cause.

Tomorrow we move.

(S.H.D.L., p.3)

These modes of discourse were one of the few arenas where a woman's "special view of history" could be documented. The tone of the intimate declarative sentence of the journal entry dominates *Secret History*. Howe is a scholar-poet in the truest meaning of that concept -- in that every word is weighed for both sonic and intellectual measure. She employs archaic

language like no other contemporary writer. She does not share Olson's faith in the poem as a transcript of measured speech. To employ archaic language and phrasing is to deny the spoken word's primacy and to create a clearly defined position for poetry apart from other, more logopoetic approaches to writing. Her fascination with the single isolated word (which is never really alone and always surrounded by ghosts and half-echoes) is similar to the Victorian fascination with the Oxford English Dictionary, a decades-long effort of hundreds of professors and amateur scholars. The OED had a great influence on both Pound and Joyce and encouraged the production of many other ancillary dictionaries that made a vast sea of the English language. "When I first read the dictionary I thought it was a long poem about everything" (comedian Steve Wright). The absence of a continuous narrative in Howe's work focuses the reader's attention onto the surfaces of the text. The story is of the language unfolding.

I threw away the reins
because there were no reins

when present I was absent.

(S.H.D.L., p.12)

Howe finds most valuable in Olson the concept of the page as a field of action and the spatial use of historical material. What is often overlooked in Howe is the manner in which she scores her poems. Her ability to make disparate forms of discourse cohere brings to mind fellow New Englander Charles Ives; at their most achieved, the How(e)text is a series of sutures that are as carefully fixed as the bones in a Japanese domino super-schematic. Other composers who come to mind as fellow-wanderers upon the same terrain are Harry Partch (who shares Howe's dual interest in Classicism and Americanism) and Anton Webern, whose focus upon the single note harmonizes with the pressure Howe applies to the single word.

Run forward
slamming doors on tapestry

laying traps to catch the Trickster

Run naked naming nothing

One vast Pharoah
or Pharoah's dream.

(S.H.D.L., p.10)

At the beginning of *Secret History*, the reader comes upon this floating phrase: "quintessential clarity of

inarticulation"(p.8). I read this as the author's auto-criticism in regards to her alleged surface "difficulty" which, when probed, can be seen as a strategy to avoid the kind of Romanticist subjectivity that has swamped other poets seeking a means to articulate an alternative to the dominant powers. Yet, Howe is no didact, nor a polemicist. She does, however, have the courage -- in this icy intellectual period of academicised Post-Modernism -- to conclude her *My Emily Dickinson* with this unequivocal declaration:

*Poetry is the great stimulation of life.
Poetry leads past possession of self to
transfiguration beyond gender. Poetry is
redemption from pessimism.*

(M.E.D., p.138)

Howe took from Olson what was needed -- primarily a way to organize a text and the permission to make an intellectual thing, and not another pedant's game, out of poetry -- and went forward from this early work to a series of brilliantly realized texts that have restored a sense of urgency to the hard work that confronts reader and writer. And in all these texts, a connecting loom is found whose objective is the pleasure of an architecture rather than the currently fashionable apprenticeship to demolition.

STEPHEN-PAUL MARTIN

ENDLESS PROTEAN LINKAGES

If language and perception are unavoidably interconnected, then a more "feminine" world-view will emerge only after women have created their own discursive methods, their own angles of articulation distinct from the ones they have been forced to use in patriarchal societies. Helene Cixous puts it this way: "Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes."

Susan Howe seems to have precisely this in mind when she claims in *My Emily Dickinson* that "most contemporary feminist literary critics -- eager to discuss the shattering of all hierarchies of being -- don't want the form they discuss this in to be shattering". Howe's own writing is a powerful example of this "shattering" technique. In *Defenestration of Prague*, for instance, the forms of "coherence" that have governed Western (phallogocratic) literature are nowhere to be found. What we find instead is a language designed to "wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes":

*oblivious window of Quiet
closing*

*egeiptes aegistes aegiptes egeps Egipp
egypt here there*

Scotus (that is darkness)

forged history)slayius slamius stanius Monarch

*greengrail mist-grey who
soundless parable possible Quiet to flame*

hay

Writing like this goes directly against one of the central "codes and regulations" of the Euro-patriarchal tradition -- the process of verbal representation. If we try to look through Howe's words to the "more substantial" reality they supposedly refer to, we are going to be frustrated and confused. We are on safer ground if we look at the poem as a series of verbal suggestions that interact more on the basis of sound than "sense."

Of course, the separation of sound and sense is an integral part of masculine aesthetic theory. Sound is generally devalued, regarded as mere ornamentation, while sense is viewed as being part of a static transcendent system of meaning that words can be used to represent. But in Howe's poem the sense is in the words themselves, in the musical and visual patterns of energy they create, and in the virtual space that exists between text and reader. The poem is not a static object offered up for consumption; it is a network of possibilities to be realized by the reader.

A line from Edmond Jabes' *The Book of Questions* is appropriate here: "There is an impassable space between writer and book which the readers are called on to fill." As we fill the "impassible space(s)" that form in the motion of words, we begin to see ourselves in the act of creating significance. What perceptual biases and limitations do we bring to the words? What preconceptions do we superimpose on what we are looking at? These questions are generally obscured when we work with books that impose a fully constituted body of significance on our reading imaginations. But in poems like the one above, we collaborate in producing patterns of meaning whose exact nature has not been predetermined.

This does not mean that Howe is asking us to participate in a "poetic Rorschach test." Rather, she is leading us to play with the musical and semantic properties of words and at the same time to see that the physical presence of her language has an identity of its own -- beyond anything we might choose to make of it. Cixous' word "impregnable" is quite apt in this connection. If the masculine process of interpretation asks us to "rape" the body of language, forcing it to act in response to our desires and preconceptions, Howe's poem calls for an "erotics of interpretation," a playful intercourse of reader and language that leads to pleasure and the desire to read/play further, moving through "e n d l e s s P R O T E A N L i n k a g e s". *Defenestration of Prague* is a metamorphic ("Protean") field, changing with each new "linkage"; it is also series of "inkages," verbal inscriptions that contain a sedimental record of various "ink ages," or periods of writing.

Parts of *Defenestration* are explorations of that sediment, attempts to demystify the patriarchal patterns built into the central myths of Euro-western culture. In this sense, Howe goes beyond the process of word-play and works with a more polemical strategy. She tells us that "we are language Lost // in language" and that writing is essentially "a play of force and play // of forces". The usual notion is that we use words to express ourselves. But Howe suggests that language is using us, that we are only free to say what patriarchal forms of expression will permit. In mastering standard English and absorbing conventional literary strategies as part of the educational process, we are subtly transformed by "a play of force," a normalizing pattern that determines not so much what we think as how. Thus we need to recognize and distance ourselves from the "play of forces" at work in the master narratives that govern Euro-patriarchal thought and feeling.

Consider Howe's presentation of Tristram and Iseult:

*Iseult seawards gazing
(pale secret fair)*

*allegorical Tristram
his knights are at war*

Sleet whips the page

We are not given the opportunity to lose ourselves in the glamor of "one of the world's great love stories." We are instead asked to see the "play of forces" that underscores it. Iseult is the conventional female "seaward gazing," pining for her lost lover. She is "(pale secret fair)", a mere

feminine signifier who has all the qualities normally assigned to women in medieval legends or romances. Tristram is the masculine signifier, the "allegorical" warrior. In the original romance (and in the countless versions of it that have come down to us through the centuries) we are encouraged to think of Tristram and Iseult as "real" flesh-and-blood human beings. But Howe shows us what they actually are: patriarchal conventions, stick figures used to convey an ideological message under the guise of storytelling. When Howe tells us that "Sleet whips the page," she reminds us that the climate Tristram and Iseult inhabit is a fictive space whose purposes can and should be analyzed.

Another fictive space that Howe demystifies is the realm of mystical abstraction:

*Abstractions mount enchanted pyramid
numbers spangle brawl*

Thorn sense dim scholar

*deep time and sudden stratagem
Cabalistic artifice*

*ransacked torn
Hopeless cross purposes*

*In teeth of stubborn
stark stars run*

Down with the bird of heaven Down

These lines work in two directions. They attack the "Hopeless cross purposes" that inhabit the "stratagem(s)" of mystical thinking. They also provide us with an alternative: the interplay of morphemes, phonemes, and graphemes -- verbal music on its most basic level. Just as Howe deconstructs the fictive network that words have been used to create, she uses words to develop a "play of (musical) forces" that does not rely on "a willing suspension of disbelief". It is physically present in its own right as a configuration of vibrational energies.

Howe is clear that this deconstructive/musical process constitutes a direct attack on patriarchal systems of authority:

*Horsemen with outstretched arms
half supernatural horses*

*soar above letters
Mythological night before letters*

Where I ride no man shall mark

The horsemen are of course part of the grandest of all patriarchal fictions -- the apocalypse. Howe firmly tells us that she will have nothing to do with it. The significance of her writing is something "no man shall mark"

or appropriate. Its meaning is impregnable, non-referential. The horses of patriarchal Armageddon soar only "above letters," above the fictions men have used to disguise the violence of their ideologies. By stripping the fictive surface to its essentials, Howe frees us from its rhetorical power and opens us to the possibility of a new kind of writing that is not a disguised argument for anything.

This change is suggested more emphatically later in *Defenestration*, in a dramatic segment called "God's Spies." The two "main characters" -- Stella (Jonathan Swift's mistress) and Cordelia (King Lear's banished daughter) -- might be taken as emblems of Howe's own writing project. They exist in the margins of a discredited civilization and seem to be trying to find their way toward a new way of speaking and seeing. They acknowledge that "Save for ourselves, there is no sign of life", that the patriarchal pattern is a literal (and literary) dead-end:

STELLA (Matter of factly): They murdered each other.
CORDELIA: -- Of course, always --

Yet at times they also seem to be in touch with the possibility of life outside the phallographic patterns that people like Jonathan Swift and King Lear represent:

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

This dance of syllables -- leading to a heightened awareness of words as musical energies -- is the primary means by which Howe and her readers reconstitute themselves outside the stranglehold of patriarchal meaning. By asking us to focus on the tangible presence of language itself -- on the morphemes, phonemes and graphemes that words are made of -- Howe moves us away from our tendency to think in abstractions, easing us into the motion and fabric of a verbal space that has not been reduced to a mere zone of representation. We are asked to see and hear the shapes and sounds of the words instead of reading through them to what they supposedly refer to. Our sense of discursive or narrative continuity shatters, replaced with the endless Protean linkages that give language its living power.

SUTURE -- & ABSENCE OF THE SOCIAL

This body of work* insistently embodies an engaged (wonderfully engaging) alternative to the maps & scale models of power & subjecthood it poses, exposes, worries over.

Ideology works through the construction of subjects, by positioning, by address (or interpellation) -- helping an unjust social order hold itself together. The spectator (or reader)'s subjectivity too often takes shape in a similar (compulsory) itinerary. (But not in the body of work at hand.)

Law scans the grammar of liberty and surrender. -- daggers like puppets scissored the sky. -- Rules are guards and fences -- In the machinery of injustice -- the subtle workings of the Body Politic on every citizen, -- Other to other we are all functions in a system of War. -- I am // Part of their encroachment -- restoration of Order -- Pseudonym cast across empty -- Incomprehensible... / fabric of structure // Stretching and patching // Slope the unmastered houses / Ghostly architecture -- Extinct order set tableaux -- no longer boundless -- monadical and anti-intellectual -- all coherence gone? --

Typically texts stare at us, tutor us, set us in our place, positioned in classical monocular perspective by the binding, blinding lure of convention.

Mortal particulars / whose shatter we are -- of jeopardy / blown through gaps in our community -- Pure knowledge freed from willing // fixed in fleeting -- The Spectre / in my room -- / Epitome -- / of Self. -- Forfeit feeds nativity -- Logical determination of position -- I is the subject of a proposition in logic. -- Outline was a point chosen -- and yet a dream world / (immediacy) hold fast to this -- shuddering... / Self formed in line -- I / inherit myself / semblance / ...dispersed -- Unity something there -- really nowhere -- / mutilation -- and scatterbrain / patch -- them in me I / halted -- Bound / symmetry yielding -- her voice / a settled place / table spread -- the Poet an animal charmed in one spot, eyes fixed to the light -- Send out a smoothness o'er the skin: -- Free from tangle... check the chart! -- Seem... // Distant monarchs... / grid -- But trace to eye... refuge sect quest focus trap -- Lives to be seen pressing and alien // Fix fleeting communication // Carried away before a pursuer -- thralldom -- and pride of place // in some contraction of place. -- We will leave the stage as prisoners -- I bind unto myself today -- Who can tell me who I am? -- I carried your name / like a huge shield. --

Ideology succeeds as ventriloquism. The subject/reader gets a subjectively subjected (or subjectedly subjective) ego -- a structured character. Out of this imaginary relation, finds herself constructed as a unified whole by identifying with a centralizing imagery, a unifying reflection; as if in a mirror, doubling the amnesias & repressions of the text.

HALLUCINATION OF THE MIRROR -- arrow itself an illusion -- Chasm dogma scoops out -- from vague / infinity of / background / that haunts / or hunts -- Theory of proof / mention of the predicables // Snare world pitted /

Presage -- We look into distance as a dream / what we are // and we are not Threading mazes -- Self ceded to sphere -- Clearly headless. -- (enchantment captivity / a paradise-prison) -- Worlds pass mirror-worlds in shelter -- Dreams walk through me -- lines to an apparitional dagger. -- because there were no reins // when present I was absent. -- hidden from our vision / MARK / border / bulwark. an object set up to indicate a boundary or position / hence a sign or token -- SECRET HISTORY OF THE DIVIDING LINE -- a LEAP // creates the pursuer --

As in film, as in film theory, the fixing (& reassuring) of spectators occurs through *suturing*: stitching, fills in, like a wound's lips surgically sewn. We are authorized to see only what a second, ghosted spectator can see -- 'the absent-one' -- through a shot/reverse shot sequence & continuity editing. 1st shot: we see the field, the protagonist: we see what an 'absent one' sees. 2nd, the reverse shot clarifies (& ideologizes): that 'look of nobody' is wiped out by a depiction of someone who occupies that place (who possesses the field in shot 1). We see the second character as if from the (neutral) place & point of view of the protagonist. Optical point-of-view in film (in so-called 'dominant cinema') produces a subject in place of that absence. We 'stand in' for the absent 2nd character -- 'nobody's look' becomes somebody's; absence becomes presence as voyeurism works as a form of identification. When the 1st protagonist is shown again, the gap is sutured, the absence sewn up -- & the reader/viewer 'comes to be' a glancing, eavesdropping subject. The reverse shot: a mirror, identified with the audience, whose members identify (as individuals) with the producer (the writer, the camera).

Apprehension as representation -- Point to point -- Posit gaze level diminish lamp -- cover drawing from *The Practice of Perspective* -- (as mirror // in mirror to be) -- kept watch / on the fixed promontory -- I looked at our precise vanishing point on the horizon -- system measuring from breach to / ...the place tendered -- Gaze endures infinite scars -- Range loom and lacing Clear / companion -- Force made desire wander / Jumping from one subject // to another / Beseiged and beseiged -- Nearer to know less before afterward schism in sum. -- fragment of a name / singing to figment -- Self and Anti-self / chemical wedding -- to deceive... / Players melt into one another -- and her false double -- Self around self // Layer after layer / mirror characters pursue each other -- without faces / empty space between two bodies -- evanishing of the actors into // one another e n d l e s s PROTEAN, i n k a g e s -- There is a gulf fixed -- has holes instead of eyes -- hiatus / chiasma -- between thwarts -- Calling the glass / partners in this marriage -- traverse to partner. --act oblique act... grid... / dual double... meridian planar point -- We closed a chasm -- little distant each other and fro -- Perception crumbles under character --

In the official versions of 'high modernism', the reader is addressed by the text's own formalized self-sufficiency, its outsidelessness: hermetically sealed, indifferent to the reader's presence in social discourse, but, figuring her to be missing, encourages her voyeurism. Ideology's medusa gaze. Such texts create an absence by their inability to come fully to grips with language & discourse -- an absence of the social, a gap, which the reader is

to fill in (or suture), also without going through the circuit (& intrication) of language. The reader has a stand-in -- the *author*: fixing her within the self-enclosures (& seeming personal possessions) of the text. And this formalist absence of the social can fix the reader as complicit & coherent stand-in. This is a containment, *sealing* the reader within the self-referring moment of the author's sovereignty (a reverse shot -- resurrecting the absence in the position of the writer, reappropriating it inside the frames of the text itself & naturalizing those social frames).

Love / (my dear Imaginary) Maze-believer -- Tranquility of a garrison -- Authorial withdrawal // Will as fourth wall -- Vision closes over vision / Standpoint melts into open -- Recreation of a poor ghost / clinging to half face -- epitomes // seconds forgeries engender -- empirical proof proving / Summary succession of spectators twisted // away -- The final ruins ahead / revealed two figures timidly engraved on one another. -- Shadows only shadows / met my gaze... Mediator -- possession / hide-and-seek border region -- Distance or outness -- Invisible to her people. Out in a gap in the shadows. -- enchantments eclipses -- Distance and eyes get lost -- An eyeless kind -- eyeing intimacies -- engaged couples / buried in epochs of armor // exhibit themselves -- drawn and drawn together / mirrors thaw -- "I kiss the wall's hole" -- because there were no reins -- annihilation of her gaze on nothing -- l a boundary manic -- aloof, aloof, and come no neare --

The author, if its moves are conventionalized enough, is so discreet & ghostly -- a sovereign absent-one, authorizing *what* of the social figuration the reader can experience yet absenting or covering up the bodily, social place (& method) out of which meanings are processed. It naturalizes the figurative & the rhetorical, by speaking impersonally, hiding its 'enunciatory work' with the help of a reader 'sewn' into the text. The absence (of production) is effaced, or filled in; the monadic reader (the basic suture) experiencing epiphanies of presence before a self-enclosed formalist space, by an identification with an absence (or a 'making imaginary') of the social. This helps guarantee a smoothed, anti-social address; it allows the process of construction of the subject -- a multiplicity of social intersections -- to be forgotten. Instead, the subject/reader takes shape & finds its place as consumer; it allows the author a sovereignty over discourse so that social norms become the subject's dream.

The real plot was invisible -- Entangled obedience // muffled discourse from distance -- in *Laws* that man is a puppet -- Ransom stammers fact -- Copies are read to pieces -- Lies domesticate the night.

*

Indented paragraphs are made up entirely of phrases, separated by long dashes, from Susan Howe's published works:

Articulation of Sound Forms in Time -- 'Boston Harbor' -- 'The Captivity

and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson' -- 'Chanting at the Crystal Sea'
 -- Defenestration of Prague -- 'Federalist 10' -- 'Heliopathy' -- The
 Liberties -- My Emily Dickinson -- 'on a...' -- Pythagorean Silence --
 Secret History of the Dividing Line -- 'Thorow' -- 'Women and Their Effect
 in the Distance' --

PETER QUARTERMAIN

AND THE WITHOUT

An interpretive essay on Susan Howe¹

How do I exist in a language that doesn't want me to
 exist, or makes me exist as a fiction, as la femme?

Nicole Brossard²

There's a deceptively literary or bookish flavour about Susan Howe's work, especially at the beginning of many of her sequences and books, prefaced as they often are with a quotation or quotations (e.g. *Hinge Picture*, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*); or opening with lines which have the feel of quotations, unmarked and unacknowledged, though the words may actually be Howe's (e.g. "Thorow"); or opening with a directly identified one. Often, as in the case of *Cabbage Gardens* or *The Liberties*, the poem responds to the challenge explicit or implicit in the quotation, debunking or deconstructing the assumptions underlying and/or the circumstances giving rise to the words quoted. *Cabbage Gardens* is prefaced with Samuel Johnson deriding the notion of poems about cabbages whilst playing with the notion that the cultivation of the cabbage marks the history of civilization. *The Liberties* gives us Jonathan Swift writing the personal "little language" of the *Journal to Stella*, his writings to her ("so adieu deelest MD MD MD FW FW Me Me / Fais I don't conceal a bitt. as hope sav'd") preserved, hers to him destroyed, prefacing a poem which in passionate rage retrieves Hester Johnson (Stella) from her "liquidation."³ Insofar as these works are bookish, they are revisionist. This is true, too, of those more explicitly radical works which seek to revise our notions of the world, and are prefaced by quotation, such as *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* and "The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson". I read the last-named work as a poem, for its direction is determined, much as the direction of Howe's astonishing *My Emily Dickinson* is determined, by her reading of language as an emblematic collection of signs, potential meanings, abbreviations, wonders, and terrors to which she is subject rather than of which she is "master." As George Butterick has observed, Howe "is another argument for the late start, like Olson," for "she does not make her earliest appearance with relatively predictable work, and then markedly develop from there."⁴ I would add that her work is, too, all of one piece: it all makes one work, one life, one poem, but carrying with it a multiplicity of works, lives, poems.

It is in these terms that I take as thoroughly representative of Howe's writing an untitled eight-poem sequence printed in *Sulfur* 22 (Spring 1988). The first poem begins with an identified quotation from a literary "classic" and the last ends with the words, significantly in upper case, "THE REVISER." The sequence itself is a further installment in Howe's radical reassessment of canonical notions of history and of language, of patriarchal notions of women and of power and of truth. While her reassessment and indeed her poetics, rejecting the possibility of definitive statement, invite elliptical commentary (if they invite commentary at all), there are indeed identifiable and even definable concerns and themes recurring throughout Howe's work. I think that the great energy of Howe's writing arises from a series of tensions, between the more-or-less explicit themes and subject matter of the work and the unstated verbal and schematic activity of the poem (between

the algorithmic and the heuristic might be one way to put it); between Howe's enchanted fascination with and desperate possession by history and with language and her intense desire to be free of them; between her desire for the secure, the stable, and the defined, and her apprehension of them as essentially false; between her impassioned attraction to and sheer terror of the wilderness. What I offer is only one way of reading Howe. Here is the opening poem of the sequence in *Sulfur*:

"on a [*p* < suddenly. . . on a > was shot thro with a dyed → < dyed → a soft]"*
(became the vision)(the rea) after Though [though]That
Fa

But what is envy [but what is envy]
Is envy the bonfire inkling?

Shackles [(shackles)] as we were told the. . . [precincts]

* Billy Budd: The Genetic Text

In the course of the following pages, my remarks are largely confined to the opening three lines.

Bluntly uncompromising and problematic, the opening line emphatically and unabashedly draws attention to itself as TEXT, as written rather than spoken language, indifferent to the reader. How, after all, can one voice this unfamiliar and cluttered-looking notation: is it musical, with its *p*, its greater-than/less-than brackets? is it conventional American-English literary orthography, with its quotation marks, lower case beginning, square brackets, italics, elision marks, and asterisk? What are we to make of those arrows? Surely this is a code, though we cannot recognise which one: a computer text perhaps? Voiced or not, it proceeds in bits and pieces, stops and starts, repeats. Problematic, and emphatically text. So uncompromisingly is it removed from the forms and modes of "normal" discourse that there is a haze of uncertainty, what Howe elsewhere calls "a halo of wilderness" ("Illogic"), thrown about the line. We know --or at any rate trust-- that it's verse, the look of the page tells us that, but how can we possibly voice it, how does one bit lead to the next? Are we to read "suddenly . . . on a" as grammatical subject to the verb "was shot"? What sorts of relationships are these, in this asyntactic writing? That "suddenly . . . on a" has something of the air of quick instruction on how to voice the first two words, and that closing "soft" looks like an echo, especially if we read the italicised *p* as *piano* (another voicing instruction). "Shot

through with a dyed --[pause?]- dyed--": like shot silk, then? or to do with death? We do not know what we see, for we do not recognise it. (Yet we do know, of course. But there are no customary meanings here --or seem to be very few.)

The second line is similarly difficult, with its off-beat spacing, its variety of parentheses, its (apparently) fragmentary word/s, its use of upper case, and its equally problematic syntax. It's almost as though the notational system is continually being pushed (is falling?) off balance, subverting convention, undermining itself: the paired parentheses look like the mathematical notation for multiplication (and why are the round brackets such late-comers on the parenthetical scene?); the square brackets pushing that word "though" tight against "That" do not seem to be used the way they were in line one; the large gap after "Though" comes as a welcome break for the eye after the headlong crowded impetus of the first line (the arrows forwarding, forwarding), but is difficult to interpret (a new breath? a second thought?). Parentheses and spacing mark words off into groups while signalling a tentative uncertain quality to them, and suggesting that the movement of thought in this writing need not necessarily be progress. Semantic grounds shift: "became" means turned into? was fitting? Syntax continues to break down (what "became the vision"? and indeed extends into the fragmenting and fracturing of words ("rea"; "[though]That"). The second line, like the first, gives us small islands of localised meaning, a haze of uncertain stumbling bursting into pockets of lucidity, clearings in the thicket, the movement toward coherence ("became the vision") shifting instantly to fragmentation and incompleteness ("the rea"), the lines diminishing down to the initial and terminal fragment "Fa" of line three. Far? Father? Fate? The uncertain context makes all three (and a lot of others) possible, and the fragment suggests they might all be under erasure. It is worth recalling, though, that *Fa* is, according to both the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Century*, a musical term (the fourth note of the octave) --so the lines sing a diminishing music? The same sources tell us that *Fa* is an obsolete word for *few* and for *foe*, as well as Scottish for *fall*. If the word is complete, it is no less uncertain.

What is remarkable is not simply that the notation for the eye plays against and with that for the ear, but that moving toward fracture and fragment the syntax and the diction move also toward completion. The "rea" in line two invites us to read "Though" as similarly "incomplete," especially after the abbreviation "thro" in line one, yielding "thought" --an invitation reinforced by what comes next, the close-packed "[though]That" (a kind of *apo koinou* at the level of the letter). This itself gives rise to a rather complicated little movement in which, rhyming "thro" in line one with the "though" of line two, the ear, reminded of Robert Duncan's habit of spelling "thought" *thot*, proposes a rhyme between the putative "Though[t] though" of line two with the "shot thro" of line one. The ear hears what the eye does not see, and the movement of the poem depends upon and is a response to the shifts and uncertainties in the language.

So the lines are packed with transformations, and we see how, amid and because of the uncertainties, language generates text, the poem generates itself. The sheer closeness of the sets of parentheses incorporates

the Rea(1) into the vision, making it visionary. And what follows? another fairly dense play, this time predominantly semantic/lexical --"after Though." The upper case on "Though" makes it seem an afterthought, a substitution for "after," which immediately suggests (if we had not seen this already) that in these lines we are privy to the processes of writing, the processes of composition, the processes of *thought* --a word remarkable in these lines for its absence. As a conjunction or as an adverb expressing contrast (but here syntactically it seems to work as a noun?) *though* manifests thought --and after a gap, a pause (for thought?), the terminal group in the line emerges: "though[that]": *that*, deictic, pointing, a gesture toward the concrete object --or, as the *Century* dictionary says of *real*, "always importing the existent." So the last two words bring together, then, enact, the vision and the real, the perceived and the thought.

"Fa" is a crux, encapsulating as it does the fracture and fragmentation of language in the very act of moving toward completion. Howe's work, from the very title of her first book (*Hinge Picture*) on, treads borders, boundaries, dividing lines, edges, invisible meeting points. Her language returns to such cusps again and again, for they mark extremities, turning points, limits, shifts, the nameless edge of mystery where transformations occur and where edge becomes centre. Hope Atherton, in *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, moves from the centre to the margin, to the wilderness, and (like Mary Rowlandson) thus marginalises the centre. "Extremities. Paths lost found forgotten. Border margin beginning. Birth/Death. Inside/Outside. She/He. Moving/Staying. Finding/Losing" ("Armantrout" 209). Kings, she tells us in *My Emily Dickinson*, ruled by "divinely ordained decree, the allegorical point where God, the State, and human life met" (81), and King Lear "rashly gave his world away. Balance, confusion, naming, transformation --. Arrived at the point of initiation, stopped at the moment of conversion, instinct draws up short" (114). Mary Rowlandson, at sun-rise "on a day of calamity, at the inverted point of antitypical history, looks out at the absence of Authority and sees we are all alone" (CMR 115). A cusp, where two curves meet and stop. Or do they. At the point where one realm meets another there is a crossover. And the great crossover place is language, always "at the blind point between what is said and meant" (*MyED* 82), always at the blind point between the static authority of name and the fluidity of nameless object. Language, moving toward definition, moving toward name, moving toward Authority, toward the arbitrary, toward Power, to assert control: "it was the primordial Adam to whom God gave the power of naming." But a world without names? "In the brave new world of Death there are no names" ("Armantrout" 211). Emily Dickinson and Emily Bronte entice Howe "away from comprehension to incommunicable mystery that may be essential harmony or most appalling anarchy" ("Women" 63). Mystery is nameless, incommunicable, pathless, wild, but irresistible. "Artists bow to no order" ("Olson" 6).

Hence the text is uncertain, indefinite; it resists description. How many words are there in line two? How many groups? How many languages? Is "rea" a word? if "rea" is conventionally incomplete, is "Though"? If "though" is complete, is "rea"? You will not find *rea* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, nor in the *Century*. But you will in Lewis and Short's *A Latin Dictionary*. It is a juridical word:

I. Originally, a party to an action (res), either plaintiff or defendant; afterwards restricted to the party accused, defendant, prisoner, etc. II. In the stricter sense. A. A party obliged or under obligation to do or pay any thing, or answerable or responsible for any thing, a bondsman, a debtor; one who is bound by any thing, who is answerable for any thing, a debtor. B. One who is accused or arraigned, a defendant, prisoner, a criminal, culprit.⁵

And it is *feminine*, a woman. Rea is also, as readers of Williams' *Paterson* find out, a Spanish word for whore. What vision what perception of women is this? Howe's poem is packed with transformations indeed, and the transformations are wrought by the apparent disorder of the language, the very irrationality of the text, out of which possible figurations and configurations of meaning emerge.

Unparaphraseable, these lines seem to register a process of perception and thought subject perpetually and continuously to re-casting, re-seeing, re-vision. They register a process of cogitating, meditating and exploring an old enigma, endemic perhaps to all human culture but especially acute in the history of New England, perpetually evoked and invoked by the complex of the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen, the cultivated and the wild: the relations between the real and the visionary. Hesitant, seeking certitude and clarity, rejecting them as impossible, the vision immediately corrected (?), re-seen, re-assigned, to the necessarily and perpetually incomplete real. Caught in the field as it is, caught in the field of language, thought can progress no Farther. Fa. The doubleness of the movement is a doubleness of desire. Clarity and definition of deixis, of pointing, of *the*, lead only to fracture in language. "The" revised, surrounded by a halo of wilderness.

But there is more. The asterisk at the end of line one points to a text which proceeds through a series of more or less minor surprises, lurching, hiccupping, stopping and starting, stuttering and stammering along, casting jerkily around for words: "*Billy Budd*. The Genetic Text."⁶ Line one is a quotation, a found text. Not --as the footnote carefully keeps clear --Melville's, but a coded text recording Melville picking his way in stops and starts through the writing of *Billy Budd*, a text recording Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts picking their way through the tangled manuscripts of *Billy Budd*. Decoding it, not knowing at any given moment whether the words we read will two words later be crossed out, perhaps only to be restored a couple of pen-strokes later, we discern a text "crisscrossed with erasures and corrections" (as Susan Howe wrote of P. Inman's *Platin* [9]), a text so urgently stumbling almost blindly along through a mind-boggling series of tentative and at times almost desperate castings-about for words and phrases that we are caught up in the sheer suspense the *processes* of the telling generate, a narrative of inarticulation unspoken within the narrative.

Howe's first line comes from the top of a left-hand page of the book (412) --it stretches from margin to margin-- and is just the sort of line that might catch the casual eye --or at least Susan Howe's-- casting through flipped pages, or drawing the sorts. Decoded, it says:

"on a [cross out in pencil all the words from 'suddenly' to 'on a'; insert, above the line and with a caret, the words 'was shot thro with a dyed'; cross out with (the same?) pencil the word 'dyed' and insert, above the line, with a caret, the words 'a soft']."

The first line of Howe's poem then, decoded, tells us that Melville's manuscript looks (more or less) like this:

~~suddenly-dyed-by-the-sun-behind-approaching-nearer~~
a soft
was shot thro with a dyed glory
~~the-horizon--took-on-a~~

Such a translation of Howe's first line, thus made more or less coherent ("with a a soft glory"?) and intelligible, does not get us very far (but where were we going?). The meaning of the line, as it appears in the Genetic Text of *Billy Budd*, seems to be nothing like its meaning in Howe's poem (meaning is a function of context). The asterisk points us explicitly to this text, and what we have is a poem which in the act of inviting translation / decoding denies it, at the same time asserting the primacy of context and drawing the reader's attention to the processes of (Howe's) writing as well as of her/his reading. What is on the page is what we see. Yet the word "suddenly," one of the words which the code tells us is crossed out, is not otherwise in Howe's line: it is, that is to say, present in its erasure. We see it in its absence. We see what we do not see.

The context from which this line comes might help if we're looking for clarity (whatever that might be) in Howe's poem, looking for a way of sorting out the syntax, the code. The sentence from which this line comes does afford a clue as to where that "(became the vision)" in the second line might have come from, but on the whole the context is not especially enlightening if we're looking for some sort of definitive meaning for Howe's text. Melville is describing the precise moment at which Billy Budd, that young man with something of the feminine in him, that young man Captain Vere has already called "an Angel," is being hanged: "At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedge of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn" (124). But how much clarity does this provide? Hayford and Sealts, in their commentary, say that "as to the implications of this . . . passage the critics are in wide disagreement" and "draw opposite conclusions from the [same] evidence" (192). Readers cannot agree on the meaning of Melville's text, though all seem to agree not only that the sentence from which Howe's line comes is of crucial significance in the narrative of *Billy Budd* but also that *Billy Budd* itself is a crucially significant document in the American literary canon (significance is a function of context). The text of *Billy Budd* is bristling with

(unspecified) significations, but we hardly needed Howe's poem to tell us that. Why then does line one point outside the poem to the Genetic Text of *Billy Budd*?

This is not an easy question, even if part of the answer is to rejoin that the footnote dissolves the distinctions between a world inside the poem and a world outside the poem. It points to that set of attractions and repulsions I referred to in my second paragraph and establishes the quoted line as a boundary, a turning point of the visible and invisible. It may indeed look as though Howe is trying to eat her cake and have it, using the footnote reference as a source, using it to declare that this writing, so difficult to sort out and decipher, so uncompromising in its eschewal of conventional meaning, so determined in its rejection of conventionally intelligible syntax, is after all not eschewing or rejecting those things, but is instead actually decodeable, is indeed "about" something, does have a paraphraseable content. Perhaps those words and notations which lie so uncompromisingly opaque on the page, language, are after all transparent, and the poem is to be seen as forum, vehicle, and hence finally static. Perhaps the reference is a sort of apron-string connecting the poem to the conventional world, making it intelligible in conventional terms. It may indeed look that way. The pull of the footnote is toward the conventional, toward the "intelligible," toward the "classic," toward "meaning," toward a paraphraseable "content." The pull of the syntax, of the weird notation on the page, is away from that, subverts and transforms the apparent stability of the transparent word. The resulting tension is not only one source of energy for the poem, not only a source of the poem's passion --for this is indeed a poem of feeling as well as of thought; it also, in grounding the language of the poem in the perceived and physical world reminds us that language is itself, physical, the perceived and felt world.

In addition, it points to a complex of thought and feeling identifiable in that tension. The footnote points to the notations, the editorial apparatus and code, which clutter the line and which litter the Genetic Text. For significant as the Genetic Text (and Melville's manuscript) may be, it (and Melville's manuscript version) is also incoherent. Jerking and stuttering along and then bursting momentarily free into coherence and even lucidity

Having settled upon h → <h → the cou → <the cou → his → <his <Having
... upon → Having determined upon the course to adopt, (371)

it is littered with mis-spellings and broken-off words

[p <striker of the blow] Too well the thought
→ <thoughtf → thoughtful officer knew what his superior meant. [p <Too well
... meant] (377)

and with omissions (the result, perhaps, of haste)

what is [*is* >remains] primeval in our formalised [formalized?]
humanity may in end have caught Billy to his arms →<arms→ heart as
→<as→ even as Abraham may have caught young Isaac

(400)

and with repetitions.

What this poem does, by making both Melville's and the Genetic text visible, is point to the incoherence, the uncertainty, the groping of Melville's text --those features of his writing which are erased, made invisible, liquidated, in the Reading Text-- and assert them as a compositional principle, insisting that we attend to the writer in the act of composition, responsive to the detailed notation of uncertainty's hesitation and accuracy's register. The first line of the poem insists that we read the Genetic Text the way Howe insists we read Emily Dickinson. "In the precinct of poetry," she says, "a word, the space around a word, each letter, every mark silence or sound, volatilizes an inner law of form; moves on a rigorous line" ("Illogic" 7).

Yet one great interest of the Genetic Text of *Billy Budd* is that, unlike Melville's manuscript and unlike Howe's poem, it is indeed littered. It is littered by the editors who interrupt their coding with such editorial comments as "left incoherent," "revision leaves the sentence incoherent" (386, 367 and elsewhere). In the long run this means for the editors that even the Genetic Text, as they say of their own Reading Text transcribed from it, only "approximates Melville's final intention" (vi). For the editors thus to conclude that the text of *Billy Budd* is indeterminate is to assume that a text is only determinate if it conforms to grammatical, syntactic, and perhaps thematic and cultural conventions. It is also to assume that Melville had intentions for the text which either were clear to Melville himself and deducible or which conformed to an implicit but nevertheless clear set of grammatical, etc. conventions. Or both. Howe's poem assumes the contrary: that Melville's "litter" of emendations, faulty grammar and syntax, mis-spellings and incoherence, is not litter at all --and neither, once it is before us, is the editorial apparatus. In transcribing Melville's manuscript the editors invented the Genetic Text, and in preparing a Reading Text they turned their backs on what they had wrought. For the Reading Text presents us with a composition whose order has been wrestled from an intractable text, from a Genetic Text which simply can not be confined within the coherence imposed by the conventional obedience of the Reading Text. The Genetic Text bristles with tentativeness and is rich with possibility; it is thematically strait-jacketed in a Reading Text which, like Captain Vere sacrificing Billy Budd to the principle of law, legislates away the sheer mystery of the Genetic Text and of Melville's actual writing encoded within it by seeking to control and to possess.

Thus Hayford and Sealts' edition of *Billy Budd Sailor (An Inside Narrative)* is, Howe's poem tells us, a trope. Within its covers we see

enacted two conflicts: that between Melville and his "material" (the essentially inchoate story of *Billy Budd*); and that between the editors and Melville's text. It is a trope for a history in which "little by little grandmothers and mothers are sinking in sand while grandfathers and fathers are electing and seceding" ("Women" 69); a history of settlers exterminating the Indians and "redeeming" the souls of the Indians' captives by buying them; of the English repressing the Irish by force and by doctrine until, irreversibly divided, they begin to exterminate themselves in the name of certitude and righteousness; of the hegemony of an intellectual and economic power which would, by revising and acculturating the texts it recognises as central, marginalise and even abolish the actual texts as written because it seeks, by stabilising the world so that its processes are arrested or invisible, to manage it. As Howe remarks of Emily Dickinson in "The Illogic of Sumptuary Values," "in a system of restricted exchange, the subject-creator and her art in its potential gesture, were domesticated and occluded by an assumptive privileged Imperative." It is a trope telling us, says the poem, that "malice dominates the history of Power and Progress. History is the record of winners. Documents were written by the Masters. But fright is formed by what we see not by what they say" ("Poetics" 13).

It thus enacts the essential human conflict, between the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen, the cultivated and the wild. The two editors, wrestling the wildness of the manuscript into stable and definitive canonical shape evoke the complex of the relations between the real and the visionary. Howe thus invites us to read *Billy Budd* as Melville wrote it, spasmodically erasing itself, constantly deconstructing and reconstructing itself. Throwing a halo of wilderness around the line from the Genetic Text with which it begins, the poem throws a halo of wilderness around *Billy Budd* itself and points to a textual, literary, intellectual and cultural arrogance which in homogenizing a work renders it invisible. Howe sees that arrogance as patriarchal, and the conflict, between the world as is (wild) and the world as wanted (ordered), as devastating. While the text longs for resolution, it insistently demands that its disorder not be dissipated in mere definition. The blankness of the page surrounding each poem in the sequence --and indeed Howe's deeply ingrained necessity to compose in units of one page-- is essential to the poem's dis-contextualizing of utterance, forcing us to read Genetic Texts (surely each poem itself is one) without translating the code, so the eye sees and attends everything on the page without hierarchising or invisibilising according to the demands of the canon.

Such a thematic view of the opening of "on a [p . . .]" as a radical re-reading of *Billy Budd* sees the poem as a further stage in Susan Howe's archaeological retrieval of lost or strait-jacketed American texts, in her retrieval of historical persons (women especially, but also writers) strait-jacketed or obliterated by being textualized and then erased: Hester Johnson, Mary Rowlandson, Thoreau, the emblematically named Hope Atherton, Emily Dickinson. "I write to break out into perfect primeval Consent," she told the New Poetics Colloquium in 1985. "I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted --inarticulate" ("Poetics" 15). They have been hidden by a utilitarian, canonizing and classicizing impulse; they have willy-nilly succumbed --like Cordelia in

The Liberties-- to an authoritative "rationalization" which, patriarchal, seeks to possess the text by removing or rationalizing all "accidentals," confining it to a single body of meaning, to a single role, to a single order of understanding. It does so by reshaping and "correcting" the text in the interests of tidiness, in order that it conform to notions of formal ("literary") decorum. It rejects outright the notion of world as text, world as language, world as trope, viewing the world instead as a series of fixed categories of meaning whose validity is determined by the rationality of the forms of discourse in which that meaning is couched. It confines Mary Rowlandson in a "familiar American hierarchical discourse of purpose and possession" (CMR 116) and rhetorically appropriates her march "away from Western rationalism deeper and deeper into limitlessness" (CMR 116) until she "excavates and subverts her own rhetoric" (CMR 117) lest she be false to her sense of the world and to her self. Such a convention-ridden view of writing not only confines value to conformity but also finds incomprehensible and reprehensible the notion that Emily Dickinson's work is as great as it is because it is like Melville's *Billy Budd* and like angelic Billy Budd. It stammers and stutters and jerks along, more silent than it is loquacious, breaking and breathing in awkward places, violating customary syntax and vocabulary and diction, occasionally incomprehensible, often incoherent, perennially uncertain because it articulates a world where, as Howe says of Rowlandson, "all illusion of volition, all individual identity, may be transformed" (CMR 116). And perennially incomplete, unfinished. So Dickinson appends to her poems alternative versions as "a sort of mini-poem" ("Illogic"); she obeys not the traditional rigidities of the quatrain, but the topography of the poem's composition, the page. Line-breaks and stanza-breaks, shifts of attention and energy resulting from reaching the edge or the end of the page, from turning the paper over and starting a new page, affect the course of the poem's breathing, and thus of the poem's making, and the course of our reading. "Specialists want to nail things down," Howe says in an essay on Charles Olson (himself notably inarticulate and incoherent). "Poets know to leave Reason alone" because "all power, including the power of Love, all nature, including the nature of Time, is utterly unstable."⁷

"What does not change / is the will to change" (Olson, "The Kingfishers"). For Howe this is not a matter of will (save in that Nature might be willfull), but of necessity to which one must submit. And the impulse to disorder in the world leaves its mark in the sheer isolation of Howe's poems on the page, surrounded by white: a visible trope of Howe's tough and difficult feminism. There are figurations in these figures who are figured against no ground, who move away from ground, who move *without*. Such a movement, to be free of the burden of ground, freed of the necessity to be same or to be made, freed of history, is terrible and exhilaration. But it is impossible and doomed. Howe knows that the primeval, that "lost prelapsarian state," "may have existed only in the mind" ("Armantrout" 209), if it existed at all; and that we can never escape "that language outside language we are all entangled in" ("Women" 61). Always one balances on the edge, on the turning point, on the move to without. Always one carries language, desire, history. One balances, as she said of Emily Dickinson, between and in "reverence and revolt" on the cusp of the present, carrying "intelligence of the past into future of our thought" (MyED 85). Caught between loss and desire, Howe's vision is difficult, uncompromising:

No hierarchy, no notion of polarity. Perception of an object means loosing and losing it. Quests end in failure, no victory and sham questor. One answer undoes another and fiction is real. Trust absence, allegory, mystery -- the setting not the rising sun is Beauty (MyED 23).

When I began writing this essay I wanted to say three things. First, that Howe is, more than any American writer I can think of except perhaps Melville or Henry Adams, burdened by history: the burden of retrieving from erasure and marginality those (women) who have been written out, without (as Howe puts it in her prose introduction to "Thorow") appropriating primal indeterminacy, is compounded by the drift of the primal toward the immediate, toward the abolition of history (and hence of language) altogether. History, like language, is not and cannot be linear. Second, that her writing is essentially religious, devoted to a lively apprehension of the sacramental nature of our experience of the world, and of the sacramental nature of the world. And third, that like Emily Dickinson she is an utterly astringent formalist. I have said none of them. I hope, though, that they persist, however implicitly, informing the pattern of what I actually wrote.

(July 1988)

NOTES

1

In what follows I refer to the following titles by Howe, abbreviated as indicated.

- "Armantrout" "Rae Armantrout: Extremities." *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, ed. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984: 208-210.
- ASFT *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*. Windsor, Vt.: Awede, 1987.
- CG *Cabbage Gardens*. n.p. Fathom Press, 1979.
- CMR "The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson." *Temblor 2* (1985): 113-121.
- HP *Hinge Picture*. New York: Telephone Books, 1974.
- "Illogic" "The Illogic of Sumptuary Values." Unpublished typescript.
- Liberties* *The Liberties*. Reprinted in *The Defenestration of Prague*. New York: Kulchur Foundation, 1980: 64-127.
- MyED *My Emily Dickinson*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985.
- "Olson" "Where Should the Commander Be." *Writing 19* (November 1987): 3-20.
- "On a [p . . .]" "On a p <suddenly . . .>." *Sulfer 22* (Spring 1988): 9-16.
- "Owen" "Howe on Owen." *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E 13* (December 1980): 28-30.
- Platin "P. Inman: Platin." *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E 12* (June 1980): 8-10.
- "Poetics" *Poetic Statements for the New Poetics Colloquium August 21-25, 1985*. Vancouver: Kootenay School of Writing, 1985: 12-15.
- "Women" "Women and Their Effect in the Distance." *Ironwood 28* (Fall 1986): 58-91.

2

Nicole Brossard at The New Poetics Colloquium, Vancouver, 23 August 1985.

3

The words "little language" are Swift's, as are those in parentheses. They are quoted by Howe (*Liberties*, 66); Part One of *The Liberties* is titled "Fragments of a Liquidation."

4

George F. Butterick. "The Mysterious Vision of Susan Howe." *North Dakota Quarterly 55* (Fall 1987): 313. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Whowe: An Essay on Work by Susan Howe," *Sulfur 20* (Fall 1987): 157-165 is, like Butterick's essay, essential for anyone interested in Howe's work. She manages that difficult task of elucidating

Howe's poetic without in the least diminishing the deep rage and pain so intrinsic to it.

5

Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short. *A Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879. Entry for reus.

6

Herman Melville. *Billy Budd Sailor: An Inside Narrative*. *Reading Text and Genetic Text*. H. Hayford and M.M. Sealts, Jr., ed. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1962: 412.

7

"Olson" 17; *MyED* 116. Guy Davenport says of Olson that "his poetry was inarticulate. His lectures achieved depths of incoherence" in *The Geography of the Imagination: Forty Essays* (San Francisco: North Point, 1981), 81.

"PASSED BY EXAMINATION": PARAGRAPHS FOR SUSAN HOWE

The poetry of Susan Howe marks a singularly engaged play at the crevices of the audible & the hidden. This luminous--illuminated--poetry refuses the categories of lyric or historical, mythopoetic or word-materializing, rather enlisting these approaches as navigational tools, multilateral compasses, on a journey into the unknown, denied and destroyed.

Form, in Howe's work, is allegorical. The lineation radiates "exophorically" (outwardly) to mime (mine) the themes of the work. *Structure of truth / Truth of structure* [53]. This isn't simply abstract. Look at a page as border marking the intersection of sight and words. Look at words as site of historical memory, as compost heap decomposing the past. Writing can engage the attention in such a way as to obliterate awareness of this border, this site, or, as in Howe, can engender a hyperactive awareness of the page's opacity and impenetrability: stopped up short by an isolated syllable or by the space between syllables, then jolted by a line that becomes a crack into long sealed chambers deep below the surface.

Speeches at the Barriers [D:19]

Howe reverses the dynamic of the "difficult" text excluding the reader by shifting the burden of exclusion outward. For the words are shut out at your own risk. *Inarticulate true meaning* [A:39]. --It is not the "marginal" anti-articulate text that is doing the excluding but the one who closes eyes, refusing to listen.

What are we divided from, divided by? To divide is to partition, to create borders, to differentiate, to delineate. These are also poetic acts: the inscription of a line of verse. These are also language acts; for to write is to divide, to speak to encode that division.

A sort of border life [T:12]

Take Mark--the name of Howe's father and son, a central figure in *The Secret History of the Dividing Line*. The mark (mar [S:1] of an enclosure. The border between. That which mars the undifferentiated, soils the soil, establishes identity, fixes territory, announces sovereignty. For what's been marked is claimed, possessed--the sign of a stake (state). At the same time, a mark is a token, that which stands for something else, the visible trace of a sign, metaphor for a word, substitute for a signature and so standing for a name. --An artist makes her mark; but the confidence man finds her mark, or, as we now say, target of

opportunity.

The poet's life is one of quiet desperation, although sometimes it gets noisy. Everywhere undermined by apathy, suspicion, competitiveness, outside the welcome friendship of those similarly situated, it seems poetry "itself" has to be defended. Many days I feel like one of those 50s street vendors demonstrating multi-purpose vegetable cutters; the flapping hands and jumping up and down may generate a small crowd because there remains interest if not in the product at least in the humiliation of trying to sell something few seem to want.

I flip through this week's *Nation* (10/3/88) and notice a letter to the editor by their own small press critic. He suggests that the "clarity" that the *New York Post* "demands of its sports writers" is a model that poets who wish to be political should emulate. Is it just my pessimism that makes me feel that this reflects an ever deepening crisis in our culture--a contempt, even in the alternate press's space for alternate presses, for intellectual and spiritual articulations not completely assimilated into and determined by the dominant culture's discursive practices. Discursive practices marked by endless chronicles of winner and losers, organized violence, and performance measured by the clock. & why exactly are the four words "dominant culture's discursive practices" any worse to someone of this persuasion than such approved formulations as "major league batting practice"? Perhaps poetry, like the wilderness, has to be denied as part of an effort to conquer it. For to admit that there is wilderness, or poetry, is to lose the battle to overcome it.

Scribbling the ineffable [T:7]

There is no better model of scholarship, or research, than the works of Susan Howe, partly because they open up to unanswered--not always even unanswerable--questions. Questions that never finish or dispose or encapsulate or surmount: they examine.

quintessential clarity of inarticulation [S:8]

History is a lie, but we are no better than dupes or fools if we ignore it. We have at our "disposal" an avalanche of facts but can't tell what they mean or how they go together. *In the machinery of injustice / my whole being is Vision* [T:11].

Why do things except for money, or sport, or family? This is something that seems no longer obvious. & if you say civic,

it still doesn't explain that the community for which you may wish to speak has few voters or consumers, or perhaps is only a figment of your imagination, or a vision of a community that may sometime come to be. It still doesn't explain that the community for which you speak may be a people that have vanished, or been expelled, or vanquished. Our history, Howe shows, is one of ghosts, whose voices we can sometimes hear sighing in the interstices of her (de)markings.

"The unexamined life is not worth living" would seem to have little currency. Howe's studies of American mythology against the grain provide a concrete method for examination. *Untraceable wandering / the meaning of knowing* [A:33].

The Now that is Night
Time comprehended in Thought [A:37]

Is there some way out of the long, dark night of our captivity in history? For the conquerors of North America, an inhabited wilderness was a desert--an empty space--to be filled. & this is the method of "our" madness: we destroy without acknowledging the actuality of that which we obliterate. *They are denying the Dark/ after dark will ever gather. . . . So dark they run against trees* [H:50].

Clear space of blackness
between us [D:23]

We disappear--benight, blacken--the other, calling it savage, inarticulate, mad, eccentric, odd, ineffable, dark, empty, so that our own history is one more concretely of evasions than charting. *The expanse of unconcealment / so different from all maps* [T:17].

& our grammar repeats just these erasures & concealments, wiping out the wildness, wilderness, of language in the name of law, rationality, homogeneity, territory, or of a "populism" that recognizes only colonized forms of "popular" expression. *sense hidden* [S:35].

What then is this project for poetry?: *Our law / vocables / of shape or sound* [S:35].

Here is blank reason [H:50]

The "savage" that we have conquered in the name of civilization is ourselves. *We all wear mocassins* [H:46]. The captivity narrative is the story of our own language held hostage, divided against itself; except when we sometimes return to it--in dreams, in the inarticulate sounds of "history", in poems such as these

that bloom in the dark, sick from the blinding light of the sun ("heliopathy" a kind of sunsickness).

disputation in dominion beyond sovereign [A:28]

"The secret history of the dividing line" is that our "enclosure acts", which we have long concealed (longed to conceal) from ourselves, need to be overthrown, thrown out, "defenestrated". *You are of me & I of you, I cannot tell / Where you leave off and I begin* [T:20]. Our language is always a "Western Border" if we push through, *mark suns rising & setting . . .* [espy] *bounds to leap over* [sic; A:9]. Poetry as a displacement of the "sovereignty" of the crown or law allowing for some other order, call it dominion.

Freedom's dominion of possible [A:36]

salvages / or / savages [S:3]: either we salvage the past or we are disappeared, marked off, banished to the dark.

Complicity battling redemption [T:17]: either we own up to--take responsibility for--our histories or we remain guilty for them.

The Great Crossing
we marched with drums beating and colors flying [S:34]

Howe weaves at the tears in the all-too-violent fabric that imparts national identity to America. She sings of origins & hears the blanks firing in the night of her exploding syllables.

WORKS BY SUSAN HOWE CITED:
A: *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (Windsor, Vermont: 1987, pagination added).
D: *Defenestration of Prague* (New York: Kulchur, 1983).
H: "Heliopathy", in *Temblor* (1986).
S: *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (New York: Telephone, 1978).
T: "Thorow", in *Temblor* 6 (1987).
See also Howe's "Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson" in *Temblor* 2 (1985) and *The Western Borders* (Berkeley: Tuumba, 1977).

"RING OF BODIES"/ "SPHERE OF SOUND": AN ESSAY ON SUSAN HOWE'S
ARTICULATION OF SOUND FORMS IN TIME (Awede, 1987)¹

Susan Howe is a kind of post-structuralist visionary.² This means that, while attuned to a transcendental possibility, she is fully aware of how mediated both language and consciousness are. This awareness leads her to acknowledge and investigate history, but, recognizing, as she does, the "infinite miscalculation of history" (26), she can not accept history as truth. Yet, truth be told, neither can she ignore history. Given the "corruptible first figure" (23) -- which can be taken to refer to rhetoric, myth, history, or a number of other disciplines -- no one discipline can be the founding discipline of truth: each possesses some truth, but always with a mixture of falsity. As she writes in "Thorow," "So many true things// which are not truth itself" (11). And yet, too often, "language was spoken against an ideal of lost perfection" (MED, 82). Against this measure, language must always be judged inadequate, for it is itself far from perfect and its access to perfection, though haunted, is undiscoverable. Such an insight may well call for an interminable writing, for a writing which continuously tests its own limits of truth and expression.

Granted that "interminable" may seem an odd, rather than apt, description of Susan Howe's work. And, granted that she does not use "interminable" to describe her work, as, say, Beverly Dahlen does, to describe her own *A Reading*.³ Still, if "predecessor and definition/ [are] incoherent inaccessible muddled inaudible" (28), we must find some compass other than "predecessor and definition" to guide us and, if the first figure is corruptible, we must take numerous readings in order to combat error (although each reading will introduce the possibility of error, as it endeavors to close off the possibility of error in the past and to rectify the errors which are recognized as such). So, too, if "Being [is a] never-ending sequence of// Becoming" (24), and if, as I assume here, becoming is our goal, we are, necessarily, locked into an interminable sequence, following the "mathematics of continua" (23). Further, it is a sequence without plot, for "untraceable wandering/ [is] the meaning of knowing" (33). And, if "untraceable," must this knowledge be not only unrepeatable but unrecapturable?

Yet why should it be untraceable? Because the cultural markers are suspect; that is, while we may know the local, we do not know the larger system. To use the titles of Howe's two sections in *Articulations*, "Hope Atherton's Wanderings" and "Taking the Forest," we may say we are conscious of where we are in the forest, but we cannot, at the same time, have a bird's (or God's) eye view of the forest. Some limitations inhere. But the suspicion attendant on cultural markers isn't solely a result of the limitations of our knowledge: those cultural markers themselves may well be biased or bent: "Sexual, racial, and geographical separation are at the heart of Definition" (MED, 21). Taking our directions from them, then, may lead us astray. When the principle of change is factored into this problematic, we may find ourselves trying to fit into patterns whose age shows in our discomfort. (Were people at one time really built like that?) Reading the past to find our own way would be like shopping for

clothes at a museum of history -- the sizes aren't right and the fabric is old. But, it's more than age. Sex shows here, too. Thus, according to the motto of the book, "scape esaid" (1); or, escape from the saying of male culture, from what he said.

But, if "the meaning of knowing" is "untraceable," what's the point of knowing anything at all? First, even if unable to trace our route, we may still get somewhere. Second, knowing, while not the be-all of life, while not gatherable into a possessable whole, may still be useful. When the "thread" of this logic (narrativized by the concept of a plot-line) breaks, we are not lost; we are forced to find our own way. A physical sense will help us through: "Thread gone/ Tongue collect song" (24). Thus, the breaking may, after all, lead to or reinforce a physicality verging on the immanent, an immanent which is imminent; that is, an imm(a)i(n)ence which, at one and the same time, is retreating and has not yet arrived. Thus, we are led to trace the "acoustic signature" (26) and, if "face to visible sense gathers moss" (35), we are led, instead, to trace the "face of the voice of speech" (25). It is not sight but sound which is privileged here, for sound is actual but sight is abstract. "Unknown harbinger of sensuous phenomena, Sound has come to us unknown" (MED, 55).

Thus, perception must be returned to the body: "Body perception thought of perceiving (half thought" (17). The thought of perceiving is but a half thought and what is perception without thought? In one of his more startling statements, Jacques Derrida has said, "I don't believe that there is any perception." Why? Because "perception is precisely a concept, a concept of an intuition or of a given originating from the thing itself, present itself in its meaning, independently from language, from the system of reference" (D/S,S,P, 272). And what does Howe think? "Perception of an object means loosing and losing it" (MED, 23). But, then, this "loosing and losing" is not unique to perception: "Do words flee their meaning? Define definition" (MED, 16). Just consider the following puns: "Poetical sea site state/ abstract alien point" (33). Note, the leading character of sound in the "sea site state" trio, reminiscent though it may be of "Fee fie fo." In poetry the see may as well be a sea (recalling Zukofsky's "It's Hard To See But Think of a Sea"), the sight a site (or cite), for it is all a state of mind and the (logical) point is like a finger pointing, like the point in a poetry abstracted from its sources (here, acoustic and historical and presentational). If "words are annexed to reality by sensation" (MED, 49), meaning must, in part, be a study of sensation and the sensation possess a reality, whether confirmed or not by theory or science, or what have you. Thus meaning doesn't come first: "Sense came after suggestion" (MED, 24). And, "our ears enclose us" (F10, 16).⁴ We need to hear, for, through the aural, we shall find "the thresh/ of beginning// Sphere of sound// Body of articulation chattering" (31).

The "body" is a juncture of self and sound, sign and wind, the ineffable and the permanent.⁵ How so? Well, the "self [was] ceded to sphere" (27) and the sphere, recall, is a circle of sound. So, to cede the self to a sphere is to make sound the determining feature of the self. Thus, what the sound says I am I am. Further, the "sign of sound/ [is] a sibilant wind" (39). What kind of sign is the wind? Hissing through leaves, it comes, a kind of traceable afflatus, which, through etymology,

traces back to breath and, thence, to spirit. (To say it traces "back" to breath is a convenience, as is the "thence," for it may be that the spirit really comes first and this "thence," by returning to that first move, but closes the sphere.)

Still, what does it mean to say that wind is "a sign"? There is a predictive element here -- where there is a sibilant wind, there is sound. But so, too, this sign is both material (as a sound) and immaterial (as object that can be neither seen nor grasped). From sign to signature, there is a kind of placeless scription involved -- a writing on the wind. If placeless, how is it writing? By conforming to a semiotics, the sign takes its place of a network of signs and, as it evaporates or is dissipated, losing its place "out there," it is transformed into a meaning held in the mind. This is where intention and protention play their parts in meaning and hold in check the sign.⁶ Sound comes first and grounds the project, even going so far as to reserve a claim on health (given the pun of "sound forms" as forms sounded out and as forms that are sound), for "sound was always part of the perfect meaning" (MED, 55). Thus, for all the difficulties, for all the puns and paradoxes, for all the reversals and transformations, for all the evaporations of signs and floundering intentions and encrusted protentions, the goal is not to delight in complexity but to gain (and maintain) health.

On a diagonal, shall we say, to this "sign" is the physicality of "this body of articulation," for "meaning has a carnal layering" (MED, 85). It crosses the point where the sign of wind evaporates into (a) meaning. Instead of transforming itself into something immaterial, the body of articulation is corporeal, material: "Ring of our bodies// Names are bridges to coast/ Permanence" (35). If we read the first phrase with the "sphere of sound" and the "body of articulation" in mind, we can hardly be surprised by the "Names" that follow: our bodies are locked in the sound of articulation, snapping body and sound together in a ring. Thus, traced out, the diagonal is not a straight line but part of a sphere and what we've been tracing are interlocked rings.

But there is a permanence in this physical state: the names (our names as well) connect us with permanence, though the connection is a little tenuous. Let's note, for instance, the ambiguity of "bridges to coast Permanence." Do the bridges reach to the coast of Permanence? Or do the bridges coast Permanence (like "coasting the boulevard")? The fact and function of permanence are clear and crucial, checking, as they do, any tendency to impermanence and (complete) relativity. There is something through all this language and our names bring us right up to it. This permanence is within or outside the writing -- but not, in either case, domesticated or contained by the writing. This inside/outside distinction (as well as the permanent/impermanent) depends upon a line, or edge. After all, if there is a coast to Permanence, there is an edge to it. And this isn't the only place where an edge is marked.

There are, for example, the "far flung North American littorals" (41). Here, of course, the edge is geographical, but, if we recall the "rigorous Americanism/ portents of lonely destructivism" (16) and, due to the shared concern with things American, bring the one to bear on the other, we could postulate an interiorization of the (American) "littoral" which might well account for the loneliness. Thus, every man is a continent and, feeling himself cut off from all else, free to pursue his own inclinations and

reckon not the cost of wrecking his will upon the world, he may come to subscribe to and practice the destruction of all that interferes with him. Such behavior is predicated on a basic alienation, reinforced by and reinforcing the "littoral," the law of one's own letter. But, what if, instead of alienation, there is love? What if, instead of separation, there was union?

"Love leads to edge/ Progress of self into illusion" (23). How does love, too, come to lead to (the) edge? Because it discloses the "kinship of infinite separation" (25). That is, it entices us to the edge, but, instead of allowing us to dissolve into one another (like Milton's angels copulating in heaven), love discloses our separation. "Union with another soul is only another illusion" (MED, 77). Still, there must be some question about the connection of the first line to the second. If the connection is strong, the edge is equal to the realization of an illusion. Thus, one possibility: love does not found a union in our lives. If union is one definition of "progress of self," we shall be disabused when love, too, brings us to the edge and enforces upon us an admission of our separation. But, so, too, the edge would seem folded back into the sphere (given the act of ceding self to sphere) and, thus, progress is equally regress and going forward going back. It is in this way that history can speak to us, however -- not as a truth we can only try to discern or mimic, but as an expression which (as expression -- in time) is as present today as it ever was.

To posit more is to hanker for "fictitious deeps" (31), but fictitious or not, something resounds in language: "Cries open to the words inside them/ Cries hurled through the woods" (31). (Or, Karl Marx: "And as the proverb has it: what is shouted into the forest, the forest echos back" [55].) The cry emphasizes sound -- sound prior to language but not necessarily prior to meaning, for there is in Howe more in our universe "than language can express" (20). We seem to verge here on presence, on a sound that conveys its meaning without having to go through the relays of decipherment. And yet this immediacy is fleeting, for, unavoidably, the cry "opens to the words inside [it]." "Words open to the names inside them, course through thought in precarious play of double-enchantment, distance" (MED, 82). Thus, if this is a present, wordless meaning we face, it is a meaning only because it is, itself, the first in a chain of signifiers.

The words come (were already inside the cry), taking us away from immediacy. But, only because the words come can immediacy mean something. Only because there is a past is there immediacy; only because the words were already inside the cry can the cry mean something. This chain of substitutions constitutes the presence of the cry, as it constitutes the meaning of the cry by substituting the word(s) for the cry. Still, this does not end the process. The words do not equal the cries. Something is left over, unaccounted for. If the word equaled the cry, if it could stand in its place with no residue of the cry, the process of substitution would stop. But, then, there would have been no difference between word and cry in the first place. (The word would never have been able to fit "inside" the cry.) So, too, if there is an inequality of signification inside, there is also an inequality of signification outside. That is, if the word doesn't equal the cry, the cry doesn't equal the woods. And the poet is the "intermediary" of this inequality, "hunting form beyond form, truth beyond theme through woods of words tangled tremendous" (MED, 80-1). Further, a

suggestion of violence is attendant on, at the least, this latter inequality, for the "cries [are] hurled through the woods."

Through the word's coming to stand in place of the cry, the (probably "fictitious") center substitutes for the (immediate) surface. So, too, through the substitutions there is a strategic reversal -- from words inside to woods outside, as if going deeper inside led to the outside. And couldn't it do this only if there were an edge inside? (So you really could fall off the world -- not geographically, but psychologically.) Thus, these terms ("center," "surface," but also "inside," "outside"), as terms of function, are not absolute. They are relative and subject to change. The outside folds back on the inside and that fold creates an edge.⁷

This edge is not unique. It runs through everyone and separates the rational from the irrational, the inside from the outside, the self from the world -- although, the edge keeps getting moved and, further, is permeable. Through it all, there remains the "Universal separation/ -- Distant coherent rational system// Vault lines divergence/ Atom keystone" (23). It is no accident that what is distant is coherent, nor that what is near upholds the arch of sight ("keystone"). May we paraphrase Thomas Campbell and say "Tis distance lends reason to the view?" But what are the implications of this view? They may seem to return us to our claim that the cultural markers are suspect -- we probably don't need to remind ourselves that "rational" need not be a positive attribute.

On the one hand, there is a rational system -- over there. Or: "World as rigorously related system" (45). But, on the other hand, "system [is] impossible in Time" (37). (And "Time [is] comprehended in Thought" [37].) So, we have a concept (system, and, too, world as system) which transcends time or, if you like, which is too large to fit into time. This "distant coherent rational system" may be present (in part) but it cannot belong to anyone for it can not be grasped (or conveyed) in time. This needn't destroy the concept; it does, however, situate it elsewhere -- in a perennial "elsewhere." To see this doesn't, of itself, free us from the concept. We may be all the more effectively haunted by it since we hear it but cannot reach it.

More important than this, however, is the question of what the rational system does to us. By the light of timeless rationalism, we are deemed irrational. By the light of the system, we are what doesn't fit -- unsystematic and chaotic. We are seen as what passes, as extrinsic, idiosyncratic, accidental, mortal. We are disenfranchised by the Idea. In such a context, writing not only has a point, it has an edge. We can use writing to unsettle the issue, to open the question of importance, to wrest life from the rational.

Concurrent with this attempt is the shifting and overlapping of terms from various disciplines. None shall determine the frame for the poem. Thus, physics gives us "atom," architecture "keystone," and psychology the "unconscious" in "Dear Unconscious scatter syntax" (46). This shifting is one means Howe uses to prevent her discourse from solidifying, just as there is a force (the "Unconscious," here) which unsettles disciplines and rational systems, a force which resists and breaks through the systems that bind.

For the same reason, Howe emphasizes the present -- as a point in time it can not be systematized (at least, not in time; if systematized, it must be removed from time, which is to say destroyed).⁸ Therefore: "Is must open apparition past Halo view border regden/ possess remote so abstract life are lost spatio-temporal hum" (18). There is, there must be, an

openness or opening in the present. This openness may account for a certain undecidability in these lines. Perhaps: the *Is* opens the apparition past its Halo (aura?) in order to reach a view which makes the border redden. This "redden" may rub against the physicality we mentioned earlier. There may also be a hint of "make ready" in this "redden." But, if so, make ready for what? To possess the remote view of life, the abstract and systematic view, within which the spatio-temporal hum, the sound of articulation itself, is lost. So the system is a speechless body, mute(d) in its codes of rationality.

The *is* speaks but it is not rational. Perhaps it is not even understood. The "so abstract life" is rational, but it does not speak. Speech, then, is not the sphere of the rational (or ordered). Paradoxes, contradictions, uncertainties, are not to be eradicated. As it is, the *is* gravitates too quickly to the abstract, too easily becoming a part of the system and, thus, too easily co-opted. To counteract this, we need to maintain our focus on the *is*, to resist getting carried past that *is*, past the halo and its border, to the "so abstract life" which beckons to us all from off in the distance. Instead of showing how weak the present is, our complaint shows how strong the abstract is at stopping the present, of leaching it of its presence and preparing it to fit into the (generic) past.

But, for all the difficulties Howe moves us into a consideration of, there remains a basic blandishment -- the "essential simplicity of Thought" (32). Thus, to grasp the essence of thought is to grasp its simplicity, but doesn't this also mean that to grasp its simplicity we must know what essentially concerns us? There is much in thought to confuse us, but only if we have no idea what we're looking for. Let us not be blase about the implications of this looking, however. The essential simplicity is not a synonym for the truth or "true meaning." In Howe we are subject to displacements -- spiritual, grammatical, textual, etc. We are assailed by the unsayable. But, for all our interest in it, for all our attunings to it, we must finally settle, not for the unsayable, but for the human.

Why, then, listen for the unsayable at all? To counteract the stratification, rigidification, or solidification of the human. This marks the lineaments, not the limits, of the text; its habitation, not its extent. Thus, the "inarticulate true meaning/ lives beyond Thought" (40). How would we have known this if we had remained within the realm of Thought? We wouldn't. We would have assumed that true meaning must, by definition (even), be found in thought. We would, therefore, have mistaken our (limited and partial) meaning for the true meaning, and we would have shrunk everything to our size. Instead, when we find our "home in a human knowledge" (35), it will be a human knowledge that knows there is more, that knows how much we lose if we lose this knowledge. In this way the presence of the past returns: we see how little has changed for us in America, for, writing (and thinking) is but homesteading on the frontier. We make our home in a world of more.

NOTES

1. The book is not paginated. I count the motto ("from seaweed said nor repossess rest/ scape esaid") as page 1; the title page of section one ("Hope Atherton's Wanderings") occurs on page 3; the title page of section two ("Taking the Forest") occurs on page 21. Where no initials are cited in text, it is *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* which I am citing.
2. For instance, in her most recent work, *Thorow*, we find "my whole being is Vision" (T, 11).
3. I do not mean "interminable" as derogation, for I take this interminability as the sign of a serious artist. Note, for instance what Robert Duncan says in his "Afterward" to Beverly Dahlen's *Egyptian Poems*: "In the Summer Issue of *Feminist Studies* selections from *A Reading -- an interminable work begun in June 1978* appear. The very choice of the epithet 'interminable' has for me the daring and recognition of what is involved in an open form that only the serious artist (willing to follow the series through to its consequences in full recognition of its perils as well as its lures) will take as the initial proposition" (n.p.).
4. Shall we cite what Derrida has said of ears? In *The Ear of the Other*, we find: "The ear is uncanny. Uncanny is what it is; double is what it can become" (33); "your ear which is also the ear of the other" (35). So, we are vulnerable through our ears.
5. As Howe puts it in her recent *Thorow*: "Scribbling the ineffable" (7).
6. Jacques Derrida in "Differance," had written: "The use of language or the employment of any code which implies a play of forms -- with no determined or invariable substratum -- also presupposes a retention and pro-tention of differences, a spacing and temporalizing, a play of traces. This play must be a sort of inscription prior to writing, a protowriting without a present origin, without an *arche*" (SP, p.146).
7. This structure where the outside becomes inside resembles that which Jacques Derrida has labeled "invagination": "Invagination is the inward refolding of *la gaine* [sheathe, girdle], the inverted reapplication of the outer edge to the inside of a form where the outside then opens a pocket" (p. 97). Stephen Melville: "This figure of 'double invagination' can serve to describe the relation between the two apparent sides of our broken dialectic -- sides that are only 'inner' and 'outer' on, as it were, a local basis, for a certain duration and purpose, strategically" (p. 61).
8. Note, too, from *Thorow*: "Domain of transcendental subjectivity/ Etymology the this // present in the past now" (3).
9. Note that these lines are reversed on the facing page: "HumTemporal-spatioLostAreLifeAbstractSoRemotePossess/ ReddenBorderViewHaloPastAppar-itionOpenMostNotion's" (19). Thus, we can move back and forth from the

present to a sound, but transcendence does not free us from being determined (or trapped) by these poles.

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LINDA REINFELD

ON HENRY DAVID (SUSAN HOWE) "THOROW"

What comes, of itself, of a name got wrong, a word caught in the throat? Thorough, Thoreau. Hawthorne: "I was interrupted by a visit from Mr. Thorow . . ."; Howe: "My eye fell on the word . . ." ¹ Howe speculates on Hawthorne's mistake, turns on the refusal of a term: "He must have been making fun of him, or he just thought if that's the way you pronounce it . . ." One just doesn't know. "So many thread" so early in the work: how to begin? The snow reprints old footsteps, Waldenesque, "in clear white type, alto relieveo." ²

Go on the Scout they say
They will go near Swegachey

I have snow shoes and Indian shoes

Idea of my present
not my silence

The poem comes to us, beautifully typeset, at the beginning of *Temblor* 6 (1987); a major poem, serious, lyrical, its 21 sections spread out over 19 pages, ³ "Thorow" may serve as a strong indication (though not, of course, the only one) that "Language poetry" has now come of age. Yet the work is indeed as fresh as it seems: Howe composed "Thorow" while she lived as writer in residence at Lake George during the bleak winter-spring of 1987. My own first impressions of the poem: words nearly flooded by white, afloat on the page; wilderness and forest slopes, reminiscent of *Pythagorean Silence* and *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*; epic breadth; a great stage set for loss. The protagonist? "Thoreau got me through Lake George," says Howe. "He's a comforter. His diaries are full of eccentricities and writing improvisations; at the same time they are a form of listening to you."

Howe's Thoreau, the listener, is well worth listening to. Consider this journal entry of March 1, 1860: "I have thoughts, as I walk, of some subject that is running in my head, but all their pertinence seems gone before I can get home to set them down. The most valuable thoughts which I entertain are anything but what I thought." Howe in fact has entertained Thoreau, thought in his place, "placed him in time where he'd like to be." Thoreau, Thorow: a name thrown open. She is his craft, his theft, as he is hers, a sound of scouting out, of getting back. I think it is Thorow who writes Howe here, the self as scout, the Indian he wished to be who nearly ("present in the past now") speaks her name. *How*, or Howe, then: a greeting.

That pun folded into the text is a bold stroke: women have not often been welcome on this ground. Looking back, one can read in the Name of the Father an awe almost forgotten: Howe (Mark) is to Thoreau (Henry) as Law (His) is to History (Hers). Thus, from *Walden*, the old warning, my Thoreau:

Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were

written. It is not enough even to be able to speak the language of the nation by which they are written, for there is a memorable interval between the spoken and the written language, the language heard and the language read. The one is commonly transitory, a sound, a tongue, a dialect merely, almost brutish, and we learn it, like the brutes, of our mothers. The other is the maturity and experience of that; if that is our mother tongue, this is our father tongue, a reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which we must be born again in order to speak. (III,3)

How deliberately and reservedly written are these words? It is possible to argue, with Stanley Cavell, that Thoreau implies there is no being "born again" without both mother and father: the elaborate puns and aural figures of *Walden* testify to his care for the sounding of thought.⁴ Yet because it remains impossible to ignore the pervasive evidence of the scorn (or at least the ambivalence) Thoreau directed towards women and "womanish" characteristics, Howe's intervention in the tradition of Thoreau scholarship at this point is a fortunate one. In bringing back from the Book the mother tongue, Howe rescues even Thoreau's language from the tyranny of the "too significant"; she returns to us a sense of the processes of our speech, the spells and spellings of our native ground. Thus the replacement of "eau" by "row" or "ow" (pronounced "oh") in "Thorow" refigures not only a word but a cry, an indication of pain and surprise: the word appears to have not a French but an American origin. The cipher "0" as ever holds the place. Howe's subjects are at once domestic and wild: "The Source of Snow / the nearness of Poetry" (12).

"Source" and "nearness" take us to the heart of Howe's work. Much of the archaic language of "Thorow" is drawn from old journals and accounts documenting the history of the Lake George region. It is worth noticing how intensely she responds to the location -- the specific history, the local truth, what D.H. Lawrence called "the Spirit of Place." Such concern with village detail indicates no scaling down of poetic ambition. With "Thorow" Howe writes herself into the "Laurentian" tradition of *Classic American Literature*, for according to Lawrence⁵

A curious thing about the Spirit of Place is the fact that no place exerts its full influence upon the newcomer until the old inhabitant is dead or absorbed. So America. While the Red Indian existed in fairly large numbers, the new colonialists were in a great measure immune from the daimon, or demon, of America. The moment the last nuclei of Red life break up in America, then the white men will have to reckon with the full force of the demon of the continent.

Susan Howe always reckons with the full force of the demon -- as does "Thorow."

What is the plot of this poem? No plot -- or rather, as Howe has put it, the only plot "a landscape out of bits of words," the story line "what time does in a landscape." The poem is set in three numbered

parts: first, (the archaeology of the poem and the deep past, says Howe), a new world staked out and divided by history: "Fence blown down in a winter storm// darkened by outstripped possession" (4). From here on in, no word, no line, no scripture can be without guilt: language is itself not true. To inhabit the wilderness is to participate in its eventual ruin, and "anybody who writes a poem is complicit in a violation of the sacred." Thoreau himself is introduced as would-be Indian scout and then immediately thrown back out of his own element and into a snowy war-torn land, a land still echoing with the battles of the French and Indian War. "Distant monarchs of Europe/ European grid on the Forest" (5) threaten. Throughout Part 1 of "Thorow" the terror mounts: from "Agreseror // Bearer law my fathers // Revealing traces / Regulating traces" (6) to the childlike anguish imagined in the penultimate stanza of Part 1:

To be sent in slays

if we are not careful

To a slightly place

no shelter

Let us gether and bury

limbs and leves

Is a great Loast

Cant say for us now

Stillest the storm world

Thought (9)

From the aftermath of the storm Howe -- like her predecessor -- steps out to survey what lies all frozen before her: "seem world anew / Only step" (10).

Part 2 consists of seven stanzas, carefully measured, mostly couplets; it begins with the clear voice of prophecy, speech fully present: "Walked on Mount Vision // New life after the Fall / So many true things . . . // In the machinery of injustice / my whole being is Vision" (11). Place matters, and the Spirit of Place has always its effect: "Nature isolates the Adirondaks" (11). It is here that the true poet (and the poet alone) may take on the poet's part absolutely without reservation, may rise to invoke the honored ghost: "I stretch out my arms / to the author // Oh the bare ground" (13), and in this place we may read on through to the end of time. "Armagedden at Fort William Henry / Sunset at Independence Point" is immediately followed by "Author the real author / acting the part of a scout" (13).

Yet, if injustice must precede vision, if suffering must be seen as

the condition of transcendence, then madness must in some form surely follow. Part 2 ends with an image of total disintegration:

*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 spaces of drifting*

Complicity battling redemption (17)

Personal and impersonal, natural and supernatural, conscious and unconscious, actual and ideal -- all such customary oppositions are here superimposed, fragmented, collapsed. The binary structures we count on fail; mind breaks under the weight. For Howe, madness must at last become an issue. "Complicity battling redemption," she explains, "that's what the history of America is." There is nothing tame about Howe's imagination:

I have imagined a center

*Wilder than this region
The figment of a book*

*Scarce broken letters
Cold leaden sky*

Laurentian system of Canada

Tuesday the instant May (16)

The affect of such statement is unmistakable, but the poetics may present some difficulties. What must mix, what may not? What is the sense of a language system that ("Laurentian") conflates the literary output of D.H. Lawrence and the St. Lawrence River, writing and water? Where elements, even races, must mingle, how may the agony of a continent be contained? Who can make the essential distinctions? How does well to choose as guides those who respect both poetry and facts.

Thoreau, 1860, writing in his journal:

*Before it rained hardest I could see in the midst of the dark
and smoother water a lighter colored and rougher surface, gen-
erally in oblong patches, which moved steadily down the stream,
and this, I think, was the new water from above welling up and
making its way downward amid the old. The waters or currents of
a river are thus not homogenous, but the surface is seen to be of*

*two shades, the smoother and darker water which already fills its
bed [?] and the fresh influx of lighter-colored and rougher, prob-
ably more rapid currents which spot it here and there; i.e., some
water seems to occupy it as a lake to some extent, other is pass-
ing through it as a stream, -- the lacustrine and the fluviatile
water. These lighter reaches without reflections (?) are, as it
were, water wrong side up. But do I ever see these except when
it rains? And are they not the rain-water which has not yet
mingled with the water of the river? (XIII, 430) (emphasis added)*

Thoreau, like Howe, investigates the minutest details accessible to perception. It is interesting to compare Thoreau's watery notes with Wittgenstein's notes on a similar theme, the evocative lines from the end of *On Certainty*:

*I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming.
Someone who, dreaming, says "I am dreaming", even if he speaks
audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his
dream "it is raining", while it was in fact raining. Even if
his dream were actually connected with the sound of the rain.*

Poetry too is an art that questions connections, attends to dreams. What can one seriously suppose? Which way is right-side-up? The articulation of difference is the preservation of hope -- which, like the rain-fed river itself, or like the recurring dream of rain, is after all the very water of life.

Part 3 of "Thorow" takes shape within a fluid, uncertain, perhaps even dreamlike, world: the landscape has thawed, the rivers run. Though the poem now entirely abandons both the "Laurentian system" and the attempt at measure (there are no couplets here, and the words, "Scarce broken letters" (16) are printed every which way on the page), Howe navigates these waters with great strength and delicacy of technique. The poet is initially beset by doubling and reflection, "water wrong side up." After the opening phrase of introduction, which reads "Cannot be // every / where I / entreat // snapt" (18), the first two sections of Part 4 reverse and mirror each other exactly. Individual words and phrases exist side by side without logic or logical relation. Nothing goes neatly together:

The frames should be exactly

fitted to the paper, the margins

of which will not per[mit] of

a very deep Rabbit (19)

I am particularly intrigued by this particular quatrain, not only because it so whimsically expresses my own frustration at being unable to provide a critical frame for this discourse, but also because, set as it is alongside "Cove / waterbug / mud . . ." (19), it reminds me

of Wittgenstein's drawing of the duck-rabbit and his wish to "distinguish between the 'continuous seeing' of an aspect and the 'dawning' of an aspect."⁷ This is the territory to which we are led by the waking of linguistic figures. At what point exactly does Thoreau become the Indian whose arts he had learned to imitate? How does Howe become Thorow? The context for such experience may be impossible to define.

Definition will not serve in the spiritual quest. Perhaps the capacity for reflection is well lost in Howe's "dawning," in the mystical setting adrift of spirit, where "You are of me & I of you, I cannot tell // Where you leave off and I begin" (20): the visible poem, the readable "Thorow," is almost at an end. As the poet's individual self is hollowed out, poetic identity is achieved. I cite the final stanza in full:

anthen uplispth enend

adamap blue wov thefthe

folled floted keen

Themis

thou sculling me
Thiefth

The first three lines are composed of duck-rabbit words: possibly "anthem" / "and then"; "uplift" / "lisps"; "an end" / "emend" -- and so on. There is no resolution to the conflict they embody, no cure for the split within the language. Each word is in itself beautiful and works rather like a double-stop or musical interval, but the tones so produced do not come together under a heading provided by a principle of order, a "Themis," a law. Rather "Themis" becomes the outlaw "Thiefth" (truly an alternative spelling), for it is theft that is, for Thoreau (and Thorow), the essence of composition. Sculling or scalping?

Howe's sub-text here is possibly the Hannah Dustan passage from Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, included in the rainy March "Thursday" chapter -- which is mainly concerned with the subject of "Art."⁸ Dustan, 150 years before Thoreau's writing, was said to have killed and scalped ten Indians who took her captive and threatened her with torture (they had already dashed out the brains of her new baby and frightened away her husband and children): Thoreau imagines that she appears on the river, in her scalp-laden canoe, "thinking of the dead . . . Every withered leaf which the winter has left seems to know their story, and in its rustling to repeat it and betray them." Hannah Dustan, in her acts of revenge, has successfully imitated the Indians; in that sense, Thoreau would have us see, we are what we overcome, and we become what we imitate. Rather than imitate

Sayre in his fine exposition of Thoreau's account of Dustan, I cite him at some length:

She has heard "the sighs of [Nature's] winds in the woods, which convey ever a slight reproof to the hearer." Such a nature is not "wild," but very refined and subtle and certainly very moral. It is a "howling wilderness" only to the frightened and guilty murderer, who in taking up the Indian tomahawk, has paradoxically become an Indian hater and imitator. And this is what relates Hannah and her companions to, of all people, Goethe and the artist. All are imitators and, in their different ways, killers -- a category in which Thoreau also includes himself. "The talent of composition is very dangerous," he says in his remarks on Goethe, "-- the striking out the heart of life at a blow, as the Indian takes off a scalp. I feel as if my life had grown more outward when I can express it." (Sayre, 53)

Howe's art, in "Thorow," may well be read as an act of complicity and violence -- or as the liberation of woman's voice in a literature dominated by men. Or as both: "complicity battling redemption." I greatly admire Howe's accomplishment, her "talent of composition," but hesitate to take it for my own. I do not know whose scalps are in her boat.

the imaginary -- a world of myth, pure sound, dream imagery -- for the world of the symbol -- a world of the Law of the Father. Yet, the imaginary remains a reservoir of memory and a potential source of female expression. In *Federalist* 10, James Madison takes the law of the Father (the father was a Professor of Law and turned it into the poetic language of the imaginary. "The Federalist No. 10" presents the poet with a structure through which she can disrupt the discourse of the symbolic with the release of her female language of the imaginary.)

Howe's writings are often readings, readings of Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, of Anne Bradstreet's letters and papers. So, I return to the question of reading. Reader response criticism was until recently, as Patricia P. Schweickart has observed, white-male-centered. "The different account of the reading experience that have been put forth overlook issues of race, class, and sex, and give no hint of the conflicts, sufferings, and passions that attend these relations. The relative truth-telling of the text of these theories testifies to the privileged position of the 'theorist'." (48). Schweickart has concluded that "the gender is critical in the text as well as the gender of the reader -- is crucial" (48).

NOTES

1. Recently (April 1988), by telephone, Susan Howe and I talked briefly together about Lake George, Indians, Thoreau, and "Thorow"; I have included some of Howe's comments on that occasion in this essay. However, here as elsewhere, the readings are my own, and in no way derived from our conversation.

2. *Walden IX*, 9. Subsequent references included in the text. I follow Stanley Cavell's practice in *The Senses of Walden* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981) in noting passages from *Walden* by chapter and paragraph number. Material from Thoreau's journal is drawn from the 14 volume edition edited by Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1949) and cited by volume number and page.

3. *Temblor* 6 (1987): 3-21. I have cited the opening lines of the poem. Subsequent references to "Thorow" are cited by page number only and included in the text.

4. From D.H. Lawrence, "Fennimore Cooper's White Novels," in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923; republished New York, 1964), pp. 33-34.

5. See Cavell, p. 16 especially.

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 90e.

7. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (London: Basil Blackwell, 1958), p. 194.

8. For an excellent analysis of Thoreau's treatment of the Hannah Dustan story, and for a summary of the recent criticism relating to that episode, see Robert F. Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indians* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977), pp. 47-55. Howe is familiar with both these secondary sources.

There is no resolution to the conflict they embody, no cure for the split within the language. Each word is in itself beautiful and works rather like a double-stop or musical interval, but the tones so produced do not come together under a heading provided by a principle of order. A "thesis," a law. Rather "thesis" becomes the outlaw "thesis" (truly an alternative spelling), for it is craft that is, for Thoreau (and Pynchon), the essence of composition. Scuffling or scuffling?

Howe's sub-text here is possibly the Hannah Dustan passage from Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, included in the entry March "Thursday" chapter -- which is mainly concerned with the subject of "Art." "Dustan, 150 years before Thoreau's writing, was said to have killed and scalped ten Indians who took her captive and threatened her with torture (they had already dashed out the brains of her new baby and frightened away her husband and children). Thoreau imagines that she appears on the river, in her scalp-laden canoe, 'thinking of the dead . . . Every withered leaf which the winter has left seems to know their story, and in its rustling to repeat it and betray them.' Hannah Dustan, in her acts of revenge, has successfully imitated the Indians; in that sense, Thoreau would have us see, we are what we overcome, and we become what we imitate. Rather than imitate

RE-VISION / IN TIME: Our Susan Howe

By 1848 there was in the United States of America nearly universal suffrage -- for white men. At the Seneca Falls Convention women issued a new Declaration of Independence beginning "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal . . . " (Flexner 75). In 1987 Rachel Blau DuPlessis published her revision of poetic history, *Tabula Rosa*. Here the tabula rasa of John Locke becomes a tabula rosa -- not a clean slate but a stained slate, stained with women's menstrual blood. Susan Howe often writes in a manner similar to that of the Seneca Falls Convention or of Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Susan Howe often takes language artifacts of the past and through her art in the present reveals the fiction in those facts. As Tina Darragh put it: "experimentation with patterns of words handed down to her equals freedom. She stands up against the weight of our language's history and, as an intellectual, fights back -- an act of liberation . . . " (71).

What does it mean for a woman to read a man? What does it mean for a woman to read a woman? What does it mean for a woman to write as woman and not as a man? Put it this way: "If language creates culture, and most known cultures are male dominated, does language itself, then, teach and support male-domination? Is male bias embedded in the very words and sentences we speak? Is language necessarily phallogocentric?" (Kitch 65). According to Luce Irigaray the answer to these questions is an emphatic yes. In a "phallogocentric" society, as she calls it, "neither woman's sex, their imaginary nor their language can exist" (106). A woman-centered civilization "would not have the same language, the same alphabet" (101).

Is silence then a woman's only tool? Can a woman writer revise the historical account or object to omissions in that account if she speaks this phallogocentric language? Can a woman find a way to speak as woman from within this phallogarchy?

According to Jacques Lacan the child leaves the pre-Oedipal world of the imaginary -- a world of metaphor, rhythm, pure sound, dream imagery -- for the world of the symbolic -- a world of the Law of the Father. Yet, the imaginary remains a reservoir of memory and a potential source of female expression. In *Federalist 10*, Susan Howe takes the Law of the Father (her father was a Professor of Law) and turns it into the poetic language of the imaginary. "The Federalist No. 10" presents the poet with a structure through which she can disrupt the discourse of the symbolic with the release of her female language of the imaginary.¹

Susan Howe's writings are often readings. Readings of Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, of Hope Atherton's letters and papers. So, I return to the question of reading. Reader response criticism was until recently, as Patrocino P. Schweickart has observed, white-elite-male-centered: "The different accounts of the reading experience that have been put forth overlook issues of race, class, and sex, and give no hint of the conflicts, sufferings, and passions that attend these realities. The relative tranquility of the tone of these theories testifies to the privileged position of the theorists" (35).² Schweickart has concluded that "the gender inscribed in the text as well as the gender of the reader -- is crucial" (48).

According to Schweickart, "feminist readings of male texts are motivated by the need to disrupt the process of imasculation" (48). To identify with the author or protagonist of a male's novel, the woman reader must be party to her own weakening. Or the woman reader can resist the male terms. She can, as Schweickart has written, "submit to the power of the text, or she can take control of the reading experience" (49). Susan Howe chooses the second alternative.

According to Schweickart, "feminist readings of female texts are motivated by the need 'to connect,' to recuperate, or to formulate . . ." (48). So it is with Susan Howe who asks, "Does a woman's mind move in time with a man's?" and who in *My Emily Dickinson*, in this reading of another woman's writing, provides one answer (17).

In a letter to me Susan Howe wrote, "How do women fit into the telling? What do they know? How do they feel about erasure and forgetting and powerlessness? What is their story?" (August 11, 1986). And in another letter she noted, "I have just read Esther Burr's journal -- J. Edwards daughter as you know" . . . "It goes to show me again how different the experience was for women and for men. Somehow women were more in contact with the Difficulties -- natural ones -- Childbirth Food Death -- they had no time for philosophical debate or not much time -- and therefore the wilderness may have pressed closer in on their psyches" (January 16, 1987). Susan Howe resists the male terms and she makes connections. She asks questions and she finds her own way of answering them.

There is a rhetorical brilliance in the shift from the language of the Articles of Confederation which begins "To All to whom these Presents shall come, we the undersigned Delegates of the States affixed to our names send greeting" to the language of the Constitution which begins "We the people" (Ferguson, "Ideology" 161). The latter's strategy of control is to include all in consensus free from challenge, a consensus within which, paradoxically, few had a part ("We Hold These Truths" 28). Who the framers were counts for as much as what they framed ("Ideology" 163). (It is Judge Brack who renders Hedda Gabler powerless in Ibsen's play, and the Judge does so through language.) And so, although the legal system claims to be "point-of-viewless" and "universal" it does not incorporate women's experience as fully as it does men's (MacKinnon 639). Think of "We the people," but also think of the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions: ". . . all men and women . . .".

Catherine MacKinnon has said that in cases of rape interpretation always locates the meaning of the act in the man's point of view. "Under conditions of sex inequality, with perspective bound up with situation, whether a contested interaction is rape comes down to whose meaning wins" (652). The question of whose meaning wins is equally pertinent to the interpretation of "The Federalist No. 10." Indeed, the essay may have a very different meaning for women than it has for men.

In "The Federalist No. 10," the most famous essay written to encourage the adoption of the Constitution, James Madison discussed the need of government to protect itself from divisive internal factions and from the unchecked rule of the majority. Madison began, "Among the numerous advantages promised by a well-constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction" (56).

Madison's solution for controlling "the violence of faction," including "when a majority is included in a faction," and "to secure the public good and private rights" (60): maintain a large and strong central government.

Ferguson has pointed out that the issue of consensus and control was not easily nor simply resolved in Madison's writings. While "The Federalist No. 10" may have offered a clear and well-reasoned solution, other essays from Madison's pen, especially No. 37, reveal a much darker side of his thought. In this essay Madison stated that agreement is nearly an impossibility due to "'the obscurity arising from the complexity of objects,' 'the imperfection of the human faculties,' and the failure of language itself ('the medium through which the conceptions of men are conveyed to each other adds a fresh embarrassment')" ("Ideology" 159).

But are these failures and embarrassments for men and women or just for men? In a review-essay of Howe's *Pythagorean Silence*, John Taggart has noted that "we live properly in the true world in which we are given a home with its promise of shelter and family by the selfless speaking of language in the poem. In the interests of self-protection and 'property' along with private rapture, however, we attempt to use and so necessarily misspeak the language" (17). I believe that although Howe's work may reveal such misspoken language and its effects, there is also another sort of "misspeak" (msspeak) in her poems. Hence, Madison used humans in one phrase and men in another for the embarrassment of men may be the pride and pleasure of women. "One must listen to her differently in order to hear an 'other meaning' which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized (Irigaray 103).

The protection of sleep

The protection of sheep

Patron of stealthy action

The Stealthy³

To return to Lacan, this is not the language of the symbolic, of the Law of the Father, but it is the language of the imaginary. "Contradictory words seem a little crazy to the logic of reason, and inaudible for him who listens with ready-made grids, a code prepared in advance" (Irigaray 103, italics mine).

But it's not easy to resist the male term, to tap the reservoir of the female. As Susan Howe wrote in a letter, "I do know through my own background what it is to be a New Englander and to have the pressure of a certain way of thinking on your psyche" (July 12, 1986). (Josiah Quincy, one of Howe's many illustrious ancestors, felt betrayed by Madison.) She listens with ready-made grids, a code prepared in advance? No. But this is the difficulty of the present. No longer the cold, cold of winter but "the town which is a different sort of wilderness the modern kind" (Howe, Letter, June, 17, 1987). Against or to connect? Both are difficult. "The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary undoubtedly places woman in a position where she can experience herself only fragmentarily as waste or as excess in the little structured margins of a dominant ideology . . ." (Irigaray 104).

Real and personal property

Paper money and tender acts

Fiction of administrative law

Fathers dare not name me

Fuse a subjective history, history as personal memory to the history of a larger society. Close links between history and fictional narrative. Will a new kind of narrative lead to a new kind of history? A new kind of narrative will lead to a new kind of history. Abandon linear development for overlapping layers of discourse rather than a single one that progresses logically. The narrative is embedded in a non-narrative discourse so as to suggest links and history.

Chasm dogma scoops out

The invention of law
the codification of money

Democracy and property
Rules are guards and fences

In the court of black earth
to be infinite

The first two pages of the poem are those most directly sprung from the Madison text. Clearly, Howe works here with a language of contradiction; not of control. This is the resistance to male terms, the revealing of the gaps in the patriarchal ideology through which the woman may take voice of her own. What is protected here is not the public good, but sleep for sheep. He who protects is a "Patron of stealthy action" and what he protects is "The Stealthy" -- his own self-interest. This counters Madison, but this corresponds to recent work on Federal America by scholars such as Joyce Appleby. Appleby and others have written on the changing nature of virtue -- from an innate social disposition to a commercial self-interest.

Even more recently Ruth Bloch has written on virtue not in terms of classical republicanism versus modern commercialism, but, rather, in terms of gender. Virtue, she has said, became in the Federal era a word with two different meanings: one personal and female, the other political and male. "Not that women were ever regarded as incapable of virtue. Women were thought to be as rational as men in exercising the private, Christian virtues -- temperance, prudence, faith, charity. It was specifically public virtue -- active, self-sacrificial service to the state on behalf of the common good -- that was an essentially male attribute" (42).

Her society from herself separated other cause or so
Discovered remain she where swamp redemption prospect son

The republican mother "would serve the new nation by making good citizens of [her] sons despite formal exclusion from political life" (Bloch 46).

First the resistance; then the return and the connection. Whereas the first page draws from "The Federalist No. 10" and is drawn in couplets or single lines of nearly equal length, the second page begins to move in different directions. V-shaped, arrow shaped: the point is

Thoughts

samethem
e sect

THROUGHTHER coopted
throng
hammer all now

alim^{ent} Ethic
a iron

"aliment": "Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires" (Madison 57). The consensus contains more than frees. The words of political and legal authority will not let the words of individuality free. "I set my heart in this world." But, moving out and away from "Throw ancor and lay" is

Other intelletual works
here
I have called them work

turned nearly ninety-degrees and pointing to another way.

And so page three has gaps in a more formalized line and page. Through these gaps, it it She? History replaced by herstory, herstory. Is "Evese" hair cut short or thatch cut at the eaves of buildings? Or does the word send us back even further: Eve see? Eve saw and the rest of history has been an attempt to deny her vision by condemning her for ever having looked.

A lamp cite

berying [burying]

So the misspeak is to say wrong, but is to say wrong also to look where the woman is not supposed to look (miss / peek)? And from the next page:

sitt and so

site A

World is

blis eye eyes

Evese clad led and so belonging

Not coopted, belonging. From against to connect.

But as Genesis tells us, the eyes of both were opened. Close the woman's eyes. The language of bliss and sight ("site") succumbs again to, is blown away by the wind of commandments: "commandndementys." These contracts of consent to do something for nothing. These districts under rule.

also as
so as

"as" -- a worn down form of also. Genesis tells us that the eyes of both were opened: close the woman's eyes.

Her with society from herself separated other cause or so

. . .

Mankind leave did circle rung for kneeled grace vassal calm

But trace to eye the tree roof refuge sect quest focus trap

Or, as Susan Howe has written similarly in another recent poem, "Thorow," "Complicity battling redemption" (17). Madison said that "a religious sect may degenerate into a political faction in a part of the Confederacy; but the variety of sects dispersed over the entire face of it must secure the national councils against any danger from that source" (65). And it is to religious sect/faction that the poem next moves. But here, too, the refuge in a particular sect's quest for Utopia is doomed because gender is ignored. Though the Moravians lived in semi-communistic communities; hence, they "solved" the problem of class (Madison condemned such "solutions" as "improper," "wicked" projects [65]), they did not "solve" the issue of gender. Indeed, women and men in the Moravian community were separated even more than in the typical community of the middle colonies. Men and women, boys and girls lived in separate dormitories. Problems of gender, Irigaray has suggested, are more complicated than those of class: "women are not, strictly speaking, a class and their dispersion in several classes makes their political struggle complex and their demands sometimes contradictory" (105). At the Ephrata religious community, "brothers" and "sisters" lived separately and practiced celibacy. Numbers could be increased only by conversions from other Pennsylvania German religious sects. So for these sects, as Howe has put it, "covered was faction but root discernable plainly hermit" and I take "hermit" here not to be recluse, but her/mit; that is, an inability of the pietistic sects to fully address issues of gender in their utopian aspirations. Instead, they -- as at Ephrata for example, quite literally covered them up.

From Federal Philadelphia to Eden to Pennsylvania German pietistic sects, the poem next moves further out toward the western frontier, the western borders. "Sculls map," that is, Nicholas Scull, the Indian interpreter and Surveyor General of the Province of Pennsylvania.

"Do you remember me mother?"

"I do but have forgotten where we met."

An abbreviated captivity narrative.

And so the poem tells us of another group not included in that rhetorically large WE of "We the people . . ." The mother forgets the son because there may be more in common between mother and Indian captors than between mother and son. Consensus, faction, control: women and Indians. During the French and Indian War, Scotch-Irish settlers destroyed the blue-ridge settlement of Moravian Indian converts. Ever westward these Christian Indians went. For they could not live in the vicinity of whites without being harmed or murdered by them (Sweet 164). And when they left Gnadenhütten (Tents of Grace)

or Friedenshütten (Tents of Peace), their settlements became forts for white Englishmen to guard against the French and their Indian allies. Franklin noted in his *Autobiography* that after the destruction of Gnadenhütten, the Moravians turned Bethlehem, Pennsylvania into an armed fortress.

The principal buildings were defended by a stockade. They had purchased a quantity of arms from New York, and had even placed small paving stones between the windows of their high stone houses, for their women to throw down upon the heads of any Indians that should attempt to force into them (157).

" . . . refuge sect quest focus trap." No refuge in sect. Quest is trap. Connection becomes consensus faction control.

More contradiction and irony follows. "Our book [the Bible] so dear to us / Copies are read to pieces." More words, force, property. "But who knows a thing." Who the framers were counts for as much as what was framed.

Incorrigible positivist illusion

[. . .]

*bay legend buoy legend
Least and least constellation*

*where Gods walked leaving no trace
invisible halos of mass*

Pine tree money of Massachusetts colony

*Plunder every sort of plunder
Signal and then signal*

*Wouldbe waving and waving
luminous cosmogonies half-forgotten*

Connected farms haphazardly strung together

*Tracts of emptiness dungeon our universe
Our masters re-interpreted as monsters*

There is no theme of translatio studii here, but, rather, its opposite. "I ask my way to lost Zion / Rapid walks absolute certainty." Lost Zion is the past, but in the fast walk the way is lost; yet, there is no way for there was no Zion. "I feel it is incumbent on me, a responsibility to understand and try to find some truth to all the lies" (Howe, Letter, August 11, 1986). Out of the past "Wind roars old ballads / over ditches and fences." The land long ago scarred by blind and silent (in consensus?) men. "Over hushed crusaders / stratospheric dust haze." The Zinzendorfs, the Beissels, the Muhlenbergs: their "Hat of flames to paint / splinters of anagogy." Only

splinters of heaven. The interpretation of the text is incomplete. Is it because "the influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States " (Madison 65), a flame extinguished by the nation and by the state that they offer only splinters of heaven or is it a heaven splintered due to the unread text, the "underseen sun in Sun," the source?

At the bible and sun
in little Wild Street

holy antithesis of ice and east

My room faces west
It has never been cleaner

a little bridge into winter

"into winter," into more ice; not into the past, the lost Zion -- because in the scheme of things there is no Zion: "holy antithesis of ice and east." Cast out somewhere east of Eden and to the west no New Canaan, but only ice.

Keep and comfort come
unhook my father

his nest is in thick of my
work

Not in winter but into Winter
Theory's thetic thread

loose in the world

Love wraps us and winds us
alone in first loving

ceaselessly consumed
ceaselessly consuming

Spirit of flesh in my heart

I live as if centuries are nothing
Imagination the imagination

Leave the Law of the Father and rejoin the first mother. "Unhook my father // his nest is in thick of my / work." How connect and not control? "... live as if centuries are nothing / Imagination the imagination." What is historical distance? Can historical distance disappear into no dis-

tance and with no distance, no difference? Some may enter.

Dickinson's last letter simply said; "Called back." What is historical distance? (Howe, "Early American Captivity Narratives" 1).

In America, Count Zinzendorf failed to unite all German denominations and so he turned to missionary work among Indians. During the second of three journeys Zinzendorf visited the Mohican town of Shekomeko between the Housatonic and the Hudson, where a Moravian missionary had been at work since 1740. Here Zinzendorf formed the Christian Indians into a congregation (Sweet 108).

Site of old Shekomeko
Sledges set out to hew pine

Far back as human memory
a stoic assembly chanting

By degrees we first
penetrated these parts

Right fact and split sect

earlier ghost-lieutenant
Skin with a hero's name

We say your name
Our ears enclose us

how intellect bends over mirrors

Recreation of a poor ghost
clinging to half face

On the path he met wonder

Immaculate identical newborn
A stone warns the traveler

What is harder than a stone
One wondertale smothers another

Isolation of selfsame children

The Frost the Sun the Wind
a true wondertale

"The Frost the Sun the Wind" these, the first tales, are the true wondertales. The poet evokes an awakening "out of deep sleep" despite the fact that she may be "Old to others yes" and that she may speak only a con-

fused rambling "Rigmarole," that the "scales of her ring" are not as profitable as the "scales of herring." Awake to herself "old nucleus Thought / storm-tossed innermost" and connect with all as she can connect. "Walking and calling wild animals / together // all that will ever happen / before and before." This is not the rule of Madison, but the realm of the poet, a ruleless and unruléd realm. For "the poet is an intermediary hunting form beyond form, truth beyond theme through woods of words tangled and tremendous. Who owns the woods?" (Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* 79-80).

I use "our" in my title not to indicate possession ("Property and propriety are undoubtedly rather foreign to all that is female" [Irigaray 104]), but to include and to join all in nearness. A connection of and between more than one and one: multiply, and everyone.

Do men always think control and women, connection? Can women read men without becoming men? Can men read men or women and not think of control? Can all be connected? Can we -- all of us -- speak about difference in a context of essential shared humanity? Schweickart has suggested that "surely, 'difference' may be interpreted to refer to what is distinctive in women's lives and works, including what makes them essentially human; unless, of course, we remain captivated by the notion that the standard model for humanity is male" (60).

So easily *Revealing traces* becomes *Regulating traces* (Howe, "Thorow" 6). Like Madison's "The Federalist No. 37," this poem ends on a dark note.

Confederate army every story

of the voyage Narratives

Lamentation earthly marching

rag commodities heady sum

NOTES

1

I am somewhat uncomfortable with the way these theories divide male and female along traditional lines of reason and prose = male; emotion and poetry = female.

2

For two recent works that run counter to this generalization see Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984) and Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986).

3

Uncited quotations in the text are from *Federalist 10*. I wanted to avoid the intrusion of apparatus. I've gone through most of the poem her and for the

most part I've gone through it in order.

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INFORMATION / END PAGES

Talisman: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Poetics will devote an issue to Susan Howe in 1990.

Contact Ed Foster

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for more information.

Readers of Susan Howe, please note also David Bromige's biographical essay in *Magill's Critical Survey of Poetry*, Pasadena, 1987.

A special note of thanks to Paradigm Press for typesetting the selection of SH's work which appears in this issue. The full text of EIKON is available from Paradigm Press

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Apologies to Joan Retallack. She should have an essay in this issue but doesn't due to a miscommunication which is solely my fault.

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I'm teaching the most cheerful
and the most difficult of moralities.
And this is all the truer since the
difficulties in it aren't overcome
with effort. --Georges Bataille (Bruce Boone trans.)

"THE PLAN IS THE BODY"

Beginning at what would seem to be the beginning: in 1979 Earel Neikirk and I decided to start a magazine we would call *The Difficulties*. Actually, it begins before that -- earlier the same year. Ken Irby came to town, through the good offices of Bob Bertholf, to read from the newly published *Catalpa*. I'd sent Irby a copy of my first book, *the Mandala book*, to which he had been kind enough to respond. Irby ignited the tinder I was then with a single remark: "Don't think of yourself as just a local poet." He gave me permission to think a little audaciously. At the same time I was eagerly reading *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine which had begun publishing in 1978. It filled a gap right away. I'd worked fitfully-- passionately and hopelessly --on a book about Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp before abandoning it as too intuitive and too wrapped up with the dead. I wanted engagement with living writers who thought beyond, say, the personal dynamics of writers like Charles Bukowski. *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* was a great source of extensions into an exciting and heterodox world of multiple approaches to writing and cultural politics.

Neikirk left the magazine after the first issue appeared in 1980. While working on issue 2, which subsequently appeared in 1981, I became determined to change the focus of the magazine. Issues 3 and 4 would format around the discussion of individual writers. I chose Charles Bernstein and Ron Silliman because I felt that they embodied two distinct poles of an incredibly rich literary movement. I still feel that their work constitutes one of the most extraordinary dialogues of our time. The Bernstein Issue appeared in 1982. The Silliman Issue appeared in 1985.

The three year gap between the Bernstein and Silliman numbers was the result of many factors. The first three issues had been produced in conjunction with a printing collective -- Shelly's Press --which sadly no longer exists. Printing costs were cheap. It was a labor-intensive operation though. The press was held together with spit and gum and beer. Collating was done by hand. As was the perfect binding. I bound the Bernstein Issue myself. The Silliman was the first to be commercially printed. What a treat. What an expense! The Bernstein cost around \$1000. The Silliman cost almost \$3000. To put things in another perspective: it cost about \$6.00 per copy to produce the Silliman number. With bookseller's discounts, postage, etc., money was lost on every copy sold, traded or given away. Grocery money.

I come home for lunch, not being able to afford eating out and not wanting to brown bag it. Occasionally I'll get the odd lunch hour telephone call. "Is this Viscerally Press, *The Difficulties*? I'd like to speak with Tom Beckett." --This is Tom Beckett. They're always funny conversations. There is no Viscerally Press International Headquarters. There have been no grants. There is no support staff. There is our little house and active family and the magazine that has been in the midst of it all. I'm not an academic. Nor am I a stooge. And I'm not independently wealthy. I've done what I've done with the magazine, and with some struggle, because I've wanted to do it. PERIOD.

After the Silliman Issue I was planning to shift focus/formats once more with the new volume. I wanted to deal with ideas and issues, not persons. Sexuality, in particular. David Bromige changed my mind when he persuaded me to do an issue on his work. It was a good move. Everything learned in the four previous issues came to bear. The Bromige number shines and is a joy still. It forced me too to envisage the project in longer and larger terms. I resolved to do 3 more issues all focussing on female writers.

What you hold in your hand was to be the first of these last three issues. Instead it looks to be the last. It's a pity. There's such a wealth of great talent out there. I'm thinking particularly of Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, Diane Ward, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Beverly Dahlen.

I'm in debt and can't afford to do a magazine right now. My physical energies are depleted also. There have been some medical problems -- back surgery, etc. "The Plan Is The Body" as Creeley wrote. So, it's time to take a breather, regroup, maybe even resume my own writing. Beginning again at what would seem to be an end . . .

--Tom Beckett

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STEPHEN RATCLIFFE

JANET RODNEY

PAUL METCALF

MAUREEN OWEN

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CHARLES BERNSTEIN

BRUCE CAMPBELL

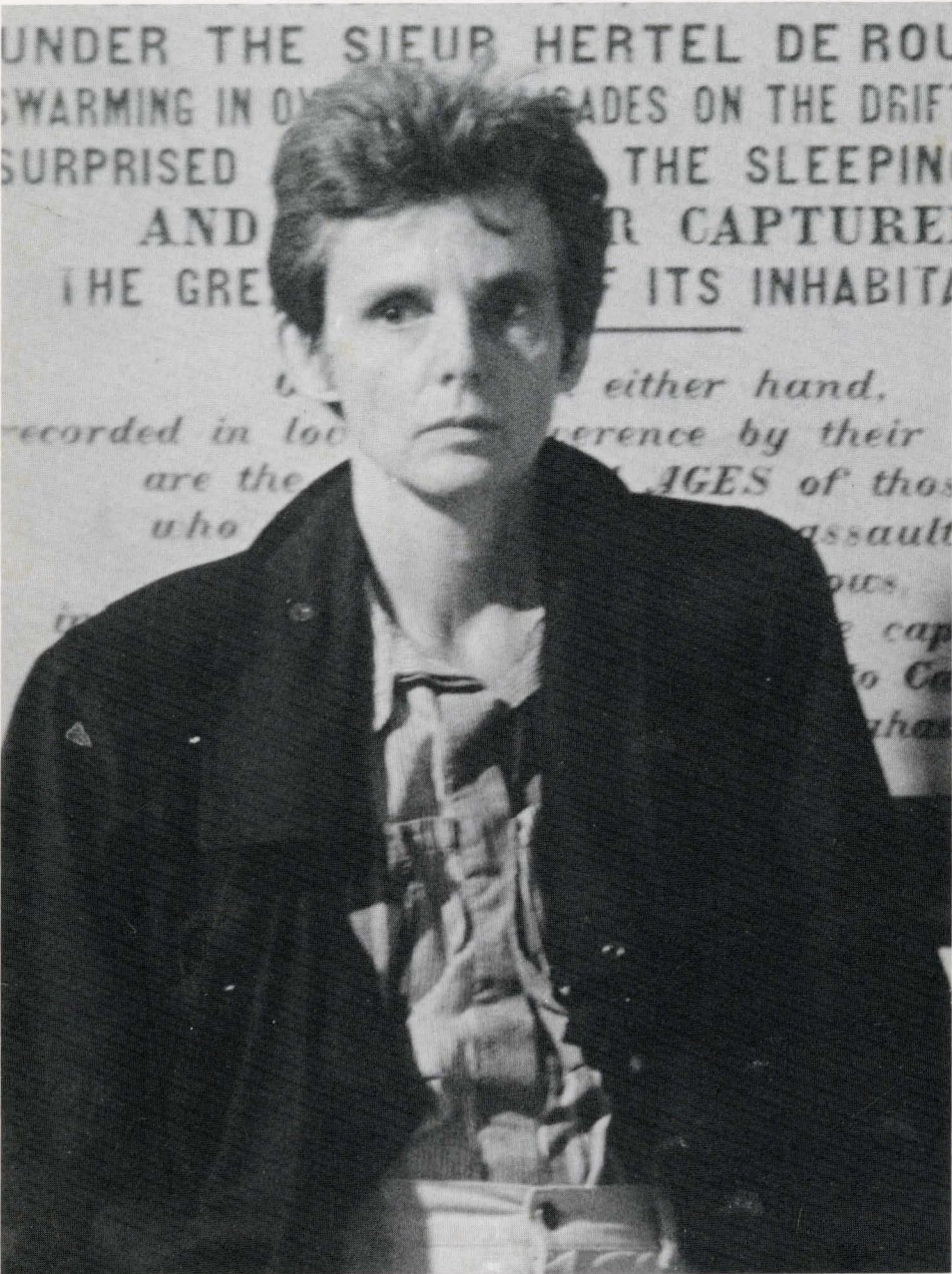
LINDA REINFELD

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THE DIFFICULTIES VOL. 3, NO. 2



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SUSAN HOWE ISSUE