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THE FEMINIST IMAGINARY IN THE EARLY WRITINGS  
OF THE POET/CRITIC SUSAN HOWE

A Dissertation

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degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

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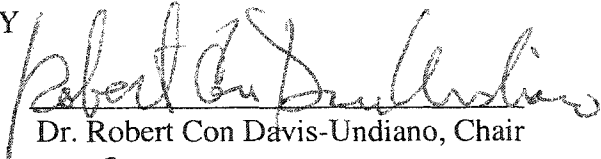
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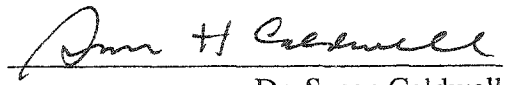
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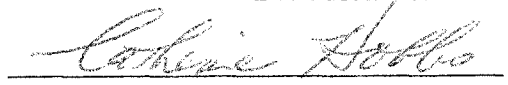
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A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

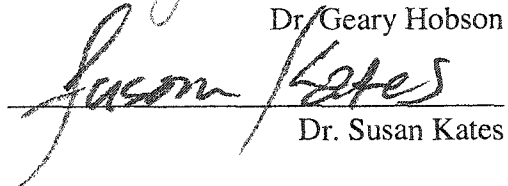
BY

  
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I received support along the way for my project by faculty, family and friends. I especially want to mention Katherine Patterson, who encouraged me when all seemed lost. My sister, Kathleen James and my parents, Gloria Placke and Clyde Stockton, continued to believe in me, no matter what. To Lloyd Moon who loved me in spite of myself, thank you. Finally, to my two children, Brandon and Jenny Bleakley, who put up with me and know more than anyone what this project cost. When Brandon, who is now aboard the U.S.S. Nimitz in the Arabian Sea learned of my graduation, he wrote me this e-mail, which expresses it best:

I just wanted to tell you that I am really proud of you. Emily told me that she and Issy [my daughter-in-law and granddaughter] are going to your graduation. I wish I could go. I

feel like we had based our whole life around your finishing this degree...Jen and I probably spent more time in the halls and lawns of the OU campus as little kids than most people do that major in engineering. I'm really happy that you are done!

I'm sure most people at the graduation will never realize, how much this one little grayed lady in the corner has accomplished. Sacrificing time with her kids growing up, writing and sitting stumped in thought on the couch for hours—to the point where she has given herself a migraine.

I remember playing at the duck pond with Jenny, looking up to see if you were around and there you were, on the bench, surrounded by geese with your nose crammed in a book that you “needed to read.” Looking back, if I were in your shoes, I would have not done it any differently. There was always milk in the refrigerator. Jen and I knew more about Macbeth and King Lear than any other 10 year old ever needed to. So it's done...Dr., Professor, and Mom.

I know this PhD would have come a lot sooner, if you didn't have to raise two kids by yourself, work, tuck us in at night, and then study. That's why I'm so proud of you!! That's why I know that I'll get my degree one day. I learned from you that not all of us get the easy road. I know I am on the hard road, long road to success, and there are two girls coming with me, but my mom just proved to me that the hard road ends one day.

You have a son who has a beautiful wife and a daughter that adores her Grammy so much. Jenny is following in your footsteps with just as much determination as you. She too will be a teacher one day. Then there is my mom, with a PhD in one hand and her granddaughter in the other. Did you ever daydream in the garden on Park Drive 25 years ago, that it would all end up like this? It's time for you to be happy! Love you, Brandon.

Thank you for believing in me.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1: MY EMILY DICKINSON

CHAPTER 2: FRAME STRUCTURES

- I. Preface
- II. Hinge Picture
- III. Chanting at the Crystal Sea/Cabbage  
Gardens/Secret History of the Dividing Line

CHAPTER 3: EUROPE OF TRUSTS

- I. Pythagorean Silence
- II. Defenestration of Prague
- III. The Liberties

CHAPTER 4: LATER WORK and CONCLUSION

- I. The Birthmark Unsettling the Wilderness in  
American Literary History
- II. The Nonconformist's Memorial
- III. Conclusion

WORKS CITED

## Preface—Thinking of Sukey

Imagine a well-furnished library. Tomes of law and history line the shelves in half the room. These are the books of scholar and law professor Mark d'Wolf Howe. The other half of the room is stuffed with books on Irish and English theater, old folios of Shakespeare, random books of poetry and poets—Yeats, Blake, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Tennyson and more. These are the books of actress, wit, and writer Mary Manning Howe. Into this world of law and politics on one side and art, culture and magic on the other, comes a child named Susan. Her family calls her Sukey. Sukey, an imaginative child with a nervous disposition and the winds of fairy ringing in her ears, grows up to be an actress, a visual artist, a poet, and a professor.

From the first she is discouraged from being a scholar like her father or pursuing a rigorous education beyond high school. He teaches at Harvard, and the Widener Library there is “off limits” to girls. To Susan, the library becomes the “wilderness”—forbidden and taboo, therefore, irresistible. Sukey steals away into the library whenever possible. She becomes a cormorant of libraries and adopts the term from Coleridge.

Her mother puts her even as a little child, in various plays as she grows up. She stays around the theater where her mother directs plays. Susan grows up hearing Irish voices and American voices and being keenly aware of their musicality. When she is a teenager, she goes to Ireland to become an actress.



Her first role is less than glorious. She plays “Toilet.” Another role is a character whom a vampire murders in the first scene of the first act. With her acting career not turning out quite as well as she has hoped, she returns to Boston and graduates from the Boston School of the Arts.

Susan becomes a visual artist. She is fascinated with collage and abstract minimalism. Her early paintings are partly collaged, with other paintings within them, palimpsest-like. She tells the story of one of her friends beginning to take notebooks and make repetitive marks across the pages. She has always kept “daybooks” or little composition books that she filled with quotations from her reading and her own thoughts. She begins to make installations all over her walls that include words—more and more words. Then, a friend comes over, notices her walls of words, and suggests she puts them down in a notebook. From writing words on the walls, Susan then progresses to putting her own words down in notebooks.

Reading her private letters and notebooks seems intrusive, yet it is instructive. Her father writes one letter to her in which he seems to apologize for having hurt her feelings. He chastises her for her loudness and the foul words that he says seem to punctuate most of her sentences. She is not a reticent, shy thing. He assures her that he loves her and wouldn’t trade her for the much more perfect Diana. He does wish however that she learn a few more manners. Her mother, on the other hand, tells her to speak clearly and don’t bawl.

Susan seems compelled by her experience and temperament to speak the poetic truth that she knows, yet the Law of the Fathers discourages her. She doubts herself. Writing much later after she has received accolades for her criticism and her work, she muses that she is just a FOOL without a proper academic education. She works past hesitation and derogation to offer a vision that sings with a mystical beauty. In her poetry we can trace “love’s enfolding.” I find this Stevens-like play of imagination in her poetry compelling, even when the visual aspects of this poetry and the Dada-ish, Duchampian humor force a distance between her work and me. Susan’s poetry is exactly what she claims much of the time:

I even think that Poetry is deeply mystical and even Religious (arrow to the side pointing to—without God). There I have said the awful word. It [Poetry] is Jubilant. Mysterious. Rigorous wonderfully illogical and un political. It is FREE. Beginning where philosophy leaves off.

Susan beckons us to follow her into a history which is wild and meaningful, a history where she holds iconoclasts in high esteem and explodes the narratives which have hidden voices like hers, discouraged, degraded, but persistent even in their hesitancy. A very brilliant mentor told me about writing an article that she feared was silly. After gathering courage, she shared it with her colleagues and friends; they saw its truth and beauty and encouraged her. This is perseverance beyond doubt. Susan’s poetry is important to me, even in its difficulties, because she, too, is a model of perseverance beyond doubt. The feminist imaginary infuses

Susan's writing—and for me that holds a message of hope, beauty, and magic. Even though she doesn't believe that poetry and politics mix and even though she despises the word feminist, her poetry, although not overtly political, is political in an oblique way. Her poetry remains a place to search for "love's enfolding."

## Introduction

I have lived so long with Susan Howe's work that it is really almost impossible for me to remember when I first "found" her. My Emily Dickinson, Susan Howe's first book of literary criticism, first captured my attention when I was studying for my master's degree, raising my two children, teaching English, and taking classes. The opening epigraph of the book quotes William Carlos Williams' In the American Grain on Emily Dickinson: "Never a woman: never a poet. That's an axiom. Never a poet saw sun here." His meaning, of course, was that there has never really been a "true" woman poet in America. Howe's meaning is that, of course, there has been a real woman poet-- *especially* Emily Dickinson. Howe's unconventional reading of Dickinson fit in with my feminist leanings and my own subversive nature. Unfortunately, I have experienced living in a world where, too often, women are ignored, passed over, or belittled. To quote Susan Howe, "In a world of exaltation of *his* imagination, feminine inscription seems single and sudden" (MED11).

How wonderful to find a poet and critic who recognized and articulated what I, too, had thought and experienced. Howe acknowledged, for me, the truth that Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein both "lifted the load of European literary custom" (11). This inspired me. Howe's works do the same. All three women poets—Dickinson, Stein, and Howe--"lift the load" and allow space for the rebirth of a *feminist imaginary* that exists as a semiotic bubbling up which nourishes my

soul. Here, by “feminist imaginary” I mean writing that is able to participate in a rupture of conventional textual meaning that creates competing narratives, fissures, and gaps, through its technique or combination of characteristics, including its use of poetic language, disruption of syntax, erasing or displacing text, and, especially, the orality and sensuality of the language. These qualities keep language dynamic and moving towards transformation. Often the feminist imaginary has qualities of voice which Ruth Salvaggio in Sounds of Feminist Theory identifies as “hearing the O” (2). What she means by this is “the necessary fusion of sound and knowledge, the aural and critical, ear and epistemology. I call this project ‘Hearing the O’” (2).

This emphasis on a feminist vision is not to reinforce a patriarchal essentialism that claims a correspondence between this technique and some essential female essence or maternal body, although that is indeed sometimes present. Also, an “imaginary” which “engage(s) the dynamics of voice will not necessarily return us to a world more sensitive to the experiences and imaginations of women any more than literacy will inevitably take us down the road of patriarchy” (Salvaggio 26). What it will do, however, is serve to charge language and to transform our possible readings of it in ways that are surprising, upsetting, and remarkable.

By “feminist imaginary” I also mean to add a dimension to the “imaginary” that is based in a very Kristevan formulation of the “semiotic.” Some

critics such as Peter Middleton have argued that if language participates in the semiotic—that pre-symbolic, amorphous knowing all people experience prior to the acquisition of language and the firm establishment of the self—language becomes mere chaotic babble and is, therefore, rendered completely nonsensical. The “feminist imaginary” does not attempt to discard the symbolic and its manifestation in language, which would be ludicrous and impossible. What the “feminist imaginary” does is to charge and to transform language with the chthonic and sub-symbolic infusion which absolutely counts on the fact that meanings will inhere and meanings will cohere, and, at the same time, they will be charged with more possibilities and with, in Susan Howe’s terms, those “endless protean linkages.”

A number of writers have been able to achieve this type of feminist imaginary in their work. These include James Joyce in Finnegan’s Wake and Virginia Woolf in much of her writing, especially in The Waves. Howe indicates in her letters that Finnegan’s Wake is especially important to her, as are the writings of Virginia Woolf (Keller “Interview” 20). Certain women critics have been able to fashion a voice of their own that participates in the “feminist imaginary.” In addition to Kristeva’s Revolution in Poetic Language and “Stabat Mater,” these critics include Luce Irigaray with “When Our Lips Speak Together,” Hélène Cixous in “Laugh of the Medusa,” Gloria Anzaldúa in Borderlands / La Frontera, Judith Butler in Bodies that Matter, Rachel DuPlessis

in The Pink Guitar, Trin Minh-ha in Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism, and many others, some of whom include Paula Gunn Allen, Leslie Marmon Silko, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Susan K. Miller. Thus, the feminist imaginary is not a restrictive or prescriptive style to proselytize for a particular point of view; rather, it is an infusion of the semiotic into the symbolic that charges language to “rapture” and to “rupture” the conventional order of things.

“Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence” (MED 11)? Howe was inspired by Dickinson, and I am inspired by her criticism and poetry. A “poetic literacy” emerges in Howe’s work that taps into the Kristevan semiotic and into a heightened language which in Ruth Salvaggio’s terms “hears the O,” the “fusion of sound and knowledge” (Salvaggio 2).

*Pythagorean Silence* and *The Liberties* continue Howe’s questioning of how women are silenced or elided from history. The Birth-mark, Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History explores her fascination with the antinomian controversy in American history, detailing and celebrating Anne Hutchison, Mary Rowlandson, and deconstructing the writings of early Puritans such as Cotton Mather and Thomas Shepherd. Overall, Howe’s writing combines her interests in memory, history, poetry, myth, legend, and visual art into

insightful experimental essays and poems which continue to reveal their mysteries to me, even after years of study.

However, there have been obstacles to work through along the way as I studied her work. First, was the daunting task of filling in the gaps of my knowledge about contemporary poetry. Although I had read a few poets, I knew more English Romantic poetry than American poetry. What a treat to discover Wallace Stevens! I read American poets such as Anne Hutcheson, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Muriel Rukeyser, Gertrude Stein, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, Theodore Roethke, to LANGUAGE poets, and contemporary poets such as Joy Harjo, Simon Ortiz, Sharon Olds, and Evan Boland, among others. This adventure has taken time.

Another obstacle for me to overcome was Howe's use of experimental form. My studying art history was fundamental in situating her work with its references to Dada and Duchamp, which I later hope to demonstrate. Howe's New Historical and postmodern theoretical leanings required brushing up on Stephen Greenblatt and the chaos theories of Deleuze and Guattari. Add to all this my study of English Literature, especially *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, and my study of feminist theory, especially Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, and my task of unfolding Susan Howe's meanings began to happen. Another important aspect of Howe's writing focuses on all things Irish, including Yeats and the Irish Theater (her mother was an Irish actress), Irish and English legend, genocide, and gender



issues. Luckily, I had an interest in many of her obsessions, including even Nietzsche and the German Romantic philosophers and poets. Everything coalesced in her writing, both fascinating and frustrating me.

As time went by, I began to understand more and more of her point of view. I read her archive in the Mandeville Library at the University of California in San Diego and attempted to understand her life and how it manifested itself in her works. This process took longer than I had hoped. I have continued to work on this dissertation throughout the past decade. My children grew up and moved away. My house burned down and destroyed my books and my manuscripts. I have lived through tornados and floods and fire, the birth of a grandchild and the death of loved ones. Yet slowly and methodically I held onto my study of this poet. In the process, I have learned a little about poetry, a lot about living with Keats' Negative Capability, and I've learned how to persevere. The result is this dissertation. Not much for so many years of toil. But something. A little thing. That difficult little.

I believe that Susan Howe's work often repays close examination with insights into a feminist imaginary and a vision that opens vistas that have, too often, been closed down by the ordinary use of language as a transparent medium for communication. It is this feminist imaginary of antinomian resistance to the "hegemonic," or the staid order of things, which I enjoy.

There are pitfalls along the way, however. Sometimes Howe's writing pushes too far from the borders of referentiality. The result is that the reader is often left disoriented. When this occurs, many readers might, understandably, simply stop reading. Most often, however, persistence in following her through the word forest results in new insights.

In a Village Voice article, "Four-Part Harmony: Robert Creeley and Susan Howe Talk It Out," Creeley says, "I'd advise students to read. Study with someone who intrigues you, or provokes you, even confuses you" (22). Susan Howe's writings held that initial fascination, provocation, and confusion for me. Her non-traditional techniques have challenged me to begin making something of them. Would her writing unfold itself to me as treasure, dross, or hoax, something like a postmodern version of the Emperor's New Clothes?

Within the same interview with Creeley, Howe asserts, "(p)eople have to find their own voices somehow. To me poetry is, I hate to say it, something holy" (22). In her personal correspondence she also indicates that poets are, to quote Hölderlin, "'(t)o attend singing to the trace of the fugitive gods.' And what a gift to have at least thought we heard the trace of their singing" (Mandeville 11, 16, 7). Her insistence that poets must find a voice seems instantly to place her outside of LANGUAGE poetries or the realm of concrete poetry, which her poetry sometimes resembles. Her urging that poetry is something "holy" situates her within a Romantic tradition. Yet, she also names Modernists—T.S. Eliot,

William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, and Hilda Doolittle--as influences. (Keller Interview ).

New Criticism has advised us to trust the poem, not the poet. Yet, perusing Howe's archive containing her early notebooks and letters gives the researcher a sense of her personal world and worldview. My project was to look closely at her writings, both poetry and criticism. I perceived this as an adventure of discovery, rather than as a problem to be solved, even as an invitation to know *jouissance* and an exploration of *differance*. Howe's poetic language seemed to me to move towards, and to sometimes embody, Kristeva's "different ethics—not one that turns its back on the law and moral code, but gives it "flesh, language and jouissance"" (Salvaggio 124). Access to her personal archive gave me additional insight and a sense of personal connection that made her poems even more interesting to me.

Much has been written about Howe since I began this study nearly a decade ago. Her writing has fascinated major critics and poets—Marjorie Perloff, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, John Taggart, and others. Howe has a substantial body of work—too much to encompass in the scope of one dissertation. I have, therefore, focused on her early and middle work. Her latest book, Pierce-Arrow, is a study of Charles Sanders Peirce, and, as such, might be a truly exciting semiotic study. Instead, in this study, I have focused, first, on Frame Structures, which gathers together much of her earliest work; second, My

Emily Dickinson; and, third the Europe of Trusts, which includes *Defenestration of Prague*, *Pythagorean Silence*, and *The Liberties*. Although her later work is beyond the scope of this study, I briefly consider the continued manifestation of the feminist imaginary in her later works: The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History, Singularities, and The Nonconformist's Memorial.

My critical exegesis of these works is largely opportunistic. Following the advice of a wise counselor, I attempted to read Howe's poems without overlaying a blueprint of any particular theorist, but to attend carefully to Howe's own poetics. Not surprisingly, I found myself seeing through many different lenses, prismatically. Although I did not treat each work or poem as a heterocosm or object complete in itself, I was guided by a basic Anglo-Saxon concern with the object. Obviously, the meaning of a poem is the poem itself, and not an explication of it. Yet, it is still a written vehicle for carrying meaning—whether that meaning is analogically presented as a visual component or whether the meaning is presented through the representation of words and their multitudinous depths, or whether through music or through noise, or through any combinations of these aspects.

Interestingly, Howe's own theory of poetics and criticism is similar to my method. In writing either she follows the "(c)inder of the lexical drift" (FS 22). In Howe's Talisman interview with Edward Foster, she clarifies her technique of

writing: "I begin with fragments and bits and pieces, and they take me to what I find" (BM 165).

I have attempted, therefore, to look, first, at the writings individually and, second, to contextualize them within her oeuvre. Third, I have attempted to read what she has written in her letters, and, fourth, to read what others have written to her. Fifth, I have, as well, sought to read what critics and scholars and poets have written about her writing. It goes without saying also that a working knowledge of poetry in general and Romantic, Modern and Contemporary movements in poetry in particular, have been essential to this study. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Richard II* are immensely important, as are German Romantic philosophers, such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, and the German poets Georg Trakl and Rainer Marie Rilke. Also, one must know Keats and Coleridge, and especially Wallace Stevens.

Add to this Howe's knowledge of art and painting from her Dadaist inspirations to the hermeticism of Ian Hamilton Finlay and her knowledge of American Colonial writers, early American antinomian poets, and the American Transcendentalists Emerson, Thoreau, and Melville. Finally, when we add Howe's Irish heritage, including William B. Yeats and James Joyce, and Irish playwrights Sean O'Casey and John M. Synge, we begin to see the study of Susan Howe's work as truly an inexhaustible tome of literacy and culture.

“Howe’s poetry questions received perspectives and centers of power as it attempts to occupy, or at least approximate, traditionally neglected positions” (Dworkin 397). Howe, like Dickinson, eschews the masculine sublime for a feminine version based on her antinomian self-reliance (“Dickinson, Moore, and the Poetics of Deflection” 45). In her earliest work, there emerges an aesthetic of “decreation” and renunciation which deconstructs both the myth of a coherent history and the myth of a coherent self, yet which allows a subtle mapping of the self and movement towards finding her own distinctive poetic voice.

I have organized my analysis more chronologically rather than semiotically or thematically. I begin with My Emily Dickinson, her earliest literary criticism in order to more fully establish Howe’s own theory of poetics. Then I move to Frame Structures, which incorporates her early work of *Hinge Picture*, *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*, *Cabbage Gardens*, and *Secret History of the Dividing Line*. I especially focus on *Hinge Pictures* in Frame Structures because it is there that her feminist imaginary begins to manifest itself. I move to the works that, although they were first published separately, are now gathered collectively in Europe of Trusts: *Pythagorean Silence*, *Defenestration of Prague*, and *The Liberties*. Finally, I consider her later works—Singularities: *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, *Thorow*, and *Scattering as Behavior Towards Risk*, Nonconformists Memorial, and The Birth-mark, Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History.

*Hinge Picture* is a polysemous, complex text that deconstructs other texts upon which it is based, exposing the violence inherent in hegemonic, hypostatic, or reified texts. A polysemous text disallows a single reading and disallows language to be viewed as a transparent medium of communication. Often the semantic sense has been undermined by the fragmentation of thought, words, or phonemes. This playful, surreal technique undermines history as anything like a coherent narrative. “Hegemonic” “hypostatic” or “reified” texts are those that have shut out all other “voices” which have “hardened” into a single thread of narrative and which allows a clear understanding and a clear narrative. Inasmuch as Decline and Fall is a hegemonic text, Howe’s use of it as a subtext or paratext disassembles the original and exposes the fact that “‘history is a record of winners’” (Keller 2).

According to Howe, “It [*Hinge Picture*] was a reaction to reading Gibbon’s Decline and Fall which brought the ancient Egyptian and Roman world alive for me. Now I feel I was too locked into the box-like form—it amounted to an obsession. But I still like it” (Mandeville 74, 4, 18). Marjorie Perloff contends that even these early works show a distinctive style which functions as a “signature” that serves subtly to reconstitute a lyric “I,” or authorial presence. Howe herself says that she found her *voice* later, while working on My Emily Dickinson. She comments about her early work in a letter to John Taggart, “I

think my early work (Chanting(sic) [at the Crystal Sea] and others) was poised on the brink of the abyss and afraid to jump” (Mandeville 11, 16, 17).

My Emily Dickinson is Howe’s first substantial work of literary criticism / poetry. Since then, she has continued her unique prose / poetry criticism with Birth-mark. My Emily Dickinson is a poet’s reading of a poet with Dickinson serving as Howe’s inspiration and model of *antinomian* resistance. Howe continues this subversive antinomian resistance even in the construction of her texts, which is experimental and nontraditional. The point here is that Howe recognizes in Dickinson a voice and a technique that she seems to imitate and even to adopt. This voice is, I believe, the “feminist imaginary.” Within this voice there is a hesitation and a transformation which occurs in the language itself. It is also an associational technique that is highly based on chance movements of the mind and fortuitous conjunctions of thought. Both Dickinson and Howe write in a vein of antinomian, almost heretical, resistance to ordinary language. Always, this is a critique of logocentrism and “single” vision.

Moving next to the works anthologized in Europe of Trusts, I continue to trace her antinomian stance as it is manifested through what it means to be a woman in a “Pythagorean” world. In this work, Howe continues to be transfixed with the sound of language and the multitudinous echoes possible for individual words or phonemes. “Language,” Howe clarifies, “surrounds chaos” (EOT 13). She traces voices of Ophelia, Esther Johnson, and Cordelia. Howe meditates and



plays with myth and history. She is especially interested in how they are reified or recorded within the written word itself, on the page, in books, and pamphlets, or other discourses. *The Liberties*, especially, questions women's position within an absurd world of violence and loss. Howe takes two women who exemplify women's "liquidation"—Esther Johnson and Lear's daughter, Cordelia. Johnson has been "liquidated" by sheer neglect. Although Jonathan Swift's letters to her were all saved, hers to him were not. Howe sketches her "portrait" by quoting the confused descriptions of Stella (Esther Johnson)—"was plump (Some), extremely thin (Others). Sickly in her childhood, she grew into perfect health (Swift)" (Eot 152). Cordelia, on the other hand, was unable to use language falsely to communicate the lies which Lear wished to hear. She chose silence, as emblematically, many women have had to do. These examples illustrate how women are caught within an absurd world of violence and loss, a world which silences them through erasure or circumstance.

Howe asks hard questions and her writing moves in angst through a decreative downwardness, reconstituting itself in a Neo-Romantic questioning. This neo-romantic questioning is illustrated in My Emily Dickinson with the image of Childe Roland who stood, at last, knowing all, losing all, yet risking all in the moment that he "Dauntless" brings "the slug-horn to my [his] lips I set/And blew" (138). The poet, like Roland, redeems himself as he risks all even though things are, apparently, without hope. Howe's poetry exemplifies in technique and

thematic concerns this search for a redemptive vision. Her writings cut through rationalism and colonization to offer that “difficult little,” that “poetry of earth” (Stevens’ Necessary Angel) which is truly the trace of fugitive gods. It is this alternative vision—a vision of the feminist imaginary—which gives Howe’s work, for me, an indispensable essence or heart and which keeps me reading and engaged, even when she moves more and more towards visual art. Howe summarizes her position, “Poetry is the great stimulation of life. Poetry leads past possession of self to transfiguration beyond gender. Poetry is redemption from pessimism. Poetry is affirmation in negation, ammunition in the yellow eye of a gun that an allegorical pilgrim will shoot straight into the quiet of Night’s frame” (MED 138). This reminds me of Stevens’ “After the final No there comes a Yes, and upon this Yes the world depends.”

John Palattella’s “An End of Abstraction: An Essay on Susan Howe’s Historicism” considers her writing in conjunction with the painter Ad Reinhardt and the concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay. This is especially pertinent because Susan Howe’s essay “The End of Art” made comparisons between these same two artists. Howe particularly admired their abstract minimalism. Palattella comments about Howe’s own abstract minimalism:

“If, for Finlay and Reinhardt, the end of art is astringent abstract formalism, for Howe the end of abstract indeterminacy is a pragmatics of art that locates the means of historical understanding in a process of linguistic and

rhetorical play that sounds out identity through the language world (and language of the world) surrounding it”( Palattella 76 ). Howe’s re-emerging focus continues to be history and how our language constructs our understanding of that history, especially how language constructs our identities.

Palattella, citing James Clifford’s essay “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” finds ethnography’s “secret sharer” to be surrealism. He makes a similar analogy with Howe’s narratives, for which the secret sharer is antinomianism (78-79). Put more simply, the paratext or subtext in Clifford’s essay is surrealism, and the paratext or subtext in Howe’s narratives, especially in My Emily Dickinson and The Birth-mark, is antinomianism. A Bibliography of the King’s Book, or Eikon Basilike and The Birth-mark’s poem, “Incloser,” which is the autobiography of Thomas Shepard, trace similar antinomian voices. These texts “(f)oreground the myriad ways that we use cultural institutions and language as much as they use us, Clifford and Howe plot how identity and agency emerge from predicament”(80). The point here is that Howe continues to rupture found texts by highlighting or tracing antinomian resistance found within these original writings. “Historical consciousness,” and the self that emerges she shows to be constructed by circumstance. Her personal example is the how the intense impression of war filled her childhood with images of mass murders, graves, destruction and the chaos of war made on her during the years 1939 to 1946 (Eot 11-12).

Considering the implications of Kristeva's semiotic, however, Palattella posits that although Howe shares Kristeva's concern for that which is culturally Other, the abjected, "Kristeva's reluctance to grant women a role beyond the silent pre-Oedipal reinforces the marginalized role they have traditionally occupied in the West" (95). First what is, in Kristeva's sense culturally Other or "abjected" is exactly what is cast aside or marginalized to the degree that this marginalization helps create the very identities of those who are casting one group aside. In other words, those who create "the Other" and that which is "abjected" define themselves as being "not that." Women are created in a patriarchal society as Other. The irrational and semiotic is delegated in a patriarchal society to the abjected—cast away as inadequate and defiled—like fingernail clippings, or phlegm, or pus from a wound, or menstrual blood. All these are abjected things, created as culturally disgusting and defiling.

Susan Howe wishes to reclaim and give voice to those voices that have been silenced, erased, or eradicated: "I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate" (EOT 14). Howe does not want to imprison women in any silent pre-oedipal amorphous moment, but to allow language itself to resonate on multiple levels, sometimes, even back to the deep level of semiotic knowing. It is this which I find to be transformational and freeing in her work—beyond pessimism and participating in a "redemptive vision."

Howe's feminism is complex. Kornelia Freitag zeroes in on Howe's differences with the essentialist feminism, represented by Alicia Ostriker and other "gynocritics." Ostriker advocates women's writing that is based on a politics of "authenticity." Critics such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar are also influenced by this model of women's writing and maintain there is such a thing as a gender-based difference. Freitag notes the marginalization of women writers like Susan Howe, who are "differently different." Howe's writing is experimental and "emphasize(s) 'the materiality of the signifier' and restores 'the reader as co-producer of the text'" (47) so it is according to Jed Rasula in what he calls the "poeticologically diverse avant-garde mode" (47). In plain language this means that Howe's writing does not follow the politically correct model of women's writing that touts the existence of an essential self which, through struggle, finds itself and begins to speak. Her writing is avant-garde and experimental in ways that are uncomfortable for some feminists. For this reason her writing has been ostracized and she has not been "invited to the party," or well received. This marginalization is based on a politics of identity which Kornelia Freitag addresses.

Freitag analyzes the politics of identity and the creation / decreation of an 'authentic' self within the text as one of Howe's main concerns in *Eikon*. The "creation," "decreation," of authentic identities is played with throughout this book. The very book itself was supposed to have been a forgery, by an unknown

author, pretending to be King Charles the First. The same theme is carried throughout with the play on the madness of Dicken's Mr. Dick of David Copperfield who continues to confuse himself with King Charles. Howe plays with this politics of identity here. Freitag comments on this aspect of her writing: "Howe, partaking in the feminist project of deconstruction, understands the definition of female 'identity' as embedded in, not outside of, the history and language of discourses" (49). Howe asserts: "This is my historical consciousness. I have no choice in it" (EOT 13). Critical to Freitag's analysis is her statement that: "I understand the poetry of Susan Howe as being situated at the intersection of the emancipatory project of feminism 'to put women into discourse,' and the project of post structuralism to distrust and deconstruct 'grand narrative of legitimation'" (56). This project of emancipatory feminism combined with her technique of deconstruction allows a feminist imaginary to emerge. It is this feminist imaginary that resonates not only throughout Howe's *Eikon Basilike*, but also throughout her early work as well. It is this double urge—to put women back into discourse and deconstruct discourse at the same time that creates an oxymoronic project which stimulates a release of associative, semiotic language through the fissures which are created by Howe's deconstructive methods.

Behind The Birth-mark, Eric Selinger claims, is "'The Poet' Howe, who 'falls from language into voice, grace into works, the open house of 'Possibility' into the closure and capture (though she resists it) of prose'" (Selinger "My Susan

Howe 61). The Birth-mark is much more like common prose than most of her writing. Even here, however, she deploys a “poetic literacy” (Salvaggio 99-126) that lifts her prose from ordinary prescriptive language of the essay into something more resonant, heightened and multivalent. Although these essays may look like more traditional prose, the point is that they are not. Howe’s language maintains that feminist imaginary which is her poetic literacy.

To further investigate this question of voice in her works, Eric Selinger pursues the “Figure of the Poet” (61) as presented in My Emily Dickinson. He is less than enthusiastic about her technique and her “strategies of abdication” (or the style of her text). When completely befuddled by her technique, he admits turning to those who do make something of her—Marjorie Perloff and Peter Quartermain. Yet, he criticizes their accounts, as well, since one “involves placing words and passages into sentences” (369) and the other method simply valorizes those, in Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ terms, “shards of mystery” (Selinger 369). Although Selinger finds that her prose in Nonconformist Memorial “braves...conventional syntax” and has “a unity and (often) fluency of voice,” he prefers her poetry with its “audacity and stammer” (385) and, I would add, its stunning lyric beauty:

Half thought thought otherwise  
Loveless and sleepless the sea  
Where you are where I would be  
Half thought though otherwise  
Loveless and sleepless the sea. (citation)

My point is that even in the Howe's later work, where she, sometimes, seems to be turning more towards convention transparent language, her writing scintillates with the stunning oral qualities that evoke the feminist semiotic transformational possibilities of language.

Susan Howe's interview with Lyn Keller appeared in the spring 1995 issue of Contemporary Literature. The introduction quickly sketches in the biographical details of her life, her publications, and some of the major themes and concerns in her writing. "Howe combines in her writing, as in her genealogy, an (Irish) love of the word's rich music, its mystery and magic, its wealth of allusive and personal association, with a (New England intellectual's) passion of documentation, fascination with tradition, and quest for truth" (Keller 2 ).

Howe's answer mentions her interest in collage, the tremendous energy of the sixties, artists such as Ad Reinhardt and John Cage, the influence of her husband, sculptor David von Schlegel, and the fascination she had for Charles Olson and Robert Smithson's interest in mapping (3-6). Howe, in explaining the mirroring of texts in The Nonconformists Memorial, emphasizes her initial interest in Duchamp's "Large Glass" and the accompanying "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even. " Remarkably, Howe identifies the "strongest element I feel when I am writing something is acoustic" (13). Howe explains that sound is the



most important element in her writing and also clarifies that she hears her work in her head “as theater” (13).

Her early influences, including those of her Irish actress mother, are evident in her following line: “For example the pages in *Eikon* and in Nonconformist’s Memorial we have been talking about are in my head as theater” (13). The interview is full of personal stories, insights in how to read her work, and her comments on why she doesn’t consider herself a “LANGUAGE” poet. In response to a question concerning whether her writing is geared towards “cultural change,” she replies that her real goal is to write something as beautiful and moving as some of Stevens’ or Eliot’s poetry, yet to be free to “pursue it [your gift] to the nth degree”(23). Here, Howe sidesteps the issue of whether her poetry is intended for disrupting anything as grandiose as a “hegemonic” world. Her most important, her real concern as a poet, is to write poetry that is both “beautiful and moving.” These aesthetic and emotive aspects of her poetic project lift her work away from the didactic and propagandistic towards an antinomian sublime—one that is oppositional, discarded, Other—one that won’t comfortably “fit” into a frame structure because it dismantles the structure from within. Susan Howe’s work embodies a “poetry of earth,” a poetry of immanence, a poetry imbued with the feminist imaginary. It is this which I now trace throughout her early work.

## Chapter One--My Emily Dickinson

My Emily Dickinson / Sharp Shooters in the Forest of Words—Susan and Emily, sisters of the Spirit in American Poetry

“Emily Dickinson’s writing is my strength and my shelter.”  
(Birth-mark 2)

A poet who began publishing in small presses, Susan Howe had received remarkably little attention until her publication of My Emily Dickinson in 1985. Now a professor at SUNY Buffalo, she has received more and more academic recognition. My Emily Dickinson is an eccentric work of criticism that examines Dickinson’s poetics as only one poet reading another might do. My Emily Dickinson does not build a scholarly argument by traditional methods, utilizing a thesis and structuring a linear, carefully empirical analysis. Paradoxically, Howe’s scholarship seems impeccable, even though her method derives from imaginative leaps and serendipitous circumstantial evidence.

Similar to William’s In the American Grain and Charles Olson’s Call Me Ishmael, Howe merges exposition, narration, and poetic language in a kaleidoscopic meditation on Dickinson. Although she covers very little original ground in her analysis of Dickinson, her prismatic technique reveals striking similarities in her own writing and poetics and in Dickinson’s writing and poetics.

A reader whose idea of Dickinson as an eccentric agoraphobic who wrote quaint hymn-like ditties about plants and bees and butterflies and who liked being “nobody too,” comes away from My Emily Dickinson with a transformed image, a truly revitalized Dickinson. Howe reveals Dickinson as a poet of incredible vision and power.

In My Emily Dickinson, Howe reconstructs Dickinson as a pre-modern poet whose vision and art she reads as a powerful, even explosive, precursor of her own poetics. My project is to reconstruct Howe’s reclamation of Dickinson in this landmark work of criticism and to identify the points at which their poetics converge. Janet Rodney identifies Howe’s Dickinson as a “sharp shooter in the forest of words” (Rodney “Language and Susan” 48). A closer look at Howe’s reading of Dickinson reveals that they are sisters in a spirit of subversion and rebellion who share a poetics that refuses “presence,” a poetics that often turns on dissembling and disguise. Both Howe and Dickinson speak with Antinomian voices. Both are “sharpshooters” in an American wilderness of words.

Howe has been identified as “one of the most important poets of our time” (Lazer 9). Her poetics has inspired reflection by some of the major poets and critics of the present, including Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Charles Bernstein, and John Taggart. Howe’s poetics, like L A N G U A G E poetry of the seventies and like Dada of the early twentieth century, is based on the “disruption” of what Kristeva posits as the ‘symbolic order.’ This symbolic order is the “frame”

through which semiotic knowing is filtered, through which we are able to articulate thoughts and create the symbolic world we know—especially language. This symbolic order is disrupted in both Dada and Surrealism and in the LANGUAGE poetry of the seventies. A similar disruption occurs in My Emily Dickinson. In Howe's poetry / criticism, the disruption is, concurrently salvaged and reinscribed into the 'symbolic order' by her use of paratexts. Paratexts are those subtexts which Howe has used as the palimpsest-like base to form her current work. These paratexts serve to gather back language set free within the semiotic unconscious by Howe's incredible word paintings. Since Howe was trained first as a visual artist, her poetry sometimes creates word art, which often does not read left to right, and which, sometimes, especially in her some of her middle and later work, hardly reads at all. Paratexts serve to re-inscribe her poetry back into meaning. Yet, the meaning remains, the poems work like tiny bombs, perched on the borders of referentially. For instance one example of the paratexts at work is the last poem in *Eikon Basilike*, page eighty-two of *Nonconformist's Memorial*. Here the effect is nearly one of visual art. The reader can trace the remnants of two classical myths—that of Arachne and Ariadne as paratexts to a poem that is scattered like broken threads, twisted down the page. Here, within these paratexts, is a key to re-inscribe this particular word-art back into some form of narrative. In order to do this, however, the reader must know

the stories and be willing to descend, with Howe, into the semiotic confusion of multiple meanings and multivalent possibilities for re-constructing this as story.

*In Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, the paratexts of Hope Atherton's actual historical wanderings through Indian territory during King Philip's War function to gather together a series of otherwise scattered poems. Howe incorporates apparently real documents within her text. An "Extract from a letter (dated June 8, 1781) of Stephen Williams to President Styles:" mentions papers left by the Rev. Hope Atherton and documents his excursion with garrison soldiers into the wilderness, where he lost his way and attempted to surrender to the Indians, who would not allow him to do so (*Singularities* 5). According to this account, his "story" was viewed with suspicion by his own congregation (4, 5). Howe's entire poem is structured around the strange, pre-revolutionary event. Another of Howe's paratexts is Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, which she uses as a base or subtext for *Hinge Picture*. These subtexts create a palimpsest effect, which holds together a poetry that, of itself, might simply "scatter" (Mei Mei Brusenbrugger). Indeed, the last poem of Singularities is titled *Scattering as Behavior towards Risk*. Often Howe uses verifiable historical events as her paratext or framework, recreating them within the bounds of poetic license and creating a dialogue with the original text.

My Emily Dickinson certainly relies on paratexts to order the disruption of her writing. Each section is pulled together through the deployment of poetry,

which is used as an extended analogy to round up the diaspora of her meditations. Keat's poem "On Sitting Down to Read Shakespeare Once Again," serves this function in section one. Howe's reference to this poem sends all readers back into "the old oak forest," ("we that were wood") the forest of words, and reminds the reader poetically of the influence of Shakespeare on Dickinson, as well as on Keats. Robert Browning's "Childe Roland" functions as the paratext to collect the meaning of the second and the third sections of My Emily Dickinson. "Child Emily" is Howe's vision of Dickinson. The point here is that Howe's associational technique is clarified and held together by the use of her paratexts throughout My Emily.

Howe's writing moves in two directions, towards and away from meaning simultaneously. Her writing is paratactic and paradigmatic. It disrupts hierarchies and univocality while at the same time providing a "topographical" map to guide the reader. The reader can literally "scout" through the forest of words, just as Thoreau himself scouted through the real forest, "Go on the Scout they say / (t)hey will go near Swegachey" (Thorow 43). The reader is led back to the "haunted house" of art and culture (MED 13).

In "Paragraphs for Susan Howe," Charles Bernstein speculates on the power of Howe's poetry: "She sings of origins & hears the blanks firing in the night of her exploding syllables" (87). He continues: "Perhaps poetry, like the wilderness, has to be denied as part of an effort to conquer it" (87). Howe's

poetry refuses the “clarity” necessitated by the “dominant culture’s discursive practices.” Instead of univocality, her work expresses Bahktinian multivocality. What Bernstein says of Howe, Howe says of Dickinson. “She [. . .] never stopped writing about Liberty, Exile, Origin” (MED 107).

Howe reads Dickinson as a poet of multiplicity and absence. There are multiple ways to understand the language of Dickinson’s poems, just as in many of the fascicles there are numerous possible words listed as alternatives for the one chosen. These choices have often been elided when her work was published. This is part of her bowdlerization and how Howe maintains that Dickinson has been edited and her penchant for poetic multiplicity has been narrowed. Howe also reads Dickinson as a poet of “absence” because Dickinson chose to “hesitate,” not to “sing” herself large as Walt Whitman did, but to be “nobody too.” This is a feminist politics of identity. Against the tradition of American poets who “sing themselves,” both Howe and Dickinson seem to remove themselves from their work. They leave only a trace, a rather ghostly presence, which functions more as the Foucauldian “author-function” than as a celebration of personality. This is in opposition to a “poetry of presence,” an egocentric patriarchal cult of poetic presence established in American letters by critics who value texts according to the extent to which it incorporates an author’s authentic “self.” Critics such as Alice Ostriker tend to explicate text through personality

and biography. This means that Howe shuns explication of a poet's work through reliance on the personal.

My Emily Dickinson refuses the standard reading of Dickinson through these methods. Although she does use elements of biography, she maintains that a poet is "salted with fire" and cannot be "explained" through these approaches (MED 7). Howe's basic approach is to analyze the influences of Dickinson's reading on her writing. To sum up, Howe illustrates the palimpsest reading of Dickinson, identifying in Dickinson a mirror image, an ancestress whose innovative form and clear-eyed analysis of culture presaged Howe's own experimental form and cultural, historical reading "Against the American Grain."

The title "My Emily Dickinson" suggests that Howe's study of Dickinson will be another that focuses on the biographical details of her life to explicate her texts or reconstruct her motives, to identify the mysterious lover of the "master letters," or to further inculcate the "Myth of the Moth of Amherst." Refreshingly, however, from the first quotation of William Carlos Williams, ironically positioned at the frontispiece to the last reference of "Childe Roland," Howe gives an alternative vision of Dickinson. Her essay repudiates Williams' contention that "Never a woman: never a poet. That's an axiom. Never a poet saw sun here" (MED Introduction).

In the Introduction to My Emily Dickinson, Howe takes Dickinson as her "Concord River," quoting Thoreau from *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack*



*Rivers*, as a stream which “let the river carry him / Emily Dickinson is my emblematical Concord River. / I am heading toward certain discoveries [. . .]” (MED Introduction). Thus, she begins her exploration of Dickinson not in a spirit of empirical, categorization or analysis, but as an adventure submerged within the flow of Dickinson’s discourse, an adventure into the semiotic “word forest” and back again. From the outset the reader is aware this is no traditional critical study, but a work of art in itself, one poetic voice interpreting another, with love.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section lacks a title yet has two quotations to announce it. The second section is “When I am through the old Oak Forest gone” and a personal note to her cousins. Part Two’s title is “Childe Emily to the Dark Tower Came,” and Part Three’s is “Trumpet Sing to Battle.” Each section functions allegorically to illuminate Dickinson as poet by drawing on Robert Browning’s dark and chivalrous figure to represent Dickinson’s struggle, her quest as poet.

Howe and Dickinson share an innovative poetics. Both poets stretched language to the edge of meaning. At this edge, Howe finds similarities between the innovative form of Dickinson and Gertrude Stein. According to Howe, Dickinson and Stein “meet each other along parts of the Self that begin and end in contradiction” (MED 11). Each poet reinvented language and “lifted the load of European literary custom” (1). Howe says of Dickinson: “In prose and in poetry she explored the implications of breaking the law just short of breaking off

communications with a reader” (11). Of Stein, she says, “she reached in words for new vision formed from the process of naming” (11). These assertions are true not only for Dickinson and Stein, but also for Howe herself.

Janet Rodney articulates the response Howe’s poetry requires of her:

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 (46).

Reading must occur in what Stanley Fish identifies as “virtual space” between the text and the reader. The disruption of the “natural” referentiality of language has been theorized for a century, especially with Saussure and Jakobson. The “avant-garde” text can be traced back to early Dadaists like Kurt Schwitters in Cologne and Stein in Paris, Pound’s experimental Cantos, Joyce and Woolf, or, even earlier, to the French Symbolist influences of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Valéry, and Mallarmé. Yet, in spite of the divergent roots of innovative or avant-garde writing, such writing remains oppositional to the dominant culture’s appropriation of language for “natural” referential communicative purposes. Like LANGUAGE poetry of the late seventies, Howe’s poetry participates in this oppositional discourse of disruption.

Dickinson, Stein, and Howe share a poetics of innovation. Hank Lazer also identifies another aspect of this innovation and multivocality. Howe's project often disallows univocality or a simplified, unified "authentic" self. Lazer makes the point that Howe's work is not fragmented without reason—not just a Cuisinart-like mess, but that the palimpsest qualities of her work, or the paratexts which fade through and create a conversation give Howe's work its unique quality. Also, he cautions that to choose a few parts that seem to cohere while disregarding those things that don't is unfair to her work. However, it is often necessary to do exactly this with Howe's work. Honestly, some of it coheres and some of it does not. To force it into a preconceived "frame" or narrative would be, according to Lazer, doing unjust violence to her work. To realize that her work might cohere in many directions is just sensible, however. It is this transformational quality of the work that, I believe, makes it exciting.

It is therefore dishonest criticism of her work to cite coherent pithy passages from the poems as if the experience of the poem crystallized with some finality...Howe's most fragmented writing is not a Cuisinart expression of a malfunctioning word processor conspiring with a virally infected computer printer...[it] suggests a more radicalized...version of John Ashbery's notion of poetry as palimpsest...a revisualization of notions of field-composition (Lazer 11).

Lazer sees the propensity in Howe to "inhabit a linguistic frontier on the verge of disorder; at the frontier she begins to remake and renew that order" (Lazer 11).

Lazer writes that Howe's project is innovative, experimental, and exploratory—  
exactly what she claims for Dickinson in My Emily Dickinson:

A great poet, carrying the antique imagination  
Of her fathers, 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. (85)

Howe's words were meant for Dickinson, yet they are just as applicable to her as  
well. Howe identifies her own penchant for linguistic decreation or  
antinomianism and innovation in Dickinson:

She built a new poetic form from her  
fractured sense of being eternally on  
intellectual borders, where confident  
masculine voices buzzed an alluring  
and inaccessible discourse, backward  
through history into aboriginal anagogy  
...a 'sheltered' woman audaciously invented  
a new grammar grounded in humility and  
hesitation. HESITATE. (20)

These "hesitations" and this "new grammar" are Dickinson's use of dashes and  
her technique of "forcing, abbreviating, pushing, padding, subtracting, riddling,  
interrogating, rewriting...pull[ing] text from text" (29). Howe identifies here  
Dickinson's need for inventing a new discourse for herself which was different  
than the confident and overbearing masculine discourse of poets such as Walt  
Whitman. Dickinson "invented a new grammar grounded in humility and  
hesitation." This new grammar is exactly another manifestation of the "feminist

imaginary” which I find in Howe, and which I believe Howe finds in Dickinson.

Virginia Woolf was another writer who struggled with this need to invent another grammar. She says:

I wish I could invent a new critical method—something swifter  
And lighter and more colloquial and yet intense: more to the point  
And less composed: more fluid and following the flight. . . The  
Old problem: how to keep the flight of the mind, yet be exact  
(Writer’s Diary 325, Pink Guitar 60) (Salvaggio 95)

It is exactly this “new critical method” which is both “lighter” and “intense”,  
“fluid and following the flight” [of thought] yet “exact.” This yearning resulted in  
Woolf’s associative stream-of-consciousness technique and this is another and,  
perhaps the most important, manifestation of the feminist imaginary as I  
understand it.

Howe’s poetry, also, often emphasizes borders, as in *Secret History of the  
Dividing Line*. In Emily Dickinson, as in Gertrude Stein, she has identified the  
precursors of her poetics, a poetics of innovation and multivocality. Howe draws  
her poetic lineage from Stein, Stevens, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and,  
especially, Wallace Stevens.

Biographical studies, which reduce a poet to the circumstances of her life  
or the eccentricities of her personality, do not, according to Howe, take into  
serious consideration the most important element in understanding a poet, what  
the poet reads. For this reason, My Emily Dickinson devotes considerable

attention to the impact of Dickinson's readings on her writing. A poet familiar with other great minds, Howe traces the impact of Shakespeare, especially the Plantagenet histories, of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and of Charles Dickens and the Bronte sisters on Dickinson. She also tracks the importance of Dickinson's relationship with T.W. Higginson and, especially, the legacy bequeathed from the history of Amherst itself: the spiritual legacy of Jonathan Edwards and the antinomian legacy of Mary Rowlandson, Anne Hutchinson, and Mrs. Dyer.

Howe's Dickinson has a complex vision of the world, a vision that cannot be reduced to the particulars of her biography. "There is a mystic separation between poetic vision and ordinary living" (13). The conditions for poetry rest outside each life at a miraculous reach indifferent to worldly chronology" (MED 13). Although this "poetic vision" and ordinary living are separate, Howe acknowledges the fact that "My voice for med from my life belongs to no one else" (13). Each voice and vision arises from a particular set of historical circumstances. "Givens of Dickinson's life: her sex, class, education, inherited character traits, all influences, all chance events--all carry the condition for her work in their wake" (13). Previous critics, including Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, have failed, in Howe's analysis, to go beyond a "reductivist" approach to her work and have, ultimately, failed to recognize its revolutionary penchant for linguistic decreation. Especially problematic for Howe has been the

misinterpretation of the so-called “master” letters. Howe sketches the “the direct use of ideas, wording, and imagery from both Aurora Leigh and David Copperfield...imagery taken from the two fictional characters, Marian Earle...and Little Em’ly...who are ‘fallen women’”(27). Howe sees these letters as a “self-conscious exercise” in imitation, not the “hysterical jargon” of a jilted lover. Howe recognizes biography but does not succumb to it in her analysis of Dickinson.

Howe believes that Dickinson’s world was formed by her readings and that her writings are imbued with the traces of those readings. Howe quotes a passage Dickinson wrote to her cousins when she had noticed George Eliot’s obituary: “‘she is the lane to the Indies, Columbus was looking for’” (19).

Dickinson constructed a female poetic voice in great part, according to Howe, from the inspiration and example of English novelists and poets George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and the Brontes. She was an “omnivorous gatherer” whose talent Howe calls “synthetic” (28).

In summary, the first section of My Emily Dickinson creates a vision of Dickinson as a poet who, herself, was “through the old oak forest gone” into the Wilderness of the human heart and the wildness of frontier borders in America. Dickinson is, for Howe, a woman whose vision and art cannot be explicated by the mere circumstances of biography or geography. She must be understood as an innovator confronting the task of articulating a vision of the world formed,

largely, from the fragments and filaments of other texts and poets that inspired her.

Paradoxically, however, although Howe does not wish to limit critique to the biographical, she maintains that the presence of the poet behind the text does matter. This issue is complicated by the fact that much of Dickinson's and much of Howe's poetry eschews the idea of presence put forth in writers such as Whitman. Howe walks a tight rope of critical maneuvering here. In The Birthmark Unsettling the Wilderness of American Literary History, Howe confronts the disposal of the author and the "stripping" of the author's subjectivity down to a mere "function of discourse." She clarifies, "I emphatically insist it does matter who's speaking" (20).

Howe maintains in this later work of American literary criticism that Dickinson has received "excommunication and banishment: analogous to the Antinomian Anne Hutchinson. Dickinson's "editorial apprehension and domestication" have chiseled her down, misrepresented her, "manhandled" her into orthodoxy and domesticated her into the canon (2) "Emily Dickinson's textual production is still being tamed for aesthetic consumption" (4). Although Howe is opposed to creating her as a "female Whitman" in a tradition that reads her poetry as the ultimate manifestation of personality or self, Howe still questions the validity of erasing the author altogether, and especially the effects this erasure and misrepresentation have on the reception of her writings.



Howe's critical technique falls outside biographical essentialism but does rely on explication of text through re-narratization of the historical and literary relationships in Dickinson's life. Here, Howe brings in a revisionist historical scholarship, which relies on the inspiration and methods of Stephen Greenblatt and of Michael Rogin. Howe reclaims Dickinson for herself by an artful and scholarly re-examination of her life as it is revealed in her letters, poems, her fascicles, and the historical and literary milieu in which Dickinson lived.

The vision Howe pulls from Dickinson's poetry is a vision of the abyss. It is a vision very similar to her own, a very dark vision. She reconstructs Dickinson as a proto-postmodernist, not only in technique, but also in her themes of desolation and refusal to accept complicity in a comforting vision of the world. The second and third sections are titled after Robert Browning's "Childe Roland," a Victorian vision of the wasteland years before T.S. Eliot, and the poet's call to create out of destruction.

"Childe Emily to the Dark Tower Came" puts Dickinson in the position of the enigmatic figure of Childe Roland himself. That a tremendous amount of scholarship has been written on this poem in an attempt to explicate the central figure adds to the real ambiguity inherent in understanding the necessity for a poet to create. However, the images of desolation and chivalric questing in the face of utter despair through a wasteland to a frightening end emphasize the predicament of the solitary individual in the world and, especially, the predicament of the poet

who still brings the 'slughorn' to his lips, who still transforms life into poetry. Child Emily is Howe's image for Dickinson in search of "Life's supreme mystery that is the Tower."

Howe not only reads other writers through Dickinson, but she reads Dickinson against the backdrop of the Civil War through a Benjaminian distrust of history as barbarity and through a Foucauldian questioning of the power relationships inherent within any discourse. What emerges is a Dickinson that erupts with renewed "Vesuvian" force, a Dickinson who is released from reductionist biological readings, such as Paula Bennett's, which make too many poems into statements of desire somewhere between conscious expression and subconscious repression.

Dickinson's writing is also freed, through Howe's handling of it, from a contextualization around her letters to her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson as Martha Nell Smith reads her poetry in "Rowing in Eden" (Morris 137). This work claims an intrinsically lesbian relationship between the two women somewhere on the continuum between subconscious latent possibility and conscious acted reality.

Howe contextualizes Dickinson in a belletristic fashion around Dickinson's reading. Much of Howe's argument centers on "My Life Had Stood a Loaded Gun." Howe believes Dickinson anticipated, in this shadowy poem, the darkness of Nietzsche's vision twenty years before his infamous statement

concerning the “death of god” (MED 35). Howe focuses the second and third sections of the book loosely around this poem. In Part II, she traces the “foreshadowing” of Dickinson’s conscience through her Calvinist / Puritan heritage, especially the impact of the ‘Myth of the Promised Land’ on the building of the American conscience. In a section titled ‘Archaeology,’ Howe digs through New England history to uncover the foundations of Emily Dickinson’s spiritual and antinomian legacy.

Howe fashions a kaleidoscopic vision of Dickinson, a vision that includes shards and pieces of literature, theology, and history. It is a vision which coalesces through the mind of a twentieth-century poet, Howe, seeing through the work of a nineteenth century poet, Dickinson, the work of other nineteenth-century poets and novelists, the works of an eighteenth-century theologian and philosopher, and the drama of the Bard of the Seventeenth Century as he echoes down the years--to our time.

Although My Emily Dickinson was written and published in the eighties, it exemplifies Howe’s obsessions with the counter sublime—that feminist, antinomian imaginary—in history, in language, and in women’s writing in a much more accessible format than her earliest poetic works. Frame Structures gathers these early works of poetry together and, indeed, serves as a “frame” in which to collect them. This “frame structure” has a multitude of possible metaphorical and non-metaphorical meanings including language, world view, and perception. The

preface plays throughout on the idea of frames and structures in many ways. This word play, punning, and wit are a substantial part of Howe's ambiguity—the possibility for language to go in more than one direction simultaneously—and it adds a poetic valence to what might otherwise be misconstrued as quirky prose. This is, indeed, heightened language of poetry even in the preface which weaves a framework or web of words around her first poems and gives us a personal voice to bind them together. This lyric or authorial presence is hidden in these early poems. Much like Dickinson, Howe maintains a distance from her work which on closer examination is itself the “frame” of the poems. Both the preface itself and the early works gathered in this anthology continue to reveal the feminist imaginary which is multivocal, transformational, poetic language that disallows singular readings and which often subverts the very language it uses without ever giving up the possibility of communication.

## Chapter Two--Frame Structures

### I. *Preface*

Frame Structures, her first anthology, features on its cover Howe's photograph of her husband David von Schlegell's "India Wharf Sculpture" beside Boston Harbor. (FS back cover). This photograph is itself a partially built frame. The sea is visible through this frame, just as the semiotic becomes visible or known through the frame of language itself. This image is used as a metaphor for the way Howe deconstructs language, revealing it as the frame through which and by which we structure our world.

Susan Howe wrote the preface to her collected early poems, Frame Structures in 1995. This twenty-seven-page introduction to her work at first appears to be written in prose. Closer examination, however, reveals these sentence-like structures to be something akin to ordinary prose *and* something akin to poetry. The language is heightened like that of poetry, and often connectives are eliminated. This chapter begins the inquiry into Howe's poetry by analyzing in an opportunistic, associative fashion her preface and collected books *Hinge Picture*, *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*, *Cabbage Gardens*, and *Secret History of the Dividing Line*. One very useful way to think about the difference between her prose and her poetry can be borrowed from Heidegger. The "real," the "facts," the "historical" comprise that which is in Heideggerean terms, "idle talk." Scattered throughout this discourse of the "real" or "idle talk" is a

discourse of poetry with language somewhere “between idle talk and silence” (Spanos 164). The term is not intended to disparage the facts as presented by Howe, but rather to contextualize them within a Heideggerean understanding, and, hopefully, to shed some light on the construction of her poetics. Howe’s poetics has a direct affinity with Heidegger’s notions of structure, play, and the tropes of measuring and distance.

First, the title of this anthology appears enigmatic. In what ways are these early poems “frame structures?” An essential correspondence exists between Howe’s poetics and Heidegger’s idea of freeing language from grammar (Sedgwick 172). Although there is evidence in her sketchbooks and in her letters that she has read Heidegger, I am only claiming a confluence of thought. “Heidegger talks of this ‘liberation of language from grammar’ in terms of a transportation of our understanding ‘into a more original essential framework...this ‘more original essential’ basis of language is conceived by Heidegger in terms of a structure: it is a framework” (Sedgwick 172). Howe’s writing does nothing, if not to participate playfully in this liberation of words from the strictures of grammar and to transport the reader from the realm of mundane or “idle-talk” to a “more original essential” language, which is poetry.

This move back towards poetry, and into a “decreative” literature, can be found in both Wallace Stevens’ work and Charles Olson’s work. Decreative

literature is discussed by Spanos in “Martin Heidegger and the Question of Literature: A Preface.” Spanos refers to postmodern fiction, plays and poetry, “For, like Heidegger’s destructive hermeneutics this is...in the phrase Wallace Stevens appropriates from Simon Weil, a ‘decreative’ literature. It is a literature, in other words, that simultaneously destroys the received forms (and their rhetorics) inherited from the Tradition—forms that are recognized as agencies of the general will to power deeply inscribed in the Western mind—and, in the process, discloses or opens up projective possibilities for a ‘new’ poetics, a poetics of and for our occasion” (Spanos preface xii). Spanos quotes Wallace Stevens’ poetry and also Olson’s Maximus poems as embodying this “decreative” poetics. Both Stevens and Olson are immensely important to Howe’s poetics and she cites them both, especially Stevens as influencing her work (Keller “Interview” 31).

History as written document inscribes some voices and elides others. It is that which is elided that interests Howe the most. It is the discourse of the dispossessed which she seeks to recover from the aporias of our history. “Historical imagination gathers in the missing” (MED 3). Howe wishes to give voice to those who have been silenced. “I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate” (EOT 14). Howe is immanently aware that “(h)istory is the record of winners” (EOT 11) and

wishes to focus our attention on that which has been silenced, elided, or covered over.

Heidegger, according to Karsten Harries in "Language and Silence: Heidegger's Dialogue with Georg Trakl," discusses a similar interest. "Heidegger understands poetry as discourse which, by preserving the silence in which the unspoken communicates itself, reveals the essential violence and thus the inadequacy of language." This inadequacy of language shows itself in the difference Heidegger termed "earth" and "world." The following quotation from Heidegger helps clarify this distinction:

Metaphysics is an attempt to grasp and to secure Being. The attack on the hidden, on what Heidegger terms the earth, is thus part of its essence the metaphysical tendency reaches its final stage, decisive for the shape of our world, with Descartes. Man's reason is made the measure of reality: only what can be known clearly and distinctly can be said to be and what can be known in this manner can also be manipulated. Metaphysics triumphs over the earth, and thus over Being, in technology. Losing the earth, man loses his own essence to his domineering spirit and decays...If there can be art in the full sense of the word, there must first be an openness to the earth. Having banished mystery and opacity from reality, we no longer live in a world which allows for such openness. Our world cannot offer a dimension which would allow the silent call of the earth to be heard. This makes the recovery of this other dimension a task which forces the artist to take leave from our world. Trakl's poetry communicates such a leave taking (Harries 168).



Susan Howe's poetry also communicates such a leave-taking. In Western culture's "attack on the hidden," what is non-rational is considered unimportant. Howe's poetry recuperates the sense of the earth in its hidden, chthonic aspect. Her writing recuperates "man's essence," (understanding "man" as being comprised of both genders) and it is this recuperated essence of "earth" which is a manifestation, through poetry, of the feminist imaginary. Julia Kristeva's "semiotic" comes closest to articulating this pre-linguistic consciousness. Susan Howe's poetry magically taps into this chthonic / semiotic depth and offers that dimension which is missing in our highly technological culture. "I write to break out into perfect primeval Consent" (EOT 14). It is this opening of the feminist imaginary that is compelling in Howe's writings. Thus, what is important is found in the aporias, the gaps, the silences, and the missing. Her collaged texts and paratactic method of writing poetry force the reader to interrogate these gaps and uncover the message in the missing. "Historical imagination gathers in the missing" (FS 3).

Next I focus on how these discourses work. In turning to Howe's Preface to Frame Structures, it seems to be composed of the discourse of the "real" and the discourse of "poetry." Howe begins with a memory of visiting the Buffalo zoo with her father in 1941. Describing the polar bears' restlessness, she speculates in enjambed sentences on how the zoo was designed "to keep brute force fenced off" (3). "I recall there were three though I could be wrong because

I was a deep and nervous child with the north wind of the fairy story ringing in my ears as well as direct perception" (FS 3). Mythic stories, the "wind of fairy" or poetry and "direct perception," combine to create her reality. In a world where "man's reason is made the measure of reality" ( Harries 168) where the Western tradition has successfully allowed metaphysics to rule over earth and Being, "true relation" is hardly possible. In *Frame Structures* Howe clarifies that: "(m)odern rationalism springs from barbarism"...and "(r)ationalism is based on violence" (FS 3). This suppression of the instinctual or semiotic or feeling aspect of our lives is akin to driving the "ice deities" away. Howe says: "a prepared people will ride the settlement of ice deities identified with rivers" (FS 3). The Western mind has banished that which holds mystery: "(f)ree will carries us past to be distance waiting for another meeting a true relation." (FS 3) This "true relation" is that "recovery of earth" which necessitates the poet to write of taking leave of the world, just as it necessitated the "artist to take leave from the world." Such recovery is part of the paradox of Howe's poetic project. Her project recuperates the feminist imaginary through a leaving taking from modern rationalism into a mixture of memory, myth, and imagination—or the semiotic.

The preface to *Frame Structures* is a collocation of meditations on historical events as recorded through texts, but also as remembered narratives. Howe plays throughout with the idea of frames, in both time and in space. She uses frames in many contexts—as framework, as perception, as "time" frame, as

window frames, as door frames, even as the framework of memory. She construes a violent and “mad” genealogy, which includes pirates and scoundrels, professors, bishops and lawyers. She acknowledges that “I may have mixed up some of these sordidly spectacular relatives but this a general genealogical picture, a postmodern version. It could be called a record of mistakes” (23). Throughout the Preface she follows word clues, “cinder of the lexical drift” (FS 3), which investigate frames and distances.

The first of these frames is the title itself. “Frame Structures” contains a multiplicity of possible meanings. The fact that one of Susan Howe’s favorite poems is Stevens’ “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” gives another valence to her title. *Both words appear in close conjunction at the end of this poem* which was written as an elegy by Stevens for George Santayana shortly after his death in Rome in 1952 (Riddle 252). Stevens and Santayana were colleagues at Harvard in the late nineteenth century, and Stevens admired him and incorporated much of Santayana’s devotion to the “real” and to the imagination into his own poetry. “Here in ‘To an Old Philosopher in Rome’ is a rendering of Santayana’s commitment to spirit and matter, and his sense of the organic origin and end of all things, including spirit” (253). Santayana and Stevens shared an acute sense of the physical world, a skepticism, and a humanism which denies transcendence, yet which can “find a human order within nature” (254). This human order is the “frame structure” created by the imagination and manifested in language:

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,  
With every visible thing enlarged and yet  
No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,  
The immensest theatre, the pillared porch,  
The book and candle in your ambered room,

Total grandeur of a total edifice,  
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures  
For himself. He stops upon this threshold,  
As if the design of all his words takes form  
And frame from thinking and is realized. (254)

Whether Susan Howe's title is serendipitously reminiscent of this epic elegy, or whether she chose the title as one of her many allusions or paratexts, the structure of her early poetry is the ultimate engagement of the imagination and "reality" or matter, Pythagoras and peas. Invoking Stevens in this collection of early work alerts her readers, who are co-makers of the text, that these poems are to be considered within the serious context of American poets and philosophers. Even though these poems deal with play, this is play in a sincere and not in a frivolous mode. Also, like both Santayana and Stevens, her poetry manifests that "violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (Stevens Necessary Angel 36). Howe's poetry is poetry of imagination and poetry of reality. Her technique is collage and fragmentation. Her purpose goes beyond the purpose of "pure" Language poetry, which according to Jed Rasula, seeks to bring our attention to surfaces for their sake only (Rasula 397). Howe's poetry partakes of a broader and deeper perspective which, although it freely scatters and shatters myth, history, and coherent narrative, continues to count on the fact that it will

carry meaning, even though this meaning may be in the aporias—where women will be found in the margins and “in the stutter” (). Howe counts on the fact that meaning inheres beyond chaos.

The preface “reports” the success John Adams had as a “minister plenipotentiary” in negotiating with the English, French, and especially the Dutch in the early Colonial period. From his visit, “A flow of capital from the Netherlands across the Atlantic Ocean follows” (FS 4). These capitalist ventures continued as Dutch bankers invested in the New World, acquiring lands to resell to “poor and desperate” German, Scottish and Irish immigrants (FS 4). Howe’s poetic voice comments that these immigrants were “under nobody’s auspices, crossing from one field of force to another field of force” (FS 4). A selected number of Dutch agents controlled the land, which was, even before the American Revolution, held for its increasing value. “Federalism” Howe notes, “its breadth and all-embracing perspective. Lines represent the limits of bodies encompassed by the eye” (FS 5). Sight and understanding are emphasized here, with the bodies of the settlers being assimilated with the “body” of the land itself.

Howe’s trope of cartography, or mapping, especially the drawing of lines and boundaries, now comes into her text even more. Such surveying and control correspond to “civil and criminal” activity by Joseph Ellicott, the first company surveyor and subagent for the Holland Land Company. Howe quotes out-of-print historical books which document speculation, surveying and activity that “focused

on the ground, the base, the frame, of prevailing social and economic systems of western Pennsylvania and upper western New York State during the Heady days of the early Republic” (6). Clearly, one frame by which the new society was built, Howe recognizes as capitalist exploitation and subjugation *of the body* of the new world. “Edenic mapping of the New World Acadie” (FS 15). The economic exploitation of the New World is revealed to be, also the “frame” or “base” on which this “new” society is built.

The text continues in a bricolaged fashion, juxtaposing meditations on various historical figures with family connections to Buffalo or to Craigie circle, where she and her family had once lived. This bricolaged, or rhizomatic, text creates a multifaceted meditation on her personal history and genealogy as it intersects with the history of Buffalo, and especially with the literary connections of Craigie Circle in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

She contemplates the literal “problem of distance” in having to carry “on a shoulder bier” the many powerful Dutch magnates who eventually died there. Always, distance is a removal from Being, or Heidegger’s idea of Dasein. Her father went away to World War II, although she admits she “was never sure what my father was doing in the army”. “Women and children experience war and its nightmare [. . .] in which disappearance fields expression” (7). Everything is “bits, mortal and menacing [. . .],” and Debris piles up which impedes the “everflowing current” (7).

Remembering when she, her mother, and her younger sister Fanny moved to Craigie Circle, she relates an in-depth history of that particular house, culminating in the fact that Longfellow had once stayed in a room let earlier by George Washington. Howe continues with sarcasm, observing that, unfortunately him, I.A. Richards disparaged his poetry in *Practical Criticism* and ruined his academic reputation (8). She recalls how lines from “Children’s Hour” were mockingly made into “Cocktail Hour” at faculty functions while the “children of modernists were perfectly free to get lost at six” (8). Abandonment, aesthetic derision of loved works, and fragments of history thematically occur and re-occur. Howe records fragments of memories in an associative fashion which cover her own life and memories from her childhood as well as facts and stories concerning Longfellow and James Joyce, and her grandfather and his travels in Africa. At one point, she segways from the Niger River in Nigeria to the Niagara River in North America. This is part of her bricolaged technique.

Longfellow, she relates, purchased Craigie House in 1843. Howe remembers her sister Fanny and herself going to the Craigie House, now part museum and part residence for Longfellow descendants, with her Great Aunt Muriel and eating in a partitioned area while sometimes tours of the House would wend by. Howe meditates on the intersection of personal and public space: “If private space is the space of private writing, objects must be arranged in position (witnesses and vanishing points) not looking both ways at once (9). Our very

identities, she seems to be saying are created in a large part by how we negotiate our private and public selves. "Space," she contemplates, continuing her metaphor, "is a frame we map ourselves in" (9).

In Howe's poetry, mapping of the self occurs within the boundaries that historical situations necessitate. Ironically, she quotes part of an essay by B.F. Skinner, who lived down the street and kept his daughters in boxes or "air cribs," which she and her sister sometimes saw from a distance. The quotation belies space, especially depth, as a metaphor for profundity (FS 10). The point being that actual distance "down the street" and the fact that the two sisters "saw from a distance," means both literally, in the distance, and figurative, that the girls did not understand what they actually saw. Her writing makes both the physical and the metaphorical world important. The "self" is constructed at a site where the givens of the historical and physical world merge with our need to construct language to explain that world.

The self, in Howe's work, continues to emerge from language itself. As in Heidegger's "Language is the house of Being" (Sedgwick 172) and Howe's "(w)e are language lost in language" (EOT 99). Howe seems to invoke what I understand as the semiotic quality of her words, their feminist imaginary: "words / language fade and change "moving toward the mind." Perception of the world is formed from language at the deepest level of knowing. The mythical breaks into the mundane. Boundaries which link public and private space are that which



“thought is arranged over.” The footpaths become Longfellow’s “forest primeval”; the real becomes the allegorical, and the mythic and utopian “the home of Acadian farmers” (10).

Howe’s personal history recapitulates literary history. *Evangeline*, a story first heard by Nathaniel Hawthorne from an exiled Canadian living in Boston, is written of by Longfellow. Howe points out that Longfellow has been abandoned by everyone except “wretched school children.” The same story, re-titled *Eveline*, was later written down by Joyce in *The Dubliners* (FS 11). This is a story of failed rescue where Eveline is bound by promise and fear and cannot extract herself from a system which enslaves her. Mary Manning’s father, Howe’s grandfather, was also “always living in another country”--Nigeria--while her mother was a child.

The colonization of Nigeria by the British for advancement of western capitalism was accomplished, in part, by Howe’s grandfather, whose copy of Swinburne’s poems inscribed with his marginalia she inherited. He was “(i)rrelevant, eccentric, cross; when he did come home he drank and was bad tempered so they didn’t miss him when he left again. Leaving leaving arriving arriving [. . .] Even a civilized person will kick a door whatever the policy of modernity surrounds every threshold point of contact” (FS 12). The preceding , and somewhat confusing passage, shows the way that Howe mixes poetry with prose to deconstruct / reconstruct the narrative, making it allegorical. Howe

concludes her reminiscence of her grandfather by remembering that one day a telegram arrived by donkey cart while they were visiting her Grandfather's Kerry relatives. "It was August, 1914" and World War I had begun (FS 12). War continues to be a continuous thread through Howe's writings.

But as quickly as she arrives, Howe transitions from Niger, a river in Africa, to Niagara, a river in North America, to Buffalo, her hometown. These leaps are made possible by the similarity in the words as well as the fact that they are both rivers. Howe notes that, ironically, thousands of Eastern European immigrants working in the Lackawanna steel mills were sent back to Europe to fight after America declared war in 1917. War, however, was prosperous for the city of Buffalo.

Although the preceding thoughts appear to be non sequiturs, they are, in essence, exemplary of Howe's technique of following the "word clues" in an associative fashion wherever they lead. However, the thread that connects these two events is that colonization, both of Africa and America, have resulted in recreating an economy which exploits its inhabitants and gathers them to its own purposes—usually war or the desire to preserve capital. It is her associative, poetic technique of writing which allows her to tap the feminist imaginary.

Next, Fanny Appleton Longfellow's tattered blue parasol becomes a symbol and reminder to Howe of Fanny's untimely death by fire. Mrs. Longfellow had been standing by the fireside, placing locks of her daughter's hair

as souvenirs into small boxes when a sudden spark from the fireplace caught her voluminous muslin dress aflame. Her gruesome death by fire is narrated poetically, jumping metonymically from meditation on female bodies to bodies missing in war. Howe transitions: “The objects which surround my body those which are near to my body frame a simple idea of time. As shadows wait on the sun so a shot soul falling shot leaves its body fathomless to draw it out. The armies are tired of their terrible mismanagement not counting the missing” (14). The fire “envelopes” Mrs. Longfellow as her husband tries unsuccessfully to save her, even to the point of horribly disfiguring his face so that afterwards he always wore a full beard (Hobson) “...she suffers intensely for a short time then gets put to sleep with ether. Softly softly hear the noise of distant falls of many wars and wars for national independence” (14). Mapping and distance combine with personal suffering with many wars and wars for national independence. Men and women both fall, lost in this economy.

Howe’s story of Fanny’s demise by fire becomes a critique of the “English idealism” which provided the false security of money and wisdom. Howe wryly notes: ““Wisdom is a defense and money is a defense. Will you come back so far to show us the cost?” (FS 14).

Distance and framing have continued to be major tropes within the narrative. Howe imagines her Irish grandfather she imagines engaged in “distancing maneuvers” (15). Along with distancing as trope, she collapses the

image of mapping and the image of theater. Multiple masks, or subjectivities, are part of the “mapping of the deep area where no stage set was ever permanent actors being one character then another according to movements she (her mother) blocked out” (16). This passage merges in a somewhat confusing way Howe’s knowledge of her mother’s directing at the Harvard Dramatic Club with what becomes manifested in her writing as multiple subjectivities. This stress on multiplicity of personality shatters any simplistic feminist focus on an “authentic” self and opts, instead, for a more complex, somewhat Kristevan investment in a semiotic or fluid self formed by the intersection, or mapping of complex given historical factors. She accomplishes this by stressing multiple subjectivities that are at the heart of the theater. Her grandfather was “one character then another” according to his circumstances, just as her mother directed various different characters or actors at the Harvard Club. Although this is somewhat confusing—it is associational writing, where one thought leads to another in a tangential nearly subconscious way. This is an aspect of the feminist imaginary—the Woolfean stream-of-consciousness.

Howe’s focus on loss and force continue in the Preface with a section devoted to analysis of her father’s, Mark DeWolfe Howe’s compelled editing of the letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes for Professor Felix Frankfurter at Harvard. History recorded is a record of lies. She quotes Bacon discussing “antiquities as: ‘history defaced or some remnants of history which have casually escaped the

shipwreck of time.’” Just as Pierre Bayle’s idea, she informs us, was to write a “record of mistakes” (FS 18) which would follow “the spirit of coordination’s lead rather than a definite plan” (FS 18) in composing The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Similarly and associatively, Howe, too, manifests in her writing a more fluid, Woolfean “stream-of-consciousness” technique and disrupts traditional narrative.

The documents of historical significance have been shut up, away from the general public, like Victorian women. The impatient “custodians of early American culture lock such antiquities away from “public gaze” in musty basements of institutions and require special authorization to view them (18). At least, this was her experience in attempting to retrieve a reproduction of an early American painting that interested her. She implies that the history which is given “all open” hides other stories “what is being said from a great distance flesh and blood yes human from head to foot so that we cannot reenter them beyond and apart” (18). We are kept from knowing what we might know of human history because we are not allowed to “crawl in” or “reenter” the story since it is kept from us. It remains hidden. This, too, is part of her project—to lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate” (EOT 14). This recuperates the feminist imaginary.

References to rogues and adventurers abound in the preface. She pictures her relatives, such as the cold-blooded, infamous Captain James d’Wolf-- whose

slave ship was named Sukey. Sukey, surprisingly, is also her nickname and what her family most often called her. Another of her forefathers is John d'Wolf or "Norwest John" who might have been Mary Shelley's model for Captain Robert Walton in *Frankenstein*. "Norwest John" was definitely included in Melville's "The Affidavit" chapter of *Moby-Dick* since he married Melville's aunt. The point is that Howe creates a personal genealogy that entangles real history and literary history, creating herself in a complex multiplicity of fantasy and reality—of the feminist imaginary.

Another macabre historical link with her family that underscores death as the legacy of colonization is her family farm in New England, named Weetamoe. "Weetamoo, squaw-sachem of the Wampanaogs, Queen of Pocasset...was drowned while trying to float by raft to her kingdom of Pocasset. The tide washed her body up on land that eventually became the Howe farm" (FS22). There are connections here. "Narrative voices of landowners map a past which is established." Language / stories mark out or create the cartography by which we understand the past. "Mow(e) rhymes visually with how(e) and aurally with moo. Of course there would be mowed lawns around the house [Howe's] because the soul is conceived to be a facsimile of the body" (FS22). The fact that "house" rhymes aurally with the possessive form of her name indicates an understood connection between the body and a house structure—possibly a "frame structure." These associative techniques are part of her collapsing the mythic and the "*real*."

Another frame structure occurs in the shape of an antique, carved ivory pagoda, “mythic and legendary,” shut up in glass. The pagoda becomes a symbol of history and a ritual structure in and around which spiritual remembrances take place. It is here that Howe imagines the past and present “coexisting” with the “thin paper dress” of the pagoda. She speculates: “Writing from perception to recollection I imagine a carved human figure at the door on each landing, semitransparent, Innocency. A pure past that returns to itself unattackable in the framework. Restoration” (FS 26). Howe’s Preface to Frame Structures plays over and over again with the idea of frames, distance, and mapping. It provides, itself, a playful structure to hold together the various early works that are collected in this anthology.

Howe has been criticized for not developing a fully authentic voice. Contrary to the confessional mode of poetry (which she loathes), her work maintains an objectivist flavor, presenting many masks or voices that open the field to multiple interpretations and paratactic play. This preface of Frame Structures gives a collaged mediation of Howe’s memories, reading, research and imaginative flights of fancy. What is true and what is not does not matter. This is “the general genealogical picture, a postmodern version” As readers we understand that an individual is, at least in part, a result of the “frame structures” in which she finds herself, linguistically, historically, and imaginatively.

## II. *Hinge Pictures*

Frame Structures is composed of five parts: the Preface, written in the 90's, *Hinge Pictures*, *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*, *Cabbage Gardens*, and *Secret History of the Dividing Line*. Following the order in which these books are compiled, I will explore how the idea of a feminist imaginary appears in *Hinge Pictures*. I will then go on to look at the other three books anthologized in Frame Structures.

After the Preface, Frame Structures is comprised of *Hinge Pictures*, a deconstruction of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*, *Cabbage Gardens*, and *Secret History of the Dividing Line*. *Chanting* and *Cabbage Gardens* remain somewhat hermetic works that appear to be based heavily on her memories of trips to Ireland. However, themes of desolation, destruction, human suffering and isolation, coexisting alongside images of natural beauty and wonders of the Earth continue to emerge throughout the poems. The final part, *Secret History of the Dividing Line* comes, intimately, from her involvement with language, as it is written, or marked. This part is also filled with very personal family references.

I will follow the themes and nuances of the poems where I can, the path through "the dark word forest, pushing back the branches." However, it is often that I find myself in a mysterious place, where the only meaning is the music itself, lyrical and haunting. Where the complexities of the text leave me



stranded, I am left looking for the trail of meaning to emerge, for the structure, once again, to cohere. Often in this early poetry what we are left with is just a sense of sorrow for the tragedy of the human predicament. It is in this early writing where we first find her technique of collage or bricolage, and parataxis, the shattering of the myth of a coherent history, and the myth of a coherent self, and thereby participating in the postmodern vision of our milieu. Early and late, Howe's work continues throughout to recuperate the feminist imaginary.

In "Writing History Poetically: Walter Benjamin and Susan Howe," Paul Naylor explores the "regions of confluence" between the two writers. He identifies these as their "critique of the narrative of progress that dominates modern historiography" and their use of montage to "unsettle traditionally received notions of authorship." Naylor explicates Benjamin's "dialectical image" as containing both the real and the ideal—Taggart poetically refers to this as Pythagoras and peas—that realm of ideas and the realm of the objective world. According to Naylor this results in the disruption of history as process. Benjamin, like the surrealists, sought to undermine the idea of "self" and the "precedence of the individual...of the self as a cogito that has as its essence an inalienable right to consume" (7). Unlike the surrealists, who were interested in only the "dream state," Benjamin adds theology and Marxism, which add utopian vision, and ground his writings historically. Combining montage and commentary, Benjamin "over come[s] the contradiction he exposes in surrealism: commentary opens the

text up to revolutionary contents, while the method of montage opens the text up to revolutionary forms” (9). Not only does Susan Howe share Benjamin’s concern for the disruption of history, but also her paratactic technique, which relies on the reader to fill in the gaps, is very similar to Benjamin’s Theses, whose style also necessitates reader participation to explicate. Also, Howe’s shattering of the underlying idea of authorship in *Thorow* corresponds to Benjamin’s concerns for the displacement of the speaking voice. Both writers are “writing history poetically” (20). Both are not only destructive but also, more importantly, they are reconstructing the present through a poetically reconfiguration of the past.

### *Hinge Picture*

Maureen Owens's *Telephone Book Press* published Howe's first book of poems, Hinge Picture, in 1974. A quote from Marcel Duchamp's The Green Box appears as the epigraph of Frame Structures:

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

In The Green Box, Duchamp collected 93 documents and a color plate of his installation "*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*," which, according to Duchamp, were instructions for decoding and understanding this masterpiece (Paz 20). In discussing Duchamp's "Large Glass" and the The Green Box, Octavio Paz notes that "The Large Glass is a design for a piece of machinery and the Green Box is therefore a bit like one of those sets of instructions that tell us how to put machines together and how they work" (60). The Bride, The Green Box, and The White Box, yet another set of instructions, are "a system of mirrors that exchange reflections; each one clarifies and *rectifies* the others" (32). Duchamp's works are enigmatic, shot through with meta-irony and the Dadaist "alliance of criticism and creation" (85). Howe's work invokes this Duchampian, Dadaist spirit of critical inquiry, punning, and play. She accomplishes word play, first with the title "Frame Structures" and continues to make playful references to

different kinds of frames and structures throughout the preface. Howe's very technique of associative connections is a kind of play. This gives her work a very Dada-ish slant.

*Hinge Picture* requires of the reader active participation in the production of meanings. The text is an experimental or avant-garde text, one which Barthes describes in *S / Z* as *scriptible*, not *lisible*, and which is a "text of bliss," requiring a kind of *jouissance* from the reader, requiring an active participation. "Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (Isaak 19). Paz identifies Duchamp's similar idea of reading, quoting him, "The spectator makes the picture" (Paz 85). "A work," Paz clarifies, "is a machine for *producing meanings*" (86). *Hinge Picture* requires of its readers that active meaning-making of the avant-garde text.

In her first book of poetry, Howe juxtaposes vignettes from history, myth, and legend, these poems impose a Barthian sense of discomfort and a state of loss that are often reiterated in the disjunction of text on the page by the dissolution of the text grammatically and semantically. This Barthian sense of loss is actually language which forces the reader to actively participate in creating its meaning. Howe mentions actual historical figures such as King Louis of France, Zingis and Tartars; she includes legendary Magi and mythical figures reminiscent of an

ancient Celtic war goddess. These techniques highlight and accentuate the deconstruction of the epic human saga which she presents.

Page one of *Hinge Pictures* reproduces a picture of the sailing ship Vigilant, black and white, in an oval, antique frame. The realism of this photograph, coupled with the real document from The Green Box used as the epigraph, lead the reader to believe this work will be historical. In the acknowledgments, Howe explains: “(t)he principal source for *Hinge Picture* is The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire by Edward Gibbon. The photograph on page 31 of this section is from An Introduction to Yachting.” Howe’s use of actual historical books and art documents gives her a footing within the “real” that she uses to advantage in deconstructing our very notions of history and culture.

Part One of *Hinge Picture* consists of eighteen pages; Part Two consists of six pages. The positioning of the individual poetic text reminds the reader that Howe was trained first as a visual artist and thus brings to her poetry a definite sense that the layout of the poem carries a significant aspect of its meaning. Twelve of the stanzas are justified on both the right and left margins. Fifteen stanzas are free form, without justification of line on the right margin. Duchamp used both choice and chance in creating his works, especially in identifying his Ready-mades. Has Howe implemented a similar strategy for structuring her stanzas? The patterning of stanzas forces the reader to look for connections between similarly structured forms. The tightly justified text creates a solid block

that conforms, confines, and limits the words or letters or phonemes. This structuring, perhaps, hegemonically reiterates in form the meanings? My purpose is not to impose a simple reading on Howe's poems but to recognize their polysemous character and, through close reading, analysis, and my participation as "spectator," to "make the picture." I acknowledge that this making is my own, however fragmented or tentative, and is bound only to begin "unpacking" Howe's thick texture of historical, mythic, and literary allusions.

Page one contains one justified stanza centered on the page:

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

Despite the mythical and realistic references that Howe is so careful to use as a "frame" for this poem, it begins strikingly with literary and theological allusions--an angel, a demon, a soul and clear references to language and speech. "Invisible angel confined to a point" reiterates the medieval scholastic argument over the number of angels, which could fit on the head of a pin, a point. "Simpler than a soul" is an adjective phrase, which modifies point. Given that souls are not simple, this is a conundrum or paradox. The grammatical construction allows the phrase to be completed by two other substantives, both preceded by the

demonstrative “a”—lunar sphere and “a demon darkened intellect.” Neither a lunar sphere nor an intellect or mind which is “demon darkened” would be a simple thing. “Demon darkened intellect” may not be the third in a series of modifying phrases, but might belong to the angel itself. Such a rebellious divinity invokes both Milton’s Paradise Lost and an inverted Blakeian world. This intellect is “receiving,” a passive verb construction. The angel and the intellect are agents that are not actively engaged, but passively receiving “mute vocables,” which might be language meant to carry meaning, which could not be heard, language which would be like an ancient hieroglyph or the thing itself. These are the vocables of God that “rained a demon daring down” in “hieroglyph and stuttering.” Language in its very nascent beginnings as writing and enunciation originates in myth and paradox.

The text itself seems to rain down, iterating from an unidentified source. No lyric self inhabits the poem that speaks to the reader through the words. No speaking voice emanates from the text. The lines of speech are broken, like stuttering, at inconvenient, nonsyllabic positions, intelle / ct, receiv / ing and h / ieroglyph. This is very different from Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” and differs substantially from the mode of confessional poetry extant in the late sixties and early seventies, all of which were major poetic concerns when Howe was publishing these poems. Olson’s theory maintains that the line is determined by the breath. Howe’s line, here, is chopped at unpronounceable points. Alicia

Ostriker and others argue feminist poetry comes into its own when women poets find and speak through an “authentic” self. Hélène Cixous’s injunction to women to “write their bodies,” does not apply to the impersonal, voiceless tone of *Hinge Picture*. Contradictorily, however, Howe’s introductory essay, written especially for the re-publication in 1996 of her three earliest books of poetry anthologized in Frame Structures, is very personal. Although *Hinge Pictures* does not manifest a personal voice, it is nonetheless a passionate poem. Yet, the poet herself might be read as one with the “demon darkened intellect receiving the mute vocables in hieroglyphs and stuttering” (FS33).

Unparaphrasable, *Hinge Picture* continues in stanzas carefully arranged to keep their integral separateness. Most stanzas function to develop an image or cinematic moment. Page two begins without an agent or subject for the verb lived. The adverb “promiscuously” and the noun “tents,” which end the lines, are jerked over to the next line, inserted, and left dangling.

Lived promiscuousl  
y  
In moveable tent  
S (34)

The effect of this dislocation emphasizes the dislocation of the subject, who has been elided as an outcast or rebel and who, perhaps having violated the sexual mores of an ancient nomadic culture, would be cast away as punishment.



The antecedent of the verb lived may be the “She” that begins the next stanza. “She rises while it is still dark, to trace a military combination / in the sand, singing / these little empires were settled about one hundred years / after the Flood” (34). The past tense verb of the first stanza shifts to the present tense-- rises-- indicating an ancient, yet ongoing situation, since it began “about one hundred years after the Flood”(34).

Another agent who appears in the third stanza of this page is the Biblical Joseph whose brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt out of jealousy:

Joseph dreamt  
that the Sun  
Moon and elev  
en Stars made  
their Obeisa  
nce to him  
his  
brothers thre

w him in a pit (34)

Joseph is egocentric and visionary. For his reward, his brothers jealously dispose of him. Playfully, these three stanzas form a cross. Ostracism of the absent subject in stanza one and ostracism of Joseph in stanza three is mediated by a woman’s tracing war plans in the sand. Even though “these little empires were settled about one hundred years after the Flood,” (34) nothing seems to be

peacefully settled. Nationalism in the form of “these little empires” (34) continues to be combined with sexuality and jealousy as the very underpinning of human life, perhaps resulting in or creating the need for some sort of redemption, thus the cross. Of course, Joseph was an Israelite many centuries before Christianity evolved.

The theme of betrayal connects the Joseph stanza with the following stanza on page three. Jacob speaks in passive voice, “LEAHISWEDDEDTOMEINTHENIGHT” (35). This is a covert betrayal by Laban. After Jacob’s served seven years to obtain Rachel as his wife, he is given Leah to wed. Leah is described as “his blear-eyed less / attractive daughter” (35) in the poem. In the King James version, “Leah was tender eyed; but Rachel was beautiful and well favoured” (Gen. 29:17). An adverb clause follows “when sailing sleep / westward through her / pillars was a sign / of being born,” which can only be used to modify the verb “is wedded” (35). This enigmatic clause reverberates with sexual allusion, “through her pillars” (35), the subconscious, “sailing sleep” (35) movement towards death, “westward” (35) and birth, “a sign / of being born” (35). Whether this incorporates some ancient and obscure Egyptian mythology or whether it makes reference to the pillar that Jacob, now renamed Israel, sets on the grave of Rachel years after he has taken her, also, to wife remains ambiguous. Another possible reference here might be the pillars of fire that led the Israelites away from Egypt, or the pillars pulled down by

Sampson in his rage. Although this is ambiguous, what is not ambiguous, however, is the sheer musical quality of the language. The alliterative effect of the repeating l's, s's and t's, b's and n's is striking: *blear-eyed, less, sailing, sleep, pillars / less, sailing sleep, westward, was, sign / attractive daughter, westward / being born.*

The following unjustified stanza appears in the lower left on page three.

The hounds of  
the hunstman of  
the emperor have  
run down a curious  
beast on all fours  
a golden circlet  
around his mouth  
shines  
like a star (35)

This poignant narrative may have derived from Decline and Fall, however, with the exception of the “emperor,” it might have come as easily from Celtic myth. The incremental repetitions in the first two lines resonate lyrically. However, ending the line with the diectic “of” twice creates an abrupt stop, which undercuts the lyrical effect. The “curious / beast” is trapped by the hounds / hunstman / emperor, continuing the theme of capture and betrayal from the early stanzas (35). Strikingly similar to the beast with the golden circlet is the white

hart from the left panel of the Wilton Diptych. This painting, preserved in the house of Wilton, is highly regarded and considered the best painting in England of the International Gothic Style (Kleinman). Richard II chose the white hart as his badge, according to Gervase Mathew, "because it was already a favorite personal ornament, and that it was a favourite ornament because a white hind had been the emblem of his mother, Joan of Kent...since the royal crown round the neck and the chain attached to it are described as of gold they must have been worked in gold thread" (Matthew 27-28, Plate 3). The white hart badge worn by Richard in this painting also appears on eleven angels assembled in the background of the opposite panel (Kleinman "The Wilton Diptych").

*Hinge Picture* continues with the next page laid out with three stanzas positioned upper left, middle right, and lower left. The following page begins far right, then lower left. Although this placement doesn't seem to be remarkable, Howe consistently separates her stanzas. A gruesome, almost sacrificial scene occurs next:

A woman whose breasts  
Had not grown was cast  
Up on a seashore in Europe  
She was fifty feet tall  
And her chest was seven  
Feet wide She had on a  
Purple cloak and her hands

Were tied behind her back

Her head had been cut off (36)

Ruthless treatment of difference, specifically the failure of the woman to develop female sexual characteristics, results in her ritual sacrifice. Her hands were tied; her head had been cut off; and she had been cast up on the seashore. The passive verbs have no agent—all this was done to her, yet we are not told who did this or why. This seems familiar, yet perhaps not. Has Howe created this myth of a female Ozymandias, or has she retold an ancient Celtic or Nordic myth? A similar resonance occurs in the next stanza:

forbad

e cohabit

ation with

a menstruous

woman or

mating with

a beast (36)

These laws seem ancient, perhaps embedded in the mythology of many cultures. One such injunction appears in Leviticus as God's commandments to the Israelites. Its juxtaposition with the preceding stanza elicits speculations on what the punishment for breaking these laws would be—death, mutilation?

The final stanza describes pageantry and ritual:

365 boys / clothed in scarlet

followed the Magi / that carried the fire

that burned on the altar / that stood at the front of their army (36)

Is the source for this The Decline and Fall, myth, or something biblical? There is one boy for each day of the year, connecting with the theme of royal sacrifice in stanza one. It is easy to assume these boys will be ritually sacrificed for the victory of “their army” (36).

A catalogue or list of “Gates” of Israel occurs next. “The Gate of Reuben / The Gate of Judah / The Gate of Levi / etc. (37). All Jacob’s sons are listed with the exception of Simeon, Leah’s second son. Leaving out one disrupts the unity and could signify incompleteness.

To the lower left of the page a more poetic and enigmatic passage completes the page.

Accessible passes roman forest craggy  
and the pyranees melt a moist valley  
flesh and milk euxine bulwark  
the lesser and flexible strength  
conducting ramparts the real their  
God and valiant magi following  
white matter of the brain and spinal  
cord a long white city ALBA (37)

This passage seems to refer to the Roman incursion into Spain, through the Pyrenees, across the river Euxine, to the city of Alba. Howe mixes land images, Pyrenees, a valley, and the river Euxine into body images, melting flesh and milk. The body images are then transformed into a military rampart. The city itself is part of the body, “white matter of the brain and spinal cord a long white city ALBA” (38).

The following pages are justified right and left into large rectangles of text that are both centered. On the left appears a listing or catalogue of items. The first category is not designated, but could be titled “creatures—real or mythical:” silkworm, peacock, salamander, bee, swan, lion, ostrich, dove, fish, basilisk, camel, eagle, taxo, beaver, weasel, swallow, cat, crow, unicorn, Minotaur, Scylla, elephant (38). These creatures, both exotic and common, could easily have been included in heraldic emblems as symbols of power, royalty, or virtues. The salamander-- supposedly able to live in fire--and the basilisk--fabled to have been hatched by a serpent from a cock’s egg --are mythic and incredible like the Minotaur and the Scylla. The list continues with the categories herbs and trees, minerals, and terrestrial and celestial phenomena. All of the items, like the creatures, might easily be represented on a coat of arms or royal heraldry. The most striking aspect of the list, however, is its incredible musicality. The alliterative effect from the consonance and assonance binds the list together and makes it sing.

Fully centered and justified on the next page is a passage that begins:  
“sing to Yahweh for He / is vastly elevate” (39). What follows collapses several biblical stories, including the Exodus, David’s dancing before the Ark of the Covenant, and Elijah’s proceeding before King Ahab’s chariot from I Kings 18. Someone is exhorted to “sing” to a God who has vindictively “hurled / into the sea Driver of / the cloud” (39). The ecstatic dancing of both David and Elijah encloses an unidentified “my,” possibly the “widewinged falcon” The falcon, or the secret watcher, lies in security along the horizon simply taking in the ecstatic scene. “(M)y / myth my wonder tale is to / to secret to lie prone / along the skyline in re / mote fastness along the hillside there to watch ” (39). Just as the biblical stories are the “myth and wonder tale,” of Western civilization, so the watcher is “to / be secret...to watch” (39). The reader is left to invent the agent of this watching beyond the text. The unidentified “watcher” could be the poet herself.

The next stanza continues an “I” which is also unidentified, possibly the falcon:

Magi to the rising sun  
primitive and solitude  
wherever spies condemn  
I fly the lonely spot  
and journey westward to  
Euphrates dread miles to



the sea between Mahomet  
and Attila peace most  
lonely anchorite there are  
white horns in the heart  
of India and elephants  
grown subtle to the ice  
of a motionless soul (40)

The presence of magi, the rising sun, something that is primitive and surrounded with solitude, creates an atmosphere of magical intrigue and loneliness. An “T” is also present, but unidentified. Perhaps it is the spy; perhaps it is the earlier falcon. This presence journeys “westward to / Euphrates dread miles to / the sea between Mahomet / and Attila,” between the spiritual / religious figure of the time and Attila, the most notorious figure of secular war and chaotic destruction. A hermit and a comment follow these images on Ivory in the “heart of India,” “most / lonely anchorite there are / white horns in the heart of India and elephants / grown subtle to the ice / of a motionless soul.” Flight, dread, and spiritual stasis predominate in this stanza.

The next stanza incorporates aspects of life in a monastery:

Refuge the moment serene  
Repose considered perpetually  
At their silent meals such expressions  
As my book my cloak my shoes  
Concupiscence. A handsome woman running

Were centuries peopled above even with delightful dreams  
The distant hermit the intellection of the stars (40)

The refuge and repose are undercut by “Concupiscence,” abnormal lust or sexual desire following the expressions of book, cloak, and shoes, which indicate possession. Perhaps “A handsome woman running” is in their “delightful dreams.” Does the “distant hermit” contemplate and understand the stars? Just as likely is that the cognition of the hermit seems to take place by the stars, in a universe, which is alive and cognizant.

This stanza matches the stanza appearing on the opposite page. Both are justified; both are thirteen lines long. The pages are balanced, and identical in format. Below these stanzas appear at the left, bottom seven line stanzas, both beginning with “Re.”

Except for the mirroring of text placement, neither page seems to be connected thematically, more than by ancient conquerors and the dissolution associated with lost civilizations. The following lines appear twice within the stanza, exactly replicated.

Night and the perpetrator  
And to merit disgrace  
The of whose indignation (41)

Who the perpetrator is, the reader is not told. Who merits disgrace? “The of whose indignation” Where one would expect to find a substantive we find only a *deictic*—of. Night is the setting, there is a perpetrator, someone may or may not merit disgrace, someone is indignant.

These lines are followed by: “walls relief country of / awake to insult clared / friendship dread rope” (41). Perhaps these are disjointed elements of a narrative involving an attack against which the walls offered some relief for the country, which awakened, clearly to the situation. Also there could be a drama of a friendship, and a “dread rope,” perhaps a noose. Betrayal and conquest seem to be evident here. The second repetition of the first three lines is followed by confirmation of this interpretation: “Labyrinthine under the / Purple under the long / hair of the Hun” (41).

The word “remembered” begins each of the seven lines of the final stanza. “Remembered a fragment of the king’s face / ...a lappet-wing / ...eunuchs lip to lip... / pygmies ... / bones of an enormous size as proof of the existence of giants / ...torso of a swimming girl / ...squeeze of a boundary” (41). The agent who is remembering is not mentioned. The memories are ancient, perhaps mythic, including eunuchs, pygmies, gigantic bones, and a girl’s torso. “(R)emembered the squeeze of a boundary” (41), is a metaphoric sensation, not an image:

Antiphon

Versicle

& Prayer  
foretell  
the Virg  
ins roll  
in the s  
cheme of  
Things (42)

The antiphon, a hymn chanted in prayer, and the versicle, a little verse chanted in prayer, “foretell” the Virgin’s “roll” in the scheme of Things. The disruption of words Virg / ins and s / cheme undercut the seriousness of this passage, as does the use of the word “scheme” and the capitalized “Things,” and, most significantly, the play on words “roll” instead of “role.” The same disruption continues in the next stanza:

A  
Zealot naked  
d in square  
be running a  
circle stark  
by buffeted  
(sat on a  
porch) numb  
numb covering  
qualm (42)

Naked / d is disjointed. The Zealot “be” running. Perhaps a ‘stark’ naked Zealot is running in a circle in the square and then sat on a porch numbly to cover regrets.

The elision of connectives creates fragments that the reader attempts to piece together into some sequence or narrative. The participial “naked” modifies Zealot, as does the adjectival prepositional phrase “in square.” The verb “be running” creates the subjunctive mode, which deconstructs the fact of the Zealot’s running at all. The article “a” and the noun “circle” seem to be the objects of an elided “in.” The adjective “stark” is preceded by an article, which turns it into a noun. The “stark” seems to refer back to the Zealot, in any case. Buffeted, usually a verb or participial, becomes the noun object of the preposition by. Finally, numb / numb covering / qualm attaches to the naked zealot who we read as ironically naked, yet covering his “qualm,” reservations? With his numbness. This disruption of language sense gives the reader bits and pieces that become part of the ruin, which the “intellection” of the reader must attempt to understand.

Dissolution and disregard occur next when “five princes / buried their father divid / ed his subje / cts forgot his / advice separ / ated from eac / h other and w / andered in qu / est of fortun / e” (43). The lure of fortune, wealth and inheritance, and the desire to be “separate” cause these sons to disinherit themselves from their father’s estate, subjects, and his advice. Whether the source or paratext of this is Decline and Fall, or whether it is Biblical or whether it is mythic is unimportant, it is an ancient cycle that repeats.

The lower stanza is only three lines and seems psalm-like: “a king /  
delight / s in War” (43). Prayers foretelling the Virgin “rolling” through history, a  
naked, zealot numbed running madly in circles, reprobate princes, and kingly  
power taking pleasure in war are four aspects of a culture bound by its religion  
and its decadence. War, too, is “sin.”

The “law of the fathers” continues to operate as the descriptive and  
declarative language of Herod’s infection with gangrene of “the privy parts en /  
gendering worms...” asks, “have you cut the / golden eagle down / who  
ordered you to / do it?” (44). The answer is “the law of the fathers.”  
Imperatively, the answer is “sur / round them all and / massacre cut into / pieces /  
cut apple / call for knife cut.” Someone “raised his hand to / strike himself ” (44).  
The agent of this action is, likely, Herod. The *Decline and Fall* appears next as  
execution and betrayal, another kind of cutting. “No one / to prevent Achiab /  
arrested the blow / and with a shout / sent guards to / execute Antipater” (44).

Fully justified on the next page and centered are brief vignettes, a series of  
cinematic moments or images that also draw their subject matter from Gibbon.  
The section begins, “clarions from the keep two ship / s against the current of the  
ri / ver wandered several days.” The second scene describes the trap set for Julian  
in the desert. “in the / e country to the eastward of Ba / ghdad a persian deserter  
led in / to a snare Julian who consumed / cities and raised a tower in / honor of the

god of light.” (45). Semantically, and syntactically, this reads as a transparent text. Even what follows seems coherent: “step / out of the imperial tent into / the midnight air....” Although this imperative does not have a recognizable subject or agent, Julian is a possible choice, and he, himself, could be “a fiery meteor / ignorant of the dark of perfidy / of torture.” Syntactically the text comes apart here. The line ends, “a persecuting court / across the night encompass wi / ndows land library Stilicho.” If the sky were the “persecuting court,” it would also “encompass” windows, land, and a library. Stilicho, who lived between 365 –408 AD, was “regent for Honorius and one of the last great Roman military commanders in the west” (Britannica). He opposed Visigoths, “repelled Ostrogothic invasions of Italy in 406. He attempted to take Illyrium in 407 and the next year was imprisoned and executed by Honorius” (Britannica). Howe uses this bit of real historical information: “Stilicho / to Belisarius (another military leader) claim of the air / patience degenerates into blind / despair replied the captured va / ndal king and before his conque / ror he burst into laughter” (45). The imagery of the “air,” which appeared in “midnight air and fiery meteor,” reappears. The “captured Vandal king,” “replied” philosophically “before his conqueror,” “patience degenerates into blind despair.” Ironically, he then “burst into laughter” (45).

The narrowest section appears at the beginning of the next page, and comments on the fall of those in power, probably emperors and generals:

A gen  
tle a  
nd gr  
adual  
desce  
nt fr  
om th  
e pin  
nacle  
of gr  
eatne  
ss (46)

The abruptly enjambed words create a sense of descending, yet the meaning is remarkably clear in this passage.

The stanza appearing at the bottom of the same page begins with a listing of things associated with power or wealth: palace, superstition, capital, pasture, paradise, park, roe, buck, boar, tiger, and silken vault. The adverb “frequently” begins the passage. Are these items “frequently” associated with power and palaces? “Syrian harbor” is repeated; the reader might conclude this is the location of this capital. “(F)ictive hanging babel all / the tongue of Universe wild / dazzled by imperial majesty of / God and imitating zodiac reject / t.” Languages are “fictive,” constructed, and they are “dazzled” by “imperial majesty.” Someone or something, most likely language itself, rejects “the joy the



persian triumphs.” “Chosroes hurl / forth anathema the anchorite,” rejected Persian rule and successfully led a rebellion against them. Is it he who hurled forth hatred? Or, is the anchorite he who “hurls forth anathema?” The “column cold maintain” might be what the “I” does who knows “I will be swallowed in the cost of / putting footprints in the sand.” The campaign the “I” is involved in is doomed to destroy that self in the service of a Chosroes or in the service of language that “fictive hanging babel” (46).

Violence, cruelty and mutilation as a result of war, perhaps as a result of the Tartars being able to cross the Danube after it had frozen is the next vignette:

Zingis filled  
nine sacks  
with the ears  
of his enemies

in winter  
the Tartars  
passed the D  
anube on ice (47)

The juxtaposition of the “Zingis” with the supposed royal valor of Louis who “leap / ed onto the beach” serves to deconstruct Louis’ action:

In com  
plete armor

oriflamme wav  
ing be  
fore him  
Louis leap  
ed onto the b  
each (47)

The familiar disruption of words adds to the deconstruction of the tale, com /  
plete, wav / ing, be / fore, leap / ed, and b / each An oriflamme is an “ancient  
royal standard of France, a red silk banner split at one end to form a flame--  
shaped with streamers and used as the early French King’s military ensign”  
(Webster’s Dictionary 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 1261).

The repetition and inversion of the “om” in com with the “mo” in armor, then the  
repeated or in “oriflamme” (note also the proximity of the “m”) and in “before”  
binds the piece together. The alliteration of l’s, b’s, and the repetition of the  
long “e” in “ea” also bind this short stanza musically.

Another macabre scene of war, presented in the familiar un-juxtaposed,  
word-disruption free verse focuses on the death of the emperor and the dissolution  
of the highest symbol of empire.

Emperor  
s body u  
nder a  
heap of

slain  
knew him  
by the  
golden e  
agles e  
mbroidered  
on his sho  
e (48)

No agent or subject is apparent for the verb “knew.” Again, in the next stanza, there is no agent or actor for the passive verb “was seized” (49). An introductory participial phrase “clinging to the / altar pillars” modifies the “he”. The stanza reads like a little narrative, although it is fully justified and centered on the page. “and the ensuing struggle was so desperate that the altar was pulled over and fell crushing the Pope beneath the mute Who in monarch” (49). A short, dramatic moment recreates the moment of struggle and of the Pope’s death narratively, yet, characteristically, in passive voice and with no agent.

The final page of *Hinge Picture*, Part One, contains two stanzas, neither of which is justified. “Claim cloud cut in two by sharpness / of steel,” begins the first stanza. “Claim cloud cut” repeats imagery used earlier. “claim of the air” in the stanza recounting the betrayal of Julian and Stilicho’s victory over a captured Vandal king. “Cut” recounts the “law of our fathers,” which order and carry out massacres, suicide, and murder. Whether this bloodshed is “praefect satraps

generals / emperor” there is “disorder in the dark confusion / of the night.”

Mankind is left to “wander without a / guide.” The terrain is the “inhuman  
avarice of evening / the wood / the rock / the cave” (50).

A darker cloud has crossed the sun  
the waves are slate  
he has entrenched himself  
up to the whiskers) I think he has

Now frightened we are not together  
that the tide has come  
and covered our tracks (50)

A metaphorical or real darkness obscures the sun and has turned the waves to  
gray. An unidentified “he” is stuck “up to the whiskers” An “I” contemplates the  
situation “I think he has” and leaves the speculation hanging. Isolated, the tide  
risen, no tracks to follow, the “we” are lost and afraid.

Part Two consists of only six pages. It begins with a quotation from the  
folktale Hansel and Gretel. “‘Crawl in, ‘said the witch, ‘and see if it’s hot enough  
to put the bread in’” (51). Evil disassembles and attempts to murder the innocent,  
yet is foiled. Could this be a foreshadowing of hope from the constant wars, epic  
deception and slaughter—that ‘nightmare of history’ from which we are trying to  
awaken? The second quote is an old Irish Proverb, “All roads lead to rooms”  
(51). This seems an absolute rejection of the imperial and, in its place, an

acceptance of shelter, home, not Rome, the local, and the homespun, homegrown as opposed to the hegemonic. The third entry or stanza is short and refers the reader back to Part One. “a stark / Quake / a numb / Stark appeared earlier as the naked zealot ran circles in the square, “numb covering / qualm” (51). Qualm is formed from Quake and Calm, so this stanza invokes the other.

The final stanza on page one is an unidentified self, “clutching / my Crumbl / ejumble” a “Dream Vision,” among “Tombs and / in Caves” (51). There has been much “crumble / jumble,” of empires and intrigue, truly a long history of “decline and fall.” Yet; there now comes a ‘Dream Vision,’ to cling to. Howe’s poetry is all about a “crumble / jumble” Dream Vision, a visionary language, no longer transparent, yet not a “pastiche,” or blank parody. Susan Howe’s vision, even in this first, her earliest published work deconstructs history as “donee” or as “given” in works like Decline and Fall, deconstructs language as transparent medium, and establishes in its place a poetics of hope and vision which “crumbles and jumbles” a hegemonic vision in order to clear the way for that difficult “little” that crumble / jumble vision, however fractured, however small.

A nursery rhyme, a variation on “Pussycat, Pussycat,” is next.

Oarsman, oarsman,  
Where have you been?  
I’ve been to Leafy,

I've dismembered the Queen.

Oarsman, Oarsman  
What did you there?  
I hid in a cleft,  
I braided the air (52).

The mad oarsman "dismembered the Queen," "hid in a cleft," and "braided the air." Like a child's nursery rhyme, with the addition of violence and madness, this is a riddle.

The next stanza is "set" in Babylon and is also like a riddle or puzzle. "(H)earing our oars where their freed goatsteps sped / and are silent / by an extinct river" the agent carries from the first stanza, there is not one but at least two "oarsmen." Their oaring splash is the only sound made long ago "by an extinct river." The puzzle continues, "O Babylon when I lay down / alert for sliding cataracts / where in corridors the print of dancing feet / beyond poise" (52). In this ancient city the "I" can lie down, but must remain vigilant, even where in the hallways / corridors there were "the print of dancing feet." The puzzle continues, "I am prey / posing in snow-light / being of human form / clothed in the scales of a fish" (52). What was clothed in the scales of a fish, an ancient deity? How is this "I" prey and vulnerable. Why must it "pose?" The enigmatic text may reveal few answers beyond the depiction of a creature or "self" oaring by an ancient, extinct river, vulnerable as prey in an abandoned city,

and clothed in the scales of a fish. Whatever else may be present here, certainly danger, extinction, death and disguise enter into the scene.

The omnipotence and violence of “the Logos of God,” “the Word original and first begotten” is “upheld by his mother.” Then, collapsing the NIKA revolt of 532 against Justinian in Constantinople in which Belisarius was victorious after slaughtering 30,000 rebels in the Hippodrome with an imaginary action, “what if” of “Simon Peter Jesus himself / walked among the cold stone faces / shouting NIKA / emptyeyed blanksmiling,’ the text connects the violence of God, the violence of revolt, and the imagined violence of two Disciples and one Divine figure (53).

An unidentifiable “I” again appears in the final stanza on this page. The text is not justified. “Artificer of the universe / Magician who controls the storm / to see you in one spot / I count the clouds others count the seasons.” Whatever divinity is apparent in the world is just a “magician,” one of “these false gods,” whom the “I” attempts to “see in one spot” by counting clouds, likely a vague and futile, even childish, pastime. “Dreaming of archipelagos and the desert / I have lived through weeks of years / I have raked up fallen leaves for winter / after winter across an empire of icy light” (53). Unfortunately, this “I” can only dream of the lushness of archipelagos and the warmth of the desert while it is stuck in time, raking leaves winter after winter “across an empire of icy light” (53). The

repetition of the long “I” sounds emphasizes the monotony of the task and repeats the sound of the self-I, I, and I.

The next page is unjustified and has an incantatory, musical quality.

Light of our dark is the fruit of my womb  
Or night falling through the reign of splashes  
Liquid light that bathes the landscape in my figure (54)

The alliteration of “li” in light, falling, liquid, splashes, and landscape combined with the rhymes light and night create a magical quality. The word “ireland” reverses the “li” to “I r l,” creating a little playfulness. The word order “r,e,a” in the word “Ireland” becomes immediately “eras and eras encircled by sea.” The reversal of letters is very much like that of Ian Hamilton Finlay’s playing with the letters in the words seas and ease which Howe talks about in an early article, “The End of Art.” The end of art is not the end and those who claim it is are wrong.

The alliteration continues in her use of “wreck or wrack,” “the barrows of my ancestors have spilled their bones / across the singing ear in hear or shell / as wreck or wrack may be in daring.” Finally, a securely identified self emerges, which is Howe herself, triumphantly acknowledging a heritage of song / poetry / story. “There were giants on the earth in those days / feasts then on hill and fort.” This ancient myth is now accessible only in dreams, “All night the borders of my



bed / carve paths across my face..." Yet, she "always forget(s) to leave my address / frightened by the way that midnight / grips my palm and tells me that my lines / are slipping out of question" (54). The mythic location of her dream vision is not always friendly—midnight "grips my palm" and "tells me that my lines / are slipping out of question." What does it mean for her writing to slip out of question? Does she fear that her writing has slipped beyond comprehension since its origins are buried in dreams and myth? She claims to have tapped an ancient source and is daring just as the singing bones of her ancestors in spite of "wreck or wrack" to articulate a lyric self. This is that feminist imaginary bursting forth. It is also Kristeva's chora. This feminist imaginary emanates from the pre-linguistic consciousness which Karl Jung and Jacques Lacan have identified as the basis for the self.

Finally, only two pages remain. The penultimate is unjustified and twenty-two lines long. Three times the pronoun "I" appears, once in the first line and twice close to the end: "Divorce I manumission round" and "Tell them I sail for the deep sea rest / a painless extraction a joyful day / bird of passage over all I love." (55). This "self" is liberated, emancipated with "a gentle blow." This self can now "sail for the deep sea rest," undergoes a "painless extraction," and finds "a joyful day" with a "bird of passage over all I love." The middle section of the poem delineates the strictures of law from which the "I" is freed. A covenant seems to be broken. "My covenant / was garment concealed or mask or matron."

The hidden garment, the mask that hides the face, a matron, who is hidden within her relationships to others, all these are discarded. "Proceed with measured step / the field and action of the law / Like day the tables twelve / whip torch and radiate halo." A freed self would not have to proceed carefully in this way, fearful of the law as written on Moses' tablets. "Sky brewing coming storm / Faraway over the hill / when Hell was harrowed / and earth was brought to heel / how the hills spread away / how the walls crumbled" (55). This cinematic moment seems to invoke the wrath of an angry deity, yet the passive voice reveals no agent for the "harrowing of hell" and earth's submission and subsequent liberation. "Where was the senate zone and horizon / Where are the people mountain of light to the east" everything mentioned has disappeared or the senate and people are missing; yet the zone and horizon and the mountain of light to the east is extant. The I, in any case, still "lives" and sets out to seek felicity. "Goodbye to all the little fir trees / of the future" remains enigmatic (55).

The final stanza is eight lines of fully justified text:

Far off in the dread  
Blindness I heard light  
Eagerly I struck my foot  
Against a stone and  
Raised a din at the  
Sound the blessed Paul  
Shut the door which had  
Been open and bolted it (56)

The agent, “I” heard” light in the “dread blindness,” and enthusiastically “struck my foot / against a stone and raised a din.” This action results in “the blessed Paul” acting to “shut the door which had / been open and bolted it,” leaving the “I” an outcast from organized religion, heretic, outside, yet aware of the light even as it emanates somewhere from the “dread blindness.” Howe’s poetry claims to have ‘raised a din’ against which the organized institutions have bolted their doors. Blake’s poetry of imagination could have claimed something similar. This “outcast I” is also the feminist imaginary.

Yet, Howe has not, within this first poem, constructed a world to share with her readers; rather, she has begun to dismantle the readers’ sense of history itself. Her technique, which justifies some texts and which writes other text in free-form stanzas undercuts the expectation of a consistent method. Justified text seems to have no thematic connection. The poetry is often lyrical and musical, yet much of it is deliberately written not to be read aloud, dividing words at places that are not semantically or syntactically logical or expected. Her words and letters always call attention to themselves in such a way as to belie the narrative scene. Her poetry is a poetry of surfaces which too often does not give up meaning, but which challenges it simultaneously, duplicitously as the text unfolds. Not “pastiche,” in Jameson’s sense, her first work is much more similar

to Hannah Höch's collages. At first these collages seem to be a random explosion of images. However, Maud Lavin has shown that Hoch's juxtapositions are not always random. Neither are Howe's juxtapositions random—but very carefully positioned. It is by their juxtaposition that they create the tension, the conversation in the space between, which is the real beauty of the work. Howe's first book of poems recreates in spirit and technique Dada for the 70's and is, therefore, aptly named *Hinge Picture*.

### III. *Chanting at the Crystal Sea, Cabbage Gardens, Secret History of the Dividing Line*

*Hinge Picture* was not well-received, and Howe tried to justify her work. In a letter to Lyn Hejinian dated July 13<sup>th</sup> Howe comments on the process of being "reviewed": "I don't like being 'interpreted.' For instance people keep saying I am talking about the constant presence of war and violence and savagery—true but they don't notice all the other things. A lot about sexual gender—word play, personal etc" (Mandeville 74, 4, 18). Her next book, collected in Frame Structures, *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*, is dedicated to her sister Helen Howe and contains much that is personal and enigmatic—childhood memories, children's games, reveries, trips to the shore. In another letter to Hejinian, Howe laments, "I have just about decided to retire from the world of poetry completely—I have

been hurt just once too often” (Mandeville 74, 4,18). She quotes a letter she had received from the poet May Sartin, “whose work I cant stand.”

You write so well! (of course!)

But I felt somewhat left out of the sur-realist images...

Because, I suppose, dream references are simply unintelligible

Except to one’s psychiatrist. Maybe I am simply like a deaf

And dumb person about sur-realism! (You will have to try to

forgive

Me and try me again with something else.)

When a “dog is down,” Howe wryly comments, “kicking doesn’t help.” In reality, however, Sartin’s point has much validity. Sometimes Howe’s poetry does go to the extreme, where all communication with the reader is severed. This makes her poetry not only difficult, but frustrating and impossible to make “coherent” in the traditional, rational sense.

Along these same lines Howe, in 1978, writes again to Hejinian that her sister Fanny’s book of poetry *Amerindian Coastline Poem*, {1975} “had received a rave review...that I would have given anything to have said about mine. I wrote *Chanting at the Crystal Sea* before that book and to me the influence was obvious—yet my poem which took over a year of agony and puzzlement to produce dropped into the bottomless pit of Oblivion” ( 74, 4, 18).

She goes on to explain how she truly loved her sister and was shocked at the “depths human nature stoops to when it comes to jealousy and ego” (74, 4, 14).

*Chanting*, like *Hinge Pictures*, is written in a surrealistic mode.

Howe’s emphasis in *Chanting* on the *play* of words makes it closer, however, to the early Dadaist spirit of Duchamp than the more serious surrealism of Breton.

Still, the poem remains enigmatic and seems to be a collage of childhood memories. Dedicated to Helen Howe, *Chanting* begins with a reproduction of a daguerreotype of four Josiah Quincys that was taken from Helen Howe’s book

*The Gentle Americans*. Ironically, this poem is filled with anything but

gentleness. There are armies, babies with smashed faces, savages, and war.

Religion is bankrupt. “O sullen Silence / Nail two sticks together / and tell resurrection stories” (FS 62). There are nightmares and children’s games. “The

clock was alive / I asked what it ate... We practiced / trips, falls, dives into snowdrifts / ... The mouths of parents, children, husband and the self talking are

“told...to lie down and put...mouth in the dust” (FS 66). Outcasts, marauders and sorcerers roam the frozen night. “Warriors wait / hidden in the fierce hearts of

children” (70.) This violence is always there; it is dormant, waiting within the hearts of the children who play. And, “Lies domesticate the night” (71). Yet, this

all is happening in *writing* and *play* since, “Around stretch parchment plains...and

“That rock / resembles a man / dressed up to act in a play.” Still the final image is one of unfulfilled expectation.

I see my father approaching  
From the narrow corner of some lost empire  
Where the name of some great king still survives.  
He has explored other lost sites of great cities  
But that vital condition—  
The glorious success of his grand enterprise  
Still eludes him (72).

*Chanting* is haunting and strangely beautiful. Although it may be based on personal history and much remains enigmatic, the poet speaks through the chaos to record much that is true and frightening of human history, whether recorded on paper or whether played out in “harmless” children’s games. The imagery in these poems is more concrete and grounded in the senses than the imagery in *Hinge Pictures*.

*Cabbage Gardens* and *Secret History of the Dividing Line* are also included in the collection. Howe writes in her letters that most of *Cabbage Gardens* came out a personal trip to Ireland with her family. *Secret History*, she clarifies, incorporates more highly personal experiences (Mandeville). Yet her poetics goes beyond the merely confessional and transforms those experiences through distance and art into near universal statements of joy and suffering.

Howe attains the universal, however, without losing her grounded-ness in particularity. She keeps us imminently in the immanent world.

The fourth section of Frame Structures is *Cabbage Gardens*. The epigraphs to this poem are from Boswell's Life of Johnson and from Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit. The first is Johnson's reflection about how civilization came to the Scotch by way of Cromwell because they had no cabbages before then. "One might thus shew how arts are propagated by conquest," Johnson states. "'One might as well write the 'Parsley-bed, a Poem;' or 'The Cabbage-garden, a Poem...one could say a great deal about cabbage.'" Johnson is "much diverted with the fertility of his own fancy" (74). Howe's *Cabbage Gardens* holds in tension both the child's world of games of war and destruction as games and a more serious world of real war, conquest, and colonization. The boundary between reality and fantasy merge. The reader is left to wonder what part of *Cabbage Gardens* reflects harmless play, and what part might reflect the reality of war. "voices of children / playing the hills are gulls / on battlements in corbelled arches / or a thief / banished to a waste place / Strongbow in search of self and servants" (83).

The penultimate page of the poem merges both, creating a reality based on the fantasy of mind.

The past  
will overtake  
alien force



our house  
formed  
of my mind  
to enter  
explorer  
in a forest  
of myself  
for all  
my learning  
Solitude  
quiet  
and quieter  
fringe  
of trees  
by a river  
bridges black  
on the deep  
the heaving sea  
a watcher stands  
to see her ship  
winging away  
Thick noises  
merge in moonlight  
dark ripples  
dissolving  
and /  
defining  
spheres  
and  
snares" (85).

History, whether personal or allegorical, comes to be part of the imagination or the imagination comes to be part of history. The past overtakes her. She is alone and watches as she is abandoned to a world of danger. In the ultimate page of the poem, the landscape, formed of souterrains or cairns comes alive as a violent, aggressive landscape of death, which attempts to "surround my face," "eternity

swallows up time / peaceable as foam / O cabbage gardens / summer's elegy / sunset survived" (86). Foam is the result of, or the tip of, a wave; just as cabbage gardens are the result of, or effect of, colonization. Yet, the sunset has survived in the end. Here there is continuance if not rest or safety.

*Secret History of the Dividing Line* shares with *Cabbage Gardens* a personal poetics. In a letter to Lyn Hejinian dated July 25, 1979, Howe responds to Hejinian's reading of *Secret History*: "I think I know what you mean about 'sentimentality'—I would rather call it 'passion' or 'obsession,' and I don't regret it. Because I feel that you must take all those things that mean most to you—be they background, family secrets, family history, fears, etc. and make use of them—you must reach for anything that cuts most to the bone and use it to carry such a long work along, and to have it make that leap—that will make it carry some universal quality in the human condition along to others—even if they take something from it that you may never have meant" (Mandeville 74, 4, 18). A poetics which "cuts most to the bone" is an anguishingly personal poetics, not in the confessional mode that borders on solipsistic self-pity, but one that, while it may seem distant or objective, gathers its poetic power, that "leap," by evoking what is universal in our experience of being human, human being. This poetry is also much more concrete than the poetry of *Hinge Picture*.

As with *Cabbage Gardens*, the lyrical beauty of the language in *Secret History* often contrasts harshly with the stark horror of death and war. "Thorn,

thistle, apron leaf,” alliteratively connects with “throng”—which are  
“cadaverous” and “who [pose and gesture / acting out roles.” Although “the  
animals speak” they are “impaled again.” Beauty combines with horror, just as  
contradictory states of being exist simultaneously, wild and tame / divisible and  
indivisible / rubbish or straw / one and many. Within this nightmarish world of  
paradox and irony comes an allusion to Duchamp’s “Bride Stripped Bare By her  
Bachelors, Even.”

“What’s in a lake?”

“Glass and sky.”

Calling the glass

Partners in this marriage

Glass bride

And her metal frame

Inside

Thread, thread

Ambiguous conclusion (98).

Within this enigmatic world of metaphor, art, and language, conclusions remain “ambiguous.” “(T)he lake is frozen over,” and we are left in a state of anticipation, expectation, and confusion... Anxiety resonates in the words: “if only this or that would happen” (98).

The mood is one of continuing loss, darkness, and dissolution. The “favorite children...come back lost / founder forgotten, reforms forgotten” (99). A child is “crying bitterly...nearly perishing with cold” (100), a couple is “hunted,” and have no path marked to find their way. The nightmare continues with besieging forces, lunacy, darkness, horror, ramparts, and savages.

Not a single chamber in the old fabric  
that was not crumbling and tottering  
How clearly this and they  
may be a lie.

Among the images here are warriors, raiders, regiments, ramparts, bullets, and wanderers. Within this nightmare world we are always called back to the fact that it is language which constructs this world. “I know the war-whoop in each dusty narrative / (t)he little heir of alphabet / lean as a knife / searches the housetop in tatters” (99). “Flakes of thick snow / fell on the open pages” (104) and “Exiles wander / and return from fiction or falsehood / thread of the story scented with flowers” (105). Howe draws our attention again and again to the fact that *this occurs on the page, in writing*. A letter to parents narrates empty experience of war... “A masterly but defeated strategy / to occupy a cold bleak hill / and sleep

under the frost and stars” (120). Everything seems to merge within “some story / heard long ago.” The MARK / border / bulwark...haunts / or hunts / an object / sign / or token / impression / or trace / THE HORIZON” (119). The mark of language collapses with the mark of boundaries and borders, until the words are traces, mere indications.

The final poem, centered and justified, maintains the ambiguous and multi-vocal character of what comes before it in the poem. Multiple readings are possible.

Sh      dispel    iris    sh      snow    sward wide ha  
 Forest 1      a    boundary    manic    aland    sh  
 Whit    thing    :target      cadence    marked    on  
 O    about    both or don't      INDICATION      Amer  
 Sh    woof    subdued      toward      foliage      free sh (122)

This polysemous text can be read in a number of differing ways. The quieting “sh” seems to chastise the speaking voice and dispels it. “Iris” may be the French Fleur de Lis, especially since France was involved in the New World, or it may be added to the “sh” following, which makes it Irish...which is probable since it is followed by “sward,” an Irish town which she has written of, or a “pure place.” Wide may modify sward, or “ha,” or forest. Is “ha” an utterance of exclamation or laughter or part of “halt?” A forest, a boundary, a land share a space with “manic” and it is all quieted with “sh.” Is America the “whit” or white

thing? Does it signify something pure? Perhaps it is a target, to be marked or one to be subdued? "foliage free" perhaps conquered made bereft of wildness? The format collects these words and pieces of words within a frame, leaving the reader a trace of language to follow through the 'word forest' and to collect into some semblance of meaning...a trace perhaps, or a frame.

That the poem refuses to cohere in a traditional sense and give the reader a single possible narrative allows us to dig into that "secret history" that has possibly been elided through the rendering of straight narrative. This is part of her project. The placement of words on the page, the space between words, as well as the overall use of space on the page has been and continues to be important in *Secret History* and in most of Howe's work. In the same letter to Lyn Hejinian, she discusses Hejinian's use of space in her Writing Is An Aid To Memory:

Sometimes just the space between words and the shapes of letters seem  
To carry a life of their own. Words as a law unto themselves. Space  
As another law. The space of a page, of the spaces between words and  
Spaces of sounds and of silence. So much is involved, memory metaphor  
Shape silence suggestion echo.....Poetry is magic (74 4 18 no date).

*Secret History* begins with two justified rectangles of words or numbers centered on the page. Each one is spaced approximately an equal distance apart. Each rectangle has four lines. The last page is written as one five-line justified rectangle. Mark, boundary, indicate, interval, position, tract, land, district, record,

appear--these are words that could easily be part of surveying or cartography of the new world, "Americ." There are also words associated with settlers—hogs, dogs, knife-- and other words associated with Native American Indians—sachem, symbol.

The title of the next section confirms hints that the setting may be North America—THE LAST FIRST PEOPLE. The European colonization of the North American continent seems to be a theme. "THE FIRST ENGLISH CHILD BORN IN NEW ENGLAND WAS NAMED / PEREGRINE OR THE WANDERER." Loss continues with "When next I looked he was gone," reappearing like a litany. A letter to parents from a disillusioned youth, perhaps a soldier follows, "Belief in the right of our cause. / Tomorrow we move /....AND THIS IS THE FRUIT OF YOUR LABOR" Ancient Irish history intervenes at the "ancient town of SWORDS...meaning pure...burnt by the Danes...and sacked by O'Melaghlin, King of Meath." The theme of destruction through colonization, razing of cities, civilizations by invaders occurs again here as it does throughout the poem. The loss of the father and the desire to be reunited with him continues also: "O / where ere / he he A / ere I were / wher / father father; O it is the old old / myth."

Peter Middleton considers whether Howe's text, which seems to validate the destruction of signifying practices, is a test case for Kristeva's theory as put forth in Revolution in Poetic Language. Middleton concludes, however, that

since Kristeva's theory "rests on the assumption that language is fundamentally propositional...it silences avant-garde writing" (85). Howe's writing is not silenced by its radical disruptive method. It becomes text as map, a metaphor used by Bernstein in describing writing: "text, 'seen as map, but in the sense of a model, or outline, or legend and not trace'...writing is always a demonstration or claim about method or the conditions of its own validity...new poetry can no longer be assumed to be automatically disruptive of the symbolic order" (86).

Middleton offers a reading of Howe's work rooted in Charles Olson's image of America as emerging from the Pleistocene Era, the ice age of which we are still a part, and which can be described as "Okeanos," or Howe's empyrean ocean. In this construction the "world's being" is "a frozen form, a Platonic form of absolute necessity maintaining a system of transcendental logic" (89). Middleton asks in response to Prynne's poem which uses this image, "Can a geological theory of the ice age be a means of thinking about otherwise intractable issues concerning history, memory and language?" (89). He goes on to offer that Prynne's poems utilize scientific discourse, but disrupts this discourse by making it also a "lyric expression." However, the poetry endorses the scientific which validates the symbolic. Middleton comes to an analysis of the following section of *Secret History*:



In its first dumb form  
Language was gesture  
Technique of traveling over sea ice  
Silent  
Before great landscapes and glittering processions  
Vastness of a great white looney north  
Of our forebeing (95).

Middleton claims this passage from *Secret History* is nearly a “summary of Howe’s poetics,” where the frozen ocean equals “forebeing,” or pre-history. “Forebeing has made us what we are and language enables us to traverse it.” Within his reading the “frozen ocean” symbolizes pre-history. Howe’s use of the word “looney” undercuts the images and signifying practice of Olson’s theories of forebeing, according to Middleton. Yet, at the same time, it could be a “loon filled” north, which would present a geographical or psychological allegory of human being, or both (90). This is especially possible because her early work, particularly an early installation preserved at the Mandeville, is full of pictures and references to various birds (201, 5, 7). But, Death impedes at this point in the text. Also impeding is the informal tone of the language, “I know all that / I was only thinking--.” Thus, everything seems relegated to the level of thought and “quintessential clarity of inarticulation.” Thought, which is not articulated or

spoken, but no doubt present “in its first dumb form...gesture.” Perhaps this is part of the secret history of our being before “the dividing line” or before language began to be spoken, or written—marked--down.

This secret history germinates from a place similar to Kristeva’s semiotic, the springs of the feminist imaginary before the logos of the symbolic world overlays its Lethe-like “frame structure.” We are left to dig in that chthonic cabbage garden and to chant our dithyrambic chant there at that “crystal sea” of the feminist imaginary.

Next, I proceed to look closely at Europe of Trusts. This anthology collects three books: *Pythagorean Silence*, *Defenestration of Prague*, and *the Liberties*. Each of these books has an important and particular feminist aspect that is, at first, hidden and that must be uncovered. Pythagorean silence refers to the aporia or gap that is the female. The Fairie Queene serves in *Pythagorean Silence* as a paratext of feminist discourse. *Defenestration of Prague* includes a “Bride’s Day.” Finally, *The Liberties* gives voice in dramatic format to two females who have been “erased” or silenced—Esther Johnson and Shakespeare’s Cordelia. All three texts tap into the feminist imaginary by using a language rich in possibility, poetry, and power. All three poems continue her interrogation of history and its violence and the role language plays in creating or covering over that violence.

### *Chapter Three--Europe of Trusts*

#### I. *Pythagorean Silence*

The title “Europe of Trusts” turns on the multiple possible meanings of trust—either a legal arrangement to protect money and property or an optimistic, faith or confidence in something—perhaps what has been bequeathed by her European, Irish and English heritage. Ironically, what seems to have been given is disenfranchisement, war, colonization, erasure, silence and “covering” or eliding, through language, of alterity, especially female being or Da-sein.

The epigraph to the table of contents and to Howe’s very personal introductory preface is written in all capital letters which emphasizes its importance: THERE ARE NOT LEAVES ENOUGH TO CROWN/TO COVER TO CROWN TO COVER. This is a direct and unacknowledged quotation from Wallace Stevens’ “United Dames of America,” from his Parts of a World:

There are not leaves enough to cover the face  
It wears. This is the way the orator spoke:  
“The mass is nothing. The number of men in a mass  
Of men is nothing. The mass is no greater than

The singular man of the mass. Masses produce  
Each one its paradigm.” There are not leaves  
Enough to hide away the face of the man  
Of this dead mass and that. The wind might fill

With faces as with leaves, be gusty with mouths,  
And with mouths crying and crying day by day.

Could all these be ourselves, sounding ourselves,  
Our faces circling round a central face

And then nowhere again, away and away?  
Yet one face keeps returning (never the one),  
The face of the man of the mass, never the face  
That hermit on reef sable would have seen,

Never the naked politician taught  
By the wise. There are not leaves enough to crown,  
To cover, to crown, to cover—let it go—  
The actor that will at last declaim our end.

There are not enough leaves (of paper) to hide within history the suffering of its people, and there are not enough leaves of honor to crown the actor who will “declaim our end.” The mass is transposed into one, whose face is the paradigm of the whole. A surreal image of the wind filled with faces, as with leaves, which are “crying day by day,” and which “sound ourselves.” These multiple faces circle around a single face, which represents them. The many voices of Howe’s poems circle around a single voice, which is the voice of an actor, or an actress, which announces their end. Each of Howe’s poems in this book, *Europe of Trusts*, gives voice and is a “sounding” of ourselves which has not been covered over with leaves—not enough leaves to crown to cover to crown to cover.

A lyrical allusion to Daphne’s transformation into a laurel tree melds with images of poetry and of war:

We that were wood  
When that a wide wood was  
In a physical Universe playing with Words  
Bark be my limbs my hair be leaf

Bride be my bow my lyre my quiver

This enigmatic lyric begins Susan Howe's book of poems *Pythagorean Silence*. The wood and wildness of the spirit embodied here rely on the marriage of self and other, weapon and word. Her lyre, her ability to create lyrical poetry is her quiver, full of words, weapons.

*Pythagorean Silence* consists of three sections, "Pearl Harbor" that is largely a reproduction of the Preface to Frame Structures, "Pythagorean Silence," and an untitled section labeled "III." John Taggart has written a compelling essay on *Pythagorean Silence* which identifies play as the "sovereign principle of composition." Play is an important aspect of Howe's writing, yet the overriding figure of Pythagoras is the "key" to this poem. In him, Howe has found "a home key (not a theme)," according to Taggart.

What we know of Pythagoras is only fragmentary. He remains a mysterious, charismatic figure who was the first to create a musical scale based on a system of ratios, which mathematically determined the intonation of a complete musical system. Because the society which he led enforced secrecy, none of his writings are extant. However, there are bits and pieces of his life, a "striking Birth-mark which he had on this thigh," and some evidence of his involvement with Egyptian priests and Babylonian Magi [ . . . ] (<http://www-gap.dcs.st-and.ac.uk/~history/Mathematicians/Pythagoras.html>). Pythagoras, a figure hugely important and one infinitely shrouded in the mists of time, is for Howe, a

ghost-like figure in white, presenting to the reader, like the ghost of Hamlet as part of both worlds, physical and nonphysical, or idea-world. (Mandeville) The Pythagorean concept of music and mathematics propositions that at the “deepest level, reality is mathematical in nature.” Howe stresses the SOUND of her words. As she emphasizes in her letters to Hejinian, the most important thing is sound. Perhaps *sound* is another of her “Frame Structures”, the Pythagorean belief, now being validated by mathematicians and scientists, that the world as ‘given’ is structured according to principles of sound. Thus, language itself is part of this structure, a bridge or a frame within which both the physical world we find ourselves in and “name” and the Pythagorean world of ideas made possible through language / sound, are both known to human beings. Through the frame structure of language, both spoken and written, humans have made a world.

Locating sound as a centrally important aspect of the construction of the universe, within a mathematical framework, she emphasizes the opposite of this--silence. Pythagorean music would make sense. Pythagorean *silence* seems oxymoronic--a lack of sound which stresses the intervals or gaps instead of music is an oxymoron. John Cage considered silence as something positive in music, and Howe has written of her admiration for his work (Keller 20). Silence, which takes time and space as well as number and proportion, is an important aspect of Howe’s work and can be seen in the layout of her lines, the placing of words on the page, and the disruption of words or phonemes.

Howe, in My Emily Dickinson, asks: “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 sighting of HE” (MED 17-18). How, when Pythagoras taught that all things masculine are regular and women are irregular, twisted, and dark can someone gendered female find herself? Women have been silenced and their voices elided. Therefore, it is in the silence or the spaces that the reader can begin to reconstruct those voices. This is demonstrated in her work and expected from her reader.

Howe’s poetry in *Pythagorean Silence* is a series of scenes set within the limits of the page, which Taggart has likened to the NOH Theater, static pictures. As with the figure of Pythagoras in which a collection of fragments is all we have to reconstruct him, her poem is a collection of fragments, which are created in words and space, which allow us as readers to construct or ‘play’ with our reality, in Heidegger’s term, our “thrown-ness,” into our world.

Taggart identifies two “realms” within the work, that of the physical world and that of Pythagoras, which is the Pythagorean world of things that only exist through their being named in language, a fictive world constructed only of language. The first section, “Pearl Harbor,” Taggart identifies as a “brooding on this experience [visiting the zoo in Buffalo with her father] and on elements that, outside its immediate occurrence, she brings to bear through association.”

Language, he concludes, “is a fundamentally human vehicle for human needs, not a software inventory system” (Mandeville).

“Pearl Harbor” begins with the location, Buffalo, the date, December 7, 1941, and two characters, He (her father) and She (the daughter) the latter of whom is distressed over discovering Herod’s murder of innocents. Inconsolable sorrow and desolation wrought by the human experience of war, from ancient Israel to modern World War II, becomes the focus of the poem. “It is dark / (t)he floor is ice / they stand on the edge of a hole singing--.” The only response to such persistent and deep sorrow is *to sing*. The only response to the overwhelming sorrow of life is a poetic, emotional response. “Rachel weeping for her children,” is a kind of singing which goes beyond language as a vehicle to know the world (inventories for things) which Talkative designates as Hell, beyond “vocabularies of *names* for *things*,” to language as a vehicle to express human need. Hamlet’s ghost enters and scatters flowers from the summit that “beetles o’er / his base,” which threatened to send Hamlet plunging into madness represented by the sea beneath. The questioning, searching mind is here threatened. Prayers or orisons, centered on the page may offer some consolation, as would the “wicket-gate / wicket-gate” below it. However, the narrow and straight wicket gate which served the righteous in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* will no longer do, and is followed by MAGPIES CLATTER, OR A CACAPHANOUS NOISE AND NUMBERS 1 2 3 while Talkative, a somewhat



allegorical character “(Walks by himself saying / he says to me softly What).

Language / saying, emphasized twice, seems to be our response to What is.

This antinomian stance continues to be a major theme in Howe’s writings.

LAW the Laws / broken / to be obeyed” like Antigone, an unidentified female moves from subversion to “home again.” In a letter to Lyn Hejinian, Howe discusses the ending of this poem. “*what* / a few / fragments / holds us to / *what*.” Whispering “whats” are like the hush and the hollow of the next section, a narrative scenario which stresses sound, namelessness, thrumming, marching, a scene played “faintly” and “softly,” while snow “spread on sound.”

There is movement through a frozen landscape to the Pale, a segregated district in East Ireland included in the Angevin Empire of King Henry II. All of the Irish conflict with the British is here alluded to, “hollow hollow holds all.” “Only / what never stops hurting remains / in memory.” Human suffering, whether Irish specifically, or universal suffering is what stays within and shapes human memory. “Old as time in the center of a room / doubt is spun” like a tale or story; our history is registered in language. “The stress of meaning / dances.” Language allows us to “Forever and for / ever / winds away Look / back Innermost / Broods infinity boundless.”

Memory and poetry first are wild and irregular “Dithyrambs” which move towards reification “into axioms.” Always, however, there is “slipping / forever / between rupture and rapture / soul / severed from Soul / Drowned.” This moves

from ecstasy to desolation, the 'eternal return.' The poem ends with shadows created by time and war which hoped to "prolong human life" but someone died displaying them.

Ophelia's voice, the female character who truly does go mad from the suffering and pain of love, hears "Their words are weeds wrapped round my head" (Eot 32). Darkness comes on, the roses are withered and Howe asks, "Body and Soul / will we ever leave childhood together" (32). Taggart, admits that although he stresses the aspect of PLAY in the poem, the poem also moves towards darkness. "From the first section, we encounter a world not unlike that of Shostakovich's late quartets, a world declining toward its final night. For all the fireworks of her playing with words, Susan Howe's vision is a world in which men and women have been made shadows by their inability to let things be and so "live out from under the black cloud of war."

*Pythagorean Silence* begins with an unnumbered poem in which an unidentified "He" who "plodded away through drifts of i / ce / ...into...Peace / A portable altar strapped on his back / pure and severe / ...he will feed / on aromatic grass and browse in leaves. An altar is here a burden, perhaps sin, and also the site of atonement for sin; thus, it is both severe as a burden and pure as a site of expiation for that burden. This could easily be a fragment of an old fairy tale, or the product of the poet's imagination. Much of Howe's writing evokes ancient tales if it does not directly allude to them.

The first poem meditates spoken and written language. “age of earth and us all chattering / a sentence or character / suddenly / steps out to seek for truth fails / falls / Into a stream of ink...? The character in a play or a letter of the alphabet collapses theater and the process of writing, both civilized activities which attempt to find meaning in the world, “seek for truth,” but, inevitably experience that cycle of ‘rapture and rupture’ again. Her dual emphasis on myth, history, and war appear, “must go on / waving fables and faces War / doings of the war.” Heidegger’s and Howe’s focus on time also appears, “Maneuvering between points / between / any two points which is / what we want...holes in a cloud are minutes passing.” The points may be points in time, but also the points made in an argument or points of the letters on paper. Finally, “flocks of words flying together tense / as an order / cast off to crows.” Are the crows critics? Howe’s overall concern has been, and continues to be language in its spoken and its written form, what compels it, what forms us.

Toward the end of “III” in *Pythagorean Silence*, the words of the poem come free and are spaced widely and irregularly across the page. Taggart sees this as Howe’s solution to making the words “play” by making them “atomic and free,” setting them spinning. This may be so, yet another important aspect of this word play is the effect of the wordplay on the page. For instance, page 78 centers and couples the word “ceremony” in the center of a series of these atomically freed words. In a letter to Hejinian, Howe talks about the placement of these

words as a representation of seeing or perceiving a ritual ceremony, but not clearly, as within a forest created of words. This 'word forest' is a calling forth or naming of things. Taggart cites Heidegger's discussion of a Georg Trakl's poem, "A winter Evening," as a source of Howe's image of "Ever tolling absence homeward Words / Toil their way forward." Language names and in naming, according to Taggart, "What is called is present in the language of the poem...The things called are given their existence as things in the language of the poem, and in their gathering we are given a world" (Mandeville).

This functioning of language as naming seems to be part of the dynamic of words in this cluster. Howe has utilized a very old device, one especially used in sixteenth century poetry, especially in the Fairie Queene. That device is the catalogue (Ferry 148). The "beadroll" (148) or catalogue was "'a list read out in church naming the living and the dead to be prayed for by the parish. The ceremony, which was revised several times by the English church in this period, was known as "bidding of the Bedes"' (148). At this point in Howe's poem we have a catalogue of items, a number of which are trees which resolve into the "ceremony" then continue with more listing. Spencer utilized a naming of trees catalogue near the beginning of the Fairie Queene which creates an allegory of the "wandering wood," and becomes an "expression of the inward state of the characters," and also serves to link the author to Chaucer, Ovid and other Medieval and ancient authors.

Howe's use of similar listing echoes the basic ceremonial or ritual aspect of this phenomenon, and also, as in Spencer, serves to link her work to those of other writers and writings or genres through allusions. For instance, the words stag, hazel, salmon, crop, churlheart, hut and revelry could easily allude to ancient folktales or fairytales, a recurrent theme in her work. References to whortleberries (an edible blackberry) and to haw (a fruit of the Old World, hawthorn) are the fruit of trees that also might be found within a fairy or folktale. Haw could be a reference to Hawthorn and it could also be a hesitation or falter in speech. Pied may be patchy in color, but it could also be part of "espied" which is to catch sight of something partially hidden. Language functions on more than one level to create a catalogue (here of trees, as in Spencer: hazel, blackthorn, hawthorn, furze) as well as to invoke old half-remembered tales. The beautiful sound of the name we give things can be heard in a list, even when taken out of a meaningful context the words retain a magical tone and incantation. I think Howe counts on this magical and persistent quality of words.

The penultimate poem in *Pythagorean Silence* names six trees or bushes: rosemary, poplar, holm, oak, juniper, holly, and the possible use for them—casket, yet it evokes the Greek myth of Dionysius through invoking a satyr, sexuality in chastity and berry-blood secrecy). The poem immediately preceding this penultimate one spins around "humanchild" a web of words which also heavily evokes myth or folktales—bat, light, ring, faun, fleece, sort, seed,

winnow, wasp, goat, frog, vulture, stork, ant, thralldom, desert, wolv, raven.

These seem to be allusions to the myth of Persephone as well as possible Germanic or Norse tales. The multiple, thick allusions, which are set free, seem to beg to be placed into some sort of narrative, yet the layout of words always resists such reification, or solidification into one “correct” reading.

*Pythagorean Silence* is composed of three parts. The first is a poetic reflection on a childhood visit to the Buffalo Zoo with her father. This section is developed in scenes, one per page with many voices, but held together by “the constant presence of her (Howe’s) speaker voice.” (Taggart Mandeville) Seventeen numbered poems comprise the second section where “the earlier character voices of the scenes are replaced by a single voice with a regular line length and stanza pattern.” (Taggart) This section gathers power because it plays around the image of Pythagoras. Finally, the third section, which is not numbered, launches into that atomic word play. This section is full of paradox—particulars are “fleeting and fixed,” the fleeting action (spoken words) are fixed (in written language) and left floating in fragments which are rich in meaning and beg to lodge with each other into meaningful clusters, “assuming,” “embracing something / some history of Materialism.” The things, which are called or named by the words, come forth embedded within a history. “Battles cheap as water / fought ferociously / on paper.” Achilles has marched off / into penciled constraint.” The Scholiast moves “in solitary symbols through shadowy /

surmises.” The annotator or commentator must piece together shards of scenes and stories from remnants, “some clue.”

Within this play of words which alludes to so much in our history, attempt to evoke it, names it, and makes it circle within the world of our minds and memory. The words themselves become charged with wonderful lyrical beauty. Howe indicates that to her sound is of utmost importance. This seems to be quite at odds with the seemingly chaotic presentation of her later work, as evinced in *Eikon Basilike*; however, her earlier work maintains an incredible lilt and alliterative music. Note the assonance and consonance of “Little girl in your greed / come down / come down / ivy and roses    ourself / will be / without defect / without decay / only what is lovely    lies / faraway.” There is much sheer musical quality in the formation of her vowels and in the lyrical repetition of the lines. Note the p’s and the d’s as well as the long vowels in: “Perspective enter / and disappear / The perpetual dead embark    Hoop / of horizon / negation pursuit and illusion / fourscore and fade /    a moving doom of brood / ...” Taggart notes that ‘weeds shiver and my clothes spread wide,’ indicates Ophelia’s voice as the as voice the poet speaks through. There is play, but this play is more than frivolous. The poem asks us as readers to consider a world of frightening darkness and incredible sorrow, our world of words, a world of beauty and terror that is made and unmade through the simple frame-structures of our words, our language.

## II. *Defenestration of Prague*

Lori Chamberlain's insightful review of *Defenestration of Prague*, reprinted from *Kulchur*, 1983, appeared in *Sulfur*, 1984. Chamberlain identifies the title event as the catalyst for the Thirty Years' War between Protestants and Catholics in the 1600's. Unlike *Pythagorean Silence*, *Defenestration of Prague* is a collection of very different genres. The poetry can be arranged for effect on the page or carefully molded into blocks of text. *The Liberties* contains the Book of Stella (Esther Johnson) and the "Book of Cordelia"; a play, "God's Spies"; and original artwork. This text radically brings into the light of imagination two women who have been, essentially, erased from actual history (Esther Johnson) and literary history (Shakespeare's Cordelia). Nicky Marsh notes that Howe's project is "to be inherently critical of the ways in which racial and gendered marginalization are maintained and produced in homogenized readings of cultural artifacts." (Marsh no page #) She goes on to quote Rachel Blau DuPlessis' The Pink Guitar "[DuPlessis] demonstrated how the poem 'The Liberties'...was able to question the derided status of the feminine within literary history while attempting to free women from such essentialist notions of gender: "[Howe is] a woman—a person mainly gendered feminine—writing 'feminine' discourses, knowing and rewriting 'masculine' discourses in the name of a critical feminist project that wants to transcend gender'" (Marsh no page #). Howe addresses the



issue of gender in numerous places, including interviews and letters. “All Poets are salted with fire” seems to claim that poetry goes beyond mere gender. Howe explains in a letter to Lyn Hejinian dated May 7, 1982: “as to feminist aesthetics—I have come to roundly detest most Feminist criticism when it comes to Poetry I feel I’m watching women poets self-destruct while being applauded by those who should be helping them onward” (Mandeville 74 4 18).

In a letter to John Taggart, she emphasizes the important differences between the way men and women interpret myths. In discussing the “similar strands have been plaited through our two poems, his Dodeka and her Pythagorean Silence, she notes: “The main and obvious difference in approaching this mystical territory—is that you are a man and I am a woman. The way each sex interprets or filters Pythagorean wisdom, Platonism, Orpheus, Kore, or Persephone—even Psyche (and her seeds to be sorted) will always remain somewhat at odds. Although at the height or depth all odds are even and both sexes are one they say—still,” Howe insists on that equivocation and adjustment of “both sexes are one” and the important highlighting of cultural difference (Mandeville). She continues in her letter about her love for Nietzsche’s idea of rapture, but makes it clear that his misogyny makes her “wary.” “Love, Cruelty, and Mystery are Poetry I suppose, and at the core it may be androgynous. But the rape of Persephone has to be read differently by each of us” (Mandeville 74/4/18).

All this is from her letters collected in the Mandeville Collection at the University of California, San Diego.

There is an absolute insistence in Howe's work on cultural construction of the individual self—the “thrown-ness” of our situation within family, history, milieu which does not disregard sexual difference, but which, also, does not enthrone essentialism. In discussing Cixous, Howe is quick to point out that her injunction to “write like a woman” too easily becomes an imperative “must” (MED 13). Kornelia Freitag identifies her project, especially in later works, such as the *Eikon Basilike*, as situated at the intersection of the postmodern deconstruction of the subject and the reconstruction of a feminist imaginary. This is a fine wire to walk, and one which Howe has been navigating from the beginning of her writing career.

In Howe's final publication of *The Defenestration of Prague* in Europe of Trusts, the poem consists of three sections: *Tuning the Sky*, *Speeches at the Barriers*, and *Bride's Day*. *The Liberties*, which had originally been included as part of *Defenestration* now follows *Defenestration* with its own separate section in Europe of Trusts. Howe states, “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.” History comes to the fore in *Tuning the Sky* in a more shattered way than in *The Liberties* or other later writings such as *Eikon Basilike*, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, or *Pierce-Arrow*. Here the

language does not seem to be the “matted palimpsests” like layering that Ming-Qian Ma has identified as the element that gives her works its three-dimensional quality (Modern American Poetry). The explosion of words and the spacing make the reader focus more attention on the “motion and fabric of a verbal space which has not been reduced to a mere zone of representation” (lost source). It is within this opening up of grammar that “our sense of discursive or narrative continuity shatters, replaced with endless Protean linkages that give language its living power” (lost source). We are still lead through “oblivious window of Quiet” (87) memory and into a “forged history” (87) where “mute memory vagrant memory / world is my way in sylvan / imagery” (89).

In a letter to Lyn Hejinian, Howe admits that the section “Speeches at the Barriers” is “my favorite part, the crux of the thing, and the way I am going” (Mandeville). This section is comprised of twenty individually numbered poems, which are approximately a page, and a half in length. The first section, *Tuning the Sky*, is dispersed spatially and is visually provocative, full of word play such as “egeiptes aegistes aegiptes egeps / Egipp / Egypt,” and it remains highly enigmatic, even, perhaps, to “the edge of babble” (Eot 87). *Speeches at the Barriers* seems more highly controlled, with not only the set length but also with lines appearing mostly in modified couplets. The numbering and more systematic presentation also has no words crunched together, no single letters or fragments of words or neologisms. If this is the “way she is going,” perhaps this means a

movement away from poetry as visual art towards more traditional words  
considered to be more referential or transparent, able to communicate a bit less  
obliquely. However, *Speeches*, like most of her work, slips away from mere  
paraphrasing or “interpretation,” and even in this more traditional format, the  
language remains highly charged, extremely lyrical and full of “play.”

Say that a ballad  
Wrapped in a ballad

A play of force and play

Of forces  
Falling out sentences

(hollow where I can shelter)  
falling out over

and gone

Dark ballad and dark crossing

Old woman prowling  
Genial telling her story

Ideal city of immaculate beauty  
Invincible children

Threshing felicity  
For we are language      Lost

In language  
Wind sweeps over the wheat

Mist-mask on woods  
Belling hounds drowse

Iseult of Ireland

Iseult of the snow-white hand

Iseult seaward gazing  
(pale secret fair)

allegorical Tristram  
his knights are at war

Sleet whips the page

Flying leaves and fugitive

Earth of ancient ballad  
Earth as thought of the sea

Water's edge to say goodbye (Eot 99-100).

Like a play within a play, a ballad or song within a song, this poem turns the world inside out, and makes consciousness, even mythical or allegorical consciousness, visible first in spoken and then in written language. The old woman "telling her story" of "ideal city of immaculate beauty / invincible children / threshing felicity / For we are language Lost / in language." This felicity, this Eden, is a fiction, a result of human desire manifesting as language. Our consciousness is formed of language. In a very Heideggerian sense, language speaks through us. "We are language lost in language." The manifestation of this "play of force and play / of forces" is "falling out sentences." Allegory and ancient tales such as Iseult and Tristram are spoken in ballads, and then written as "(s)leet whips the page."

Language continues to be “rent,” “to the winds shall be thrown,” “sound and suggestion speared / open” “washed up by the sea” (101). Out of bounds language is “fugitive dialogue” (102). In poem four, “Tiny words of substance cross / the darkness / falling into lines of human / habitation (105). Throw my body at the mark / then to move forward into unknown / Crumbling compulsion of syllables” (106). Poem five continues in being “(t)orn away” and moves “forward downward / ” into a “fictive realm / Words and meaning meet in / feigning” (107) with “Night / ...no clock running / no clock in the forest / evanishing of the actors into / one another / Am in a simple allegory / Reading out alone is words oh / peerless poesy” (108). This movement like Stevens’ “downward to darkness” moves into a paradoxical space of timelessness and transience as the mind moves into allegory / myth expressed in poetry—“oh / peerless poesy.”

As Lori Chamberlain points out, the “remembering of herself in allegory” is also a remembering of Ireland. This becomes clearer in the second section of the book, “The Liberties” (“Defenestration of Prague,” 203). (*The Liberties* is published as a separate book within *Europe of Trusts*). *Speeches at the Barriers* contains references to Spenser’s *Fairie Queene* in the characters of Florimell and Marinell (202-203). Chamberlain makes clear that just as Florimell flees into the forest and is captured in “a fictive realm,” or language, Howe is also captured there by language. Howe maps “that inner exile of memory and genealogy, where

she searches for the meaning of the father and the daughter, the mother land and the mother tongue” (Sulfur):

Inward memory

Mystery passing myth sanctuary

Secret isle and mortal father  
Shell half of my face

Eden or ebb of the sea (Eot146) (Chamberlain 205).

Ireland in myth and in memory, which is shrouded in mystery and secrets, remains for Howe a source of wounds and wonder. Like Yeats before her, Ireland has wounded her into poetry.

### III. *The Liberties*

*The Liberties*, as Lori Chamberlain points out in her review of *Defenestration of Prague*, begins with what seems to be an Irish postage stamp reproduction, and it also ends with a stamp-like drawing of “Ireland’s Eye” (203). The book is dedicated to Susan Manning, Howe’s mother. The point is that *The Liberties* is a letter to her mother. It was through her mother that Howe’s Irish heritage was made possible. This book begins with “Fragments of Liquidation,” a prose explication, a meditation on Esther Johnson, known as Stella, and her entanglements with Jonathan Swift.

Stella was likely the illegitimate daughter of Sir William Temple. Swift became her tutor and friend early in her life. After Temple died, Esther Johnson inherited land in Ireland and an annual annuity. Swift encouraged her to move to Ireland, which she did, with her companion, Rebecca Dingley. Johnson and Dingley were Swift’s companions for nearly thirty years. When Swift was summoned back to England, he wrote letters to Dingley, which were meant for Stella. A few of Swift’s letters to Stella were saved, as were Swift’s Journal to Stella; however, none of Esther’s letters to him were saved. Stella was erased—effectively liquidated. Howe’s project is, in part, to remember her.

The first part of *The Liberties* continues with “Stella’s Portrait,” “THEIR / Book of Stella,” and WHITE FOOLSCAP / Book of Cordelia. The second part of



*The Liberties* is “Gods’ Spies,” a play. The third part begins with an untitled poem highlighting different kinds of stone and geological formations; it then moves into “formation of a Separatist, I.” Part of Howe’s expressed project is to “tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted,--inarticulate” (Eot 14). This is a double meditation on Stella, a historical figure whom history has silenced through neglect, and on Cordelia, Lear’s inarticulate daughter. Howe plays around the figures of these silenced souls, giving them voice, situating them outside of history to ponder it in “God’s Spies.” Howe challenges her readers to be apprised of real gaps within history, which is “a record of victors.” Howe’s project is, as Kornelia Freitag speculates, an intersection that fulfills Alice Jardine’s exhortation to “put women into discourse,” and a postmodern penchant to dismantle Lyotards “grand narratives.”

*The Liberties* and also Howe’s later book, *A Bibliography of the King’s Book, Eikon Basilike*, succeed in these two aims. *The Liberties* attempts to put back into discourse, or to articulate Howe, herself, as a “separatist, I.” Surely, this dance of re-instantiating some kind of subjectivity, even in a fragmented, partially hidden aspect does not reify these subjects into any narrative / historical stasis but returns authenticity to what had been elided, shines light into the aporia surrounding Stella, and gives weight to the hesitant and inarticulate stammerings of Cordelia that legitimize the hesitancy in women’s speech from Sappho’s fragments, to Dickinson’s cryptic hymns, to Howe’s enigmatic poetics itself.

Freitag points out that “(i)n Howe’s work, post-structural philosophical insight and feminist project are carefully negotiated to qualify each other and to prevent the installation of a new authoritarian ‘mother’ voice replacing the eroded voice of ‘the father.’” In her letters, Howe cautions against aligning her too freely with “feminist critics” “As to Feminist criticism when it comes to Poetry...I feel I’m watching women poets while being applauded by those who should be helping them onward “ (Mandeville 74 4 18).

In *The Liberties*, “Stella’s portrait” has no corresponding portrait of Cordelia, although there is a “Book of Stella” and a corresponding “Book of Cordelia.” “Stella’s Portrait” draws a picture of Stella in contradiction and ambiguity. She is described as “plump (Some), extremely thin (Others). Sickly in her childhood, she grew into perfect health (Swift)” (EOT 152). Even though she had weak eyesight, Stella exhibited courage and aim as “she shot and killed a prowler after her servants had fled the house in terror” (152), yet had weak eyesight. Howe admits, “no authentic portrait exists” (152). Howe, also comments, “Nothing is known of Stella’s feelings or what she suffered from” when her health was failing partly as a result of the shock of the publication of Swift’s letters to Vanessa (Esther Vanhomrigh), when Stella died in April of 1722 (154).

Receiving news that Stella had died, Swift continued entertaining party guests, “as if nothing had happened” (154), and then stayed in his room writing

instead of attending her funeral. Whether Swift attended her burial at midnight in the nave of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Howe does not address. She does speculate, however, on why the two never married, although one story, which she deems doubtful, has them secretly marrying. Sir William Temple may have fathered both Jonathan and Esther illegitimately, or they may have suspected they were closely related. After Swift's death of dementia in 1745, he was interred "at the same hour and in the same place that Stella had been interred, under the cathedral floor" (156).

Lori Chamberlain notes that what is interesting about the "Book of Stella" is that Stella herself is missing (Sulfur 203). There are descriptions of the environment, especially the church, the sea, and the countryside. Rather than investigate the romantic relations between Swift and Stella, the focus, Chamberlain notes, is on the father / daughter relationship, which "becomes even more prominent in the "Book of Cordelia," where Lear's exile seems to prompt the sections concerned with flux, anxiety and madness" (204). Also, images of madness and dissolution appear ubiquitously throughout the "Book of Stella." The churchyard suffers "dilapidation," "appeased / an ancient cliff or cleft... / and quarreled...surmising... / this treachery." Someone is speaking with an unidentified voice, perhaps the voice of Stella or of Ireland herself: "trackless near sea... / in my dispeopled kingdom / ...plague    famine    pestilence / there in me    them in me    I / halted I heard footsteps" (159). If this is Ireland, as a

conquered, beaten and colonized land, within it is also a paradise. This paradise is described lyrically: “the blue of sweet salvation / such roads between the uplands / over the lowered cols / eden eadan brow of a hill... / and O / her voice / a settled place / table spread flesh and milk / in mystery / in the room / in the sunlight” (161) Yet the next line is “about the dead.” And “fearsad bell high stone wall” (EOT 161) began this poem. What is encompassed behind the wall within the room, which Stella has made, is felicity and nourishment. There is sunlight and a table, which is spread as if for a meal. Yet, she is “A PENDULUM SWUNG BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES” (163).

The next section is highly enigmatic and difficult to make something of. It may be meant to exemplify Stella’s experiences in Ireland, her recollection of ancient Irish stories or myths, and some passages from Shakespeare since all these things appear here. Ultimately, however, the passage ends with an abrupt: “SHE DIED OF SHAME / This is certain”(168) If the publication of Swift’s letters to Vanessa caused Stella great grief and declining health, this could be true, unlike what comes before, unlike what her daily life was really like, which remains "mist:"

The real plot was invisible  
Everything possible  
Was the attempt for the finest thing?  
Was the attempt  
Him over the bridge into the water  
Her some sort of daughter (169)

As Chamberlain speculates, this may be about Stella as a daughter, but it seems also, and more importantly, to be about Howe's father's crossing the Atlantic to fight in WWII. The "real plot" for Stella was her internal life, desires, and "attempt for the finest thing." Stella's narrative collapses into Howe's own narrative history. Here Stella's history and Howe's history as daughters and as women merge.

Part Two of *The Liberties* continues in the mode of the Theater of the Absurd with "God's Spies," a play in the tradition of *Waiting for Godot*. Stella, Cordelia, and the ghost of Jonathan Swift make up the entire ensemble. Stella and Cordelia sit in the wilderness with a backdrop of a painted waterfall and a stream bisecting the stage itself. They are young and dressed as boys. The gender switch is continued from the Book of Stella, where "She must be traced through many dark paths as a boy" (162).

Stella (Reading): Her heart was in her throat—

Cordelia (Looking straight ahead): Her words—

Stella: --were unintelligible (183).

Easily, this dialogue could be describing Cordelia's situation with Lear, or Stella's with Swift. Allegorically, it could easily be women as a group, who must disguise themselves, simply to survive. Violent images of "(a) falcon [that] throws the wild goose, to the ground on trampled snow" (184) underscore their helplessness since they are identified with wild birds—"Save for ourselves—

circling above we rested—there was no sign of life. / Cordelia: Did we survive at all? / Stella: Left without regrets—tracing points—vertices—stages—flying swiftly—past fleecy stars” (184). The absolute dissolution of the self and images of vertiginous flight deconstruct the selves of the speakers in this passage.

The scene progresses from Tuesday through Sunday, although the repetition of the words and scenes belie any real movement in time. On Tuesday, they are lost in the woods that are burning. They are “weary” and “lame” (184). They “have forgotten” (184) something. Stella begs Cordelia, “don’t leave me” (184). Cordelia replies, “I won’t” (184). Their world is frightening. They talk of robbery, murder, and its inevitability. Stella makes puns on Swift, “Swift, they were swift” (185). Cordelia, like Howe herself, is obsessed with “mark” (185), measuring or drawing. They play a game of hopscotch, which Howe discussed in her letters as one of the ancient games she found while doing her research in Dublin.

Stella and Cordelia speak in cryptic, idiomatic language that references an absurd world:

Cordelia: In history people are all dead.  
The plot *was* this—the fantasy *was* this—  
Her spirit flew in feathers  
Stella: I know nothing of it.  
Cordelia (Pauses): Speak again.  
Stella: It is—  
Cordelia: --not true.  
Stella: Did we pass by?  
Cordelia (*Remembering*): I knew a child—

Stella—her snowy flesh was all in leaf—nickname  
White—her forehead ash.

Cordelia: Secret saltbox—flooded marsh  
King= father hunting in evening  
And his return  
Tracks dog to hollow tree (187).

Cordelia, finally speaking, and speaking an obvious truth of history, distinguishes sequence of events, plot, from fantasy, and alludes to a female's spirit flying, as bird, or angel. Stella contests everything that has been said. Cordelia implores her to "speak again," or she will do so herself. As Lori Chamberlain points out, they complete each others' sentences (Sulfur 202). There are references to what might be ashleaf to whom or what the book is dedicated. Images of the salt, the king, and hunting seem to be from a fairytale, as do the references to six white swans, which could easily be a reference to the classic Grimm's tale, *The Six Swans*. If this is a paratext, it is achieved by simply using the term "wild geese," since in Act II, Scene IV of *King Lear*, the Fool uses these words:

Fool. Winter's not gone yet, if the wild geese fly that way.

Fathers that wear rags  
Do make their children blind;  
But fathers that bear bags  
Shall see their children blind;  
Fortune, that arrant whore,  
Ne'er turns the key to the poor.

What is the significance, if any of these references? Cordelia and Stella, as daughter and friend / lover / admirer / possible paramour, respectively of Lear and Swift, exemplify a male / female, father / daughter bond. Even Stella relied

on Swift early on as her tutor, and later on to guide and to teach her. These actions by Swift bestow a fatherly function upon him. In this passage Lear has found Kent in stocks and has just been turned out by Goneril and will soon be dispossessed by Regan as well. Cordelia, the silent daughter, is like the goose that is thrown down and trampled by the falcon.

The possible paratextual reference is *The Six Swans*, the story of a king, lost in the forest, who happens upon a witch. He promises to marry her beautiful daughter in exchange for help in finding his way out of the forest. The daughter, in jealousy, however, changes the king's six sons into swans to be rid of them, missing, however, the seventh child, a daughter, of whom she knew nothing. Again, the female is hidden. The daughter searched for her brothers and discovered that only through six years of her absolute silence would her brothers be released from their curse. Subsequently, she was found by another king, who was taken with her beauty and her silence, and made her his queen. The evil stepmother stole away each of three children that she bore the king and accused her of murdering them. Still, she refused to speak to defend herself. The king agreed to have her burned at the stake. Luckily, it was the last day of the sixth year. As she was about to be burned, six swans flew towards her and when she quickly threw the magic shirts that she had in readiness over them, they transformed into vibrant, healthy young men. Soon all was known to the king, the



wicked stepmother was burned to ashes, the three missing children were returned,  
and all was reconciled.

In “God’s Spies,” there is again, on Sunday, talk of murder and of swans:

Stella: (Matter-of-factly): They murdered each other.

Cordelia: Of course, always.

Stella (Quietly): Off at sea—a misty mark—

We shoot them there—there where they swim—

We lay nets for them—from a blind you see,

We shoot them down.

Cordelia: (Rising suddenly. Pointing to the sky):

Wild geese fly over in the letter V.

Yes. They are there Reversed

They lead off the A’s.

( Loud gunshot. She looks wildly around): A shot! Pause. Then cry of wild  
geese, as they fly over—and away

Transfigured cries. The cries of souls transfigured.

Beating their wings—making great circles—

Upward—evermore—free—

Silence

A swan. White swans—seven. (Pause): Nothing (197).

The swans are seven, not six, yet the fairytale seems to fit. The children are dispossessed by the father, but are rescued by the silence and the perseverance of the dispossessed daughter / sister. Lear, himself, is dispossessed after he dispossesses Cordelia, and although they both die at the end of the play, her love does effect a sort of rescue of Lear.

As the conversation between Stella and Cordelia continues, dispossession of the two women and an allusion to the myth of Leda and the Swan, especially as retold by Yeats, seems to be mirrored in Howe's text.

Cordelia (Cries out): Nothing is our own! (After a thoughtful silence.)  
I learned in leafy woods hmmm—depths of the sea  
That No one in first father—so soon a terror  
Of feather wings—soft and tremblingly swift—  
How did we happen—because we were written (197).

The “feather wings—soft and tremblingly swift—coupled with “learned” which is carnal knowledge and “that No one in first father—so soon a terror” (197) points to Leda, raped by Zeus and mother of Clytemnestra, who murdered Agamemnon in retaliation for the death of her daughter Iphigenia. Leda dies of shame when Helen is born of this rape.

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
By the dark web, her nape caught in his bill,  
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push  
The feathered glory from her loosening things?  
And how can body, laid in that white rush,  
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?



The title “W H I T E F O O L S C A P” could be a reference to either paper or to an actual fool’s hat, leaving the reference ambiguously close to both a poem written on paper and to the important character of the fool in King Lear. “(H)eroine in ass-skin” (171) could be a reference to Balzac’s novel in which great riches, gained illicitly, create destruction. This parallels the calculated machinations and destruction of Goneril and Regan. Cordelia can speak “only nonsense” (171), for Lear does not understand her.

At this point in the Book of Cordelia, Howe references Cinderella, another dispossessed daughter and merges her with the dispossessed Cordelia: “cap o’ruses tatter-coat / ...turnspit scullion the apples pick them. Transformation / wax forehead ash / shoe fits.” The daughter of night, NEMESIS appears next “singing from cask” (171). Since Nemesis is avenger of the gods and is particularly concerned with the punishment of impiety and *hybris*, she embodies the perfect retribution for Cordelia, who according to Lear is such a daughter.

Howe becomes very associative in the next section. I believe that the ocean god Lir is the next surreal image. It was Lir “whose children turned into swans,” and fly in Howe’s poem towards the corona, chromosphere, and Cordelia. Howe asks: “(H)as his children brought him to this pass? / Whowe.” Do the children of Lear / Lir / the father have some responsibility in Lear’s madness? Who we? Howe implies that children are complicit in the relationships, which create this dynamic. She continues very metaphorically. The

ship is sinking. Howe describes the action “arrowy sleet / bale the sea / out and in.” The children are apostate, “recreant.” Although “there are nets on the hills,” to capture them, they “have traveled all night.” These children remain homeless “recreant” “leaving home constantly.” This may be the endless story, but it becomes children fleeing a mad father, which is, allegorically, patriarchal society:

L E A R

Leans on his lance            he

Has holes instead of eyes

Blind (folded)

Bare (footed)

Nuclear (hooded)

Windbridled

For how or to who (174).

Within this ‘world gone mad’ there are “armed men who continually remove their hats to make clear / their peaceful / intentions / Murderers” (175)! The scene shifts abruptly to a writer, possibly Howe, herself, who passively “will go to my desk / I will sit quietly as if nothing / has happened” The children of Lir / Lear suffer “all coherence gone? .we are left darkling / waiting in the wings again / thrall in the heart of Hell” (176). Women’s position within this absurd and dark world of loss and violence is “Lodged in the ebbing actual / women in the flight

of time stand framed” The ending of the book alludes to Beckett’s “comment C’EST.” Blom and Pim “crawl naked in the darkness and mud of existence.”

I can re

Trac

My steps

Iwho

Crawl

Between thwarts

Do not come down the ladder

Ifor I

Have eaten

It a

Way (179-180).

Cordelia and the other children of Lear are trapped in an absurd world—a world where language in its traditional forms cannot give it meaning.

#### Chapter Four—Later Works: Singularities

##### Articulation of Sound Forms in Time, Thorow, Scattering As Behavior Toward

##### Risk and Conclusion

Published in 1990, Singularities is another of Howe's works that attempts to renew and remake history. Singularities combines liberty and exile in the first poem "Articulation of Sound Forms in Time." First, "Articulation" merges a traditional historical narrative and an avant-garde lyric verse, which, like Charles Olson's poetry, takes the "page-as-field." Thematically, Hope Atherton is exiled into liberty, and, hermeneutically, the reader is exiled from language which is strictly referential. The poem resonates with history as if filtered through deep imagery and myth.

Like almost all of Howe's writing, history is again her focus in Singularities. John Palattella considers her concern with historicism in conjunction with the painter Ad Reinhardt and the concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay. This is important because Susan Howe's essay "The End of Art" also made comparisons between these same two artists, in addition to Robert Lax, a poet. According to Howe, Lax's concrete poems exemplified in technique his obsession with verticality and his movement towards abstraction. Similar interest in simplification of forms is evidenced, Howe notes, in Ad Reinhardt's abstract paintings and in his poem "Art in Art is Art as Art." Ian Hamilton Finlay, a friend

of Lax, was taken by his work. Howe identifies the common elements these two artists shared as their “unsentimental classicists” bent that allowed them to remove from their work “all biographical revelation” without giving up that which was “romantic and even religious” (Howe “The End of Art” 4-7). Not surprisingly, Palatella identifies very similar elements in Howe’s work as she identifies as similar in Lax, Finlay, and Reinhardt:

If, for Finlay and Reinhardt, the end of art is astringent abstract formalism, for Howe the end of abstract indeterminacy is a pragmatics of art that locates the means of historical understanding in a process of linguistic and rhetorical play that sounds out identity through the language world (and language of the world) surrounding it (Palatella “An End of Abstraction” 76).

Howe’s work is playful, word art that challenges the viewer/reader to interpret the meaning through a “search for a solution” (6).

Susan Howe critiques “the narrative of progress that dominates modern historiography” and uses montage to “unsettle traditionally received notions of authorship.” These are two “regions of confluence” identified by Paul Naylor in his essay on Howe and Walter Benjamin. He continues to explicate Benjamin’s “dialectical image” as containing both the real and the ideal which result in the disruption of history as process. Benjamin, like the surrealist, sought to undermine the idea of “self” and the “precedence of the individual...of the self as a cogito that has as its essence an inalienable right to consume” (Naylor “Writing History Poetically” 7). Like the surrealists, who were interested in the “dream



state,” Benjamin adds layers of theology and Marxism, which create a Utopian vision and ground his writings historically. Combining montage and commentary, Benjamin “over come[s] the contradiction he exposes in surrealism: commentary opens the text up to revolutionary contents, while the method of montage opens the text up to revolutionary forms” (9). Not only does Susan Howe share Benjamin’s concern for the disruption of history, but her paratactic technique, which relies on the reader to fill in the gaps, is very similar to that of Benjamin’s “Theses,” whose style also necessitates reader participation in its explication. Also, Howe’s shattering of the underlying idea of authorship in *Thorow* corresponds to Benjamin’s concerns for the displacement of the voice. Both writers are “writing history poetically” (2, 11-12). Both are not only *destructive*, but also, more importantly, both authors are reconstructing the present through poetically reconfiguring the past.

The second piece in Singularities, *Thorow*, continues to explore shattering and fragmentation of the individual self as well as the complex relationship of nature to the writing self. Quoting Deleuze and Guattari, Howe stresses that “the proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity. The proper name is the subject of a pure infinitive comprehended as such in a field of intensity” (Singularities 42). This shattering of the self is a kind of exile *and* a kind of liberty. “Work penetrated by the edge of author, traverses multiplicities, light letters exploding apprehension suppose when individual hearing.” The reader is

freed into something like liberty with “light letters exploding apprehension. All lendings off, meaning utterly unsafe, I destroy what I love and love is joy” (MED 108).

Singularities ends with *Scattering as Behavior Towards Risk*. This poem is full of “page-as-field” writing, which tosses words and letters about the page, much as Jackson Pollock might splatter paint. The reader is faced with devising a tactic for interpreting what seems chaotic. Lines impede upon lines, words and sentences flow, dissipate, disrupt, and punctuation curtails translation:

On a[p<suddenly...on a>was shot thro with a dyed→a soft}”\*  
(became the vision (the rea) after Though [though] that  
Fa (Singularities 63)

Peter Quartermain offers a possible reading of this unusual passage, claiming that the marks are editorial marks which tell the printer exactly how to lay it out. This seems believable. It also seems an embodiment of language as gesture, the spoken integrated with the unspoken. It also seems chaotic. At this point in “Scattering,” she has incorporated the radical chaos.

Howe explained the origin of “singularity” as a mathematical term Rene Thom uses in *Mathematical Models of Morphogenesis* for the exact point where the positive integers in math become the negative, the boundary, or “dividing line,” from which chaos threatens to erupt. Howe explains: “(i)t’s the point chaos enters cosmos, the instant articulation” (Bm 173). It is to this point of

“singularity” that Howe’s writing takes the reader—to “liberty, chaos, and origins.”

Peter Quartermain offers a scholarly assessment of Howe’s work:

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...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. Like Emily Dickinson she is an utterly astringent formalist (“And the Without, an Interpretive Essay on Susan Howe” 194).

Quartermain offers one of the most intriguing readings of part of “Scattering as Behavior toward Risk,” a reading which clearly shows the multiplicities possible in her use of indeterminate and shifting semantic and syntactic combinations. “Howe invites us to read *Billy Budd* as Melville wrote it, spasmodically erasing itself, constantly deconstructing and reconstructing itself” (191-192).

Another critic, Linda Reinfeld, develops the resemblance between Howe’s writings and that of Theodor Adorno: “a kinship of experience, a concern with language as that which articulates the experience of exile even as language itself is broken down by the cultural filters and deceptions of the text upon which language as history, or personal history, must depend” (“Susan Howe: Prisms 124). Reinfeld notes that *Articulation* is, according to her interview with Howe, based on Schoenberg and is “an attempt to let the sounding qualities of language

break through the narrative.” Reinfeld also finds hints of Beckett’s *Murphy* in Howe’s work. Noting that Adorno thought the texts of a culture are the prisms “through which the world in all its differences is most accurately perceived,” Reinfeld makes the point that Howe is concerned, primarily, with texts and not theory (128). Adorno’s “principle of nonidentity” is, according to Reinfeld, Howe’s Hope Atherton (129).

Susan Schultz writes, “the more I read and teach her work, the more forcefully I am struck by the essential conservatism of her poetics...Howe believes in history and ...in the possibility that history (and gender) can be transcended through art.” Schultz calls her technique “backward-looking prophesy.” In *Nonconformist’s Memorial*, she notes “(w)oman is figured as an impasse to narrative, but this impasse does not create incoherence so much as re-coherence” (Schultz “Exaggerated History” 1). Schultz’s appreciation and critique of Howe’s writings come from intimate knowledge of them through her teaching.

In the article “‘Collision or Collusion with History:’ Susan Howe’s Articulation of Sound Forms in Time,” Marjorie Perloff, in reading “Articulation,” notes the importance of her word play and the absence of a lyric self in the poetry. She reads Articulation closely, illuminating what others found to be too arcane and too eclectic to understand. Stressing the importance in Howe’s writing of word play such as rock / rook, Ibex / Ibis and collision /

collusion of “mythic / historical configurations of ‘sound forms,’” ( “Collision or Collusion with History” 298). Perloff emphasizes the way Howe creates an Ireland of myth and mystery. Perloff also notes a lack of individual ego or self, which is so pronounced in the confessional poets of the seventies. Reflecting on the opening lines, “(f)rom seaweed said nor repossess rest / scape esaid,” she recognizes echoes of T.S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett (298-299). She notes Howe’s “uncanny ability to enter the experience of an actual historical woman to make that experience her own,” in both *My Emily* and in *The Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. Perloff reads Howe without foreclosing possibilities or reifying the text into univocality. Finally, she emphasizes Howe’s very complex feminism. According to her, Howe chose not to end *Articulation* with the rather uplifting “Girl with forest shoulder,” but with a much more austere poem: “To kin I call in the Iron-Woods / Turn I to dark Fells last always / ...Far flung North Atlantic littorals / ...Crumbling masonry windswept hickory” (309). Howe’s dark vision ends with a “call” to “kin” into the dark with her words.

## Conclusion

“scape esaid”

“The time has come,” the Walrus said,  
“To talk of many things:  
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—  
Of cabbages—and kings” (Carroll Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There, 1872)

I wish I could invent a new critical method—something swifter  
And lighter and more colloquial and yet intense: more to the point  
And less composed: more fluid and following the flight. . . The  
Old problem: how to keep the flight of the mind, yet be exact.  
(Writer’s Diary 325. Pink Guitar 60) (Salvaggio 95)

Where does Howe fit within the tradition of American poet/critics? Howe, herself addressed this issue and the importance of including women within the tradition of American poetry in a letter to Lyn Hejinian. Interestingly, the male poets she presents are also distinguished critics of poetry.

It is important for women to be included ...as they have always been left out in the worthwhile history of American poetry. I’m not talking about the second rate history. I’m talking about Zukovsky, Pound, Duncan, Olson et al. You, Rae [Armantrout], Bernadette [Mayer], Alice Notley, Barbara Guest, Maureen [Owen], Ann Luterbach and I hope me, are not to be mentioned in passing, or listed then shoveled under the rug as they say. Others too. In fact there is a balancing on the edge, an energy and risk taking, a leap of faith that is lonelier, and therefore more dangerous and charged within the work of certain women – that they (men) would do well to pay attention to (Mandeville 74/4/18).

Women poets, Howe claims, manifest an energy and a power within their poetry that she advises men to be aware of. Howe writes of her disappointment that

women are simply ignored or rejected “as serious workers unless they are dead, were the mistress or girlfriends of famous male poets, or have the blessing of some lead Male, like Pound or Zukofsky.” Howe goes on to qualify her statement with this disclaimer: “the fact is Poetry is a miracle and so precious and so tenuous, and so filled with pain and pleasure, and it is indeed beyond gender” (Mandeville 11/16/18). Ironically, Howe identifies the importance and power in women’s poetry, yet she is careful not to limit that power to women only. Howe recognizes a number of precursors as mentors and permission givers—some of these are male and some are female. Also, she recognizes a number of male poets such as Anselm Hollo, George Oppen, and Charles Reznikoff as unsung and awesome poets in contrast to others, both male and female, who are uninspiring, but who seem to garner all the accolades and academic attention; her example is Elizabeth Bishop (Mandeville 74/4/18).

Howe traces the genealogy of poets and critics and poet/critics who have influenced her. These include both British and American poets and writers. Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf have been highly influential. Hamlet has meant everything to her. “Hamlet has everything EVERYTHING for me...and the last line of my poems (PS) weeds shiver etc. is a springing off from Ophelia’s drowning—with Virginia Woolf’s as well and her *The Waves* in mind” (Mandeville 11/16/7). Besides Hamlet, *King Lear* has also been a huge influence, especially in *The Liberties*. Of Virginia Woolf, she says: “I have just

finished my long Virginia Woolf program and it taught me so much! I got completely immersed in Virginia Woolf, in her work, life, diaries, letters, etc. It was a tremendous learning experience for me” (Mandeville 74/4/18). In contrast to both Shakespeare and Woolf, Adrienne Rich leaves her less inspired:

I have also just done one [radio program] with Adrienne Rich. Simply because I thought I ought to try to understand her – most of her recent poetry leaves me cold, and almost none of her earlier work moves me. But I wanted to try to understand what is propelling her into such extreme feminism. She is a very bright woman and she certainly did not have to go that route, she was accepted completely by the male establishment poets such as they are. She has written very truthfully in *O Woman Born* about the conflicts of being a mother and a writer. Anyway I was curious, and it has turned into a big deal with a lot of editorial work which will have to be done. Not the rich experience the Virginia Woolf program was, but interesting nevertheless. (Mandeville 74/4/18)

Another poet/critic who has been very significant to Howe is Hilda Doolittle. Part of Howe’s fascination with HD is that Howe’s poetic method is very much like HD’s, as was her ambition, and her obsession with history and myth. “I can relate to her on many levels. Most particularly her precise use of words and her love of history” (Mandeville 74/4/18). Howe quotes HD’s novel Bid Me to Live in a letter dated August 19<sup>th</sup>, 1977:

She was self effacing in her attack on those Greek words. She was flamboyantly ambitious. The words themselves held inner words. She thought if you look at a word long enough, this peculiar twist, its magic angle, would lead somewhere, like that Phoenician track, trod by the old traders. She was a trader in the gold the old gold, the myrrh of the dead spirit. She was bargaining with each word (Mandeville 74/4/18).



This serendipitous following of the “magic angle” of each word is very similar to Howe’s own poetic methodology. HD was an inspiration for her as a poet and a critic. Howe clarifies in a letter her feelings about HD:

On HD...her psychic need for the father, for identification with the male, is something more than the trauma of dislocation suffered in early childhood. It leaves her with at once intimations of the bliss of early childhood, a nostalgia for some prelapsarian world of unity, and a hunger for some future reconciliation a re-merging of the feminine and masculine subjectivity and objectivity (Mandeville 74/4/18).

When considering other influences Howe identifies Melville:

Melville has been more important to me than any other writer. I have read literally everything by or about him I could lay me hands on him. Too many people just read Moby Dick, Pierre, Mardi, White Jacket, many of the poems, the short stories, are so wonderful too. I think he is America’s Shakespeare and every American writer must come to some kinds of grips with what he was trying to tell us and how he did just that (74/4/18).

Although she identifies Melville as “more important to me than any other writer,” this ultimate statement must be qualified by the many references in her personal correspondence and in her interviews to other poets who were of great importance and influence to her, especially Wallace Stevens. In addition to Melville and Wallace Stevens, she recognizes Emily Dickinson and William Carlos Williams as precursors. “Then of course the master or mistress of combining tenseness and intensity was Emily Dickinson. William Carlos Williams I love as well. There is an excellent

and highly underrated poet Lorraine Niedecker who also understood economy and intensity.” Niedecker, however, suffers in her estimation from her being a disciple of William Carlos Williams. In this quote, Howe recognizes the “economy and intensity” of Dickinson and reproduces a similar economy and intensity in her own poetry.

In addition to these poets, Howe identifies an anti-Modern aspect to her work and does not count herself a “Modern poet.” On June 12, 1982 she wrote to Hejinian:

As to women and Modernism. I do not feel a Modern in the sense that I think Watten, Andrews, Silliman – see Modernism. I’m not Modern. I was born out of time. I am writing for mainly dead poets. Or talking to them in my work and loving them for their passion for words and for some sort of scholarship that seems to lie all in a dead world of Courtesy and passion – or something. Stevens being the most recent I guess and Robert Duncan who thank God as far as I am concerned keeps the old strains at least in the open...(74/4/18).

An earlier letter, April 18, 1980 to Hejinian identified her in an older tradition: “I guess I am a Romantic and always was and always will be.” This highly mystical, romantic strain in her poetic taste emerges in her discussion of Anselm Hollow versus Elizabeth Bishop. In a handwritten note at the top of a letter to Hejinian, she queries, “I asked Elizabeth Bishop if she was interested in Olson’s work as they both were obsessed with Geography and History—answer—‘No, I don’t like it at all.’ Where do you go from there?”

The following cryptic analysis of Bishop/Lowell versus Hollow/Ashbery makes very clear her position on the discrepancy between which poetry and poets are valorized in our society as opposed to which poetry and poets she would recognize as truly good:

First Anselm Hollow, a poet whose work I admire very much and always have – came to read. He was terrific. My idea of a poet. Filled with a sense of the power of myth and magic and what it is to care passionately for life and Art etc. He tells me his book Maya, a book I love, which has meant a great deal to me (I have only found it in the Yale Library) is out of print. Then I had to do (I was set up to do it – had no interest myself) with the poet. Elizabeth Bishop who has many many books, teaches at Harvard, is considered by John Ashbery (yea!) and Robert Lowell (Ugg!) to be one of the great American poets. She read her work as if it was an instruction manual, the work for me was dead at heart. She claimed not to work very much at all when I asked her what if anything Emily Dickinson had meant to her. She replied “I don’t like sad poetry.” How do you follow that?...Well what I mean to say – Here is this woman at the pinnacle of her career. She is in her sixties I would say. She goes about accompanied with a publicity agent for Farrar Strauss, she has jobs, everything in print and is not remotely aware of what I would consider the mystical calling of Poet. Then there is Anselm Hollow out of print, looking for work desperately for next year, worried, suffering and with the wisdom of the ages about him.....Life, life (74/4/18).

The fact that John Ashbery rates a “yea!” and Robert Lowell rates an “Ugg!” perhaps illustrates Howe’s dislike for both the realism and the confessionalism of Lowell’s *Life Studies*, as opposed to the more open and experimental forms of Ashbery. Howe identifies the polysemous character of Ashbery’s work—where a simple meaning is all but impossible to nail down and where “there is no logical

explanation only a new being born every time one reads or looks or listens to it.”

She explains:

I also agree about Ashbery. The Tennis Court Oath is my favorite of all his books although I love some of the poems in Self Portrait. He never mentions The Tennis Court Oath himself anymore as if he would like to forget the whole thing. But I think in that book he is out there swimming in the waters of pure inspiration, delight in words, language, images, the page, swimming around for all he is worth. Taking any wild chance, any combination- like a collage – that will form a final picture. You can float around in those poems and never find a specific meaning, message, or whatever. I suppose that is a part of all Art that doesn't go dead on one. That there is no logical explanation only a new being born every time one reads or looks or listens to it. “How much longer will I be able to inhabit the divine sepulcher.” Is one of my favorite poems. What energy it has. Also the poem Rain was a real influence on me when I started writing. I still find new surprises in it. As for Europe? Wow! His poems are a little like de Chirico paintings – with their enigma and blending of past and present. Dream and reality. The title of a de Chirico painting in the Modern is the title of one of Ashbery's books The Double Dream of Spring (74/4/18).

As with Emily Dickinson and Hilda Doolittle, Howe finds in Ashbery's poetry the very qualities of intensity, energy, and multiplicity of meaning that she so often creates in her work.

Besides these poets, Wallace Stevens, Charles Olson, and Robert Duncan are very important to Howe. “Wallace Stevens is just about my favorite – but her [Holly Stevens'] book about him was strangely dull” (74/4/18). In a letter to John Taggart, Howe comments on the importance of Stevens to her:

I used to think Harmonium (sic) was wonderful and now the later poems (of course the Idea of Order and Sunday Morning are supreme,) but those later ones like Aurora's of Autumn are so full

of awe akin to terror (Aurora is about the terror of light) that they are more a part of my psyche now. I think though that Stevens isn't an open poet in the way that Olson, Zukofsky, Williams, Pound, HD are. When I read them I am filled with the excitements of possibilities – the feeling that one must dare to take risks – to push the poem to the very edge of babble. I can see their mistakes and their successes. With Stevens I feel utterly defeated at the start. He is so complete a miracle unto himself that he can defeat another writer. A certain staleness can result as in the case of a truly deadly poet like John Hollander. But that isn't Stevens fault and it does seem to me that the Hugh Kenner school of Pound worshipping criticism does shortchange Stevens badly (Mandeville 11/16/17).

Howe's strong opinions regarding poetry emerge time and time again in her personal letters. She is, sometimes, beset by jealousy or disdain towards contemporary poets. Of Rochelle Owens, on whom she produced a radio program with WBAI, she states, "I am responsible for editing the most DISGUSTING program of wailing drivel by Rochelle Owens. And to think she is published by Black Sparrow and in the Anthology America a Prophecy (sic). The worst sort of female complaining and fake mythologizing. I can barely bring myself to listen to it, let alone make something of it (74/4/18). Howe excoriates the poetry of Rochelle Owens, along with other female poets in the confessional mode such as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Much more to her liking is the less whining and more "objective" work which TS Eliot championed earlier in the century. Discussing male LANGUAGE poets she scathingly comments in Nov 30<sup>th</sup> 1982:

It's all right for Language Poets such as Watten, Silliman, Bernstein, and all to be "difficult" but with me it means dismissal

as I have found so far. I was very excited writing it [The Liberties]  
– and its not “difficult” to me --but there you are. (11/16/7)

Howe’s disdain for males who seem to be accepted in spite of their “difficulty”  
continues in another frank assessment of their egotism:

The majority [of poets in California] are dull, macho, empty and  
exceedingly conceited. I have been sickened recently by having to  
listen and reply to phone calls over the air Alan Ginsberg’s  
Workshop at Naropa. By now I loathe the man. He has literally  
cut all women out of his version of the History of Poetry in  
America. ...I think of ED....I think of Emily Bronte, of Christina  
Rossetti, of HD of so many – would they have wasted their time  
listening to this junk (74/4/18).~ .

Women poets, Howe claims, have been elided from Ginsberg’s version of  
poetic history. She consoles herself to think that none of the female writers who  
are important to her such as Emily Bronte, Christina Rossetti, or HD would have  
bothered with his posturing and self-indulgent macho “junk.” Ironically, at the  
same time she recognizes the absence of women poets and their subsequent  
dismissal by the men who have power and recognition, she also recognizes in the  
following passage written to Hejinian her own difficulty relating to other  
contemporary women writers, with, of course, a few exceptions:

I know exactly what you mean when you say you have trouble  
(apart from Carla) relating to other women who are writers! I  
completely feel the same. I feel removed to the extent that I  
sometimes feel walled up in my own skin and cut off. ...Apart  
from Maureen [Owen], and Joan Jonas, and you by letter – and  
maybe Bernadette [Mayer] by letter (though I’m not wholly sure  
there ) I feel separate, and in a way I find bothering. Have I been  
programmed to feel this way – or is it some mole of nature in me.

I have no difficulty in feeling close to certain dead writers who are women! Jane Austen, Emily Bronte and Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, to name a very few. ...Is it a sexual jealousy, are we just desperately fighting for the few crumbs that fall our way? Will this change? A mystery (74/4/18).

Of the poets associated at the time with St. Marks Bowery, Howe adores

Maureen Owen, is conflicted about Anne Waldman, and finds Ted

Berrigan a good poet, but like Larry Fagin, a less than lovely individual:

About Anne Waldman. I feel sour grapes about her, very much so in fact. But I admire her. I admire a driven quality in her. She dares to take chances and live alone and travel about etc. In a certain sense St Marks is wonderful, at least they have an instinct for what is ALIVE in poetry. ...Ted Berrigan who is a tremendous influence on Anne is a good poet but an ego maniac macho PIG. Larry Fagin is diabolical...If it weren't for Maureen I would have nothing to do with the place. She literally saves it.

But Maureen. There is the wonderful person. A fine poet – quite naturally. And a GOOD person. I can't tell you about her. But when you meet her you will see at once what I mean. There is simply no one like her. She is wonderful (74/4/18).

I simply loved the book you put out by Kathleen Fraser, I have lent it to my sister so haven't got it here at the moment. The one about her father's architecture...really it interested me more than anything I have read recently...(74/4/18).

Where, then, does Susan Howe fit into the poets/critics of our time?

Rachelle Blau DuPlessis's *Pink Guitar* offers Howe as a model of feminist

writing. In spite of Howe's rejection of that term, I think Howe's poetry and

criticism release the feminist imaginary, and as such are both model and beacon

for other poets and critics, both male and female. In a brief conversation with

Rae Armantrout, who was teaching a contemporary poetry course at the

University of California, San Diego, she spoke to me of Howe's influence on contemporary poets including Mei Mei Brusenbrugger. I believe Howe will continue to have a lasting influence on younger poets. Also, Susan Howe has continued to publish interesting and important works since I began this study. These include *Pierce-Arrow*, a study of Charles Sanders Peirce. Articles continue to be written about her. As her poetry is discovered, read, and understood, I believe she will become more and more important within the context of contemporary American poets. Just as the poet and critic Alice Ostriker seeks to articulate the power of the female voice in books such as Writing Like a Woman and Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird seek to articulate the power of the indigenous female voice in Reinventing the Enemy's Language. Howe's poetry and criticism also articulate a powerful poetic voice through the feminist imaginary.

My argument has been that Susan Howe's early work—the poetry collected in Frame Structures, Europe of Trusts, and My Emily Dickinson, reveals the emergence of a feminist imaginary. I define the feminist imaginary as writing which participates in the rupture of conventional textual meaning that creates fissures and gaps and competing narratives through either its disruption of syntax, the erasing or displacing of text, or the orality and sensuality, the poetic qualities of the language itself. The feminist imaginary adds a Kristevan “semiotic” dimension which transforms language and makes it dynamic and restless, charged with multiple meanings and many possible readings. These



“endless protean linkages” are manifested quite often in language that is charged poetically and orally. The feminist imaginary is also writing that is able to encode discourses that are oppositional to the dominant discourses of our culture. For Emily Dickinson this practice meant finding a “new grammar.” For Virginia Woolf, it meant inventing “a new critical method,” one that could “keep the flight of the mind, yet be exact” (Salvaggio 95). I believe that there are many and various manifestations of the feminist imaginary. Joyce’s feminist imaginary emerged in eloquent word play of Finnegan’s Wake. Other critics and writers manifest the feminist imaginary in their own ways. These include Woolf, Kristeva, Cixous, Irigaray, Anzaldúa, Butler, DuPlessis, Trinh Minh-ha, Gunn Allen, Silko, and many others. Charles Bernstein identifies aspects of the feminist imaginary in Howe’s writing:

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, mytho-poetic or word-materializing, rather  
Enlisting these approaches as navigational tools, multilateral  
Compasses, on a journey into the unknown, denied and destroyed.  
(Difficulties 84)

Bernstein correctly identifies the “crevices of the audible & the hidden” and the “luminous” aspect of language which refuses to be categorized and classified, and which “denied and destroyed” these old “navigational tools.” Howe’s text embodies both the rupture and the rapture of the feminist imaginary.

I have argued that Howe's method of writing—a very associational method that follows the “cinders of the lexical drift” is an implementation of Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique. Howe admits beginning with “fragments and bits and pieces” and allowing them to take her on a journey of discovery (BM 165). This journey often encompasses an aesthetic of “decreation” which deconstructs the myth of a coherent history and the myth of a coherent self. This is a feminist sublime or a counter-sublime. Stevens is her mentor in showing this move towards immanence.

In Howe's earliest published work of literary criticism, My Emily Dickinson, she found her mentor and model of antinomian resistance. Howe identifies, in a very nontraditional essay that is dependent on juxtapositions and tangential leaps of association, the kinds of hesitation, transformation, and heretical resistance to ordinary language in Dickinson which she incorporates herself. Next I considered the anthology of some of her earliest poetry, Frame Structures.

Kornelia Freitag identifies Howe's project in her later work such as *Eikon Basilike* as an “emancipatory project of feminism which at the same time deconstructs what Lyotard has called the “grand narratives of legitimation” (Freitag 56). Howe's poetic project prospers with the deployment of a feminist imaginary and it is also very important in her earlier work as well as in *Eikon*. I have attempted to read the books included in Frame Structures to show Howe's

use of the feminist imaginary in *Hinge Picture*, *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*, *Cabbage Gardens*, and *Secret History of the Dividing Line*.

*Hinge Picture* manifests the feminist imaginary by deconstructing the paratext Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, upon which it is based. It is a polysemous text whose surreal technique exposes the violence done to “other voices” by a reified or traditional text. Howe’s Dada-like technique is very much like Duchamp’s original *Hinge Picture*. Next, I delved into the mysterious and enigmatic poetry of *Chanting at the Crystal Sea* and *Cabbage Gardens*. Both these texts were based on her excursions to Ireland with her family. May Sartin criticized this poem for being too surreal to understand. Although, it seems as though Howe was hurt by this comment, in a sense, it is true. However, the fact that the reader must then work to uncover a nontraditional meaning makes it very much in the mode of the semiotic or feminist imaginary. This poem requires a kind of *jouissance*. It is a “text of bliss,” through which the poet exposes the chaos and violence of human history and its beauty and mystery. Especially important in this poem is the confluence of reality and fantasy—children’s play and real historical events. The boundaries between these worlds, as it is in childhood, are blurred. Also, the imagery in these poems is more concrete and grounded in the senses than the imagery in *Hinge Pictures*.

*Cabbage Gardens* and *Secret History of the Dividing Line* also came from a personal trip to Ireland with her family. Although these poems are “personal,”

her poetics is not “confessional.” Cabbage Gardens is especially lyrical-- permeated by a feminist imaginary fully cognizant of the beauty inherent in the oral aspects of language. Howe quotes Johnson: “One could say a great deal about cabbage.” Cabbages are homely and used for pottage and soups—a key vegetable in a kitchen garden and so associated with women, home, warmth, and nourishment. Also, since Howe also glyphs Beatrix Potter’s Peter Rabbit, she creates the association with children and childhood. These associations are all part of the feminist imaginary.

The last book in the anthology is *Secret History of the Dividing Line*. This is another polysemous work that actually incorporates more and more radical dislocation of words and their placement on the page. The space around the words is very important to Howe in this as well. All this creates a difficult work, full of surreal technique, which disallows any singular reading.

The Europe of Trusts focuses on being feminine in a masculine world. Pythagoras classified women as being that which was dark and irregular. What, Howe asks, does it mean to be a woman in a Pythagorean world? Her answer is that it is a world of violence in which language is a record of the victors. She meditates on Esther Johnson or Stella and Cordelia and how women are erased or elided from the written records of history. The voices of these two females are heard throughout a drama of the absurd, very much like something from Samuel Beckett. In this play much that is irrational, semiotic, and abjected in our culture

is examined—including myths of rape (Leda and the Swan) and myths of romance (Cinderella).

Howe's writing does not follow the politically correct format of championing an authentic self—yet she also does not discard the importance of that self and its formation within given historical circumstances. Howe's writing is complex and challenging. Much of it is surreal and much of it implodes the very structures of language that play around sound, and meaning, and chaos. Her poetry questions the politics of identity and the way women and others can be colonized and marginalized through language. Howe “puts women back into discourse,” as Freitag claims and deconstructs narratives simultaneously. Her writing is mostly poetry; even her prose is charged with poetic literacy. One can “follow the O” in her work—that insistent, lyrical, sparkle which manifests the semiotic, and in doing so, creates a poetry of “earth” or a poetry of immanence that is fully imbued with the feminist imaginary.

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