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Marjorie Perloff

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Spectral Telepathy: the Late Style of Susan Howe

Marjorie Perloff

1 Many of our finest poets—think of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound—are also known as major critics, but in Susan Howe's case, it has always been difficult to separate the two practices.[1] *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), the book that first brought Howe wide attention, is at once revisionary scholarship, careful close reading, and aphoristic meditation on the writing process—a book that tells us at least as much about Howe's own poetics as about Dickinson's. *My Emily Dickinson* was prompted, at least in part, by Howe's objection to the portrayal of Dickinson as a kind of "madwoman in the attic" in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's celebrated feminist study by that title. Far from being the neurotic and repressed recluse of Amherst, Howe's Emily Dickinson is a strong poet, keenly interested in her culture and unusually well read :

> Pulling pieces of geometry, geology, alchemy, philosophy, politics, biography, biology, mythology, and philology from alien territory, a "sheltered" woman audaciously invented a new grammar grounded in humility and hesitation. HESITATE from the Latin, meaning to stick. Stammer. (21)

2 Here, and in her later "Logic of Sumptuary Values" in *The Birth-mark*, Howe showed to what extent Dickinson's curious punctuation—especially the dash, which "drew liberty of interruption inside the structure of each poem" (23)—revolutionized our understanding of the Dickinson corpus. And although *My Emily Dickinson* has a particular argument to make, it also introduced, perhaps inadvertently, a new hybrid mode of writing. Eliot Weinberger, in his Introduction to the reprint edition (2007), calls it "a poet's book, a classic of writers writing on writers" in the tradition of D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature,* Charles Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*, William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain*, Robert Duncan's *The H.D. Book*, and H.D's own *Tribute to Freud* (xi). But Howe's "critical" books, of which *My Emily Dickinson* is the first, have a somewhat different valence from those that Weinberger cites, distinguished as hers are by their poetic structure, in which documentary material—facts, dates, place names, citations—are so fully absorbed into the lyric fabric that the texts come to

function as long poems in their own right, no longer distinguishable from the volumes classified as poetry like *The Midnight* or *That This*. The key in Howe's case is a fierce empathy—a sense of becoming the other in what Howe herself has called an act of "spectral telepathy," of *mesmerism.*

3 This is especially true of the "essays" in Howe's most recent collection *The Quarry*, whose title piece is an elegiac essay on her "favorite twentieth-century poet," Wallace Stevens.[2] In such earlier volumes as *The Birth-mark,* the poet still places much weight on outside sources. Compensating for not being herself an academic, Howe was extra-conscientious in acknowledging scholarship like Patricia Caldwell's *The Puritan Conversion Narrative* as a source for her own brilliant discussion of Jonathan Edwards or Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence : The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973) as the inspiration for her own now classic essay "The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson," an essay that charts, as her scholarly sources do not, the ironies of the Biblical authority constantly invoked and then undermined by the authors of captivity narratives.

4 In the writing of the last decade, however, Howe has increasingly discarded or internalized such buttressing, relying now on what Wallace Stevens called, in a late poem, "the plain sense of things," although in her case, as in Stevens's, that plain sense has turned out to be nothing if not mysterious. When I speak of the "late style" of these writings, I am using the term, not in Edward Said's sense, derived from Adorno, of "artistic lateness . . . as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction" (7), but rather—and in the more literal and historical sense—"late style" in the tradition of Samuel Beckett's late minimalist works like "Lessness" and "Rockaby"—"texts for nothing" that have dropped all the trappings associated with a particular genre or mode in their focus on language itself.[3]

5 The very title of Howe's new book of essays has poetic resonance : a *quarry* (OED) is "an open-air excavation from which stone for building or other purposes is obtained by cutting, blasting, or the like ; a place where the rock has been, or is being, cut away." Further, by a nice coincidence, Susan Howe lives at 115 New Quarry Road in Guilford, Connecticut, an hour's drive from Stevens's Hartford, whose particular geography, with its seasonal extremes, is also hers. The *Quarry*'s title essay, in any case, cuts into Stevens's final volume *The Rock*, excavating words and lines that Howe recharges, making them her own. Subsequent essays take as their quarry (in the noun's other sense) Jonathan Edwards and Charles Peirce, the filmmaker Chris Marker, various Concrete artists (again rock is a medium), and the poet's own forebears, whose history, on her father's side, is closely bound up with that of New England. Indeed, *The Quarry* is a book of ghosts—literary as well as familial. And death—the death of two Howe's husbands, the sculptor David von Schlegell and the Peirce scholar Peter Hare—binds together what might look like "accidental sightings."

Word Frequencies and Zero Zones

6

"March . . . Someone has walked across the snow,
Someone looking for he knows not what."

7 This is the epigraph for the first section ("Roaming") of *The Quarry*'s opening essay "Vagrancy in the Park." The text opens with an italicized citation, "*Singeth spells*," referring no doubt to the Celtic myths and folk tales Susan Howe learned from her Irish mother, and then the declaration : "The poetry of Wallace Stevens makes me happy. This is the simple truth. Pleasure springs from the sense of fluid sound patterns phonetic utterance excites in us. Beauty, harmony, and order are represented by the arrangement, and repetition of particular words on paper" (3).

8 But Howe knows only too well that the "simple truth" is never so simple and that "arrangement" is the most complex of processes. Her epigraph comes from a short poem in *The Rock* called "Vacancy in the Park," whose last two couplets read :

9

It is like the feeling of a man
Come back to see a certain house.

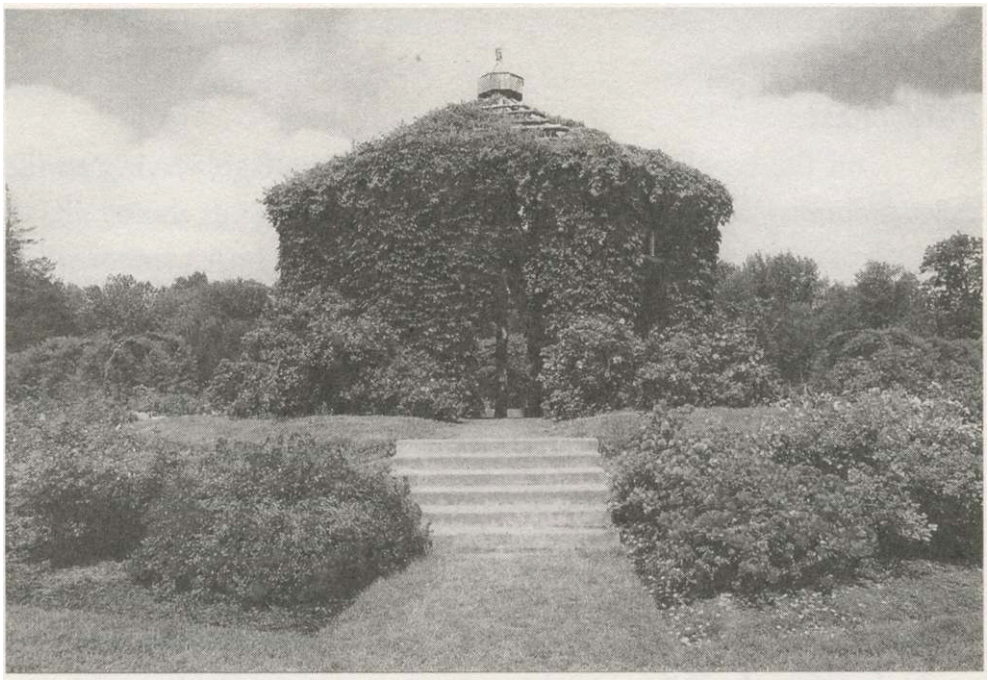
The four winds blow through the rustic arbor,
Under its mattresses of vines.

10 Now look at the photograph on the title page [figure 1] and then the one on the title page of part 2, "Ring Around the Roses" [figure 2]. Both are images, so Howe has noted, of a small pavilion or "rustic arbor" in Elizabeth Park in Hartford that Stevens frequented. The first picture is taken in winter, the second in summer. The "vacancy" of winter in the snow-covered park becomes, in Howe's own poetic text, *vagrancy* : it is the poet herself who is the vagrant "roaming" through Stevens's "park" and singing her own "spells"—*vagrant* recalling Emerson and Thoreau's play on the related *extravagant*. "I fear chiefly," wrote Thoreau, "lest my expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I am convinced" (*Walden*, 324). In a similar vein, Howe writes, "I owe [Stevens] an incalculable debt, "for ways in which, through word frequencies and zero zones, his writing locates, rescues, and delivers what is various and vagrant in the near at hand" (*Quarry*, 3).

Figure 1



Figure 2



11 In coming to terms with Stevens's "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" ("The Snowman"), Howe writes as if from deep inside Stevens's world. Here she is on "The Course of a Particular," in which "the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind" :

> Most critics read the season as autumn. For me, its lyric austerity defines late February weather in Guilford, Connecticut. Often on afternoon winter walks out on the quarry during this coldest month, there is hardly any foliage to cry in the raw air. Some brittle oak leaves still cling to their branches like tattered camouflage while tiny salt hay spindles scud across withered grass and frost-worked asphalt. Smoke-drift from indoor woodstoves is another vagrant variant. (4)

12 The passage begins matter-of-factly with the differentiation of late winter from autumn in Connecticut, but soon the imagery becomes increasingly graphic, and the sound structure highly rhythmic and figured, with its intricate repetitions of voiceless and voiced stops—*k*, *t* and *d*—aligned with the spirants *s* and *t* and the fricative *ft.* "Salt" rhymes with "asphalt" ; "vagrant" echoes "variant," which is itself a variant of "vacant." Sound repetition rises to a Keatsian pitch as Howe notes that Stevens deploys the obsolete past participle "shapen" ("shapen snow"), whose "pastness echoes in the sound of wind soughing through pitch pines." And now she makes us aware of her own presence in the landscape :

> On my way home I see a small stream rushing along under ice. Maybe the nature of a particular can be understood only in relation to sound inside the sense it quickens. Setting sun. A mourning dove compounds invisible declensions.
> "Deep dove, placate you in your hiddenness." (5)

13 The line comes from an earlier Stevens poem called "The Dove in the Belly" (366), but the dove's "invisible declensions" also bring to mind the famous conclusion of "Sunday Morning," where "casual flocks of pigeons make / Ambiguous undulations as they sink, / Downward to darkness, on extended wings" (70). And further : in Howe's *Spontaneous*

Particulars, *The Telepathy of Archives*, the dove—here the Psalmist's dove (Psalm 55), invoked by Jonathan Edwards's sister mourning his death—"Oh that I had wings like a dove ! *for then* would I fly away, and be at rest" (*Telepath*y, 52)—is also Henry James's in *The Wings of the Dove*—"the novel where James so perfectly finds his form for the work that follows, after." *The Wings of the Dove* is one of Howe's sacred texts, and in *Spontaneous Particulars*, James's heroine Milly Theale becomes a spectral emblem of suffering, even her name T H E A L E suggesting an "aspirate puff of breath [that] co-implicates his fictional birdwoman with wealth, theatricality and death" (*Telepathy*, 55).

14 *Theatricality and death.* As "Vagrancy in Park" unfolds, each section develops some aspect of "the sound inside the sense it quickens." The first line of the Stevens poem "Somnambulisma" (Stevens 304)—"On an old shore, the vulgar ocean rolls"—prompts Howe to puzzle over the poet's obsession with the consonant *r*, so rarely prominent in American English. This "vagrancy" leads her to thoughts of Spinoza, "by profession a lens-grinder," who understood that "A poem is a glass, through which light is conveyed to us," and then to Santayana, for whom Stevens wrote his own great elegy "To an Old Philosopher in Rome." Mrs. Ramsay of *To the Lighthouse* makes an appearance, "covering the boar skull on the nursery wall with her green shawl," as does, a few pages later, Mr. Ramsay, who, groping his way through the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, could never get beyond "R." And in the midst of Howe's metonymic *r* passages, the mood becomes more meditative, more phantasmagoric :

> As we grow old we return to our parents. Their absent submission to the harsh reality of Death renders the tangle luminous. A stellar pallor hangs on strips of silver bubbling before the sun. The spell is broken. There they are—embarking with other happy couples for Cythera. (*Quarry* 12)

15 The reference is evidently to Watteau's brilliant little painting *The Embarkation for Cythera* ("L'Embarquement pour Cythère", 1717) ; the painter's "luminous" and "silvery" figures—their fragile figures rendered here in falling rhythm, again with elaborate repetition of *r*'s and *s*'s. Cythera, of course is never reached. Indeed, Stevens's river this side of Stygia, "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" (there's that *r* again !) "flows nowhere, like a sea." In the end, Howe insists, following Stevens, she can only be a realist. And so on the penultimate page we read :

> These days I listen to the high speed Acela Express rushing through the remaining traces of woodland surrounding this four and a half acre, exurban almost suburban lot on the Northeast Corridor en route to Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington. Amtrak owns the land immediately bordering the tracks. Recently there has been a lot of hammering into the rock at night for some reason connected with a five-year plan for deploying free Wi-Fi internet service on all trains including slower regional ones.
>
> It's the new millennium. Post 9/11, spangled bleeding banners, war's carnage, the global War on Terror, Guantánamo, metadata, relationships, fracking, plastic bags, nuclear power plants, climate change, global warming, black holes, possible human extinction. (14-15)

16 A little reality check, just a shade tongue-in-cheek, cataloging those items most poets at this very moment are writing about. True, there is no Cythera at the end of the Acela line, only a passage through "Hartford in a Purple Light"— a town first stumbled upon in June 1636 by a group of pilgrims travelling the hundred plus miles from Cambridge

"through a hideous and trackless wilderness." "Vagrancy in the Park" is by no means a nostalgia trip :

> Late last night, when I couldn't sleep, I wondered at how the cold reversal of moonlight on snow from outside brightens the commonplace stillness of the house and how quietly night stands open to us, and sits up for us. Not fastening the door (16)

17 No closure in this very twenty-first century elegy, no Miltonic "fresh woods, and pasture new" as the poet finds herself "on the beached margin, after long pilgrimage, waving to the quiet moon." Remember that a few pages earlier, when Susan was reciting her "Star light, star bright" prayer to herself, she noted that "looking at a new moon through glass was and is terribly unlucky according to my mother's divinations so I can't take a chance of accidental sightings" (11). To be true to Stevens's spirit, the door must stay open.

18 Having carefully mined Stevens's *Rock* to assemble her own "Quarry" (Part II, "Ring around the Roses" completes this task), Howe sets the stage for the elegiac essay-poems that follow. The most important of these, to my mind, is "The Disappearance Approach," written in memory of Howe's husband Peter Hare, who died in his sleep on a January night in 2008 without her knowing anything was wrong. Howe's flat documentary account of the morning after, when, thinking Peter might already be up and out for a walk, she "looked out the window and saw the New York Times still on the driveway in its bright blue plastic wrapper" (29), makes for painful reading. Unlike most death memoirs, Howe never directly describes her feelings. Rather, emotion is objectified by intense concentration on such external objects as the CPAP mask used for sleep apnea that is still covering Peter's face when she enters the room, notes and work plans in Peter's computer, an overdue tax bill, anecdotes and emails about recent trips, memories of Peter's quirks like introducing himself to people, adding, "Peter Hare as in Peter Rabbit," his Buffalo house, whose décor, bearing the imprint of his first wife, didn't appeal to Susan, and so on. Pain is recorded, never directly, but in analogous stories of other sufferers at other moments in history. In the course of the essay we are presented with the autopsy report, "EMBOLIC OBSTRUCTION OF THE RIGHT VENTRICULAR OUTFLOW TRACT"—and finally with a visit to the Metropolitan to see the exhibition *Poussin and Nature*, where Howe's reading of Poussin's *Pyramus and Thisbe* becomes a mirror of her own situation. Trying, finally, to understand what such sudden, wholly unanticipated death can mean to the one dying, she muses :

> It could have been the instant of balance between silence, seeing, and saying ; the moment before speech. Peirce would call this moment secondness. Peter was returning to the common course of things—the world of signs. (46)

19 The rest can only be a zero zone.

20

21 It has long been a cliché that the "language poets," with whom Susan Howe was loosely grouped because she taught in the Buffalo Poetics Program with Charles Bernstein in the later 80s and 90s, are not true poets at all, failing as they do to present lyric emotion, to dwell in subjectivity. But I can't think of another contemporary elegy as deeply moving as "The Disappearance Text," unless it is the long "Sorting Facts," purportedly a critical essay on the documentary filmmaker Chris Marker, but also—and perhaps primarily—an elegy for Howe's first husband David von Schlegell, whose death, in contrast to Peter's, was slow and agonizing. Howe's study of the representation of

war in the films of Chris Marker, along with such other great filmmakers as Dziga Vertov and Andrei Tarkovsky, focuses on World War II, in which both David, seventeen years Susan's senior, and her father had fought. But, as always for this poet, objective correlatives tell the story. In Marker's early "ciné-roman" *La Jetée* (1962), World War III is about to begin. "Marker's use of freeze frames in this film that calls itself a fiction," writes Howe, "is a compelling documentation of the interaction and multiple connections perceived separately and at once between lyric poetry and murderous history" (*Quarry*, 111).

22 These hidden connections—words and phrases that seem separate but everywhere echo one another—are omnipresent in Howe's own writing, especially in *The Quarry.* Lyric poetry *interacts* with murderous history to produce a new kind of essay. Part 1 of "Vagrancy in the Park" concludes with the lines

23

Fishmonger
on the beached margin after long pilgrimage, waving to
the quiet moon. (17)

24 Here Stevens's "Hartford in a Purple Light" seems to have morphed into an Irish seascape : it was the Molly Malone of the famous ballad who was a fishmonger. Howe, who is relating Molly Malone to her own Irish mother Molly Manning, concludes her "long pilgrimage"—or is it Stevens's ? —"on the beached margin," "waving," in an echo of Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," "to the quiet moon." In this mesmerizing moment—the piece began with "setting sun"—"essay" and elegy—an elegy for Stevens but also for the poet's mother, and, later in *The Quarry*, for her lost husbands and father as well—become one.

Poem As Textile : Tom Tit Tot

25 While she was composing the essays in *The Quarry*, Howe was conducting another poetic experiment—this time not with prose but with found text, fragment, facsimile, and textual montage.[4] The artist's book *Tom Tit Tot* is, so to speak, the lyric counterpart of *The Quarry*, and although the fragments on its pages look more like poetry than does an "essay" like *Vagrancy in the Park*, the paradox is that these fragments, highly original as they are, are entirely made up of cited text : not a word here is Howe's own.

26 In conversation with W. Scott Howard, who curated a recent exhibition of *Tom Tit Tot* at the University of Denver Special Collections (2015), Howe explains :

> *TOM TIT TOT* broke my poetry, opened a new path to follow that began with the poems in *Frolic Architecture* [2011] and has been encouraged in acoustic directions while working on collaborations with the musician and composer, David Grubbs. I still felt somehow that *Frolic* was anchored—down to some material, a document or fact—to Hannah Edwards' original text—whereas *TOM TIT TOT* tosses chance and discipline together in a more kaleidoscopic way—seeing the Paul Thek show and then my experience of living at the Gardner Museum in Boston on a fellowship. All my life, I've loved fairy tales, and the magic appearance of those three monosyllabic three-letter words as both name and title reminded me of Thek's wonderful title to a series of sculptures, *The Personal Effects of the Pied Piper*, which led me back to Browning's poem and beyond that to his wonderful "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." I began *My*

Emily Dickinson with "Childe Roland." So, at the very beginning of my work and now here so many years later in *TOM TIT TOT*—via Thek, Browning, even Yeats, who also made use of Childe Roland and the black tower—I have circled through spontaneous particulars (fable and folklore) ending with the beginning.

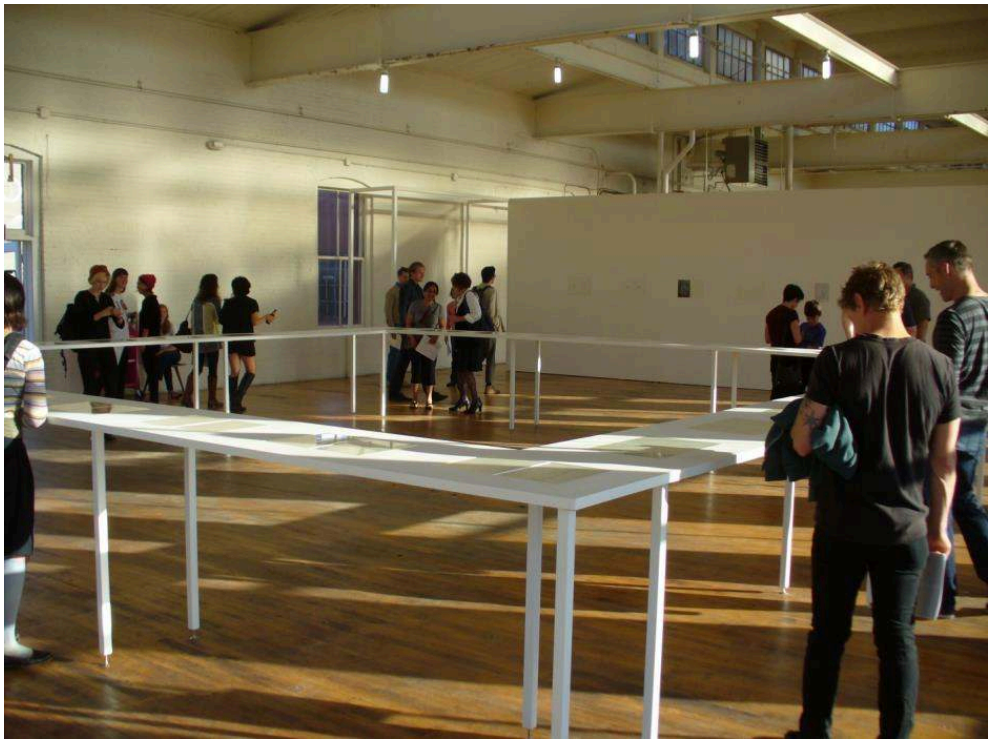
27 Howe's book is "kaleidoscopic," not only with respect to source material, listed at the end in a bibliography that includes poets from Ovid to Yeats, philosophers from Spinoza to Charles Peirce, and a good sprinkling of scholars, historians, and artists like Paul Thek, but it is also what I have called a "differential text," in that it exists in various forms. There isn't one definitive version. We have, to begin with, the collector's item : a fine press book published by the Library Council of the Museum of Modern Art in 2014, made in collaboration with the poet's daughter, the artist R. W. Quaytman. The MOMA book was hand-printed at The Grenfell Press in New York by Brad Ewing and Leslie Miller, who designed it with the poet and artist. As the colophon informs us :

> Howe created the poems for *Tom Tit Tot* with slivers of typeset text extracted from her readings in American, British, and Irish folklore, poetry, philosophy, art criticism and history. Beginning with copies of the source material,and including excerpts not only from the texts themselves but from the surrounding footnotes, tables of contents, and marginalia, Howe cut out words and sentence fragments, then spliced and taped them together while retaining their typefaces, spacing, and rhythms. These re-collected images, formed into arrangements shaped both by control and by chance, were then transferred into letterpress prints.
>
> Quaytman's design for the book is inspired partly by the geographical atlases and histories of Emma Hart Willard (787-1870), an American author, educator, and civil- and women's rights activist. (unpaginated)

28 The colophon further informs us that "The poems in *Tom Tit Tot* are part of an in-progress trilogy." The publishing history here is complicated. The sixty-seven poems in the MOMA book were first exhibited at the Yale Union in Portland, Oregon in October 2013 [see figure 3]. A group of related poems (this time not appropriated) was printed as an elegant chapbook, again called *Tom Tit Tot*, edited by Andrea Andersson, who compiled her own interpretive bibliography, providing notes to some of Howe's key poetic sources. Again, eight pairs of poems were exhibited at the Whitney Biennial of 2014. And the version of the MOMA book (the trilogy), to be published by New Directions in 2017 under the title *Debths* (the word comes from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*), will include a new section of "prose poems" conceived while Howe was doing a residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. Occupying a private wing of the sumptuous Venetian-style Palazzo, Howe was able to explore the museum's galleries at night when they were empty—a ghostly experience she found genuinely mesmerizing. For example, and this time in the poet's own language :

> Footprint
>
> Certain bronze elements found among the Pied Piper's
> personal effects have been moved from one exhibition
> room to another. Here are messages. "The Face of God."
> "Dust," "Time is a river." Props and other disinherited
> paraphernalia are never enough.
> I have to go in and catch my breath

Figure 3



29 The reference here is to Paul Thek's *The Personal Effects of the Pied Power* [figure 4], exhibited, like Howe's *Tom Tit Tot,* at the Whitney Museum in New York and cited by the poet in the comment for the Denver exhibition. Thek's title is a nice play on the Pied Piper motif in Browning's *Childe Roland,* so central to *Tom Tit Tot* in the MOMA version. And Browning leads in turn to W.B. Yeats's late work—"The Dark Tower" and "The Ghost of Roger Casement"—the transcriptions of whose manuscripts, as edited by J.C.C. Mays and Stephen Parish, have inspired Howe's own cuts and strikethroughs.

Figure 4



30 The intricate textual threads that hold such disparate items together are sonic as well as visual and semantic. A number of the Gardner poems may be heard on

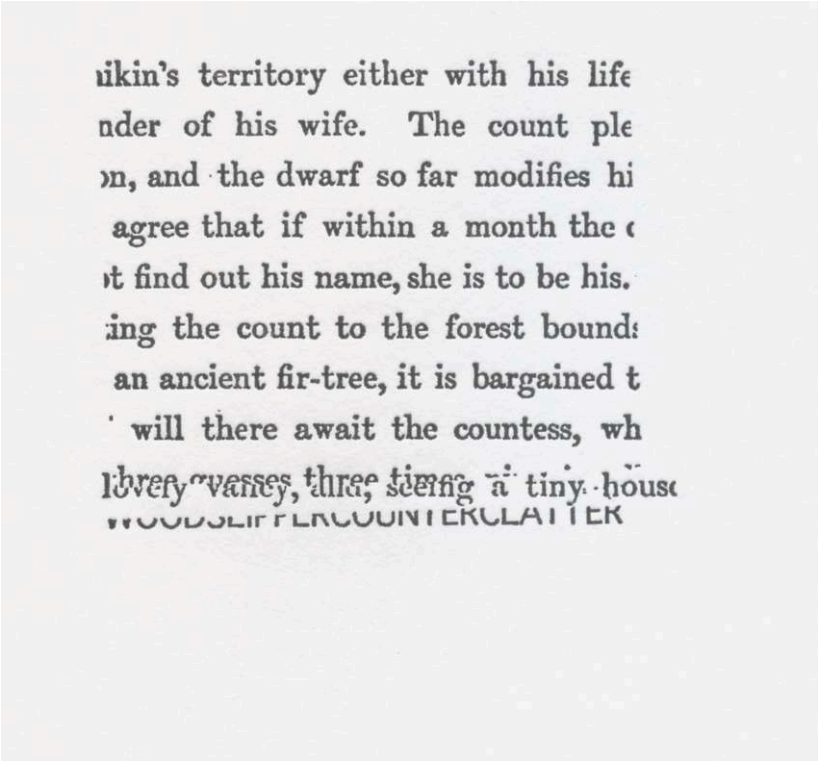
WOODSLIPPERCOUNTERCLATTER, the recording of a collaborative performance by Howe and the composer David Grubbs.[5] "Poeticity," Roman Jakobson reminds us, "is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality" (378). Or, in the words of the Brazilian concrete poet Haroldo de Campos : "Whereas for the referential use of language, it makes no difference whether the word *astre* ("star") can be found within the adjective *désastreux* ("disastrous") or the noun *désastre* ("disaster") . . . for the poet this kind of 'discovery' is of prime relevance" (294-95). *Astre/désastre :* it is precisely the sort of etymological game Howe plays in "Vagrancy in the Park," in her play on *vacant / vagrant / extravagant,* and the metonymic use of etymology is central to *Tom Tit Tot* as well.

31 At the same time—and here Howe puts a new spin on the Jakobson model—it is hard to imagine that the differential texts in question could have been produced before the internet age. "Vagrancy in the Park" appeared as an independent "essay" in *The Nation,* where the illustrations were reproduced in color. Hand crafted, quirky, wholly unique, with regards to construction, and available in such different states—deluxe collaborative artist's book, recorded musical composition, exhibition catalogue, conventional paperback—*Tom Tit Tot* could not be what it is without the current possibilities of digital production and distribution. No longer is a given sequence composed of self-contained lyrics—poems that might be anthologized or reprinted. Rather, the materiality of the text itself becomes central to the project. As Howe puts it in *Spontaneous Particulars*, *STITCH* (originally *STICH*) had as its original definition, "In *poetry,* a verse of whatever measure or number of feet" (31). We still use the term *hemistich*. But the "sewing" definition is also central :

> Quotations are skeins or collected knots. "KNOT, (*n., not. . .*) The complication of threads made by knitting ; a tie, union of cords by interweaving ; as a *knot* difficult to be untied." Quotations are lines or passages taken at hazard from piled up cultural treasures. A quotation, cut, or closely teased out as if with a needle, can interrupt the continuous flow of a poem, a tapestry, a picture, an essay ; or a piece of writing like this one. "STITCH, *n*. A single pass of a needle in sewing.

32 "Quotations are skeins or collected knots." From *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1978) on, Howe, trained as a visual artist, has been using typography and page layout in experimental and expressive ways. But now found-text fragments, cut up, superimposed, overlaid—take center stage. In *Tom Tit Tot,* whose first page contains no more than an enigmatic mathematical formula, evidently taken from the notebooks of the philosopher Charles Peirce, with a few words in Greek handwriting scribbled on the right, we come to pages that relate to the *Rumpelstiltskin* motif of the title, for example [figure 5] :

Figure 5



33 Here is the text of the familiar fairy-tale, but with margins cut off so that we have to rely on our own knowledge or guess work. From line 1, we surmise that the count must atone for invading the little "[*mann*]ikin's territory either with his lif[*e*]" or with the [*surre*]nder of his wife. The count ple[*ads*]—we don't know what exactly—"and the dwarf so far modifies hi[*s*]/ demand or his initial bargain, so as to "agree that if within a month the / c[*ountess*] can't find out his name, she is to be his."[6] There is a gap in the narrative (line 6), but, in any case, something is [*bring*]ing the count to the forest bound[*s*]—notice the near-rhyme—and beside "an ancient fir-tree, it is bargained t[*hat*] Rumpelstiltskin (or is it, in the version Howe is using, Tom Tit Tot ?) "wll there await the countess, w[*ho*] . . . ." At this point, the narrative becomes irrecoverable, one line folded over another, allowing us to discern no more than the famous "three guesses" and a "lovely vancy" (fancy ? relevancy ?, vacancy ?) in what is presumably the "tiny hous[*e*] of the dwarf. Everything dissolves into WOODSLIPPER-COUNTERCLATTER, barely visible at the fragment's bottom, but sounded emphatically and intensified by repetition in Howe's oral performance.

34 What makes Howe's retelling of the familiar fairy tale so oddly arresting ? The answer, I think, is that the ellipses and elisions, torn fragments and superpositions found in *Tom Tit Tot,* fanciful as they may seem at first sight, actually track the movement whereby we process the information that constantly bombards us. We read or hear snatches of conversation or the tail end of a radio program, we catch sight of a sign or placard as we drive through traffic, we come across familiar stories retold on websites or the social media, and find items in the blogosphere that trigger childhood memories. There is, on our literary horizon, no continuous narrative, no linear progression from A to B. Rather, fragmentary phrases take on a life of their own, especially when, as so often here, they are skillfully repeated and varied. Consider the two facing pages where, in

capital letters, the words “TANGIBLE THINGS” are reproduced, with “TOM TIT TOT” peeking out from underneath “THINGS.” Almost buried on the right side are the words “DIFFUSION OF STOR[*IES*] and, below this text, in small typeface, the phrase, evidently from a nineteenth-century historical text, “Out of a stark oblivion disenter,” where dissent is doubly asserted by its misspelling and strikethrough. Or again, in another instance, the text contains a reference to something that “partially obscures the newspaper grid,” arousing the reader’s curiosity about the small letters printed sideways and the reference in italics to “See Edgar’s song in”—words that point us to a story of betrayal very different from *Rumpelstiltskin*—namely *King Lear*.

35 Throughout, the poet has arranged her text fragments so as to keep the reader in a state of suspension : her initiating fairytale plot comes to encompass any number of related stories, legends, myths, scientific descriptions—and also rumor. Along the way, *Tom Tit Tot* defamiliarizes the reading and writing process itself, challenging us to confront that “snake’s small eye” and “white scarfed riders,” whose origins we do not know. At the same time, the poet reminds us at every turn that we are dealing with *material*—with paper, print, font, and typeface, and that meaning often depends on a single letter, syllable, or line break. On the very last page—a page that at first looks blank until we detect a small 8-line stanza at its far left margin, looking as if it wants to exit from the page, we read :

paper’s edges. The par-
from underneath, half
no chance for any unity
field, dust and puddle
R, opposition in its most
Zed, and yet all will be
a LITTLE above eye-
level if not a little below

36 Between those “littles,” both above and below, the letter “R,” the subject of Howe’s extended meditation in “Vagrancy in the Park,” returns, this time as an instance of “opposition in its most / Zed.” In the Stevens essay, we find this passage :

> For Webster the letter *r* is numbered among the liquids and “is uttered with a guttural extrusion of the breath, and in some words, particularly at the end of or after a labial and a dental letter, with a sort of quivering motion or slight jar of the tongue.” He defines a Roamer as “A wanderer ; a rover ; a rambler ; a vagrant.” Signal sender, faraway receiver. (*Quarry*, 15)

37 Just so, the poet-narrator of *Tom Tit Tot*, knowing there is “no chance for any unity,” surveys the “field, dust and puddle” around her from the perspective of the alphabet’s last letter, Zed—the emblem, it seems, of the vagrant—“the signal sender, the faraway receiver.” As one turns that last page, whose comforting adage “yet all will be” breaks off before the expected adjective “well,” the text opens up, suggesting that the real scene of poetry is just beyond the “page’s edges.” In the words of one of the prose poems for “Debths” :

> Electric bulb
>
> It’s a manic condition ; barbaric conceptions of an “other self”
> sawing away our finite future as we approach the laws which
> govern clutter ; leaving at death to return no more although

fitfully visiting old haunts with the aid of metal, clay, gouache,
glass, glue

38 From the electric bulb to gouache, glass, and glue : it is, Howe suggests, the "clutter" assembled with such ordinary tools, that transforms the flax of our daily sightings and readings into the poetic gold of *Tom Tit Tot*.

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NOTES

1. A portion of this essay was published in different form as "Conversation with Reality," *The Weekly Standard*, April 18, 2016, 39-41.
2. Maureen N. McLane, interview with Susan Howe ("Susan Howe, The Art of Poetry No. 97"), *The Paris Review* 203 (Winter 2012). Howe, who has been paying homage to Stevens—especially the late Stevens of *The Rock*—throughout her career, adds, "I am so much in awe of [Stevens's] power —he is the father figure, if you like—that [W.C.] Williams and the library section of *Paterson* seemed more humanly possible to discuss."
3. For Said, following Adorno, the exemplar is Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis,* which Adorno calls an "alienated masterpiece by virtue of its difficulty, its archaisms, and its strange subjective revaluation of the Mass" (Said, 7-8).
4. For an excellent discussion of Howe's recent use of the facsimile, see Jennings, "Susan Howe's Facsimile Aesthetic." And on Howe's use of erasure, see Dworkin, 31-49.
5. For the video of an earlier collaboration, see Grubbs and Howe, *Frolic Architecture* (2011).
6. The actual text is given in regular typeface, the "missing" in bracketed *italics*.

ABSTRACTS

Susan Howe's late style marks a departure from her earlier work. Two books recently published—*The Quarry* (New Directions, 2015) and *Tom Tit Tot* (Museum of Modern Art, 2015) illustrate this point. Whereas Howe's earlier books of critical prose—for example, *My Emily Dickinson* (1985)—used scholarship to buttress Howe's critical positions and arguments, her new "essays" in *The Quarry* are more properly understood as poems. When we analyze Howe's meditations on Wallace Stevens, we learn that she identifies with Stevens to create a new poetic hybrid. And the language and rhythm of these new essays is that of a poetic construct. In the same vein, her long poetic sequence, *Tom Tit Tot*, made up of fragments of other people's writings, the underlying thread being the fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin (Tom Tit Tot), is a conceptual work that appropriates fragments of other texts so as to create an entirely new angle on the fairy tale and its cognates. Both of these new books show how contemporary technique—facsimile, xerography, overprint, digital processing—can reanimate literary texts and make them new. Howe's austere later writing is perhaps her very finest.

Le style tardif de Susan Howe s'écarte sensiblement de son travail antérieur. Deux livres récemment publiés, *The Quarry* (New Directions, 2015) et *Tom Tit Tot* (Museum of Modern Art, 2015), suffisent à illustrer mon propos. Tandis que ses précédents ouvrages de prose critique, notamment *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), se fondaient sur la recherche pour étayer ses arguments et ses positions critiques, les nouveaux « essais » parus dans *The Quarry* sont mieux appréhendés s'ils sont lus comme des poèmes. Lorsqu'on analyse les méditations de Howe sur Wallace Stevens, on apprend qu'elle s'identifie à Stevens pour créer un nouvel objet poétique hybride. La langue et le rythme de ces nouveaux textes participent de la construction d'un monde poétique. Dans la même veine, *Tom Tit Tot*, sa longue séquence poétique inspirée du conte de fée *Rumpelstiltskin*, composée de fragments empruntés à d'autres auteurs, est une œuvre conceptuelle qui désintègre

et s'approprie d'autres textes afin d'ouvrir une perspective radicalement nouvelle sur le conte et ses ramifications. Ces deux ouvrages montrent comment la technologie contemporaine, du facsimile à la xérographie, de la surimpression au traitement numérique, permet de ranimer les textes littéraires et d'en renouveler les enjeux. Le style tardif de Susan Howe, pour austère qu'il soit, est peut-être son plus achevé.

INDEX

Keywords: essay, hybridity, rhythm, anaphora, repetition, fragment, mesmerism, Stevens, documentary, lyric
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AUTHOR

MARJORIE PERLOFF

Stanford University