

The Errand Wanderer and the Book-Worm: A Short Reading of Susan Howe's *Souls of the Labadie Tract*

Jessica Wilkinson

Susan Howe, ***Souls of the Labadie Tract*** (New Directions, 2007)

Susan Howe and David Grubbs, ***Souls of the Labadie Tract*** (Blue Chopsticks, 2007)

When we sit down to the task of discerning the content, themes and meanings of a Susan Howe text, we are faced with a somewhat arduous project of historical, biographical, literary and etymological research. We must piece together a puzzle whose fragments have been haphazardly cut and tossed around on pages rich with meaning. Megan Simpson contends that Howe ‘reverses the method of the traditional historian who, in his desire to make sense of history, privileges a coherent narrative at the expense of the insignificant (rich and strange) details that do not fit’. Howe’s ‘puzzle’, with its inclusion of the ‘rich and strange’, reminds me of that devised by Bartlebooth in Georges Perec’s *Life, A User’s Manual*—a puzzle whose last piece may not necessarily fit. Howe does not *rewrite* history per se, nor does she offer to us a tale to be ‘solved’ by a more conventional syntax or narrative classification. She has observed that ‘History is the record of winners. Documents were written by the Masters’. In response to these biased accounts, Howe explores a new kind of poetic-historical narrative that involves a searching investigation of the ‘blanks and gaps’ of history for traces of marginal, hidden and antinomian voices. In this way, Howe hopes that we may perceive and conceive of a more inclusive encounter with the past that is ‘outside of the frame’ set by her history-

writing predecessors. This is true of her two latest works, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, a collection of three new long poems introduced by a short essay, and her CD collaboration (with musician David Grubbs) of the same name, a spoken-word and acoustic recording of one of the poems from this publication.

Leafing through Howe's new book of poems, published by New Directions in 2007, several of her poetic trademarks are immediately recognizable. Brief sections of unconventional prose narrative are interspersed with lengthy poetic sequences consisting of compact word blocks (4-8 lines each) surrounded by a predominant and prevailing white space. Words are used sparingly—but forcefully—by this poet, who appreciates each and every one as a significant clue to our historical past. Her knack for ambiguity and opacity lends her texts an elusive quality; multiple readings of her poems are possible, and thus dependent on the reader's interaction with the text and its diverging references. Visual stimuli—here in the form of archival fragments, typographical experiments, and even a facsimile of dress fabric—distract and captivate the eyes of Howe's readers as they shift through this intricate labyrinthine artifact.

The *materiality* of *Souls* is an important literal and metaphoric thread that binds together the works collected in this edition, a theme which is suggested by the dual epigraph opening the text. A quote from theologian Jonathan Edwards begins: 'The silk-worm is a remarkable type of Christ, which when it dies yields us that of which we make such glorious clothing.' This is followed by a quote from Wallace Stevens—'The poet makes silk dresses out of worms'—which draws on both the metaphoric and

metonymic resonances of the silkworm's unnatural existence, domesticated and enslaved by humans for the manufacture of fine clothing. In her previous works, Susan Howe has repeatedly associated 'word' with 'wood', the textual mark with its material derivations in bark and trees.¹ In this latest publication, however, Howe connects the word with the *silkworm*, both of which are dependent on humans for their reproduction and survival. Howe says that '[p]oetry is love for the felt fact stated in sharpest, most agile and detailed lyric terms,' and there are poetic resonances in the figure of the silkworm—it spins threads (lines) with its mouth-organs, which are used in the production of fabric (poetry). Interestingly, the silkworm will eat only the leaves of the mulberry tree, and must be fed constantly. Howe thus forges a powerful metaphor of the silkworm-as-bookworm, devouring the "leaves" of a book and producing in its place thread-lines with which we humans may weave our complex "interpretations".

But the fate of the silk-worm (like the poet!) is not a happy one. These insects emerge from their cocoons by emitting a liquid that partially dissolves, and therefore ruins, the silk strands. In order for us to unravel an unspoiled silk thread, the cocoon is boiled with the worm inside—their sacrifice for humans, like that of Christ, is ultimate. If the insect is to be used for reproduction, it will emerge from its cocoon as a moth that is unable to fly. A miserable existence, then, for both male and female of the species, who die naturally after the reproductive act and laying of eggs: 'continually moving then/ silk moth fly mulberry tree/ Come and come rapture,' laments Howe. The silkworm—'a curious little figure'—is significant in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* as a metaphor for a cycle of poetic and textual creation, transformation and disintegration. It also emphasizes

¹ For a good example of this, see the first poem of *Pythagorean Silence*.

the organic, material and transformative nature of words. This transition of Howe's symbolism from "wood" to "worm", then, is all the more appropriate in that it accentuates the reader's active agency in the decipherment of her texts. This readerly activity is a common feature within Howe's oeuvre; her combination of scattered text and verbal opacity makes the reader both physically and cognitively interact with the words on the page as part of the reading process. This new dominant motif—the silkworm—reflects the way in which the Barthesian 'Death of the Author' (worm) gives way to the 'Birth of the Reader' (the thread-weaver).

Howe is fascinated by the complex textual fabric of the material manuscript, its errors and erasures, its traces of the author's time and space of writing. Jonathan Edwards and Wallace Stevens resurface in *Souls* through this idea of "textual fabric," in two short prose *Errands*. Whilst traveling from parish to parish, Edwards wrote down his ideas on small pieces of paper as they occurred to him, and pinned them to his clothing, 'fixing in his mind an association between the location of the paper and the particular insight' (9). Clothing himself in his thoughts, Edwards gave words a time and place in the physical world beyond the book. Howe identifies with this writer's strange poetic practice, although her landscape is more *textual* than *geographical*: 'I wanted to transplant words onto paper with soil sticking to their roots'—the soil keeps her word/worms alive, perhaps it is "food for thought". In the second *Errand*, Howe describes Wallace Stevens' practice of writing down his ideas on 'the backs of envelopes and old laundry bills cut into two-by-four-inch scraps he carried in his pocket' (73). In both of these examples, the 'errand' wanderer participates in an 'errant' textual practice that escapes the rigidity and

artificiality of an edited text. This “mystical” writing practice shared by two well known authors across centuries speaks of and to the errant voices lost in the wilderness of American history. It is a practice that Howe revives as she unsettles our literary and historical past with her own textual aberrations.

In a ‘Personal Narrative’ Howe recounts (and echoes) the sounds and themes of her previous work *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (Awede, 1987). She gives us an inside glimpse of her experience of researching the wild wanderings of Reverend Hope Atherton as he drifted, lost and alone, in the wilderness following the Falls Fight of 1676—a ‘botched expedition’ against several Indian tribes. Howe recalls her encounter with Hope’s ‘wandering story’, in which she discovered ‘the authority of a prior life for [her] own writing voice.’ From an early age Howe was made aware of the masculine bias of the historical domain. As she has said in interview, her father (Harvard Law Professor Mark DeWolfe Howe) intimated that Howe’s entrance into the stacks of the Widener Library (the domain of historical narratives and documents) would be ‘trespassing’. As a consequence of this exclusion, Howe finds her own writing voice to be at odds with conventional narrative as she sympathises with the marginal and the hidden. In this short essay, Howe identifies and includes facsimiled (and partially cut-off) fragments from George Sheldon’s *A History of Deerfield Massachusetts*—the ‘seldom opened book’ that briefly accounts for Hope Atherton’s story, and from which many of the archaic terms used in *Articulation* were derived. Howe (the bookworm) states that ‘[o]ften a damaged edition’s semi-decay is the soil in which I thrive.’ She reveals to us ‘the *process* of [her]

writing' and researching so that we may reflect on her previous publication(s) with renewed interest and knowledge.

This 'retrospective excursion' also helps us to understand and interpret the threads of her three newest poems, 'Souls of the Labadie Tract' (for which the publication and the CD recording is named), '118 Westerly Terrace' (named for Wallace Stevens' home address) and 'Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards'. The first of these, the longest sequence of the publication, is focused on the 'utopian Quietist sect' founded in the Netherlands by Jean de Labadie in 1666. In 1684, the sect migrated to New England and settled in Maryland (they called it 'New Bohemia') in preparation for the coming millennium. The community dissolved in 1722. Howe's interest in the Labadists was triggered by a chance encounter—a common method in her development of poetic subjects: her interest in the *Eikon Basilike* was sparked by a 'useless book' cast out of the Sterling Library; she found Wilson Walker Cowen's *Melville's Marginalia* whilst researching *Billy Budd*; here, she finds the "Labadists" in the genealogical research of Wallace Stevens and his wife: 'So it's telepathic though who knows why or in what way'. Certainly, the echoes, ghosts and phantoms in this text indicate Howe's telepathic connections and response to obscure voices hidden within the gaps and blanks of history. 'The content is the process,' says Howe.

These aspects of 'Souls of the Labadie Tract' are echoed in the audio version of this particular poetic sequence. The CD release (also entitled *Souls of the Labadie Tract*)—Howe's second collaboration with musician David Grubbs—contains a reading

of this one section from the book. Like their previous collaborative effort *Thieft* (2005), *Souls* is a haunting work that unsettles the listener with its combination of atonal rhythms produced by the khaen baet and khaen jet (varieties of Asian mouth organ—possibly selected for the silkworm’s association with Asia), and a synthesizer. Howe’s measured reading is thus accompanied with a lingering drone reminiscent of buzzing insects on a summer evening—an apt association considering the images used to decorate the CD. Physically beautiful, the cover is adorned with reproductions of drawings by entomologist and scientific illustrator Maria Sybilla Merian, who lived in the Labadist community from 1685 until 1691. The interior image depicts species of fly, wasp, beetle and caterpillar. Merian was best known for her illustrations of the latter’s transformation to a butterfly. Her identification of (and with) this “worm”—‘She left the sect which split’—is aptly concealed by Howe, who does not mention Merian’s name in the printed text, and buries her illustration acknowledgement on the inside of the CD cover, beneath the disc. In this way, Howe does not “domesticate” Merian by “pinning her down” with words, but sets her free about the pages where the reader may or may not find her.

The recording is not so overtly alternative as *Thieft*, where overlapping, interrupted and stuttered voices complement the equally radical printed versions of Howe’s *Thorrow* and *Melville’s Marginalia*. Indeed, there is only one instance of vocal overlap/repetition in this work as Howe reads ‘I see you and you see I see you’—‘I see you’ is repeated and overlapped, lending the text an echoed, doubling effect. It is as if Howe identifies with her roaming, marginal subjects, and wishes to share with them this space of the wild and free. This new text is read slowly and assuredly, its mood

complemented by Grubbs' synthesized harmonies, and with a voice that occasionally "breaks through" the drone to achieve its own space in the clearing—an audible realization, perhaps, of the minimal text amidst the predominant whiteness of the publication. Susan Howe is known for her prolific use of archaic words, misspellings, neologisms, word fragments, appropriated text and often violently scattered sentences. But in this work, her words are more "quietly spoken" and unassuming—a fact exemplified by this recording. Howe notes that the Labadists believed in 'inner illumination, diligence and contemplative reflection.' Identifying with the Labadists, then, perhaps Howe has reached a stage of 'contemplative reflection' where radical, explosive techniques are no longer necessary to make her point. Whilst she acknowledges in *Frame Structures* (1996) that '[her] early poems project aggression', this latest collection is a more reserved, "listening" text. The repetition of 'Oh' signifies her recognition of the '[c]ries open to the words inside them/ Cries hurled through the woods'—these narrative threads that lead us towards and through the 'civil lacunae' of History.

Interestingly, whilst Grubbs imitates the sound of insects, these sounds constitute a very *man-made* interference. It reflects on both white man's intrusion on the New England landscape, and on History's "covering up" of the dissenting voices stirring within that wilderness. Deeply appreciative of this "translation" of the text, I am left wondering why Howe and Grubbs decided to record just this one section of the book. Perhaps Howe felt that 'Souls of the Labadie Tract' responded best to the change in medium—indeed, that these 'souls' might flutter their wings and leap from the page. The

remaining poems of the book may well communicate their ideas best within the spaces of the page.

In ‘118 Westerly Terrace’, for example, a connective thread between ‘stanza’ and ‘room’ is played out on the page as we picture Howe shifting between poetic and domestic spaces:

In the house the house is all
house and each of its authors
passing from room to room

Short eclogues as one might
say on tiptoe do not infringe

‘118 Westerly Terrace’ meditates on the life and work of author Wallace Stevens with a surreal and dreamlike movement through his house in Hartford. The gentle quietude of this poetic tribute displays Howe’s reluctance to disturb the peace: ‘I’d rather read than hurt a/ hair of you listen to me’, says Howe. She does not wish to “harm” the memory of her subjects by reciprocating the practice of her antiquarian forefathers—that is, by “imprisoning” them within the ‘house’ of a printed text (a ‘nearest wrapped/ bundle of belonging idle’). Rather, Howe hopes that these ‘ghosts wrapped in appreciative obituaries’ can be loosened from the grip of the canon, and ‘*reanimated* by appropriation’. Howe appropriates the figure of the errand wanderer and errant wonderer, following in the footsteps of Atherton, Edwards, Thoreau and Stevens before her. Her eye

is projected *outside* of the house and onto the vast space of an unarticulated American wilderness:

Face to the window I had
to know what ought to be
accomplished by predecessors
in the same field of labor
because beauty is what *is*
What is said and what this
it—it in itself insistent *is*
(97)

In my experience of reading Howe's poetic work to date, I find myself consistently and immediately drawn to her most unconventional pages, where the physicality of the word (and its ancestral fragments in the scriptural archive) attracts the reader's eye and arrests any conventional reading patterns. It is in these moments that Howe combines '[w]hat is said' with the '*it*' that is insistently seen. These pages also remind us of our own labor in the manufacture of historical narrative, as well as the fragility of memory, recollection, and historical documentation. *Souls of the Labadie Tract* concludes with 'Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards', and whilst the preceding poems have been relatively tame in comparison to some of her textual configurations in other collections, these pages are among some of her most unusual creations ever. A facsimile of a square fabric swatch of wedding dress that is irregular and frayed at the edges is followed by thirteen pages of irregular typographical patterning, where sentence fragments unravel, tangle and disperse. Word and image are

woven together here as the functions of eye and ear become entangled and entwined. The reader is ‘torn’ between appreciating the text as object to be admired and attempting to *reweave* these threads into comprehensible sentences with a recognizable syntax. On page 118, for example, lines of ‘upright’ text are separated by lines of ‘upside down’ text. Howe revises a format used in *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (New Directions, 1993), but in this context she specifically mimics Jonathan Edwards’ practice of recycling old bills and paper scraps, writing his sermons ‘[o]n the verso side’ and stitching them into notebooks. Interestingly, this anecdote is mentioned in a prose section of her previous work *The Midnight* (New Directions, 2003). Howe is threading together her own texts, too. Indeed, this silkworm metaphor reaches new heights towards the conclusion of *Souls*, where, on page 123, the word-worms appear to “break out” of their skins and “fly off” the page.

This new book of poems by Susan Howe, as well as her CD collaboration with David Grubbs, are both exciting additions to a captivating poetic-historical oeuvre. Howe continues and extends her fascination with American literary history in these works, where material and textual threads lead us through a labyrinth of hidden historical and literary spaces. The final page of *Souls of the Labadie Tract* goes some way towards summing up Howe’s larger project: a sliver of unreadable text barely reveals ‘a trace of a stain’. Is this a single, unwoven thread, ready to be used by the poet? Or has Howe slashed this page open, revealing the ‘understory of anotherword’ (*Singularities*, 50) haunted by Howe’s beloved marginal voices? As is to be expected, Howe leaves us wondering and wandering in a textual and mental wilderness, clutching at threads.