

**LANDSCAPE AS LANGUAGE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SELECTED
WORKS BY SUSAN HOWE AND DAPHNE MARLATT**

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Landscape as Language: A Comparative Study of Selected Works by Susan Howe and Daphne Marlatt.

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This thesis explores the work of two contemporary women poets, one American, the other Canadian, looking particularly at questions of subjectivity and embodiment in relation to place and to history. Their work is considered in the contexts of American modernist poetry, for instance that of Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson, and in the light of critical theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous. Modernist concerns with the materiality of the text, both as product of a capitalist economy and as visual object, are considered alongside postmodern aspects of language as processional and reflexive. The early work of each writer is discussed separately in Chapters One and Two, with selected later work in more direct comparison in Chapters Three and Four.

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INTRODUCTION

Comparative Contexts

I

This is a comparative study of the work of two contemporary North American poets, Susan Howe who lives, writes and teaches in New England, and Daphne Marlatt whose base is on the West Coast of Canada. My study focuses on their engagements with place, with history and with language, and more particularly with issues of embodiment in relation to these.

The thesis will situate these poets initially in relation to a strand of late twentieth century poetry which emerged as a deliberately marginal, intellectually difficult interrogation of the structures and uses of language in the United States and which, as a literary development, includes writers from Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand and Australia. As Jerome McGann implies in his editorial of *Verse*, Vol. 7, No. 1, a radical, challenging poetry emerged in the United States in the 1960s as part of the widespread spirit of protest and revolt, particularly in response to the Vietnam War. At the same time, this oppositional writing was attempting a break from a “degenerative [literary] history,” what McGann calls “the degeneration of the romantic eye,” so that the work attempts a relinquishment of the ego to the medium of language where it becomes

“not an authority, ... instead a witness, for and against.” This “decentering of the ‘I’” takes place on a formal level so that disorientation is a condition of comprehension, and the reader must negotiate possibilities of meaning within “a wholesale derangement of the sentences.”¹

This radical, difficult, oppositional writing is an element of postmodern culture, a phenomenon Frederic Jameson defines as an historical development of western capitalism arising in the late 1950s and 1960s. The term “postmodernism” for Jameson is interchangeable with “the multinational,” a latter phase of capitalism coming after “the earlier expansions of the national market and older imperialist system, which each had their own cultural specificity and generated new types of space appropriate to their dynamics.” Jameson argues that the expansion of multinational capital has encroached upon, suffused, and colonised all areas of “post-industrial” society and subjectivity so that even the most radical, experimental and controversial gestures made by writers and artists are vulnerable to its reifications.² The opacity of the language of the new, initially American west coast writing was resistant to the imperatives of contemporary commerce, defining a strategic space between the language of poetry and the language of advertisement.

McGann cites Peter Seaton’s poem “An Ethics of Anxiety”³ as an exemplary postmodern title, and continues to make the observation that

¹ Jerome McGann, “Postmodern Poetries,” *Verse* 7, no. 1 (1990) : 6-8.

² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 43-49.

³ Peter Seaton, “An Ethics of Anxiety,” *Verse* 7, no. 1 (1990) : 18-19.

despite their themes and methods of fragmentation and disorientation, for these poets language reconstructs a vision that is social rather than solipsistic.⁴ I think that Howe and Marlatt are interesting within this area of postmodern poetics because of the ways in which their writing examines and exposes the material interconnectedness of the human body and systems of power. Language as medium of the imagining, sentient body is risked within and against language as illusory instrument of advanced capitalism. Their writing does not recoil from the territories of postmodernity but constructs sites of language in resistance to the encroachments into “those ... pre-capitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious),” by the commercial world.⁵ The writing refuses to acquiesce but instead asserts “the imagination of those places, the ... judgement that they are what they are ... that they define one of the ways we live now.”⁶ This thesis will examine selected works of Marlatt and Howe, as an enquiry into the means by which the writing finds spaces of resistance, and both attempts the possibility and confronts the impossibility of writing beyond a franchised subjectivity.

I am interested in the contemporary writing of landscape partly because it is in a sense the antithesis of postmodernism. What does “Nature” mean at the millennium, in the cosmopolitan, technocratic west? It is difficult to separate a concept of landscape from traces of Romantic and conservative priorities. It belongs more to the “degenerative history” than to the restless appropriations of a global media and the oppositional responses to it that

⁴ McGann, “Postmodern Poetries,” 7.

⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 49.

⁶ McGann, “Postmodern Poetries,” 7.

radical poetry asserts. Or, again with reference to Jameson, it belongs to the substitute realm of nostalgia in the absence of the “real.”⁷ Therefore, if “Nature” or “wilderness” is a concern of these writers it must be in the context of the material world within and against which they work.

Perhaps, it has to do with composition and decomposition, the corruption of culture by nature and vice versa; the machine in the forest, the wood in the paper, the tree in the atrium, the wilderness on screen. Finally, only the electronic text can provisionally forget the forest as origin.

These writers do not construct forms of poetry about loss, another theme of Romanticism, amidst such heterogeneity. Rather they acknowledge and exploit not loss so much as the condition of being lost; “lost in language” is a phrase both Howe and Marlatt variously use. The subject and the physical world increasingly share forms of estrangement and mutability, and this thesis will try to describe how Marlatt and Howe represent such forms. By what methods do they order language so that “the imagination of those places” flares within “the judgement” of these poets? If the “places” the poet writes are recognised as also prior to commercial (re)development and the flood of the “simulacrum,”⁸ the “judgement” and the “imagination” will create a dynamic of contradiction. For instance, a lyric thread in response to “landscape” is broken and contravened, in an act of writing material forms as a form of cultural dissent.

⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 19-21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

In aesthetic terms, the foregrounding of the material, which Howe's work in particular demonstrates, is part of a modernist insistence on attention and specificity which comes down through Imagism, Objectivism, and the "palimtext," the name Michael Davidson gives to the accretion of palpable manuscripts deposited as archive.⁹ Both Davidson and McGann trace the importance of composition and materiality as content in modern and postmodern poetry, an aesthetic and political emphasis made possible by innovations in print technology.¹⁰ The rise and proliferation of small press magazines and chapbooks between the late 1950s and the late 1980s in North America were often linked to anti-establishment, particularly anti-Vietnam War and pro-civil rights activism.¹¹ Because it was often aligned with an oppositional stance towards mainstream corporate politics, the object-ness of poetry had an overt history of material production and an allegiance to political activism.

As Howe and Marlatt are women, issues of gender politics and feminist revisions of literary history inform their prose and poetry. Their representations of the feminine body in relation to the physical world and the material text necessarily include arguments with Romanticism, Modernism and the cultural blindness postmodernism in its deconstructive levelling might dispel. However, we must be careful when linking a democratising impulse or a politics of equality with postmodern theory and practise, which is defined as difference, multiplicity and heterogeneity and,

⁹ Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), 64-93.

¹⁰ Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 76-117.

¹¹ Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 30.

after Friedrich Nietzsche, is “anti-idealist.”¹² The idealist, elitist and masculinist principles of High Modernism are part of what writers such as Marlatt and Howe reject. If to instate a non-hierarchical plane of language might emancipate alternative and potential narratives, its virtue is in the exposure of difference, not the demonstration of equality. Much of this study, then, will discuss in what ways and by what means these women writers come to terms with the problematic of influence, and the significance of their own methods of incorporation and appropriation from the texts of modernist precedents. I will consider questions of formal space and/or spatial form in the poetry of Howe and Marlatt, and how linguistic maps of the human body (or its absence), both as subject and object in the landscape, are constructed. In the process I examine implications of singularity, multiplicity, and disintegration in terms of their formal practices.

In the course of this introduction I attempt to develop useful starting points of comparison between these two writers, beginning with their respective relationships to the Black Mountain poets, to concepts of the avant-garde, to feminist discourse, and to ideas of the sacred. In the subsequent chapters I will begin to extend ideas about differences of national identity and how these manifest in the writing. I will consider the ways in which land for these writers is an unstable entity; it is a typological loop; contested postcolonial territory; destination and departed from; elsewhere; it is or is not native land; of the body/mind; a map; buried under conurbation; a

¹² John Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Postmodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 217.

sentient, haunted, inhabited space; and/or a potential ground of origin. In Chapter One I discuss Marlatt's *What Matters*;¹³ in Chapter Two, Howe's *Frame Structures*,¹⁴ and passages from Marlatt's *Touch to My Tongue*;¹⁵ Chapter Three compares Howe's *Articulations of Sound Forms in Time*¹⁶ and Marlatt's *Steveston*,¹⁷ and Chapter Four discusses Howe's *The Liberties*¹⁸ and *Thorow*¹⁹ with Marlatt's *How Hug a Stone*.²⁰

My theoretical reference points are recruited to support or clarify my readings of the poetry rather than vice versa. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* advocate a theory of multiplicity and exteriority figured through the concepts of the "rhizome" and the "nomad." Their essay "Introduction: Rhizome" explains the model of the rhizomatic root as opposed to the "world-tree" in anticipation of lateral, adventitious capacities of language and thought: "In contrast to centred (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and pre-established paths, the rhizome is an acentred, non-hierarchical, non-signifying system. ..." Their contention with history is as unitary perspective, its sedentary powerbase and the interests it is written to

¹³ Daphne Marlatt, *What Matters: Writing 1968-70* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1980).

¹⁴ Susan Howe, *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974-1979* (New York: New Directions, 1996).

¹⁵ Daphne Marlatt, *Touch To My Tongue*, in *Two Women in a Birth*, by Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland (Toronto, Montreal and New York: Guernica, 1994), 7-30.

¹⁶ Susan Howe, *Singularities* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press), 1-38.

¹⁷ Daphne Marlatt, *Steveston*, 3d ed. (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2001).

¹⁸ Susan Howe, *The Europe of Trusts*, 2d ed. (New York: New Directions, 1990), 147-217.

¹⁹ Howe, *Singularities*, 39-59.

²⁰ Daphne Marlatt, *How Hug a Stone* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Turnstone Press, 1983).

serve. History in that sense is a “State apparatus, ... even when the topic is nomads. What is lacking is a Nomadology, the opposite of a history.”²¹

I draw on the work of French feminist theorists: Luce Irigaray’s concept of an “economy of fluids” in *Speculum of the Other Woman*²² and *This Sex Which Is Not One*,²³ Helene Cixous’s theories of *écriture* in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*,²⁴ and Julia Kristeva’s notion of “abjection” in *Powers of Horror*.²⁵ Michel Foucault’s theory of “dispersion” and the “already said” from his *Archaeology of Knowledge*²⁶ in the context of a search for origins are relevant to the discussion in Chapter Three. Also useful are works of ecocriticism such as William Cronon’s *Changes in the Land*,²⁷ Robert Pogue Harrison’s *Forests*²⁸ and *The Dominion of the Dead*,²⁹ and Jonathan Bate’s *The Song of the Earth*.³⁰ I refer to Lew Daly’s study of the influence of the *King James Bible* on Howe’s poetry in his book *Swallowing the Scroll*,³¹ a provocative meditation on the religious dimension in Howe’s work.

²¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 1987), 3-28.

²² Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

²³ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

²⁴ Helene Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

²⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1972).

²⁷ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983).

²⁸ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²⁹ Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

³⁰ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Basingstoke and London: Picador, 2001).

³¹ Lew Daly, *Swallowing The Scroll: Late in a Prophetic Tradition with the Poetry of Susan Howe and John Taggart* (Buffalo, New York: M Press, 1994).

Before I begin to write in more detail about what tend to be American precedents and spheres of influence on both Marlatt and Howe, I will adumbrate a sense of a specifically Canadian poetic tradition. Anglophone Canadian landscape poetry has developed since the mid nineteenth century from a tendency closely linked in form and theme to the English Romantic poets on the one hand, and the American Transcendentalists on the other, into a distinctively Canadian orientation. Ralph Gustafson, writing in his “Introduction” to *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse* in 1957, marks the emergence of a national identity evident in work produced by the “Group of the Sixties – poets born near the Confederation of 1867 who came to their maturity in the 1890s: [Robert] Lampman, [Robert] Carman, Duncan Campbell Scott.”³² Gustafson identifies the slightly older E. J. Pratt as an important figure in the history of Canadian poetry. Pratt wrote such epics as *Brebeuf and His Brethren*, about a seventeenth century Jesuit missionary who worked amongst the Huron tribe before being killed in an Iroquois raid.³³ His shorter poems about animals and seasons, although responsive to the Canadian landscape, are formally conservative. George Woodcock, writing the “Introduction” to the 1994 edition of the Canadian Classics *Canadian Poetry Volume One* traces a development from the colonial “Laurentian” landscape poetry of such writers as Charles Sangster and Robert Lampman, which retain elements of derivation and nostalgia,

³² *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse*, ed. Ralph Gustafson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1958), 22.

³³ Scott W. See, *The History of Canada*, The Greenwood Histories of the Modern Nations, series eds. Frank W. Thackeray and John E. Findling (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 37.

towards a mature realism in the writing of such as Archibald Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott.³⁴

The short-lived but far-reaching Imagist movement of the early twentieth century was influential in Canadian poetry. T. E. Hulme was closely involved in the inception of the movement and, although English, applied its strict disciplines of writing and vision to the landscape of western Canada. Louis Dudek, despite being one of the first important practitioners of the Canadian long poem, writes “All my poetic development begins with the Imagist movement.”³⁵ During the twentieth century important Canadian poets such as A. M. Klein, Dorothy Livesay and Earle Birney influenced to an extent by English poets of the 1930s, Stephen Spender and W.H. Auden, have written poetry of a social and political conscience.³⁶

There has been no equivalent to Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* in the history of Canadian poetry. Whitman at once inaugurated an original Romantic vision and established a national ground for the emergence of Modernist writers in the United States, such as William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound. However, it is through the development of the long poem that Canadian writers have produced distinctively original work. Writers such as Robert Kroetsch, whose “dialoguing with the document, with small histories, with poetic boundaries,”³⁷ produced

³⁴ George Woodcock, *Canadian Poetry: Volume One*, New Press Canadian Classics, eds. Jack David and Robert Lecker (Toronto: Stoddard Publishing Co. Ltd., 1994), 19.

³⁵ Sharon Thesen, ed., *The New Long Poem Anthology*, 2d. ed. (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2001), 465.

³⁶ Woodcock, *Canadian Poetry*, 26.

³⁷ *New Long Poem Anthology*, 473.

over a period of fifteen years his *Completed Field Notes*; Christopher Dewdney whose extraordinary *The Cenozoic Asylum: Book Two of The Natural History of Southwestern Ontario* is sensuous, dense, surreal and impersonal;³⁸ George Bowering, whose long poems are undertaken as “projects, not casual lyric responses”³⁹ and bp Nichol, for whom the long poem is “[A] narrative in language. ... How I see the world.”⁴⁰ Daphne Marlatt, prominent amongst this group of late twentieth century Canadian poets, speaks of “the mobility of time and space in the immanence of language invoked by desire.”⁴¹

As distinctive examples of a contemporary postmodern poetics in North America, the early work of both Marlatt and Howe can be situated in relation to the Black Mountain poets, and to questions of form and process that are characteristic of the long poem tradition from Walt Whitman through William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, H.D., Hart Crane and Charles Olson in America, and from E. J. Pratt, Dorothy Livesay, George Bowering, Frank Davey and bp Nichol in Canada. Howe’s engagement with topography and history places her work in a line from Williams’s *Paterson* through Olson’s *Maximus Poems*, both in her use of documents and the ways in which her work explores the materiality of written and printed language, historicity and the material world. Process and movement are complicated in much of Howe’s writing by her attention to singularity and violence, both in history and in language. If, as Dorothy

³⁸ Ibid., 107-120.

³⁹ Ibid., 457.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 483.

⁴¹ Ibid., 474.

Livesay claims, “the great American epics: *Leaves of Grass*, *The Columbiad*, *Conquistador*, *John Brown’s Body*, *The Bridge*, and *Patterson* sic... [emphasise] ... historical perspective and the creation of a national myth,”⁴² Howe’s emphasis is on the blind spots of that perspective and the absences created and perpetuated by acts of violence and banishment implicit in that myth.

The long poem or sequence of poems is a form for which various commentators have made claims. Dorothy Livesay considers that the long poem in Canada is characteristic of the development of an identifiably Canadian genre, one that she terms the “documentary” poem.

“Documentary” in this sense goes beyond the social realism more often applied to television or film, and implies a mixture of historical research, environmental lyric poetry and national myth making. Livesay compares it variously to the Anglo Saxon heroic epic *Beowulf*, the narrative poetry of the English Victorians and the works of American writers such as Whitman and Crane, and finds that Canadian poets from the late nineteenth century onwards have looked to themes of topical, topographical and cultural relevance for inspiration. Canadian poets began to research amongst written and recorded data and through exploration of particular environments. For instance, Livesay notes that “Ottawa poets, Duncan Campbell Scott and Archibald Lampman ... had to go north on long canoe

⁴² Dorothy Livesay, “The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre,” in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 267-281.

trips; they had also to study the documents of fur traders, missionaries, and Indian agents.”⁴³

Smaro Kamboureli, just over twenty years later, develops Livesay’s point that “our narratives are told not from the point of view of one protagonist, but rather to illustrate a precept.”⁴⁴ Kamboureli reads the Canadian long poem more as a genre that encompasses the breaking of generic boundaries, as a site of intertextuality and extension, being about concept rather than precept and the generation of ideas rather than the application of principles. Her description draws attention to the long poem’s typical fluidity in both its inclusive and excessive potential:

the long poem transgresses not the limits of a single genre but the limits, the frames of several genres, such as those of the lyric, the epic, the narrative, the drama, the documentary, and the prose poem. Only if we remain constantly attentive to the dynamics of its various generic components will we do justice to its protean form.⁴⁵

The American parallel of the Canadian poetic that exceeds limits and distinctions in a flowing beyond, enacts movement towards the outside and the other through dislocation and dissociation as much as discontinuous extension. In her thesis *This Ecstatic Nation* Jean Kathleen Crown places both Olson and Howe among twentieth-century poets who are in some sense “ecstatic witnesses” to historical trauma. Crown believes that their engagement with documents and historical evidence of temporal and racial otherness is a way of speaking with the dead and of undergoing “historical

⁴³ Ibid., 275-276.

⁴⁴ Smaro Kamboureli, *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 269.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 100.

possession.” As she writes: “ecstatic speech intersects directly with historical narratives and voices, including those emerging from European encounters with Native Americans.”⁴⁶ As in the Canadian long poem there is the sense of a genre born of the breaching of generic boundaries in which a disruption of monologic and subjective syntax creates opacity and anomaly. For Crown:

a strangely ventriloquised lyric subjectivity – ecstatic, peopled, terrifyingly multiple – has dramatic effects on a poetic form, including a movement ... toward a poetry of sequence or seriality. Ecstatic speech arises as an effect of these poets’ experimentation with radically open forms and, conversely, is constitutive of this poetics.⁴⁷

Here form and content do not mirror and contain one another, they collide and shatter as the poetry risks disintegration and anarchy in its exposure of aesthetics to the traces of history. If the field of writing is receptive to other voices and other times its impulse is also to project those dynamics beyond its spatial form, outward toward possibility and the future.

Certainly, one of the more obvious differences between Howe and Marlatt is a formal one, in that Marlatt’s poetry after about 1972 is typically constructed of long, sinuous, and complex sentences that seek to extend connections between subject and other, subject and world. By contrast, in Howe’s poetry the subject is partially effaced within the fragments of language and geometric abstractions of form. We could say that in Howe there is fracture and refraction, in Marlatt flow and connection.

⁴⁶ Jean Kathleen Crown, *“This Ecstatic Nation”: History, Trauma, and Vision in American Poetry Since World War II* (Ph.D. diss., State University of New Jersey, 1999), 6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

III

Both the eldest of three sisters, Susan Howe and Daphne Marlatt were born on different continents into a global catastrophe. Howe's birth came two years prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, in Boston, Massachusetts, to an Irish mother and an American father in 1937; Marlatt's came three years into it, in Melbourne, Victoria, to English parents in 1942. Howe's writing of particular landscapes involves ancestral and cultural history as she moves between New England and the Irish Republic, home of her maternal relations. In her poems about New England she is exploring the legacy of a Protestant, militaristic and patriarchal heritage late in a land which contains traces of Norse and Native American presences, while those of Ireland allude to survivals of heroic pagan myth, Catholicism's cult of the maternal and Protestant settlement. Marlatt considers place as an inquiry into human history and personal belonging; for her the self is a place that changes with the "movements of [the self's] story."⁴⁸

Marlatt's writing has developed from her earliest volume *Frames*,⁴⁹ published in 1968 and showing the influence of the Black Mountain Poets, through a growing sense of herself as a woman writing within a predominantly male tradition. She attended classes taught by Olson and Robert Duncan at the University of British Columbia during the summer of 1963 and acknowledges that "they opened up the whole activity of writing

⁴⁸ Daphne Marlatt, *Ghost Works* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1993) viii.

⁴⁹ Daphne Marlatt, *Frames of a story* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1968).

for me.”⁵⁰ Marlatt and Gladys Hindmarsh were among those generating the creative energy that materialised as *Tish*, a poetry newsletter featuring the work of Canadian poets whose examples were Olson, Duncan and Robert Creeley. Others involved in the *Tish* collective were Frank Davey, George Bowering, Fred Wah and bill bissett.

The American inspiration introduced into the work of these Canadian writers “a new aesthetic ... attuned to multiplicity, fragmentation, discontinuity, non-linearity and unpredictability.”⁵¹ At least until the late 1970s the contribution of a feminist perspective did not enter the consciousness of this West Coast scene. Frank Davey recognised in his assessment of Marlatt’s *Steveston* (1974) the importance of its formal qualities, declaring that it would “initiate us into the intricacies and depths of the post-modern age.”⁵² But according to Diana Relke, writing over twenty years later, the publication of *Steveston* was “a milestone” due largely to the fact of its author’s gender. In a retrospective interview with Brenda Carr in 1991, Marlatt insists that a consciously gendered subject-position is central to her work, and that her development as a writer was both nourished and inhibited by the example of her mentors:

To enter the world, I mean to really take it on conceptually and feel you have as valid an analysis of what you see going on around you as any man does, is a difficult thing for a woman, perhaps the most difficult leap to make as a woman writer. And I had the benefit of a poetic that ... was open, that placed me, gender aside (well, there’s the problem), in an open field of composition and, in terms of ethics, set me

⁵⁰ Daphne Marlatt quoted in Fred Ribkoff, “Daphne Marlatt’s ‘Rings’: An Extension of the Proprioceptive,” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 50 (Fall 1993) : 232.

⁵¹ Diana M. A. Relke, “‘time is, the delta’: *Steveston* in Historical and Ecological Context,” *Canadian Poetry* 38 (Spring-Summer 1996) : 29-30.

⁵² Frank Davey, *From There to Here* (Erin, Ontario: Porcupine, 1974), 197.

within an environment I was interwoven with and responsible to ... The twinning of the language field, how you move within that, and what your response-ability is in each case – that was a very important contribution.⁵³

For Marlatt, then, writing is central to “social praxis,”⁵⁴ describing a bodily movement through language which is, after Duncan and Olson, a “field,” an opening in relation to other environmental spaces, both non-human and social. Writing and life are “responsibilities” and “response-abilities” demanding equally aesthetic and ethical choices which can create real consequence and change. It is at once a social/political and a personal/spiritual conscience and in articulating this holistic stance Marlatt echoes Duncan’s lines: “Responsibility is to keep / the ability to respond.”⁵⁵ Marlatt’s phrase “the twinning of the language field” suggests both an ethical and imaginative realm where language is used to find forms that might trace and sound life’s “multiplicities.” This “twinning” which implies equivalence between poetry and conscience, provides a discursive space in which meaning and alternative meaning, sound and potential echo, are released. At the same time as we acknowledge Marlatt’s importance as a poet we must also ask whether her dual concern with the life of language and the (correct) politics of life do not ground her too firmly in a metaphorical landscape already ideologically staked out. In her revision of some of her earlier poetry in the light of “feminist reading and thought of the late eighties,” most particularly the writing collected in *Salvage* (1991),

⁵³ Daphne Marlatt, “Between Continuity and Difference: An Interview with Daphne Marlatt,” interview by Brenda Carr, in *Beyond Tish*, ed. Douglas Barbour (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1990), 100.

⁵⁴ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 4 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 3.

⁵⁵ Robert Duncan, “The Law I Love Is Major Mover,” *The Opening of the Field*, 2d ed. (New York: New Directions, 1973), 10.

there is a sense that issues of gender politics, at the same time as they motivate also foreclose the potential reach of language. As she writes in the “Foreword” of this volume:

These are littoral poems, shoreline poems – and by extension the whole book – written on that edge where a feminist consciousness floods the structures of patriarchal thought ... attempts to salvage the wreckage of language so freighted with phallogentric values it must be subverted and reshaped ... for a woman’s use.⁵⁶

Her project at this time, then, is deliberate, pragmatic and risky. The “littoral” is in danger of becoming literal in its separation of “patriarchal” and “feminist”, “phallogentric and “gynocentric,” the land and the sea. Again, however it must be noticed that Marlatt’s fertile ground is the transitional space in which one distinct entity is submerged or overwhelmed or at least infiltrated by another, a surface in constant dynamic flux.

Although in an interview in 1974 she describes herself as “a local writer,” Marlatt always seems to position herself in relation to somewhere else.⁵⁷

Firstly working on the West Coast in the 1960s she was involved with a group of mostly male peers who identified more with the open forms of the most innovative American poets rather than with Canadian poets further East; then as an emerging lesbian/feminist in the early 1980s she increasingly placed herself in relation to the Quebec-based Francophone poets and theorists who in turn regarded the western Anglophone writers as “irrevocably tied to realism and unacquainted with postmodernist

⁵⁶ Daphne Marlatt, *Salvage* (Red Deer, Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1991).

⁵⁷ Daphne Marlatt, “Given This Body: an interview with Daphne Marlatt,” interview by George Bowering, *Open Letter*, 4th ser., no. 3 (1979) : 32-88.

techniques.”⁵⁸ Both the 1980s American Language writers and the Quebecoise feminists, who by radical practice demonstrate distinct oppositional agendas, recognise that linguistic forms which collude with and promulgate the ideological hegemony of Late Capitalism are capable of deceiving poetry. “[The organic work] promotes,” as Peter Bürger says in his discussion of Adorno’s theoretical position, “by its very form, the illusion of a world that is whole, even though the explicit contents may show a wholly different intent.”⁵⁹

My discussion is about late twentieth century American poetry but an admittedly rough analogy can be made between the Canadian Francophone writers’ critique of their West Coast peers and the debate Peter Bürger outlines between George Lukács and Theodor Adorno about the “organic” versus the “avant-garde.” Bürger concedes that Adorno does not fail to historicize “art forms” so that, after Hegel, “the avant-gardiste work of art presents itself as the historically necessary expression of alienation in late-capitalist society.” Adorno does, however, fail to historicize “art as an institution” and therefore also fails to recognize that the importance of the avant-gardistes of the early twentieth century was not their break with tradition, necessary for all revolutionary movements, but their break with the institution of art itself. This rejection of the Capitalist institution opened the art work, it was believed by its practitioners at the time, to the “praxis of life” beyond the monolithic institutional shadow.

⁵⁸ Daphne Marlatt, *Readings from the Labyrinth* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1998), 146.

⁵⁹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 86.

There are, of course, important ideological and historical differences between these theoreticians and revolutionary groups, yet it is still appropriate to say that the “illusion of a world that is whole” is maintained in the form of the poem rather than its content.⁶⁰ The Quebecoise feminists, with their allegiance to a cultural history of separatism within the Confederation of Canada, assess the contemporary Anglophone postmodernists from the perspective of linguistic difference and creative practices of translation. Issues of tradition, gender, language and violence distinguish the Quebecoise postmodernists in the context of Canada as a nation and western literature as an institution.

Nicole Brossard, with whom Marlatt has collaborated on writing and translation projects,⁶¹ explains the foundation of her radicalism in relation to western institutions, including the “literary establishment.” Like Marlatt, she started to write in the early 1960s but although they are both Canadian women they each contend with a different cultural heritage. As Brossard writes of her own situation:

Who were we? Who are we? We have a Canadian passport
but our soul and tradition are not Canadian, we speak French
but we are not French, we are North American but we are not
American. As a young person and as a young writer there
were three kinds of institutions that had a sour taste to me: ...
*The Catholic Church ... The Canadian Confederation ... The
literary establishment ...*⁶²

Brossard goes on to speak of her developing practice of radical difference and transgression in relation to these institutions as being more and more

⁶⁰ Ibid., 83-92.

⁶¹ Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt, *Acts of Passage*, in *Salvage*, 93-110.

⁶² Nicole Brossard, “Poetic Politics,” in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: ROOF Books, 1990), 76-77.

centred in her own body: “For me the body is a metaphor of energy, intensity, desire, pleasure, memory and awareness.”⁶³ In a way comparable to Olson’s “projective” theory of verse, Brossard and French feminist thinkers such as Irigaray understand that language consists of breath, that the breathing body shapes and is shaped by linguistic forms. The vital difference is in the gender and/or sexuality of the body in question:

Breathing your identity is always a shocking experience which often takes a writer an entire life. I know personally that breathing a woman subject in patriarchal language is something which requires a lot of concentration, energy, and audacity.⁶⁴

Marlatt has evolved via Olson’s theories of “proprioception,” “kinaesthesia”⁶⁵ and the breath-line, writing poetry as measure of a visceral responsiveness, towards the *écriture au féminin* of such writers as Louky Bersianik and Nicole Brossard. Her explicitly feminist perception and theorising of language is of “a living body ... [that] ... sustains and contains us,” therefore it is physical and maternal, an inhabited, generative corpus. Marlatt’s figure of the labyrinth as site of feminist resistance and discovery envisages a struggle in the dark, a circuitous underworld the emergence through which requires a strong awareness of self in relation to others and environment. And Marlatt’s project is essentially communal. She writes from within a feminist culture which is also “[t]he labyrinth of culture that feminists find themselves within,” recognises that a hegemonic version of history refutes what it cannot use, and believes, like Howe, in

⁶³ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 84.

⁶⁵ Charles Olson, *Additional Prose: A Bibliography of America, Proprioception & Other Notes & Essays* (Bolin: Four Seasons Foundation, 1974), 17.

“possibility,” which Marlatt writes of as an “historical leak,” an untapped but sustainable resource.⁶⁶

There is an important difference between Howe and Marlatt which has to do with an impulse towards recovery and origin. The labyrinth, although it implies confusion and disorientation also implies a continuation between outer and inner, centre and periphery and a potential, equivalent psychic connection. Lucy Lippard’s description of the labyrinth’s archetypal significance is usefully suggestive for a consideration of Marlatt’s sense of “narrative” as journey, compared to Howe’s “narrative in non-narrative,”⁶⁷ the latter asserting contradiction and the bafflement of sequence, therefore the impossibility of a circular return:

the cosmic/visceral labyrinth, an image found world-wide, dating back to the third millennium B.C. ... [e]verywhere ... symbolizes initiation and birth, death and rebirth – the return to the center, or womb. The true labyrinth (also related to the double axe or labrys of the Great Goddess) has a single path to the center that traces every ring, moving away from the center before reaching it ... As Hermann Kern has pointed out, the labyrinth’s center “signifies the place and opportunity for a perception so fundamental that it demands a basic change of direction. To get out of the labyrinth one must turn around ... meaning the greatest dissociation from the past.”⁶⁸

In Howe’s play “God’s Spies,” which is Part II of *The Liberties*, Cordelia says: “Leafy I / labyrinth am / lost in the woods (or hiding),”⁶⁹ invoking a symbiotic metamorphosis between the speaker and her setting, the narrative of which is dissembled in the confusion of its elements, the

⁶⁶ Marlatt, *Readings from the Labyrinth*, 125.

⁶⁷ Howe, *Singularities*, 40.

⁶⁸ Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 146-149.

⁶⁹ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 195.

merging of subject and object, self-determination and panic. These lines demonstrate, perhaps, what Deleuze and Guattari call “deterritorialization and ... reterritorialization ... always caught up in one another ... as heterogeneous elements ...”⁷⁰ The conceptual figure for such a dynamic of mutability and exchange they conceive as a “rhizome,” an alternative to the unitary model of “the root-book” and “the world tree” which exemplify “the classical book, as noble, signifying, and subjective organic interiority.” On the other hand, rhizomatic writing “has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come.”⁷¹

If Marlatt’s personae are more clearly defined within their background, consolidated in relationship to environment as political consciousness grows, this definition takes place within what Marlatt recognises as “multiplicity,” a concept also important to such post-modern thinkers as Nicole Brossard, Deleuze and Guattari. For the latter “multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature.”⁷² Marlatt’s sense of “multiplicity simply there”⁷³ is an endeavour to write the interactivity of all elements of a witnessed event, including her own physiological presence, a point I will develop in my discussion of *Steveston* in Chapter Three. As a subjective witness does Marlatt write “multiplicity” in ways that “no longer belong to the form of

⁷⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 11.

⁷¹ Ibid., 5.

⁷² Ibid., 9.

⁷³ Marlatt, *Steveston*, 19.

expression of a hidden unity, becoming themselves dimensions of the multiplicity”⁷⁴ or does the lower-case “i,” as indication of subjectivity retain an agenda of self-differentiation? ⁷⁵ The question is related more closely, perhaps, to Brossard’s experience that “[s]exual energy produces a multiplicity of images and scenarios”⁷⁶ which again can be read alongside Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of

the rhizome in relation to sexuality – but also to the animal, the vegetal, the world, politics, the book, things natural and artificial - that is totally different from the aborescent relation: all manner of ‘becomings.’⁷⁷

For now I will return to the potential recovery implied in Marlatt’s figure of the “labyrinth” to say that if she seeks its centre it is as site of change rather than origin, in order to “turn around ... meaning the greatest dissociation from the past.”⁷⁸ While we are discussing the important concept of multiplicity, it must be remembered that for Howe a word apparently signifying the opposite is seminal. Yet she talks about the word “singularities” in terms of a point of absolute change, comparable to that required in the depths of the labyrinth. Howe’s use of the word in its plural form, thus including morphologic contradiction, was arrived at through her interest in the work of the mathematician René Thom, which can be connected to her aesthetic of geometry and fracture, and her conception of

⁷⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 24.

⁷⁵ Susan Knutson notes that “Marlatt developed this “i” in explicit opposition to the blindly ethnocentric and colonizing postures of white Europeans. The power relations that she criticizes include, but are not limited, to those of gender.” Susan Knutson, *Narrative in the Feminine: Daphne Marlatt and Nicole Brossard* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 87.

⁷⁶ Brossard, *The Politics of Poetic Form*, 74.

⁷⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 23-24.

⁷⁸ Lippard, *Overlay*, 149.

the teachings of Pythagoras. In an interview with Edward Foster she explains:

Algebraic formulas are also articulations of sound forms in time. Thom says mathematics is a universal language; numbers have sounds. ...

It was because of Thom that I named my Wesleyan book 'Singularities.' ... Thom came to Buffalo and gave a lecture called 'Singularities.' In algebra a singularity is the point where plus becomes minus. ... The singularity (I think Thom is saying) is the point where there is a sudden change to something completely else. It's a chaotic point. It's the point chaos enters cosmos, the instant articulation. Then there is a leap into something else. ...⁷⁹

This sense of the singularity which is so important to Howe's methods of typographic composition and for the significance of her linguistic abstractions is a theme I will return to in Chapters Three and Four. In the context of writing landscape what she says to Foster about her interpretation of Thom's theory is particularly interesting: "Predation and capture are terms he uses constantly. I thought this was both a metaphor for Europeans arriving on this continent, where a catastrophic change then had to happen – a new sense of things on the part of the original inhabitants and the emigrants, and to the land as well."⁸⁰ This chaotic event is persistently returned to in Howe's work, as one of incommensurable repercussions.

Howe's landscapes, suffice to say for now, are highly intellectual abstractions, textual spaces about those events. Beside Marlatt's figure of the "labyrinth," along with the theoretical concept of the "rhizome" and the "singularity," a significant architectural and psychological edifice for

⁷⁹ Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 173.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Howe is the library. Howe comes from a family of writers. Her father was a professor of law at Harvard, her mother was a writer and theatre director, and her paternal aunt Helen Howe was a writer. She grew up in a literary, artistic and academic culture and the written word represents a profound complexity for Howe that is difficult to assess. If there is a sense of community invoked in her work, it includes, as Ann Vickery has observed, a community of the dead, an “ethics of Antigone” as she terms it,⁸¹ and there is a suggestion of a chthonic space in both the figure of the labyrinth and the enclosure of the library.

Marlatt’s writing departs from the textual ground characteristic of Howe’s work, in her insistence on language as medium of relational, explicitly political, process and interaction, a sort of feminist echo-location within the labyrinth of culture. And in a sense Marlatt’s representations of human involvement with environment are clearer, for she writes about history through the processes of the immediate, through speech and memory, whereas Howe reads through the diagrammatic or textual remnants of history, and constructs her poetry as a kind of removal of those remnants. For Howe, the feminine in contemporary and historical North American culture is an element that has been banished, disguised or effaced, beginning with the crushing of antinomian resistance in the early Puritan communities of New England.

⁸¹ Ann Vickery, “The Quiet Rupture,” *Southerly: Review of Australian Literature* 57, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 93-94.

Miriam Nicholls usefully distinguishes the strategies of Howe and Marlatt as “complementary” parts of a “cultural ecology” of contemporary poetics and language theory, offering a reading of Marlatt which she terms “present provisional,” alongside one of Howe as “past irreparable”:

Through her staging of perception, Daphne Marlatt re-writes sexual difference as provisional, present-tense narrative. Her focus is thus on the work of imagining new feminist identities that have immediate, practical implications. ... Susan Howe’s pursuit of historical subjects brings forward a relationship between past and present that displays the irreparability of the past. Howe complicates the politics of historical narration with her attention to the complex singularity of historical subjects and events.⁸²

Nicholls’s phrase “cultural ecology” is a suggestive means of placing these writers both within and beyond “contemporary poetics and language theory.” Marlatt’s pragmatic feminism, Howe’s subversive historicism might also be seen as aspects of what Max Oelschlaeger terms “an evolution in consciousness,” which addresses with optimism questions concerning the division between culture and nature, and the tensions between nostalgia and innovation:

[P]rospectively the idea of wilderness may be understood lying along a continuum where it is, on one end, little more than a romantic anachronism and, on the other, a category intrinsically bound up with the emergence of an evolutionary viewpoint on cosmological process.⁸³

This introduces a larger question to bear in mind throughout a close reading of a selection of texts from the works of both writers. The cultural environment is figured as more physically immediate for Marlatt, there is a

⁸² Miriam Nicholls, “Tensing the Difference: Daphne Marlatt, Karen MacCormack, and Susan Howe,” *Tessera* 27 (Winter 1999): 39-54.

⁸³ Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 2-3.

tension between enclosure and emergence in her idea of self in place, revised from Greek mythology. Howe's concept of "wilderness" is in relation not directly to herself as gendered body, but to herself as woman writer/reader of America. She is not in a dark underground maze, she is entering to "unsettle" a dark place in "literary history"; the "wilderness" is in the library, her woods, as she says, are of words. Nature and culture are compounded within the immediate presence of print on paper, which is the material residue of trees. Robert Pogue Harrison writes that in Latin "*Materia* means wood ... [a]nd *materia* has the same root ... as the word *mater*, or mother."⁸⁴

IV

In the 1993 "Preface" to the collection entitled *Ghost Works*, Marlatt refers to her writing as autobiography, for her a version of the genre in which poetry, myth, journal writing and documentary intersect. This version is necessarily complex as it narrates the life-story of a white Anglo-Canadian, daughter of a colonial family whose movements in the world were directly related to British foreign policy. Her birth and infancy coincided with the mobilising of Japan's imperial strategy, its military offences against western colonial occupation in South-East Asia, of which her parents were a part, and the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Conscious of her oppression as a woman in western culture and of her position in relation to cultures and races subjugated and displaced by the British and European colonial

⁸⁴ Pogue Harrison, *Forests*, 28.

agenda, much of her work questions the possibilities available for a white woman in a postcolonial world. Her own personal history is so closely bound up with the end of Empire that these questions are necessarily intimate and are experienced and written as choices about and acts made by her own body. Her complicated English heritage is most closely explored in the long poem *How Hug A Stone*, (1983) a text I discuss in Chapter Four.

Much of Marlatt's work derives from journeys and her experiences of places that are not "home." She is a traveller, she "enters in" to Canada at the age of nine with her family after an unsettled childhood, moving from Australia to Malaysia, briefly to England and finally to North Vancouver. In her essay "Entering In: The Immigrant Imagination," she writes of her experiences of arrival and assimilation in Vancouver and of the developing need to belong to "the new place" which became "*this* place with its real people and things."⁸⁵ She describes the past she carried with her to Vancouver as "a phantom limb," as if places the body has inhabited persist as a kind of psychosomatic (in)capacity. Like Brossard, she identifies text with the body as a site of difference and resistance, and so her landscapes become incorporated into processes of personal departure and discovery, relationship and growth, and her language unearths possibilities of meaning through narratives of physical presence within place and community. Her earlier poetry, described by herself and others as "proprioceptive," a word derived from Olson and signifying a holistic, interoceptive sense of the

⁸⁵ Marlatt, *Readings from the Labyrinth*, 24.

body (“consciousness”) and the soul (“equally ‘physical’”),⁸⁶ develops through the 1980s within an increasingly committed lesbian feminist identity. During this later phase of her career she writes in *Territory & co.*: “in dreams places are the architecture of souls”⁸⁷ a line which compounds and inverts the physical and the psychic and in a sense demonstrates Marlatt’s particular method of writing postmodern landscapes.

Marlatt’s auditory network, at first her body and its effects, extends with her political thought into a dialectic recovery of the feminine in language, history and society. In this sense the graphic and sonic landscapes of her more recent writing focus, and are focused through, an explicit ideology. Yet, as they become political and attentive to community, Marlatt’s places remain subjective and ambulant, carried within the body: “my region ... is not so much place or landscape these days as life as a woman.”⁸⁸ The places are equivalent at once to an ecological and a psychosomatic ground upon which social reality and the conditions and experiences both inevitable and possible for women in western society are questioned and explored. There is not so much a compounding of the psychic and the physical in terms of body and world in Howe’s writing as of the visual and the sonic as dimensions of the material text, what McGann describes as “Howe’s almost mystical involvement with the materialities of writing.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Olson, *Additional Prose*, 18.

⁸⁷ Marlatt, *Salvage*, 89.

⁸⁸ Daphne Marlatt, “An Interview with Daphne Marlatt,” interview by Eleanor Wachtel, *Capilano Review* 41 (1986) : 4-13, quoted in W. H. New, *Landsliding: Imagining Space, Presence and Power in Canadian Writing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 167.

⁸⁹ McGann, *Black Riders*, 104.

Perhaps both Marlatt and Howe are closer in spirit to Robert Duncan than to Olson. This may be to do with Duncan's homosexuality, his innate sympathy with the feminine⁹⁰ (he writes of Christ in "The Maiden," "He was part girl. He had solitude."),⁹¹ and with his experience of growing up in a household of practising Theosophists, which construed the external world as significant manifestation of the spiritual. Both Duncan and Howe have access through their writing to a kind of "blessedness," which might be described as a secular spiritualism. This form of double-vision animates and distinguishes their practices of postmodern poetry but it is, as Howe points out, also analogous to the seventeenth century Puritans' obsessive typology. It was the "[d]ualism of visible and invisible"⁹² which the Calvinist mind invested in "wilderness," a supernatural institution where the human spirit was tried by God and the Devil. That violent psychological projection still marking the landscapes of America is implicated in "the unforgivable crime" and part of what Howe is fascinated by in her own heritage:

Uninterrupted nature usually is a dream enjoyed by the spoilers and looters – my ancestors. It's a dream of wildness that most of us need in order to breathe; and yet to inhabit a wilderness is to destroy it. An eternal contradiction. Olson's wonderful sentence "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America." I am a woman born in America. I can't take central facts for granted. But then Olson didn't really either.⁹³

⁹⁰ Although, as Adrienne Rich points out, this sympathy was not feminist so much as fascination with an archetype: "Duncan's deep attachment to a mythological Feminine ..." Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 166.

⁹¹ Duncan, *Opening of the Field*, 28.

⁹² Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985), 45.

⁹³ Susan Howe, "On Susan Howe and History," *Modern American Poetry* [journal online]; available from http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g._l/howe/history.htm; Internet.

Duncan's "open field composition" differed from Olson's concept in that Duncan would not concede to a regime of openness. "If we have a field, how can we throw out closed forms. They are only forms within a field," he has said in an interview with Eckbert Faas.⁹⁴ Michael Palmer writes of this "composition by field," whereby all elements of the poem are potentially equally active in the composition as "events" of the poem, including the "closed forms."⁹⁵ "In the field of the poem the unexpected / must come" Duncan writes in "The Propositions."⁹⁶ In its lyric beauty, his poem "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" can hold intellectual purity in tension with Romantic longing and a "spirit of romance," because it is, like a Wallace Stevens poem, explicitly a "made place" of language. It begins:

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
that is not mine, but is a made place,

that is mine, it is so near to the heart,
an eternal pasture folded in all thought
so that there is a hall therein

that is a made place, created by light
wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.

Wherefrom fall all architectures I am
I say are likenesses of the First Beloved
whose flowers are flames lit to the Lady.

She it is Queen Under the Hill
whose hosts are a disturbance of words within words
that is a field folded.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Robert Duncan, "Interview: Robert Duncan," *Towards a New American Poetics*, ed. Eckbert Faas, quoted in *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Paul Hoover (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 29.

⁹⁵ Michael Palmer, "On Robert Duncan," *Modern American Poetry* [journal on-line]; available from http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/duncan/palmeronduncan.htm; Internet.

⁹⁶ Duncan, *Opening of the Field*, 35.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

In her chapter “Architecture of Meaning,” from *My Emily Dickinson*, Howe writes in sympathy with Duncan’s lyric, except that her prose displaces his archetypal figure of “Lady” and “Queen” into an apparently Wordsworthian apprehension of “Nature”: “In childhood if we are lucky, Nature furls us in the confidence of her huge harmony. ... A poem is an invocation, rebellious return to the blessedness of beginning again, wandering free in pure process of forgetting and finding.”⁹⁸ This intellectual commitment to “beginning again,” however, is not, either for Duncan or Howe, a Romantic capitulation or an ironic pastiche, but a complex revolution, “a disturbance of words within words,” a “rebellious ... beginning again ... in ... process of ... finding.” But if Duncan and Olson can be said to seek “organic form ... a form beyond forms” as Denise Levertov proposed,⁹⁹ Howe does not. Although she writes a nearly identical phrase “The poet is an intermediary hunting form beyond form”¹⁰⁰ it is not to arrive at the singular beyond the several but to continue hunting. Again she writes “[a] great poet ... carries intelligence of the past into future of our thought by reverence and revolt” and “[t]he lyric poet reads a past that is a huge imagination of one form. ...”¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, the lyric element in Howe’s poetry is typically interrupted by fracture and the contradiction of an abstract form. Howe constructs forms to recover the excluded of form, to rescue, carry and demonstrate brokenness, fracture, stammer and silence. In “God’s Spies” the protagonists at one point share this exchange:

⁹⁸ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 98.

⁹⁹ Denise Levertov, “Some Notes on Organic Form,” *Postmodern American Poetry*, 629.

¹⁰⁰ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 79.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 85, 106.

CORDELIA: The woods are on fire.
 STELLA: Let's rest here.
 CORDELIA: Let's wade.
 STELLA: How deep?
 CORDELIA: (*Marks a point with her crook*): This deep.
 STELLA: I am weary.
 CORDELIA: I am lame.
 STELLA: I have forgotten.
 CORDELIA: I must go back.
 STELLA: Don't leave me.
 CORDELIA: I won't.¹⁰²

The themes of impediment and immersion are raised in more detail in my discussion of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* in Chapter Three, which is also about Howe's view on the "pacification of the feminine" in American history.¹⁰³ But if we think again about the tenability of the concept of a search for origins in the context of a comparison of Marlatt and Howe, perhaps Marlatt's "provisional" methods despite her commitment to "narrative," are part of the repudiation of such a search. She journeys and arrives in order to explore and depart again, and her dwelling bears in mind the absent and elsewhere; Howe persistently interrogates the documents of history and finds contradiction.

Howe's relationship to Williams and Olson is essentially to do with being an American writer who reads, partly as a corrective, the pacification or occlusion of the feminine. She tells Edward Foster, "This problem of an American voice was something I wanted to write about."¹⁰⁴ For Howe, Olson's importance centres on his concepts of space and history. In a piece entitled "Toward Autobiography" Howe explains her transition from painting to poetry: "I did a series of watercolors with pencilled lines,

¹⁰² Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 184.

¹⁰³ Howe, *Singularities*, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 174.

watercolor washes, and pictures and words – I always left a lot of white space on the page. Around that time (1968 or '69) ... I became acquainted with Charles Olson's writing. What interested me in both Olson and Robert Smithson was their interest in archaeology and mapping. Space. North American space – how it's connected to memory, war, and history."¹⁰⁵

This space, for Howe, reverberates with the arrival of the word of God, and the institution of Puritan ideology. History is both drama and story, both text and act: "History has happened. The narrator is disobedient. A return is necessary, a way for women to go. ... We were expelled from the Garden of the Mythology of the American Frontier. The drama's done. We are the Wilderness."¹⁰⁶

If Olson's Maximus, as George Butterick has defined him, "is Western man at the limit of himself"¹⁰⁷ on a continent which had been, two centuries earlier "the edge of the mapped earth,"¹⁰⁸ now with no further west to go but down into the strata of locality and place, Howe claims identity with that aspect of America, both place and mind, that was destroyed, subdued or mythologised by western man in the accomplishment of that "limit." If for Williams "the city / the man, an identity" and "a man like a city and a woman like a flower"¹⁰⁹ while for Howe "[women] are the Wilderness," in the juxtaposition of these statements we can appreciate the cultural distance between "flower" and

¹⁰⁵ Susan Howe, "Fragments Toward Autobiography," *Modern American Poetry* [journal on-line]; available from http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_L/howe/autobio.htm; Internet.

¹⁰⁶ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 181.

¹⁰⁷ George Butterick, *Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), xxi.

¹⁰⁸ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 46.

¹⁰⁹ William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, 2d ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1983).

“wilderness,” as well as an apparent perpetuation of the binary concepts male/female and culture/nature that Howe’s work would apparently explode. In a sense paradoxically, Howe represents the material environment of New England as pure culture, so that the land is textual palimpsest and the “Wilderness” is not a place beyond the bounds of culture so much as a loop in the original typology. Through this loop the banished feminine persists, in Howe’s view, as “the presence of absence” in American literature:

I can see how in some way the feminist issue may do away with interest in Olson by the young. Because Olson is far more extreme than Melville on that subject. If there is Woman in Olson’s writing (there aren’t many women there), she is either “Cunt,” “Great Mother,” “Cow,” or “Whore.” But the feminine is very much in his poems in another way. A way similar to Melville – It’s the voice ... The fractured syntax, the gaps, the silences are equal to the sounds in *Maximus*.¹¹⁰

Howe worked in the theatre and trained as a painter before she turned to poetry. She is interested in the visual potential of the printed page and her visual and aural aesthetic is profoundly connected to her sense of America’s past as its present. If Olson’s pages acknowledge the blank they do not achieve the abstract quality of Howe’s austere patterns, in which paper and print are equally present. The relationships between words and between words and page have a distinctive resonance. Her authorial intentions are not those of Olson whose seminal prescripts on breath poetics and projective verse emphasise an organic, somatic rhythm for the poetic line, implying a subject integrated within and open to an

¹¹⁰ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 180.

environment, one who maintains a dialectic tension, a sensational/linguistic transaction with that environment.¹¹¹

Howard W. Scott calls Howe's material arena:

an 'appositional discursive field' ... to distinguish [it] from Olson's 'COMPOSITION BY FIELD' [It] is far more 'out of hand' and indicates ... an interinscriptive compositional process in which a multiplicity of discursive practices under-and-over-write the conditions of possible subject positions.¹¹²

For Howe, the relationship between environment and language, between sensation and language, is no longer taken on trust. Her authorial act involves a yielding to the abstract potential of language itself, so that the potential for privilege of one meaning above others resides in the relationship of the author to the linguistic order she repudiates. Howe's language opens inwards, refers to the objects of other words as much as to the world of objects. The page, then, becomes a site of "freedom," "possibility," "silence," an aspect of her "wilderness," a frontier beyond language or, perhaps, its transcendent space.

In a recorded interview for the 1997 radio series *LINEbreak*, Howe explains to Charles Bernstein that she is "trying to make landscapes with words" and that what she responds to in the landscape of Connecticut is "other voices," those of past lives.¹¹³ If there is an element of synaesthesia

¹¹¹ Olson, "Projective Verse," *Postmodern American Poetry*, 613-621.

¹¹² Howard W. Scott, "writing ghost writing: A Discursive Poetics of History; or, Howe's 'hau' in Susan Howe's *a bibliography of the king's book; or, eikonbasilike*," *Talisman* 14, no. 5 (Fall 1995) : 124.

¹¹³ Susan Howe, interview by Charles Bernstein, *LINEbreak*, <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/linebreak/programs/howe/>; Internet.

in this idea of the auditory within the visual, the text within the landscape, it should not be taken for a suggestion that Howe's pages are Symbolist interiors or psychological projections, for they are meditations on the social and cultural, upon history. Indeed the particular discontinuities between text and world, and the dynamics of print and page preclude a purely subjective space. As Olson in his seminal essay "Projective Verse" (1966) writes "It is now too late to be bothered with ["subjectivism."] It has excellently done itself to death, even though we are all caught in its dying." What he is setting against "subjectivism" is the "objectivism" of Pound and Williams from which Olson's own sense of the term is developed:

a word to be taken to stand for the kind of relation
of man to experience which a poet might state as the
necessity of a line or work to be as wood is, to be as
clean as wood is as it issues from the hand of nature,
to be shaped as wood can be when a man has had his
hand to it.¹¹⁴

Howe is not "a man" and is more committed to ambivalence than is Olson. Because her words are so precisely put together and precisely broken up, they retain a hermetic, shadowy symbolism, *and* a mutability and potential that opens towards a collective history of "other voices." This complicates the opposition of symbolism and objectivism, because in the concreteness of Howe's poetry there are elements of both.

To suggest an important distinction between the methodologies and intentions of Howe and Marlatt, Howe's poetry is emphatically visual, presenting work analogous to both a musical score and a pictorial collage.

¹¹⁴ Olson, *Postmodern American Poetry*, 619-620.

It is far more abstract than Marlatt's, less "projective." By this I mean that the shape of Marlatt's poems and the lengths of her lines are attentive to the movements and extensions of the breathing speaking body, and concur (to an extent) with Olson's insistence on the human as "himself an object" in relation to others, both human and non-human. And if I have said that Howe's poetry compares to a musical score it is not quite in the sense of Olson's appreciation of the typewritten page:

It is the advantage of the typewriter that due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work.¹¹⁵

For Howe and her contemporaries, a later generation, the tools of composition have become more sophisticated but the technology remains, like Olson's typewriter, a vital component in the work. For instance, as Albert Gelpi has explained, the direct source for Bernstein's poem "I & the" is a psychoanalyst's data base, whereas Christopher Dewdney's "Fractal Diffusion" depends upon the word processor as mechanical agent for a pattern of syllabic interchange. Steve McCaffery's notion of privileging the signifier in order to obstruct the mechanics of reference and block "the optical illusion of reality in Capitalist thought," was meant to create a linguistic field receptive to meanings beyond those capable of

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 618.

collusion with market forces.¹¹⁶ Importantly, the prescriptive element in Olson's arrangements is deliberately relinquished by the Language writers.

The visual "score" of Howe's work notates the wounded and estranged body; abstracted, detached and yet susceptible to the unlimited intentions of others. Olson's idea of the poet and the poem as intentional objects in relation, as vehicles of breath engendered sound operating reciprocally in the open, is in Howe at once interiorised and inverted, launched and deflected. "Language is a wild interiority. I am lost in the refuge of its dark life."¹¹⁷ Howe's language seeks to conceal and release potential meaning: "At the blind point between what is said and meant, who is sounding herself? Words open to the names inside them ..."¹¹⁸ she writes as prose, and "Cries open to the words inside them / Cries hurled through the Woods" as poetry.¹¹⁹ Howe's poetry presents what McGann has described as "complex systems of sonic echo"¹²⁰ in which significance and resonance emerge through the potentials of phonetic relationship. Therefore, the visual shape, the material fact, of the poem can be seen as an acoustic "landscape of words."

In saying that Howe's work is more "interior" than Olson's I mean to emphasise that textual field is less history of place than it is in his work, and more history of texts. Her New England landscapes are Thoreau's and

¹¹⁶ Albert Gelpi, "The Genealogy of Postmodernism: Contemporary American Poetry," *The Southern Review* (Summer 1990), 517-541.

¹¹⁷ Susan Howe, *Modern American Poetry* [journal on-line]; available at http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_h/howe/about.htm; Internet.

¹¹⁸ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 82.

¹¹⁹ Howe, *Singularities*, 23.

¹²⁰ McGann, *Black Riders*, 102.

Emily Dickinson's and Jonathan Edward's and Herman Melville's; their "voices" substantiate her ground. As Michael Palmer says of Robert Duncan, she is "a poet of near infinite derivations" without being unconsciously derivative.¹²¹ And these voices carry through other textual voices; in a variation of the quote above Howe writes of Emily Dickinson: "Words hurled through allegorical woods seen backwards through Shakespeare, Bunyon and Milton."¹²²

In terms of late twentieth century American poetry Susan Howe has been associated with Language writers such as Charles Bernstein, Bob Perelman, Lyn Hejinian, and Ron Silliman whose poetry demonstrates a challenge to the idea of language as referential, as a transparent medium of the socio-political world. Ron Silliman, in his introduction to the 1986 anthology *In the American Tree*, considers that "language" writing was at first a reaction against the previously innovative "breath poetics" or "projective" verse of the Black Mountain writers, with its emphasis on speech acts, which was in its turn a rejection of the perceived elitism of late Modernism with its privileged subjectivities and persistent Romantic trace. Silliman considers that now "... new methods ... might lead to a more open and useful investigation, hopefully to renew verse itself, so that it might offer readers the same opacity, density, otherness, challenge and relevance persons find in the 'real' world."¹²³ It is the act of writing not of speech that takes precedence. In turning from Olson's "open field" of speech and breath towards an autotelic language field, Language writing

¹²¹ Palmer, "On Robert Duncan," *Modern American Poetry*, [journal on-line].

¹²² Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 84.

¹²³ Ron Silliman, *In the American Tree* (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1986), xvi.

enters “a broad territory of possibility” as Silliman puts it, where “if nothing in the poem could be taken for granted, then anything might be possible.”

What Silliman and others mean to challenge is late capitalism’s insidious recruitment of the signifying power of language, so that theirs is an ideological critique calling for attention and responsibility from both writer and reader. Marjorie Perloff considers that “the Language movement arose as an essentially Marxist critique of contemporary American society on behalf of young poets who came of age in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate.”¹²⁴ If this is so and its initial impulse grew out of the established discursive opposition of capitalism and Marxism, then the space it opened, the “broad territory of possibility,” became available to writers concerned with alternative issues, for instance of gender difference and inequality, of racial oppression and exclusion, and situations of power relationship assumed and perpetuated within that inherited opposition. The concerns of these writers are with the dynamics of language as an abstract system, an attempt to estrange words from their accepted currency and open up and exploit alternative resources of meaning.

¹²⁴ Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 232. Perloff questions the implications of their Marxist argument: “For one thing, what the Language poets call late monopoly capitalism is never compared to the economic system of existing Marxist countries. ... Is Silliman implying that in contemporary China, ‘the optical illusion of realism’ has given way to a valorization of ‘gestural poetic forms’? Or is the very opposite not the case in the countries that can only tolerate social realism?” (234).

Howe's work demonstrates the radical commitment of the Language writers to an intense focus upon the materiality of text and print, but it is peculiar within that context because of its engagements with history and historical texts, her identifications with earlier writers and the religious or sacramental dimension she evokes. Identification with any particular movement or group is not appropriate in an assessment of Howe's work, but her relationship to the Language writers raises questions about the ambiguous correspondence between radical art and that which it purports to subvert. John C. Gilmour in his book *Fire on the Earth: Anselm Kiefer and the Postmodern World* cites Bürger's critique of the avant-garde and the neo avant-garde as gestures that become appropriated by, and so ultimately perpetuate, the institutions they ostensibly reject. Gilmour's work is interesting in this context because Kiefer alludes to history and myth in his paintings in a way that could be interpreted as a form of nostalgia, rather than a form of radical vision and critique. Gilmour writes:

we have no definitive way to evaluate whether the post-modern return to references, historical allusions, and mythological perspectives will, in fact, undermine or reinforce established historical institutions, especially since they resemble in some respects forms of nostalgia within contemporary culture.¹²⁵

The question if applied to Howe's work might be reversed in that her "forms of nostalgia," if such they are, resemble subversively new forms in writing. That is, the received interpretations of her "references," "allusions" and "perspectives" are intrinsic to the work itself as objects of critique. Content as site of interaction between writer and reader, or

¹²⁵ John C. Gilmour, *Fire on the Earth: Anselm Kiefer and the Postmodern World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 12.

writer/reader and audience, is as vital as formal innovation. Form in this case does not preserve nostalgic perspectives but exposes them to disturbance, subversion and debate. Howe's reading of history is an active re-vision, a creative writing-into received and recovered accounts. "[W]e are in the field of history"¹²⁶ she writes, and "If history is a record of survivors, Poetry shelters other voices"¹²⁷ indicating again the lateral potential of poetry, its capacity to exploit significant dimensions of sound and silence within recorded language.

Howe's feminism is less explicitly engaged than Marlatt's, although her work sustains a powerful and subtle critique of patriarchal structures identified as religious and political. The religious element in Howe's work is problematic and intriguing, and is peculiarly at odds with the linguistic materialism of much postmodern American poetry. There is a kind of sacramental intensity in her commitment to language. For instance, she compounds space, time and presence in one short sentence that witnesses the suffering of animals, particularly the human, embedded and persistent in the mineral: "Pain is nailed to the landscape in time."¹²⁸ This pain is of numberless beings, peoples persecuted and displaced by imperial (Christian) armies, yet there is an unmistakable allusion to the Christian icon in "nailed," so that an idea of agony's location also encompasses and exceeds the millennium. In passing, and by way of comparison, in a poem entitled "Leaves 'the doublet of'" Marlatt's image of the "not nailed"

¹²⁶ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 25.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹²⁸ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 13.

alludes to sexual/emotional possibilities of “attachment” between living individuals:

“attached,” trees rain beats down rainbeats down the
street, dark would beat them off leaves, attached and
free, whirl attacked tacked, not nailed to the tree
they’re dancing from, as on, in leaf up through the stem,
slender petiole a stalk or little foot¹²⁹

There is a difference, then, in the ways in which Howe and Marlatt write the spatial dimensions of landscape; Howe’s are empty, desolate and haunted, where-as Marlatt’s tend to be thorough-fares of familiar ghosts whispering of imperial crimes and love’s potential.

The complex inter-relation of the visual and the sonic implicates Howe’s sense of her Calvinist heritage; and, I think, her own sense of poetry is akin to a religious calling: “Sound is part of the mystery. But sounds are only the echoes of a place of first love. The Puritans or Calvinists knew that what we see is as nothing to the unseen.”¹³⁰ On the other hand Howe’s work is intensively concerned with the construction of books, the means and materials of writing and book production. Therefore the literary “content” is aware of its physical “form” and presence in the market place. This is not to say that the content is overtly “materialist,” she is not a Marxist writer. Her materialist aesthetic is neither apolitical nor partisan and refers beyond the means of production in a capitalist economy towards a resource removed from, yet partially exposed to, that culture’s economic base. There is an esoteric slant to Howe’s intellectual non-conformism which compounds ethics and aesthetics, and includes a kind of nature

¹²⁹ Marlatt, *Salvage*, 62.

¹³⁰ Susan Howe, “Susan Howe and History,” *Modern American Poetry*, [journal on-line].

mysticism conceived in sympathy with human suffering and in critical dialogue with Puritan typology, Romantic Transcendentalism and with processes of exploitation and manufacture. Craig Dworkin makes the point:

Howe's poems frequently draw attention to their own pages ... in part by conflating the space of the page with an evocation of the distinctly Northeastern rural setting which recurs throughout her work. This sylvan *mise en scene* is linked, in part of course, to her concern with 'wilderness' and a certain historical and colonial 'American' landscape: with what is culturally marginalized and at the margins of culture.¹³¹

Within this "*mise en scene*" is both a paradoxical ideal and an ancient terror, of the "departure of mankind"¹³² an imaginary absence potential in landscape of the human eye and the human tongue, against which other absences, for instance that of trees, resonate. Her lines from *Secret History of the Dividing Line* allude to incapacities of sight and speech: "Splinter in my sister's eye / plank in my own / I cut out my tongue in the forest"¹³³ imply both agency and impediment. With a plank in "her own" eye, she would be blinded by the stuff of trees, almost blended into the processed tree, as an inverse sacrifice to the forest. Self mutilation here seems to hint

¹³¹ Craig D. Dworkin, "Waging Political Babble," *A Journal of Verbal Visual Enquiry* 12, no. 4 (October-December 1996), 399. For his account of the close etymological connections between the language of books and the language of trees, on which Howe's poetry often plays, Dworkin's source is an essay by Carol Blyth, "Touch wood: coming to terms with bibliography," *Word & Image* 9, no. 1 (January – March 1993). Blyth writes "'Library' is derived from 'liber' - the inner bark of the tree ...," 68.

¹³² Howe, *Frame Structures*, 50.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 102. In Greek mythology Philomela and Procne were daughters of Pandion. "Procne was married to Tereus, king of Athens. The latter became enamoured of Philomela, and after having seduced or outraged her, cut out her tongue and hid her in a lonely place, that she might not reveal his ill-usage. But Philomela managed to depict her misfortunes on a piece of needlework and send it to Procne. Procne sought out her sister and, to revenge her, killed her own son Itys and served up his flesh to her husband. Tereus drew his sword to slay the sisters, but was changed into a hoopoe, Philomela into a swallow, and Procne into a nightingale (or, according to Latin authors, Philomela into a nightingale and Procne into a swallow)." Paul Harvey, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 324.

at identification or solidarity with the oppressed, although its content and form, its figure of speech, is grounded in the cultural history of the oppressor, within the realms of which female agency is curtailed. As Marlatt, at the end of her 1996 novel *Taken*, writes: “We *are* complicit, yes. Folded into the wreckage of grief and power.”¹³⁴

Against Howe’s image of the excised tongue we can place Marlatt’s trope of the tongue as both organ and agent of an overthrow of the terms of that cultural history: “woman tongue, speaking in and of and for each other,” and “putting the living body of language together means putting the world together, the world we live in: an act of composition, an act of birthing, us, uttered and outered there in it.”¹³⁵ Marlatt’s sense of the materiality of print and page, then, is a more “organic” and integrated concept of the human trace in a potentially affirmative space, the page as arena within which speech and gesture reach in attempts to produce, inscribe, communicate and receive meaning. Her writing is always conscious of processes of production and the ethics, or lack of them, involved in a contemporary industrial ecology, especially apparent, for instance, in *Steveston*.

Howe’s critique of hegemonic persecution that includes the feminine in American cultural history, recovers enthusiasm as an element of the voices she attempts to mediate, rather than writing it as the transformative force of a sexualised body. When “The Mountains straight reply-” they carry Dickinson’s voice back to and through her own, not the affirmation of

¹³⁴ Daphne Marlatt, *Taken* (Concord, Ontario: House of Anansi Press, 1996), 130.

¹³⁵ Marlatt, *Two Women in a Birth*, 30.

(queer) desire. Howe and Marlatt, are both “historical materialists” according to Benjamin’s definition in his “Theses on the philosophy of history” but ones who must also “blast open the continuum” of a symbolic law that demonstrably excludes their agency:

A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the “eternal” image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called “Once upon a time” in historicism’s bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history.¹³⁶

By this definition we can see what woman writers with a particular and radical position in relation to “the continuum of history” are up against and how comprehensively subversive their language acts must be to shift the feminine from the shadows of the objective world. As Marlatt writes “what if history is simply a shell we exude for a place to live in? *all wrapped up*. break out before it buries us. stories can kill.”¹³⁷

V

If Marlatt’s event of “entering in” to the new place of North America is centred on her own experience and embodiment, Howe understands contemporary America as a perpetual “arena ...[of] ... originary fury”¹³⁸ established with the arrival of seventeenth century English Puritans, an historical arena into and within which the contemporary self nonetheless

¹³⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, 3d ed. (London and Glasgow: Collins/Fontana Books, 1973), 264.

¹³⁷ Marlatt, *How Hug a Stone*, 51.

¹³⁸ Howe, “Encloser,” in *Politics of Poetic Form*, 180.

enters and acts. The first part of *The Europe of Trusts* begins “For me there was no silence before armies” and goes on to intersperse family history with contemporary political events in Europe leading up to the outbreak of World War. Here the writer places her family in Ireland and the “I” amongst them taking her first steps, in the context of European nation states creating the conditions for war. The slender capital of the personal pronoun appears in the following paragraph, at first before and then following “Ireland,” the connection between self and nation being at once irrefutable and tenuous, wholly unstable, both inherent in its name and unbalanced by the list of names that follow, which disturb, as it were, the ground “I” walked upon. The self enters a disintegrating world of chaos and fear and becomes ontologically stranded between an extended family, grounded and benign, and the unquantifiable, faceless statesmen across the sea:

In the summer of 1938 my mother and I were staying with my grandmother, uncle, aunt, great-aunts, cousins, and friends in Ireland, and I had just learned to walk, when Czechoslovakia was dismembered by Hitler, Ribbentrop, Mussolini, Chamberlain, and Daladier, during the Conference and Agreement at Munich. That October we sailed home on a ship crowded with refugees fleeing various countries in Europe.¹³⁹

In this retrospective account connections and entities are broken up, the familiar and vulnerable within the powerful and strange. Howe inserts the “I” into history, so that the statement recalling herself and her mother at sea amongst the European refugees of 1938 invokes an un-stated recollection of the seventeenth century exodus of Puritans from England and Holland. In this sense, there is a kind of double premonition, which is also hindsight.

¹³⁹ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 9.

of catastrophe. The Jewish holocaust of the twentieth century, and the extermination of Native Peoples in America during the westward course of “manifest destiny” were permutations of history that buried “nameless numberless men women and children, ...”¹⁴⁰ The “originary fury” is also that of the child in time, a dimension of terror and wonder, approached by poetry, beyond the language of recorded history yet subject to the forces of temporal events. And if, like Duncan after Whitman (“I too / that am a nation sustain the damage / where smokes of continual ravage obscure the flame”),¹⁴¹ Howe identifies self with nation, in her it is complicated by a split allegiance, both to the most powerful and to another much smaller nation, historically oppressed by imperial power.

As Crown observes, part of what Howe’s language seeks to disrupt is the ego-centric subject, the ordering I/eye: “Instead of the inward eye of a private and solitary speaker, we encounter a painfully public, dissociated, and multiple sensibility.”¹⁴² And yet this diffuse subject is embedded in poetry of an unmistakable austerity and solitariness; her language emphasises the material singularity of each word. In a recorded conversation with Robert Creeley, Howe refers to her sense of the word’s “metaphysical” quality and her feeling that it exists as spiritual entity beyond its possible audience.¹⁴³ As Crown puts it:

Howe’s poems do not engage in a kind of feminist “her-story” methodology that, according to Diane Elam, conceptualises women as a unitary recognizable category and then rewrites

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴¹ Duncan, *Opening of the Field*, 64.

¹⁴² Crown, *Ecstatic Nation*, 191.

¹⁴³ Susan Howe, “Four Part Harmony: Howe, Susan and Creeley, Robert,” *Village Voice Literary Supplement* 124 (April 1994): 21-22.

history to include that category. Instead, Howe transfers the speaking voice away from any essentialist connection to a gendered body, moving it toward the nongendered body of the bounded page, the audible sound, and the visible word. Thus there is no gendered subjectivity in Howe's work, only a series of shifting, fugitive speakers.¹⁴⁴

If we accept Crown's perception of Howe's material abstraction of the written word from the human body, making it a kind of transcendent artefact, it is important to pursue the implications of this distinction between the two writers under discussion, in order to approach an understanding of their respective positions in relation to land, environment, place and its communities, both living and dead.

A useful distinction between the poetics of Howe and of Marlatt might be that Howe's is transcendentalist¹⁴⁵ whereas Marlatt's is phenomenological, in that it deals with the objects of the senses, of the embodied mind. Howe is fascinated with the quality of difference between the American and the English voice in poetry, how this new representation was articulated, particularly as an element developed through a religious vision. The element of the sacramental in Howe's vision is partly what complicates a reading of her poetry within the theoretical contexts of new historicism and feminism. Howe's statements on religion and poetry at times seem contradictory, if we consider them in the light of Louis Montrose's perception that "The possibility of social and political agency cannot be

¹⁴⁴ Crown, *Ecstatic Nation*, 228.

¹⁴⁵ Brian Reed makes the useful point that "in Howe's poetry ... she puts transcendence itself up for grabs. At almost every point ... she can be read as critiquing and or offering access to Truth. In other words, the existence of a transcendental referent is perpetually put into doubt even as, paradoxically, that same existence is celebrated." Brian Reed, "'Eden or Ebb of the Sea': Susan Howe's Word Squares and Postlinear Poetics," available on-line at <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/current.issue/14.2reed.html>.

based on the illusion that consciousness is a condition somehow beyond ideology.”¹⁴⁶ When Howe writes of “grace” and “infinite mystery” underlying such disparate voices contained within the ideology of Puritanism as Cotton Mather, Mary Rowlandson and Jonathan Edwards, she refers to it as a “calling” to which she, as contemporary poet, also responds: “This central mystery – this huge imagination of one form is both a lyric thing and a great ‘secresie,’ on an unbeaten way; the only human way left. ...”¹⁴⁷ It is, then, apparently both culturally and historically specific and trans-temporal, both peculiar to the American experience and universal.

On the issue of gender Howe is recorded as saying “Anything is possible. I think the lyric poem is a most compressed and lovely thing. I guess it’s the highest form. And in this form I hope that sexual differences are translated, transformed, and vanish.”¹⁴⁸ Again, in “Architecture of Meaning” she writes “All war is the same. Culture representing form and order will always demand sacrifice and subjugation of one group by another.”¹⁴⁹ Yet, talking to Charles Bernstein about her part in the poetics teaching programme at Buffalo, in an interview for the *LINEbreak* radio series, she says how important she considers it is for poetry, or poetic thinking, to be “grounded in fact” and to be responsive to contemporary cultural and critical theory.

¹⁴⁶ Louis Montrose, “New Historicisms,” in *Redrawing the Boundaries*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992), 414.

¹⁴⁷ Howe, *Modern American Poetry*, [journal on-line].

¹⁴⁸ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 171.

¹⁴⁹ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 93.

With regard to her engagement with the cultural poetics of 1980s new historicism, Howe cites Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* as an influential book, and especially the chapter entitled "The Word of God in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction."¹⁵⁰ We can appreciate perhaps why Howe would respond to Greenblatt's account of the "special kind of presence" and the "*abstractness*" that early printed works had for the sixteenth century Protestant readership.¹⁵¹ Greenblatt explains that the significance of the word reaches beyond the colonising of New England by the Puritan founders, back through sixteenth century England and the martyrdom of Protestant heretics. Against the "demonic theatre" created by their Catholic persecutors the heretics placed complete and subversive faith in the words of the gospel, those printed for the first time in 1525 in a language that spoke directly to ordinary English men and women. Tyndale's *New English Testament* provided them with personal access to the word of God, and when Latin manuscripts were replaced by printed books the dissemination of heretical works became much more difficult for the authorities to control. Greenblatt's presentation of the imagery used by the religious antagonists offers an interesting configuration of difference between the book and the body:

Even for a man well trained in Latin, the English Scriptures spoke to the heart in a way the Vulgate never could; the vernacular was the unself-conscious language of the inner man. Bainham's interrogators offered him the embrace of the Holy Mother Church – "the bosom of his mother was open for him" ... they told him. The Reformers offered a different intimacy not of the institution, imaged as the

¹⁵⁰ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 74-114.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

nurturing female body, but of the book, imaged, in terms displaced from that body, as self, food, and protection.¹⁵²

The printed word of the Gospel affirmed the spiritual separation, independence and righteousness of the heretics, and later the Protestant non-conformists, while the fortuitous coincidence of technological advances in print production extended literacy and the opportunities for religious dissent. It seemed that God was made manifest in the vernacular and for this reason the printed word was a vital sign subsequently lost to standardisation and mass production. This spirit of resistance, embodied in and transmitted through the literal word, created an underground network of radical Protestantism. In a society of brutal religious intolerance many were burnt at the stake for heresy. Others, to escape later orthodox persecution, fled England to become Americans, carrying the Word's incommensurable power across the sea, into a new space of history and event. It was unlike any other these pilgrims had encountered and it forced them to make new representations of themselves, to themselves, of their place on earth in relation to God. This extraordinary compression of faith and language became part of the material impact that the early settlers brought to the landscape of New England. Howe continues to appreciate the compounding of the material word and the immaterial "grace," if no longer of God then of some "central mystery" comparable to that Greenblatt describes for the Renaissance heretics. The printed word retains the capacity to conceal and convey what is made fugitive by the order of things.

¹⁵² Ibid., 96.

An important essay on the religious dimension of Howe's work is Lew Daly's *Swallowing the Scroll: Late in a Prophetic Tradition in the Poetry of Susan Howe and John Taggart*. Daly sees the "poetics" of Howe and Taggart as being exceptional in contemporary North American writing because they share a radical regard for spirit and prophecy. He places the oppositional stance of the poetry in the context of a "modern counter history" the particular origins of which he posits in "early Protestantism" to whom the word was, almost literally, God. Howe writes poetry in "a radical Protestant tradition" which is both "religious" and committed to profound political dissent, analogous to such mystics and "anti-capitalist" thinkers as Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and Simone Weill. Daly recognises that the *Authorised Version* is central to Howe's vision and methodology and likens its influence on the political/historical discourse of her poetry to that which the "vernacular Bible" had on "peasant revolts, ... conventicler-style and prophetic feminism, ... mystical anti-clericalism, ... proto-communism and messianic anarchism, [and] black emancipation."¹⁵³ This is helpful in that it gives a constructive slant on the connection between Howe's writing of history and her sense of the sacred. I would argue, though, that there is a greater critical distance between her reading of the Bible as sacred text and her reading of it as comparative myth than Daly suggests. I will return to Daly's thesis in Chapter Two where I discuss Howe's use of Biblical stories in her poem *Hinge Picture* (1974) in the context of the 1996 volume *Frame Structures*.

¹⁵³ Daly, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 11.

Before we get there, in Chapter One I look in some detail at work collected in Marlatt's *What Matters*. I am interested in how she writes about crossing distances between the United States and Canada, and how these travels are mapped into the internal landscapes of her body and memories of other places. Or again, how those embodied topographies redefine the geographical borders she traverses. Chapter One and Chapter Two are companion pieces in that they concentrate on collections of early work by each of the writers under discussion, and although my readings are not determined to find parallels, I examine tropes of exploration, arrival and discovery and how these are developed by both Marlatt and Howe, in terms of relational embodiment and vast space.

CHAPTER ONE

Mapping a Way Out: Marlatt's *What Matters*

Out? I can't imagine it, left here
holding the thread of our story, knotted in remembrance, not ...

Daphne Marlatt, *Frames of a story*

I

In this Chapter I look in some detail at Marlatt's writing collected in *What Matters*. This volume includes prose and poetry which together construct a narrative of physical travel and temporary dwelling, in British Columbia and the United States, through developing strategies of language and poetic form. If we think of Howe as an East coast writer and Marlatt as a West coast writer, and what that polar distinction might imply in a search for literary ancestors and original landscapes, we must think again about the provisional, pragmatic and transitional nature of Marlatt's arrivals and sojourns, alongside Howe's almost obsessive examination of the difference between English and American poetic voices, and how this difference reveals itself in the New England landscapes of her texts.

Deleuze and Guattari make a useful distinction between American east and west coast ways of mapping temporality and landscape when they write:

directions in America are different: the search for
arborescence and the return to the Old World occur

in the East. But there is the rhizomatic West, with its Indians, without ancestry, its ever-receding limit, its shifting and displaced frontiers. There is a whole American 'map' in the West, where even the trees form rhizomes. America reversed the directions: it put its orient in the West, as if it were precisely in America that the earth came full circle; its West is the edge of the East.¹

In this and the following chapter I will return to these questions of a geographically determined difference, most specifically in my discussion of Marlatt's *Columbus Poems* and Howe's *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, as both poems contain mnemonic figures of language that speak of arrivals, ascendancies, distance and displacement.

II

Both volumes, Marlatt's *What Matters* (1980) and Howe's *Frame Structures* (1996) include versions of long poems originally printed in limited editions by small presses, prefaced in these later collections by a prose piece written especially for the new publication. Marlatt's foreword is brief and refers directly to the contexts out of which the short poems, journal entries and long poems came. "Frame Structures" on the other hand can be read independently of the following poems. Its connection to them is oblique as its themes of personal memory, family history, and New England history sustain a subjective narrative that is dissimulated in the poetry.

¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 21.

The publication of these books represents a certain level of prominence for Howe in America and Marlatt in Canada, being retrospective collections produced by mainstream publishing houses, New Directions in New York and The Coach House Press in Toronto respectively.² Both writers have revised the early poems reprinted here and participated in the editorial choice of reading. The cover designs are very different yet both incorporate images originating from within the author's immediate family. The black and white photograph reproduced on the front cover of *Frame Structures* is attributed to Susan Howe, a picture taken from a corner angle of David von Schlegell's "*India Wharf Sculpture* (1972) overlooking Boston Harbor,"³ the sculptor being her husband. Constructed in metal the sculpture is a horizontal rectangular grid at one end of which rise vertical staves, opening out the pattern of rectilinear frames. In the immediate foreground of the photo, partially cut off by the edge of the page, an open tool-box suggests that the sculpture is in progress.

Making a very different visual impression on the front cover of *What Matters* is the reproduction in colour of a crayon drawing by Marlatt's son, of the sun's face rising over outlined figures with arms outstretched, walking up through the yellow scribbles, representing rays. In each case the lettering, black for *Frame Structures*, red for *What Matters*, is printed

² These levels are not necessarily equal, as Coach House Press remains committed to the traditions of the small press, producing "finely designed and crafted books in limited editions with the author integrally involved in the process." Available from <http://www.chbooks.com/chb/index.html>; Internet. New Directions Publishing Corporation is a much larger and financially more powerful institution having gained the prominence of a mainstream publishing house in the United States.

³ Howe, *Frame Structures*, back cover.

across the white space above the main image, which in the context of the graphic scenario, denotes sky.

I point out the visual impact of these books because together they hint at the different concerns of these writers with subjective and collective history, and the ways in which their writing implicates personal vision in cultural event. Visual abstraction, for instance black figures on white ground, becomes a material priority for Howe, so that the blank page upon which print and image are set, signifies a complex of ideas about the space into and on to which language enters. There is a sense in which personal or familial signifiers in Howe's work are also already cultural and public, while they retain a hermetic secrecy. Marlatt's interweaving of subjective experience and cultural space resides less in the emblematic potential of print and paper, more in the ways language links up across the page to convey ideas and narratives.

What Matters taken in its entirety tells the story of Marlatt's journey from dependence and "alienation,"⁴ from being young and married, living where her husband's work takes them, through the conception and birth of their child, towards the break-up of their marriage and the possibility of belonging on her own terms to the place in which she chooses to be. The three sections of the book are each headed by the name of the place in which the contents were written or written about, "California," "Vancouver" and "Wisconsin," an indication of the importance Marlatt places on the geographical setting for the process of writing. Equally

⁴ Marlatt, "Of the matter," *What Matters*, unpaginated.

important is the human experience of being alive within those places of language, of being receptive and active. These brief sentences chosen as epigraph: “In the beginning was not the word. In the beginning is the hearing.” (Mary Daly) and “If you don’t understand the story you’d better tell it.” (George Bowering)⁵ indicate how being alive for Marlatt is essentially involved with aural and oral processes, and motivated by resistance to inimical forms of inherited culture.

Marlatt’s 1980 preface is entitled “Of the matter.” The opening paragraph begins by locating the self within the “common condition” and in relation to “the closed terms of our culture”: “Material, what matters. Indeed what (grave) matters & does it matter to anyone but myself? There are passages we all make ...”⁶ Here the parenthetical adjective “grave” preceding the noun “passages,” reminds us of her later “labyrinth of culture,” just as it projects a reminder of death and the presence of history into the adjacent phrase “being alive at this point in time.” She returns to the word “matter” in the final paragraph and relates it to an idea, not of “wood” or “mother” for the time being, but of “missing.” The implication of the familiar question “what is the matter with you” is, according to Marlatt, “that you [are] missing something, meaning ‘not all there.’ ” Interestingly she states that the strategic elision of “with you,” the words that carry the connotations of “missing something,” enables her to formulate the more suggestive phrase “what matters”: “& so to be present, to a place i could take on as home ... in a language i share with others ...” The paradoxical

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

absence implicit in “with you,” the objectified subject, is converted into a reflection of presence.⁷

Writing about her writing in this preface she is more interested in the process of “articulation” than the quality of “voice”; in the politics of construction rather than the lyric gift: “Articulate, join, fit the parts together, connect.” She describes her journal as “account ... workbook ... confessional” indicating a pragmatic, responsible attitude to the need to “make sense” of her life in the work. The journal was a means of counteracting dislocation and confusion: “Making sense became the work, generated by the fear that if I could not make sense of what was happening then my life was indeed senseless & immaterial.” There is a distinction made here between the status of the “journal” and the “poems” but it is a distinction in degree rather than kind. The impetus and function of the journal was to “make sense” as she testifies, whereas the poetry is given over to the autonomy of language, a medium in which her experience, the raw material of the journal, is grounded and connected to other narratives, other significations. Therefore the poetry opens up the ground of her “confessional” and “account” not as universal shrine, more as exposed site.

In *Month of Hungry Ghosts* (1979) and *How Hug a Stone* (1983),⁸ the journal and the letter are formal elements included as recurring structural motifs; the former work intersperses drafts of personal letters and journal entries with both short-line and prose poems, whereas the latter is divided

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Both collected in *Ghost Works*.

into sections based on date and place. In these works Marlatt, by her methods of construction, repositions the ostensibly more personal genres of journal and letter writing on to an equal and shared plane with poetry. In *What Matters* the distinction in status between the journal and the poetry is more clearly marked within the structure of the volume. As the sections of journal occur as discrete units under the subheading “Journal” we read them as background or surround to the poems rather than as intrinsic elements of an integrated whole. Both journal and poems share the same territory but the poetry explores its dangers and possibilities with an independent faith in the expository resources of language.

The “confessional” aspect of the journal feeds the poetry not as content formally enshrined but as exposed narrative in the first person lower-case, in which speaker and listener are equally implicated. Therefore, it is hard to read much of Marlatt’s work without learning the story of her own life. In “Of the matter” her sojourns in the United States as a young married woman are remembered as times of personal estrangement and her marriage is described as a “struggle for the Real.” *What Matters* is dedicated to her son Kit, born of this marriage, whose conception, birth and early infancy provide context and content for much of the writing here, particularly the two long poem sequences included in the volume, *Rings* and *Columbus Poems*. Before the event of conception she transcribes into her journal these lines by Lorine Niedecker:

Nobody nothing
ever gave me
greater thing

than time
unless light
and silence

adding under them: “pregnancy would be time made matter in me.” In this proposal Marlatt translates abstract gifts into material presence, a body within her own body, and to that extent determines her future. Just as in the “body of language” words carry “their history,” here “time [is] made matter” and she will carry time.⁹

In “Of the matter,” in the discourse developed in the intervening decade, Marlatt goes on to observe that while her journal “tried to ‘make sense’” she was achieving through the poetry an understanding of the intrinsic dynamics of language. Formalised as written language, voice offers a reflection of the sentient body on shared ground, self in communal place:

... i was writing poems, both short- & long-line, composing
out of a poetic that taught me language, its ‘drift,’ could ground
my experience in the turn of a line as tense, as double-edged,
as being felt. In the oscillation of a pun, or a rhyming return,
i sensed a narrative that wasn’t only mine, though I participated
in its telling and was thereby told. Caught up in it, connected,
in the body of language where we also live.¹⁰

There is a reassuring circularity in the way Marlatt’s later prose consistently seeks connection and somatic integrity when she writes about the practice of writing. From about this time, 1980, Marlatt’s theoretical emphasis on connection and integration starts to improvise towards an ideal comparable to Adrienne Rich’s “dream of a common language”¹¹ against collusion and closure. However, Marlatt recognises a contradiction

⁹ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 25.

¹⁰ Ibid., unpaginated.

¹¹ Adrienne Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950-1984* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984) 223-269.

between self and community when she refers in a journal entry of May

1970 to Garcia Lorca:

how he was a great singer, insofar as he expressed the feelings of his people – not the nation so much as the Andalusians, a group. ‘your people’ are the people you feel kinship with, are inspired by even, moving into a larger sense of ‘self’ where a common feeling burns, moving to share it, show it, through whatever medium ... maybe genuine singing occurs when a large experience (of a people) is forced through a small exit, the individual’s throat, ‘tongue,’ way of speaking. or maybe the artist is always the one outside, yearning to belong. creates what s/he wants to be part of, makes it so, momentarily in art.¹²

Marlatt uses the analogy of giving birth to describe the process of giving voice, with emphasis on the physicality, specifically the orality, involved in the relationship between individual and group. Her “people,” particularly after the disintegration of her marriage late in 1970, are the writers amongst whom she learnt “a poetic that taught me ... its drift,” those who had shared the Canadian West Coast receptivity to the “open field” and “projective verse” of the American Black Mountain writers, then the more polemic and radical practitioners of Quebecoise *écriture au féminin*.

Many of the poems about relationship during the 1960s seem to bear witness to a region comparable to that charted in Rich’s “Cartographies of Silence”:

A conversation begins
with a lie. And each
speaker of the so-called common language feels
the ice-floe split, the drift apart¹³

¹² Marlatt, *What Matters*, 149.

¹³ Rich, *Fact of a Doorframe*, 232.

Certainly the short poems that open the “California” section contain many instances of the possessive case, and the syntactic compressions express tensions between sharing and separation, intimacy and resistance. The first poem “let” begins in continuation “your cock mine / a dark / light ahead” and proceeds some lines further:

that lock

emptiness wears
lockt tight in it
self lockt
 hands
 will work
whose invention is
a door again

unlockt, opens on
some shared dark¹⁴

Another poem “acacia (war)” begins: “time’s spine / sensitive to touch” and continues a few lines further:

whose right?

 hands a
cloud round me that
we stands for *i*
lies
 root in me
a radical whose tip
wears deeper
in re
 sistance¹⁵

She is writing about difference before a feminist consensual voice had become audible and pervasive in American and Canadian poetry and

¹⁴ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

criticism, before the “project ... to be cartographers of new realms”¹⁶ had become accessible to her. In the above lines there is a sense of constriction rather than opening out, of movement cramped in the dark. The instance in both poems of the verb “wear” suggests habits of caution and disguise, weariness and conflict. At this stage of her development, during the time spent in California, Marlatt was experimenting with line, writing poems such as the above but others such as “How can one of another show?,”¹⁷ “Time out”¹⁸ and “Mokelumne Hill”¹⁹ in long lines of extended sentences, parenthetical phrases, one word questions, one word sentences, which build up complexities of narrative, perspective and syntactic variation. In an interview given in 1997 Marlatt remembers the context of these experiments:

I got very involved in reading Cid Corman and Louis Zukofsky and H.D., who all have these short lines. But I started to feel trapped in the short line. I love the shifts in perception that are possible in that rapid line jump. But I wanted something more rhythmic, something that had build-up to it. You see I was already hooked on narrative. Even a sentence has a narrative in it. ...²⁰

Being trapped is a condition against and within which Marlatt is writing in 1968: “pacing up & down the rows of Di Rosa’s vineyard each morning. nowhere to walk in this country that is not marked off by some fence or row. the present we walk marked out for us ...”²¹ It is a cultural condition

¹⁶ Barbara Godard, “Mapmaking: A Survey of Feminist Criticism,” in *Gynocritics: Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women’s Writing*, ed. Barbara Godard (Oakville, Ontario: ECW Press, 1985), 2.

¹⁷ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 21-22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30-35.

²⁰ Daphne Marlatt, “‘Take Me to the River,’: an interview with Daphne Marlatt,” interview by Mark David Young, *New Fiction* 28 (Fall 1997).

²¹ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 24.

experienced as both a physical and a psychic discontent. In her journal she uses a topographical image “(I’m not completely here. writing on the borders ...)”²² related to that strategically employed by the critic Barbara Godard nearly twenty years later: “[Feminist critics] ... are engaged in a vigorous border-traffic between the world defined for them and the world defined by them which they hope to bring into being.”²³ In the 1960s, existing between the defined and the yet to be defined world, Marlatt was gradually and independently constructing a subject position out of her own sense of difference and priority:

reading Dorn’s *Rites of Passage* ... but I’m not Dorn, don’t have that experience which necessitates the literal quality of his work, ... a hard edge against the hard edge of life ... mine’s against a more abstract danger – mental survival ... the fear that things are not what they seem.²⁴

Although centred in the self and emanating from meditations upon consciousness, embodiment, sensory experience and memory, her work persistently asks questions about the space and significance of other selves. An extract from her journal of May 1968 reads:

driving down Old Sonoma Road, a long triplex facing east,
2 Mexican boys at the balcony, children shouting – again that
quick sense of my past alive in others’ present –

realized what pushed me to writing was these
intuitions of the other: inspiration I’ve since called it, inter-
weaving of my life & a life outside me, as if I could see myself
as an object within a more total relationship – something I don’t
know how to reach in paint or music but perhaps in words: the
way they link up carrying their history.²⁵

²² Ibid., 25.

²³ Godard, *Gynocritics*, 2.

²⁴ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 25.

²⁵ Ibid., 24.

Whereas Howe describes her poetry as “trying to make landscapes with words,” Marlatt sees language as a vehicle for narrative within which many stories can intersect. There is an interesting play between self and world in the paragraphs just quoted. Inspiration, with its initial I, suggests an elevation of the Romantic subject, yet Marlatt proposes a subjective entry into “a life outside me,” implying, but not yet instigating a necessary disturbance of language, a new way of ordering syntax: “as if I could see myself as an object ...”

Marlatt seems to internalise perceived aspects of the other into “that ‘place’ in which we relate”²⁶ yet is troubled by the unknowable quantity of that relationship. In a journal entry of November 1968 she writes of

“negative capability’ – or the seeping of one’s consciousness into other, non-self places (but if every imagining of the other is only a projection of the self?), or as Ponge puts it, the invasion of self by things.’²⁷

Here Keats is not mentioned as the originator of the phrase “negative capability” in whose terms it means “being in uncertainties.” In this case the subjective consciousness resists the impulse to know the other, accepting a certain mystery in relationship, which seems very different to the movements of “seeping” and “invasion” Marlatt associates with it. Olson includes as epigraph to his *The Special View of History* an extract of a letter in which Keats introduces and explains the concept: “... that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without

²⁶ Ibid., 27.

²⁷ Ibid., 44.

any irritable reaching after fact and reason ...”²⁸ Keats’s human subject is definitively masculine so that an acceptance of his terms, and those of Olson, are problematic for Marlatt. Her use of the present tense “seeping” as description of a movement between self and non-self when the self is not sure of its relational motives occurs several years before Luce Irigaray elaborated an “economy of fluids.” According to Irigaray this economy or “mechanics” is only residually present in language because “*a complicity of long standing between rationality and the mechanics of solids alone*”²⁹ is built into the structure of language. In her essay “Volume-Fluidity” Irigaray writes:

So woman has not yet taken (a) place. ... woman is still the place, the whole of the place in which she cannot take possession of herself as such. ... She is never here and now because it is she who sets up that eternal elsewhere from which the ‘subject’ continues to draw his reserves, his resources, his re-sources, though without being able to recognize them/her. She is not uprooted from matter, from the earth, but yet ... she is already scattered into *x* number of places that are never gathered together into anything she knows of herself, and these remain the basis of (re)production – particularly discourse – in all its forms.³⁰

Marlatt’s writing bears positive witness to a comparable sense of diffuseness, one that permeates her experience and her language. But the forms of discourse informing that writing in 1968 came via the Black Mountain Poets and the phenomenological existentialism disseminated through Olson. In a journal entry from August 1968 during the time in California, Marlatt ponders the existentialism of Merleau-Ponty whose

²⁸ Charles Olson, *The Special View of History*, ed. Ann Chartres (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970), 14.

²⁹ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 107.

³⁰ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 227.

Phenomenology of Perception (1945) is alluded to also in Olson's *Additional Prose: A Bibliography on America*.³¹

Merleau-Ponty was a contemporary and one time friend of Jean Paul Sartre whose contribution to existentialist ideas about consciousness drew attention to the importance of the body.³² The importance Merleau-Ponty placed upon lived experience and embodied perception influenced Olson's notion of "proprioception," which emphasises the integrated processes of physiology, psychology, the unconscious, the soul, perception, identity and projection. Olson's human subject as organic process in terrestrial place, envisages a continuous interaction between self and universe: "*proprioception* / 'one's own'-ception," and "the unconscious is the universe flowing-in, inside."³³

Marlatt interprets Merleau-Ponty's structuralist phenomenology as subjective creation, or re-creation, of objective reality:

M-P also says: 'the perceived thing ... exists only in so far as someone can perceive it. I cannot even for an instant imagine an object in itself. ... [I]f I attempt to imagine some place in the world which has never been seen, the very fact that I imagine it makes me present at that place.'³⁴

³¹ Olson, *Additional Prose*, 74.

³² John Lechte writes of Merleau-Ponty: "Pitting himself directly against the abstractness and emptiness of the Cartesian cogito – 'I think therefore I am' – [he] shows that that 'to be a body is not primarily in space: it is of it.' ... Perception ... is always an embodied perception, one that is what it is only within a specific context or situation." *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, 30.

³³ Olson, *Additional Prose*, 17-19.

³⁴ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 26.

A place attains reality, or at least a presence capable of reflection, through the agency of the writer's imagination, whether or not it is represented on a map.

III

The work in *What Matters* written between 1966 and 1970 is "evidence of one passage, or one story, or one version of a common story" as she retrospectively puts it in her 1980 preface. Certainly the evidence suggests traces of a struggle between the subject and obstacles which prevent expression of the self in relationship to others and community. Marlatt will not accept, as Emily Dickinson a century earlier did, that her poetry remain an unreciprocated letter to the contemporary world. She interrogates language in an attempt to evoke a valid narration of subject/object, self/other reciprocity. If *What Matters* is a narrative in which the questing self is dramatised, then the drama concerns the subjective relinquishment to language as guide and potential access to convocation.

"Vancouver" the central section of *What Matters* is the longest of the volume. Between the final poem of "California" and the first poem of "Vancouver" there are four journal entries, the first of which begins:

 this house Vera found for us in Dunbar – staid, English,
 middle-class Vancouver. Houses separated by yards of
 lawn, "shops" trying to look like a village clustered around
 2 supermarkets. this place feels so established after our
 crooked Pigeon Hill house by the tracks (Bloomington),

its pokey rooms & roaches – after our yellow foreman’s
bungalow so close to the earth & the vineyard in Napa.³⁵

Vancouver is the setting for her dreams of its history, and unlike Joyce with Dublin she does not have to leave the place in order to write about it: “Vancouver because I can write more easily here? / because I can be angrier here? this neighbourhood, this city, in some / sense mine / Dubliners. / interred.” The house in “staid, English, middle-class Vancouver” becomes an important trope of embodiment and shelter, an enclosure for the “chaos of feelings below words” which interpenetrate the local, environmental elements of weather and sea.

The final poem of the previous “California” section is entitled “homeward” and the first of “Vancouver” is entitled “here.”³⁶ A significant distinction is that “homeward” is a poem about travelling overland, passing a house that seems rooted in the earth, the house “settles” as the sun “settles” over a “stranger” landscape, encompassing distant aspects “open country under / / opulent mountain rain,” whereas “here” is pervaded by images of birds and the sea. While “homeward” begins: “tan / fields look stranger / rain, clouds, torn / scour sun settles” so that the verbs “scour” and “settle” are preceded by nouns and adjectives, “here” begins by turning a noun into a verb through which following signifiers are lifted, creating an interplay of moving world and seeing eye:

wings it
glues light
green shows thru

³⁵ Ibid., 43.

³⁶ Ibid., 40, 47.

(birds
inland reflectors

out to sea
your longing move
in on itself
/waves

aqueous humour steep
what shines in
your window

(our perceptions, do
birds indicate our weather?³⁷

There is a sense that Vancouver is important to Marlatt because it is a complex of transitional sites; it is a coastal city, so that it has a shoreline, a delta, and diverse immigrant and native populations.³⁸ Images of shore and sea and delta are pervasive through the shorter poems in this section such as “reading,”³⁹ “delta,”⁴⁰ and “largely sea”;⁴¹ “O miz estrus” give a sense of human influx through the city, reaching it and settling as the sea reaches towards it from the other side of the shore-line, a very different take on “strand” to that of Howe.⁴² This is about identity and movement rather than the depths and margins of texts:

³⁷ Ibid., 47.

³⁸ James Clifford writes “Despite enormous damage to indigenous cultures and continuing economic and political inequality, many tribal groups and individuals have found ways to live separate from and in negotiation with the modern state.” James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 109.

³⁹ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 51.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁴¹ Ibid., 59.

⁴² “A strand is the part of a shore lying between tidemarks. / A strand is a filament or fiber laid flat to form a unit for twisting or braiding yarn, thread, rope, or cordage. A strand could be a stalk of grass, a string of pearls, barbs or fibres of feathers, a filament of hair. Molecular changes in the brain are caused by impulses travelling along the strands of nerve fibers. / ‘God brought Moses law into the world to be as a strand to the inundation of impiety’ – Jeremy Taylor, 1649. / Strand, *v.t.*, to drift or be driven on shore.” Howe, *Birth-mark*, 27.

who rides composed, immigrant to this city,
longtime resident. in shadow, shallow (who knows?)
nothing of tides.

o miz estrus who rides, whose mouth is
the mouth of rockcod, rocked, open & shut down avenues of
sun, bus on big tires braking⁴³

There is a more dynamic interplay between outer and inner in the
“Vancouver” section, between transparency and opacity although Marlatt is
attempting to subvert, or contravert linear logic, thinking about difference
and connection rather than distinction and opposition. As it proceeds she
begins to confront the significance of a gendered identity and realises that
“the fear I share with Al? of the mother, of being suffocated in the dark” is
a fear she must “face and name.”⁴⁴ In March 1969 the writer meditates in
her journal on the word “matter” years before the event of this volume and
its preface, trying to work through the impasse of maternal identification:

cutting edge: what matters?
matter (incarnate) in what’s the matter?
primary stuff for building (rings)

mater (mother) in matter⁴⁵

Some days later she writes: “Matter is opaque - mother is secret
(inarticulate) source of smothering yet skin as window (that’s the solution):
Lennart Nilsson’s photos of embryo growing inside.”⁴⁶ Very often Marlatt
will recruit documentary material to extend or validate her progressive

⁴³ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 43.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

explorations of the imaginary suggested from within language and dream. For instance in April 1969 she records a dream she had of flowering cherry trees in the street outside their rented house and the subsequent discovery from local history archives that a settlement of assorted employees at “Stamp’s Mill, beginning of the city ... ‘became known as Kanaka Rancherie or, alternatively, The Cherry Orchard, for in time its cherry trees became one of the springtime sights of the inlet.’”⁴⁷

Unlike California where the land is marked out by property boundaries the more northern Vancouver is subject to the transient, illusory levelling of snow: “snow / / transforms all / matter of things / / weights wings, erases / territory / / whose fence? / under the impact of / light merriment”

(“merci”).⁴⁸ In “Rings, i” snow is also an internal element, a trope for silence and disguise within relationship, so that its aspects of covering and obscuring and muffling permeate the interior landscape. Yet rather than being an agent of imprisonment, as it is experienced by the male “you” in “Rings, i,” Marlatt explores in her journal the idea she will develop in the poem, of snow as site of multiplicity within community: “approach it on a language level: vocabulary, its range: snow as collective experience, use cutups from *Province* accounts of drifts in Sumas Prairie, etc – milk trucks – people on their rounds (rings).”⁴⁹ This is the “workbook” aspect of her journal where she attempts to collage ideas of difference between the male and female partners in a marriage into a vision of dwelling within a larger

⁴⁷ Ibid., 75-76.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 54-55.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 71.

environment and community. She is testing the validity and potential of the rings trope as an effective agent of resistance and connection.

Rings is a long poem in six parts and is an account of the latter stages of a woman's pregnancy from her point of view, the birth as experience and shared event, the postnatal period and first weeks of the child's life, and the migration of the family out of Vancouver and across the border to the United States. The first section describes the tensions between two people, a man and a woman inside a house they share, which is surrounded by deep snow. The final section ends with the same couple and their new child in a car travelling overland through the dark. In rhythms that fluctuate between staccato and expansive, through variations of statement, question, dialogue, thought, observation on perception and sensation; in sentences ranging from one word to several lines of continuous sentence punctuated by commas and parentheses, the poem's language carries associations and recollections, opens questions and suggestions. The idea of the ring is explored severally as absence within presence; as stone creating ripples, as sound reverberating through silence, as matter encircling void, and as a trope of connection. This figure is related to the presence of the embryo within the woman both linking and separating the couple within the house, which is surrounded by snow that extends into and brings home the wider world.

In "Rings, i" the rings figure is introduced in the first line with the suggestion of a stone dropped in a pool:

Like a stone. My what's the matter? dropt as
mothering smothered by the snowy silence, yours. Me?
the morning? or?

Metal clangs in zero weather cold hands
make. A jangling of rings, loose. Sky does not begin
today. Disguising offwhite of what the ground is. falling.
away from us.

... will look up, stare as if (Why do you make
so much noise? Slurping coffee he objects to. What if
it's pleasure? Forgot. Noise occupies a room already
occupied by

Snow, as silence,⁵⁰

In these first few lines are six question marks. With the first unanswered question comes the implication of something missing, an absence confirmed by "the snowy silence ...". One response within that atmosphere is a "stare as if" another question is implied: "(Why do you make so much noise? ...". The alliterative counterpoint between the consonants "m" of "my," "matter," "mothering," "me," "morning," "metal," "make," and "s" of "stone," "snowy silence," "sky," "disguising," "snow as silence," comes together in the intransitive form of the verb "smothered." Language as both "noise" and guesswork belongs here to the subjective voice, which provisionally construes an association between the other person and the effects of the elements. He is camouflaged within the disguise of sky and ground: "the snowy silence, yours." Mutual smothering, however, is not an effect of speech or its lack but perhaps of the "inarticulate dark" a condition which she comes to question as attribute of the maternal.

Sound in silence comes in from the external world. The "Metal clangs in zero weather cold hands make. A jangling of rings, loose" and the "Snow"

⁵⁰ Ibid., 79.

are not just metaphors for aspects of a particular human relationship but are evidence of a shared environment in which others act and influence. At this stage the poem describes snow as an element that pervades and connects at the same time as it muffles and isolates. Matter is the accretion of snowflakes “in thickets” and the body whose “eye, looking out, sees them suspend”:

Snow. Inhabits a
room, a silent, blanket. he can't stand. windows. smothering.
light flakes lower themselves, no wind so, begin to eddy but
the eye, looking out, sees them suspend in thickets – thicker
i grow, looking more globular & still. Not stone but silent
plummeting slow descent of white. Or who knows what form it
takes in that liquid, fishtailed small frog swimming, shut
eyes blurred by water. soft. touch⁵¹

Both the “eye” and the “i” are “looking,” at once actively as subject and with the knowing appearance of an object. Not like Eliot’s roses that “Had the look of flowers that are looked at”⁵² but like one who is conscious of the gaze of the other, in Irigaray’s terms, the object “from which the ‘subject’ continues to draw his reserves, though without being able to recognize them/her.” Here, “he” is resistant and trapped within the elements whereas the “i” identifies with the elemental world that enters through “the eye.” Marlatt is not setting up a male/female opposition in order to affirm an essential difference so much as she is questioning and exploring the difficulties and impasses of a relationship that has grown strange and hard to negotiate. The subject’s attempts to hazard points of contact are provisional and processional; the rhetoric of the poetic voice in

⁵¹ Ibid., 80.

⁵² T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 172.

this case projects a space in which the silence of the implicated other resonates. The voice is persistently enquiring and articulates uncertainty:

news-
paper boy. Must have been up at 5:30 this morning, anyway
still dark when I saw him. & want to say, how, tell you that
moment? Down our hall's perspective, old posters, yours, &
family tree, phonograph ad, no, sidetrack ... At night only
illuminated inroads of light (from) street burning still thru
glass. untimed. unchecked. Felt like i was trespassing our
hall this hour & all hours inhabited by outer ... movement,
Caught movement first then, must have been the tail end of his
swing, the second bag up across his back, Pause, that
lonely, even lordly stance – legs braced solid against the
weight, stare (for breath?) down HIS street, not knowing
anyone else ...⁵³

How the body fits into its space is a problem to do with the integration of outer and inner realities. There is an experienced “moment” the speaker wants to communicate: “say, how, tell you.” Her point of perspective at that moment is from within a space that is shared, “our hall,” although it is no longer of their sharing, which has instead become an attribute of the place, “our hall’s perspective.” It is as if the hall already framed and contained an intimacy they must, if they have not already done so, separately relinquish. What is temporarily fixed to that frame belongs to the separate other, “old posters, yours, & / family tree, phonograph ad ...,” what transitionally compromises the space and defines the subject’s experience originates beyond it: “illuminated inroads of light (from) street ...” Within it she is exposed to the outside and to the future, on the threshold between an idea of an integrated past and a perceived and sensed “movement” that is both within her body and beyond where that body has

⁵³ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 80.

sheltered. The assured presence of the news-paper boy seen in the early dark mirrors obliquely the “fishtailed small frog swimming, shut / eyes blurred by water.” Again Marlatt resists writing pregnancy as essential integration, keeping faith with the provisional, illusory moment informed by doubt and potential, which the speaker inhabits and witnesses.

(Mothering hindsight, that voice. But i’m
as much at sea as fish tailed thing, waiting for whatever clue
(dumb, hurts) observing ... Your anger carefully cut off here
as the door is shut.

Your anger’s at the snow? Or at this
strangeness (mine) snow also creates – a cover. no clarity.
or long view to

Ah miles of country road you’re wanting, beer,
sunshine, sage. Moving anywhere at any junction’s chance (Lost
Gap, Last Chance) of getting lost, of moving off the map.

I’m
lost already. You’d shrug, word games. Or melodrama’s badly
contained elements. Your discontent, feeling contained here.
Or mine? My nerve ends stretch. I read too much in your words,
read silences where there is nothing to say, to be said, to be
read. in,⁵⁴

As a counterpoint to the “news-paper boy” who is also a “paper boy” a construct of written/printed language, “your” idea of possibility is imagined as unwritten, unchartered, taking place “off the map” in a space beyond the border of language. This can be seen in the context of Marlatt’s reading of Merleau-Ponty’s creation of place through imagination, although in this situation such imagined landscapes are contracted to the domestic interior, and what the paper-boy brings in from outside becomes

⁵⁴ Ibid., 81.

another imprisoned disguise: “Newspaper face, newspaper up & you behind it”⁵⁵

Also hidden from view, a contentious space between ‘i’ and ‘you’ in this poem, is the occupied womb. The writer deliberately considers and refuses the potential in language for collusive self-entrapment here, subverting through reference to a visual resource beyond language the linguistic association of mother and smother. Drawing upon the journal notes, “skin as window,” the poem instates aspects of revelation and light into the protective capacity of the womb:

& weather, inside or out, whether anyone is. skin
flakes off the cats. dust falling. hair in eye or hand closeup
skin leaded like some windowpane opaque. is old. ‘you want to
stay home all the time.’ No, i need to feel at home here at
impenetrable skin.

Mother is inarticulate dark?

Smothering?

No. Get water walk to the kitchen. Pot still
pool bits of oatmeal float in. floats in body temperature
within, soft skin, covered with a down to which some wax
adheres, lardlike, secretion. a photograph filtered thru its
rim (hand’s): light, thru membrane & water.

Remember? ways
of breaking thru (waves) windows are: the front room’s sun!⁵⁶

Both the house and the maternal body are accessible to light and movement. The darkness of the womb becomes translated as picture, a site yielding clarity “as photograph filtered thru its / rim.” Transparency and permeability are qualities that allow an exchange of outer and inner elements so that shelter is envisaged here as concourse rather than

⁵⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 83.

enclosure. In the lines: “Remember? ways / of breaking thru (waves) windows are: the front room’s sun!” is a reminder of energy, aspiration and the desire within which the embryo was conceived. The final phrase is almost a conceit, as the room is temporary possessor of the sun, so the womb is of the son, or vice versa. It suggests a kind of inversion of John Donne’s “Busie old foole, unruly Sunne,” which the poet wishes to detain with the lovers in bed: “in that the world’s contracted thus”:

Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere.⁵⁷

As Donne’s poem is entitled “The Sunne Rising” it has a nice resonance too with the cover design of *What Matters*. However, Marlatt’s priority is not to celebrate or contrive a metaphysical eternal moment but to make a particular and ordinary restlessness and imminence inhabit her language. There are rooms within rooms for the sun’s influence to filter through and many transparent barriers through which the life inside might emerge, but it is a painfully physical process:

Kicks, suddenly unaccountable unseen, make their way felt thru
skin anyway a fact beginning. Heat. Pierces glass (cold)
irradiating skin, water, wood. & snow crust isolate in crystal
flake like mica or micro-point all joined uncountable thousands
& one-cell, each a room, internal, order in time runs
on, in
me, pierced, clouds uncountably moving body works, his light
foot within.

& out? Coming in & going out, he wants to break
thru, into the flow memory brings uncalled for⁵⁸

The centre is the inhabited body, the physical self, rather than the space that temporarily contains it. From her side of “the newspaper he’s with- /

⁵⁷ John Donne, “The Sunne Rising” in *The Metaphysical Poets*, ed. Helen Gardner, 3d ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1973), 60-61.

⁵⁸ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 83-84.

drawn behind,” the writer construes in alternative words a remembered or imagined journey in which “he,” in the following passage, is both the voice evoking memory and the concealed “you” who by its sound is drawn out:

redbuds in spring red canyon down
thru which ... in lampdark light glitters, fitful, his voice
picks at word/ sound descends, that one lost town we never
could find, he says, & forgets the name of brownstown, brown
county, no. the lost one, Gosport. With stone houses never
stopt at, steinsville. by land. (& missed.) he is surrounded
by hands, voices picking for, lost note, name all recognize
in time (glossed over) we,

the single sound a moment he will
be in

not the newspaper he's with-
drawn behind, that cover temporary only, Well
What? Sun's out,
look. You do look. Warmer. So it is.

In the passage prior to this one above, which concludes “Rings, i,” the poet includes italicised phrases of song thereby weaving a reminder of aural experience, if not the particular aural memory the protagonists share, into our reading of her writing. This writing, by recalling “the one lost town we never / could find” and the “lost note,” also incorporates by allusion the space beyond the border of language, the material blank and the immaterial silence it inhabits.

If there is a conceit at work in Marlatt's poem it derives from what Jerome McGann describes as "the visible language of modernism," which is "poetry as a materially-oriented act of imagination [in which] 'meaning' is

most fully constituted not as a conception but as an embodiment.”⁵⁹

Marlatt’s language exploits resources of sound and sense, it is “the flow of memory” in speech, narrative, song, i.e. an aural process carrying history, but it is also black marks on white ground. McGann cites Louis Zukofsky’s experiments with the idea of the printed poem as an auditory as much as a visual field from which “[t]he (free verse) line from Zukofsky to the projectionist work of the 1950s is quite direct. It is a line for composing, in the musical sense, sound and speech patterning.” Marlatt’s poetry, more obviously than Howe’s, inherits this line which “is spun from Whitman rather than Pound.”⁶⁰ If Howe wants to indicate a coincidence of voice she prints over almost exactly so that there are two words visibly present, their difference marked by the blur between, or she types lines across other lines so that there are knots of letters, visually arresting but virtually illegible. Or, perhaps to signify one voice speaking under or against another she sets one line with another upside down beneath it, each reading from the opposite margin.⁶¹ These are performative, dramatic methods of composing with typography. Marlatt’s method in *Rings* is to notate an auditory shift in the switch from Roman font to italics.

The motif of song as memory and connection is carried on throughout “Rings, ii” where again the coincidence of, and the distinction between, present speech and the presence of recorded song is indicated

⁵⁹ McGann, *Black Riders*, 49.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 83.

⁶¹ See, for instance, Susan Howe, *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (New York: New Directions, 1993), 7-9.

typographically. In this instance two voices overlap as Al sings along with the record:

*Gonna / move up to the /
country,* Suddenly Al, that funny toneless voice he never hears
himself in, singing, elsewhere.⁶²

This “elsewhere” relates to the interpenetration of the outer and the inner, and the perpetual movement from “here” towards “there” that the poem imagines as the action of a central impact towards its furthest reverberations. This movement accrues multiple forms as the poem progresses, but in the journal entry under “May 20/69” a line separated from the paragraphs above and below it notes “communication: the central problem of Rings.”⁶³ We should bear in mind here Irigaray’s concept of the woman in relation to the man as “that eternal elsewhere,” one that disturbs the pattern of expanding circles. And it is worth recognising that by insisting on the influence of a determining pattern I represent the poem’s language as a “mechanics of solids” in Irigaray’s terms, whereas Marlatt’s writing in *Rings* is seeking “fluidity” prior to the theoretical formulations of *écriture féminine*. In an entry of “July 20/70” Marlatt describes her method in terms that suggest the pursuit of a signification that would exceed and elude the formal structure of language:

the writing is after something at bottom
wordless, a complex in time where imagination/memory click
with environment. each day of writing much like one cast of a
net. the cast may come up with only a small piece of the whole
or nothing at all. I criticize my net on the basis of its cohesiveness.

⁶² Marlatt, *What Matters*, 87.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 117.

differently between the woman and man within the dynamics of the poem.

The writer experiences the other's effect upon her as a determining influence under which her own potential narratives are increasingly confined, and therefore challenged.

In "Rings, iii," "Rings, iv" and "Rings, v" the distance traced growing between them is to a large extent determined by gender. In "Rings, iii" the writing subject is alone because heavily pregnant while the men have left her to go out drinking. In this section there is a link between document and dream reminiscent of that recorded in the journal entry of "April 13/69" already referred to, yet different because in this case the document is part of the dream:

It was a dream, a report in the newspaper Norman was reading (it was reported of him telling) he was born in the small house / shack at the back of 443 Windsor (the street where we lived – it must have been in the 100's) a big old tree, dust, & the dilapidation of the main house where they later lived, all this against a very blue sky that belonged to the girl the paper said had come out to the coast for health reasons & stayed, fell in love with the mountains & sea & made frequent trips by ferry to the island ⁶⁷

Again the material paper is the ground upon which the "architecture of souls" grows up but, unlike the imagined place referred to in connection with Merleau Ponty, the subconscious imagining does not contract into reality, it opens into conscious memory. There are seven more lines recounting the dream and its transition:

⁶⁷ Ibid., 92.

& when i woke up i remembered that Norman had
 drowned in a river in the interior in his teens. But not before
 i'd thought the past is still alive & grows itself so easily
 i must set it down, pre-dawn of a sunny day, Wet, birds in the
 half dark singing, trees only just beginning to unfold their
 leaves ...⁶⁸

At this point the poem resembles the journal, but indicates its priority in the phrase "i must set it down, pre-dawn of a sunny day." If we assume what is to be set down will constitute a journal entry it is important to recognise that it is the poem. In the poem's dream the boy is reading a report of his telling, the writer/dreamer writes of an imperative to record the dream, "set it down." Within the setting of this section, at once house, land and dream – "the bath is a river" - the coincidence of Norman's telling and reading, and the incidence of his death is embedded in the poem's ongoing narrative:

Tell him, in the bath in the quiet (wind & the bell
 clanging outside) only this restless streaming night, fresh
 wind off the sea, is where he is. Water, candle changing in
 the draft, turns slowly cool. Ripples when i lift my fingers
 edge around this streaming, in the river-sea outside that winds
 around our time, this city, his father's father ...
'delivered'
 is a coming into THIS stream. You start at the beginning
 & it keeps on beginning.⁶⁹

The long poem's continuing narrative bears witness to the experience of giving birth in "Rings, iv," and in "Rings, v" the fragile and exclusive intimacy between mother and infant:

this newborn (reborn) sensing, child I am with him,
 with sight, all my senses clear, for the first time, since
 i can remember, childlike spinning, dizzy ...⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 102.

The “he/you” of the first section becomes increasingly estranged and in the final couplet of “Rings, v” is a metonym for the barrier between them, as if he’s become a part of “the newspaper he’s with- / drawn behind” in “Rings, i”: “Cars whirr by outside, gravel spews. (A certain motor. / Gears down, stops. News from outside coming home.”⁷¹

Although the intimacy of dream and the strangeness of news are what links and separates the woman and man, and these are formed to a large extent by culturally determined gender roles and identities, they also have to do with the divergence of their Canadian dreams of America. In the final section of the poem, “Rings, vi” the multiple images of rings are consolidated momentarily in the opening lines: “Your hands on the steering wheel. steer us. turning, new / corners of the moment, loops, curves back? having, you’d / underlined it, left behind that taint of city & our past. lives.”⁷² The “loops, curves back” are in conflict with the intention she attributes to him, “A positive charge, an obvious forward-looking. Energy. Means / your different take on this thread spinning out before us, spinning / / back where i am holding, as you drive us out beyond the city.”⁷³ The differences developed in the previous section have been gathered into that which brought the outside “home,” the car which now takes them away from where “you” now becomes the child she carries, instead of the man who drives them: “*Here*’s / lilacs outside your window. Lilac time i brought you home in”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid., 107.

⁷² Ibid., 108.

⁷³ Ibid., 109.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 104.

In “Rings, iv” the border crossing, both as anticipated act and as journey of desire, is the trope around which conflicts of unity and difference revolve. By leaving Vancouver and heading for the States they are to be “you say, final, finally free.” In the oblique abnegation of a shared dream of America, as it is implied throughout this section, the writing subject discovers the finiteness of their relationship. In the following passage Marlatt frames an idea of America as an illusion nourished on popular visual and aural mythology from a time they have both already relinquished, so that she can question, as they travel towards these outgrown promises, his notion of “finally free.”

Of what? your past i think, i never knew it's where you live, on
that edge: the border calls. call it nostalgia, not for home, for
open country/ film of america we saw, yellow buggy jouncing across
widescreen panavision's promise. & after, came out into the delta,
driving thru fields, into, under a row of trees unravelled, wind,
watched, both of us adolescent in short sleeves stirred by sun
more real than movie colours clear the fields of ocean horizon –
here, i said, is *our* 'country' – you agreed, fading
on our mantel
this past year to coloured bits in lights, your brighter dream:
blue mailbox house in the country, Nashville, going down the
backroads, We are going, back ⁷⁵

In the line “here, i said, is *our* 'country' – you agreed, fading,” despite the clausal balance of “i said” and “you agreed” either side of the common object “*our* 'country,’” is evidence of her perception of their difference. His passive resistance to her inclusive identification, of “i” and “you” and land, is realised in the contrast between the past participle “said” and the present intransitive “fading.” “[Y]our brighter dream” has absconded or

⁷⁵ Ibid., 108, 109.

migrated to a different linguistic configuration, the words of a familiar song “blue mailbox house in the country” which proposes an ideal elsewhere. Vancouver’s landscape is the place into which the poem’s subject has grown, “the delta ... fields ... row of trees ... wind ... sun ... ocean horizon” are alive for her “more real than movie colours” so that she seems here to be travelling away from it towards “nostalgia,” a place where “i” and “you” once involuntarily diverged: “We are going back / into/ Life-size colour, that fable, / that it’s new, a different place for us to make our lives in, new / *now*.”⁷⁶

Already her new nostalgia is for the sensual immersion in a place of potential community, a place where the material world and the “matter” of language are become intrinsically linked:

Lilac, Is lilac all there is? That backlane
not yet oiled for summer, heavy with it, four trees, three corners
of the lot, & other backyards, dusty gravel past, brokedown cars &
ancient coal bin, flats in the distant streaming, Fraser, Bob’s
house, streets over, shaded by the tree & night, Rory’s (music?)
raided, over all their gnarled trunks even in abandoned lots a flood
of fragrance ... SPRING’S ... renewed matter grows, it matters, these
mutterings ...⁷⁷

This is a microcosmic account of a place experienced at ground level, the “home” to which she brought their child, not the “rotten city” of lost communities, the “nowhere” of which “you say ... nothing’s happening for us in it.” From another perspective the city is the map upon which both the unity and divergence of “us” is charted, it is a place of darkness through

⁷⁶ Ibid., 109.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 110.

which they at once travel and try to “read” as if already at a distance from it:

What is Vancouver but dark shadow
port its aura, its bright doorway, empty as any other strung from
mountain smallness of us two bodyclose back to forest staring at
the promise laid at our feet (we thought), city of phosphor, ours,
our (false) unreadable map – we have diverged from,
you: goodbye
rotten city, having come a long way thru closed doors. No. this
city rings us, rings its harbour’s dark water, dark heart of the
lights we live, part of our skin, dying as it is, our past, tho we
emerge from it,⁷⁸

Here the writer has transposed the opening image of the ring as “your hands on the steering wheel” by which they are “Drawn along the highway of lights / illuminating what our two heads move in,” into an image of the city itself as a much larger encompassing ring. Although it is one “we / emerge from,” because she writes it as maternal body she identifies with its location rather than with the car’s trajectory. The poem so far has traced how pregnancy and maternity have guided the writing subject into a new relationship to her gendered self, so that by now the “part of our skin, dying as it is” belongs to that shared fear of “Mother [as] inarticulate dark”⁷⁹ she has been forced to see through and relinquish. Throughout *Rings* the subjective voice has identified as much with the dropped “stone” as the widening circles it instigates, with the still point (to revert to an anachronistic dualism) as much as the turning world.

Marlatt’s poem resists closure in this concluding section. *Rings* is a narrative of transitions in its ongoing exploration of difference between self

⁷⁸ Ibid., 111-112.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 83.

and other, the past and the present, here culminating in the physical process of crossing a national border: “Are we out, as you said? This trip, / this time. A brilliant highway heralded by arc lamps overhead / that turn, in the wind of our passing into, dark.”⁸⁰ Either side of that border the relationship between self and other is configured as a perpetual splitting of we/us into i/you or i/he whereas at the border the eyes of the customs officer assigns them a common identity, that of Canadian immigrants, a link more secure perhaps than any other. At this point the separable trinity i/you/he reforms into the collective “we,” meeting the officer’s gaze and recognizing the first public signs of America:

We drive straight thru, around, the Canadian (no one visible inspection house, & down towards the American. Car stopped ahead in the line we choose. Customs officer looks somehow less official, more bored? not unkind but overly curious in a way, leaning on the sill of the car, his manner recognizably (small shock) American. What we're re-entering.

Past the Peace Arch, muck flats of
Blaine, Or in, America. Its neon signs flickering thru our
past, its main street full of taverns we know, Wagon Wheel, the
liquor store, road house, all, the nights we drove back,⁸¹

If his nostalgia seems to be for a dream of an elsewhere he now pursues, her own seems to be for “turns,” returns, the “loops, curves back” which resist his “underline” his “obvious forward-looking” throughout “Rings, vi.” In conversation with George Bowering in 1974 Marlatt remembers a time to which the phrase “the nights we drove back” might allude:

⁸⁰ Ibid., 113.

81 Ibid.

... I had not been able to write for that whole summer & all fall, & I had nothing to do. I had no immigrant visa, so I couldn't work, & we didn't have enough money for me to go to school & I was stuck in this one-room apartment in Married Housing, & I was just going crazy ... We went back to Montreal at Christmas time, and it was so great to be back in Canada. Even though I didn't really know Montreal, it just felt different. Crossing the border. As soon as we got into Windsor the neon signs looked different, & they were the same neon signs.

I have said that Marlatt in the writing of *Rings* and her exploration of differences and tensions within a heterosexual relationship does not construct those differences as essentially identical with gender. This however remains a questionable point as, in my reading of "Rings, vi" especially, her experience and desire is figured as flexible and sinuous whereas his is linear and determining.

In a later work, *Zocalo*, (1977) the writer draws upon the experiences of a journey she shared with another male partner, the Japanese Canadian writer Roy Kiyooka, to the Yucatan in Mexico. In this account the different ways of seeing and exploring the Mayan remains is explicitly connected to gender: "Man, she thinks, men with their distancing eye."⁸² and "Do you want to use the camera, he asks, offering her what he is here for. No, she waves the guidebook, I'll stick with this."⁸³ She puts her faith in language as guide, although that of an official guidebook and that of poetry function on very different levels.

⁸² Marlatt, *Ghost Works*, 44.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 45.

If Marlatt's poetry is what she relies upon as guide towards a possible site of excess and dialogue, that arena when she reaches it during the 1980s is one of feminist voices. At the stage in which she is writing *Rings* at the end of the 1960s she is questioning personal and cultural conditions of experience, relationship and identity for the effect and potential significance of these in written language. She is a writer for whom the ongoing discovery, rather than the construction of identity is intrinsic to the activity of writing, and the place in which she feels most at home is an essential ground for the activity and the production of that writing. The border crossing therefore creates more than a shift in her individual relationship to cultural or national identity, and reverberates through every point of resistance to, and intersection of, difference within that unstable and relative identity.

Helene Cixous suggests the parodic value of the "cliché" of the border metaphor when she writes of Genet "He strongly stresses the cliché to out-cliché the cliché, making the cliché cross the border it is."⁸⁴ In her paper "The School of Roots" Cixous questions the effect of internalised borders on the limits of self definition, in a sense comparable to Marlatt's testing of such limits:

The person who trembles while crossing a border casts doubt on their own definition, not only on their passport,

⁸⁴ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 122.

not only on their driver's licence but also on every aspect and form of their definition; from the definition of age, which we talk about very little, to the definition that concerns us the whole time and which is, at the same time, the one we can't or won't reply to, that of the sexual definition. What "nature" are we? What "species" are we?⁸⁵

Marlatt writes with a traveller's heightened sense of expectancy and discovery and explores the indeterminacy, or fluidity, of all boundaries and borders. In the final part of *What Matters*, entitled "Wisconsin," the writer comes to a temporary standstill beyond the national border, to a place whose address she writes as description of its boundlessness:

Old Stage Road
Brooklyn, Wisconsin

tobacco shed only other
building in view

fields & fields & sky⁸⁶

American space is described here not in terms of its division, as in California, but of its continuation. Ideas of discovery and space, the invisible and the visible, nourish the sense of a world renewed through birth, and new for the child who shares "all this space" with the isolated writer. Both the space and the isolation are represented in the material structure of *Columbus Poems*, a sequence of short line poems about the particularity of this sharing. This sequence then is in formal contrast to *Rings*, as Marlatt notes under "August 4/70" "the ongoing line gives a larger context while the short lines tend to stress the words in isolation (Stein's nouns)"⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Ibid., 131.

⁸⁶ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 121.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 153.

I have applied an interpretation of Irigaray's notion of "fluids" and "solids" to this discussion of Marlatt, suggesting that the experiments with poetic language the latter presciently undertakes approach an understanding of what the former might mean when she writes:

Woman thus cannot hear herself. And, if everything she says is in some way language, that does not make the lingual aspect of her speech what it signifies, all the same. That her speech may draw the possibility conditions [sic] of its meaning from its confinement to language is quite another matter.⁸⁸

What we are discussing here, however, is not speech but writing, a meditative poetic that takes as its figural ground the material world. In Marlatt's poetry that figural ground does not assert a complicity with solidity or rationality, but is nonetheless of the temporal, social environment. This phenomenological world is responsive to the human organism, to language and its projection of a space and time beyond language. Marlatt's journey overland from Vancouver to Wisconsin is written in "Rings, vi" as a traversal incommensurable with an idea of linear advance. The poem's sense of that journey turns, loops and abides in the rings around the departed from location so that there are currents of belonging and reserve to which the language submits, as it also traces a movement from one point to another across the mapped earth. When the destination is reached the writer notes in her "Journal" of "September 4/69" "cloudy morning / wind: invisible sea, moves like one, always at the edge of consciousness, / rolling in from the edge of earth —."⁸⁹ This "invisible

⁸⁸ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 111-112.

⁸⁹ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 121.

sea” is partly perhaps her longing for the presence and vista of sea left behind in Vancouver, partly the visual and aural reminiscence of ocean in the wide open spaces of grassland, and also it is that the moving wind is an image of the moving earth, a figure for the motivating flow of Marlatt’s language, which she means to carry both sound and silence, sense and a sense of that which exceeds it. It exemplifies, we could say, the conceptual horizontality of Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking of “the rhizomatic West, ... its ever-receding limit, its shifting and displaced frontiers,” although of course the grasslands of Wisconsin are further East and further inland than the vineyards of California.

Robert Pogue Harrison writes suggestively of the different significances the earth and the sea hold for the imagination:

In the eschatological imagination where such visions are born, earth and sea belong to different, even opposing orders. In its solidity and stability the earth is inscribable, we can build upon its ground, while the sea offers no such foothold for human worldhood. No doubt that is why the sea, in its hostility to architecturally or textually imprinted memory, often figures as the imaginary agent of ultimate oblivion.⁹⁰

This brings us back to the observation that Marlatt’s writing remembers the presence of death and forms of life beyond human language, and on to another. Although the sea may be hostile to “architecturally or textually imprinted memory” human memory is inscribed since at least “a thousand years before Columbus opened the door into America”⁹¹ with a history of voyages by sea, and so with the image of a boat’s architecture moving on

⁹⁰ Pogue Harrison, *Dominion of the Dead*, 4.

⁹¹ Thor Heyerdahl, *Aku-Aku: The Secret of Easter Island*, 2d ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958) 13.

the moving waters. The cultural and historical implications of this architectural form of travel are significant too in Howe's poetry; the visual images of a boat, as frontispiece in *Frame Structures*, and in a drawing reproduced on the front cover of *The Nonconformists Memorial*, have an iconic aura.

While Marlatt's *Columbus Poems* are about imperial discovery and acquisition they are also about the attainment of life, becoming human and the entry into language and history. They explore a delicate balance between newness (the child's) and knowledge (hers), which involves a maternal anxiety about the world's inscription upon the child. Marlatt's language apprehends his wonder and absorbs a reminder of the colonial encounters which a form of his given name invokes. A journal entry from the final pages of the previous "Vancouver" section introduces the significance of this name: " 'Christopher': figure of secrecy, of unknown – travelling from it. figure of inward. ..."⁹² Associations of exploration become located at this point in the name, or names, that link momentarily space, time and history. The epigraph to *Columbus Poems* reads:

*in Spanish,
Cristoval Colon;*

*in Italian,
Cristoforo Colombo,
which is his real
name*

⁹² Marlatt, *What Matters*, 117.

Here Marlatt indicates the importance of questions connected to genealogy and nationality. Colombus made his voyages to the New World under the patronage of Spain but he was born and raised in Genoa. Christopher is the Christian patron saint of travellers, so significant to Marlatt for that reason, and if meditation upon this name involves inwardness and secrecy it implies also vision, projections of the unknown and perceptions of otherness. In the context of Marlatt's poem the name Christopher obliquely recalls another language behind the adopted Spanish that Colombus brought to the new world in which to rename it, and through which to impose alien structures upon the indigenous peoples. In this sense he carried an official language to assert and promulgate between two others, the Italian as an individual he strategically put by, and the speech of native Central American peoples it displaced. An inheritance of the English language upon the American continent bequeaths a particular strand of history, which Marlatt relates back to an earlier colonial impact and the arrival of a different imperial tongue.

Renewal and history are central to the *Columbus Poems*, for they are meditations upon the gaining of "this world." Marlatt considers "world" as historical age and individual span, and how the one enters and accedes to the other through language. "[W]orold" is Anglo Saxon, the dictionary definition of which she records: " 'age of man' 'course of man's life.'" A more personal concept of "world" is "space to move in / EXTENT – limits of vision / what one can encompass." The ecosystems including mother and child in lonely Wisconsin that *Columbus Poems* explore are the

microcosmic interrelationship of sight, sound and language within the linguistic pull of the wider “worold.”⁹³

The first poem is entitled “colours.” The child’s world observed in close up discrete detail is pieced together in few primary words upon the space of the page:

brown
grass green
may,
a little head,

Colombo wait –
blue eyes out
stare

this world

greens in
my eyes, his
on the brown there⁹⁴

The first syllable of Colon/Colombo/Columbus is repeated in that of the noun “colours” and is a reminder of “colonial.” “Colours” encompasses the seeing eyes and the seen world suggesting a fine balance between them, although in the three lines “blue eyes out / stare / / this world” there is allusion to an overpowering Caucasian presence far behind this particular child’s wonder. The second very short poem, “at ease” observes the physical rapport between mother and infant, and in the context of the sequence offers a paradigm of accord.

⁹³ Ibid., 125.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 131.

In the following poem “island of Guanahani” there is a more overt interweaving of kinds of discovery, as the title includes the native name for the first island Columbus and his crew came upon on the first voyage out from Spain. “In the native tongue, the island was known as Guanahani, but Columbus re-christened it San Salvador, in honour of their safe arrival from the sea.”⁹⁵ Here Marlatt re-imagines a moment of first encounter in which desire remains curiosity but not as prelude to possession. Again there is a careful balance traced between the child’s human presence and the responsive world with, as a sort of hinge between, a reference to geography and the infiltration of history:

your finger flower
 motile in air
 uncloset
 after
 hard

sail
 (night
 from Europe’s close
 this shore means
 light, What sways in
 drinks in

 (all manner of eye

things too seem to be
 watching you

crib bars, birds
 (their sky grasp
 air
 flowers feel

do move in
 vision’d now⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Hunter Davies, *In Search of Columbus* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991), 98.

⁹⁶ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 133.

The “hard / sail” may be the embryo’s development and journey towards birth, or the journey from Vancouver’s coast to the “invisible sea” of Wisconsin, but a distinct allusion, too, is to Columbus’s voyage and first landing, on which, according to Bartolome de las Casas, a contemporary historian:

they saw very green trees and much water and fruit of various kinds. The Admiral called the two captains and the others who had landed and Rodrigo Escobedo, recorder of the whole fleet, ... and demanded that they should bear faithful witness that he had taken possession of the island – which he did – for his sovereigns and masters the King and Queen.⁹⁷

The first three lines on the particular and immediate, “your finger flower / motile in air / uncloset,” suggest a biological motive shared between human and botanical as the uncloset is in both cases involuntary and responsive to environmental stimuli. However, this motility is in the context of the “hard / sail / ... / from Europe’s closet,” just as that imperial advance exists in the context of fragile ecosystems. In terms of language Marlatt’s account of the child’s pre-linguistic gestures and responses can be connected with Kristeva’s concept of the pre-symbolic “semiotic chora.”⁹⁸

⁹⁷ J. M. Cohen, ed., *Christopher Columbus: The Four Voyages* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 53.

⁹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 2d ed., trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). In Margaret Waller’s translation the word “motility” is used to suggest the chora’s nature, which in turn seems related to the fluidity exceeding “symbolic law” so far discussed in the context of Irigaray. Kristeva’s definition of the chora is of an “indeterminate articulation ... [which] as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality.” It is linked to the “thetic” phase of infancy which “marks a threshold between two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic.” It precedes, therefore, “the mirror stage, [which] produces the ‘spatial intuition’ ... found at the heart of the functioning of signification – in signs and sentences,” 20-47.

The remaining lines of the poem concede the implications of humanity's different way of being from flowers and birds. Phenomena are imbued with significance, "this shore means," and the seeing eye projects a vision on the world as mirror, "things too seem to be / watching you." A difference in motive power is indicated in the final lines, "flowers feel // do move in / vision'd now" between seer and seen. Because of the ambiguity of its relation to preceding nouns, "vision," by the addition of the apostrophe and consonant becomes an adjective with an undefined subject. Marlatt suggests by this indeterminacy a tenuous reciprocity between child and world, sustained in the poem's presence, its perpetual "now."

The distinction between "motility" and "will," between simply being alive and being human, is explored in the next poem "Columbus will." The child's world is full of his own needs the satisfaction of which he has no independent power to secure, as he exists separately yet is intimately connected to the mother's body. Marlatt imagines the protective environment through which this world is substantiated as a place between sea and land (another idea for strand) and the baby is personified as amphibian "turtle." Surrounded with toy representatives of a world he doesn't yet know, the child is subject to the hyper responsiveness of the mother, "who-comes, clair / audient" listening for his pre-linguistic sounds, and bearing in mind the protean will of language. The second half of the poem conveys the interrelationship of infant and adult without omitting a sense of the child's reality:

Cid, the split
knowing & feeling
 ‘doesn’t know he
only wants to sleep’
doubts
 you cry for the
 world at times over
 much

 want
no ears to hear
my tiptoe, wake
at the smallest
who-comes, clair
audient

 Taurus
 mix-up of
 animal i
 dentity, these
 creatures we
 live with
 mobile of
 moo
 graar
 the blue
 hooves or shell crystalline

tortoise before the
new world brought
turtle up
 a long
 trip to
reiterate

 the unseen
 things we live with
 (Indies possibly

to sleep, turtle, dream
your patchwork shell of
memories at 6 months you
anticipate
 (imminent
 ‘boo’ yet

 the sea creeps up unknown

see, you

The child's emergence into language is traced as responsiveness to sounds in the process of becoming associated with particular creatures or patterns of play. A meditation on the associative basis of human language is woven into the writer's apprehension of the originality of this new life, so that the poem demonstrates both knowledge and wonder. Within historical language the child sleeps and although the linguistic subject can "see," the encroachment of the phonetically identical "sea" suggests that its "unknown" signifies an un-inscribable element, in Pogue Harrison's terms, "[hostile] to ... textually imprinted memory," and so beyond her knowledge as much as his. However, "Colombus will" navigate the sea, anticipate the Indies and discover the "new world" of America, "Turtle Island – the old/new name for the continent,"¹⁰⁰ making history that "brought / turtle up / a long / trip / to reiterate / the unseen / things we live with."

To "reiterate" is a way of learning language, which is both new and inherited and begins to separate the human individual from "these / creatures we / live with." Here, a stage in the development of this difference, both vulnerable and inevitable, is suggested in the contrasting "shell crystalline" and "your patchwork shell." The first is a necessary protection for life (marine animal) or, divested of that life, a desirable object (human); the second shelters "memories" and "dream" and

⁹⁹ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 135-136.

¹⁰⁰ Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974). Snyder's phrase marks the qualified appropriation by Europeans of a Native world-view.

nourishes the emergence of a will to knowledge. A journal entry of “February 23/70” uses the same adjective “patchwork” to describe the conceptual “world of 15th c. Europe.” In the later poem *How Hug a Stone* Marlatt wonders “what if history is simply a shell we exude for a place to live in?” Here, a sense of the rhythmic processes of formative growth is suggested in the lullaby sibilants “unseen,” “sleep,” “shell,” “sea,” “see” and “sleep,” a phase of pre-linguistic consciousness growing inexorably into an historical world.

This natural process of growth and will to autonomy resists a benevolent maternal will in the poem “protest,” a “will” that is intrinsic to the administering of language, for its practitioner claims it:

my will to
make well

DRINK THIS

crash of hand
fever heads
no captain keeled
in/
subordinate

the breaking
edge of wave cool
claritas¹⁰¹

The poem explores an aspect of a relationship in which there is a natural imbalance of power. What the one attempts to impose on the other is literally meant for his own good, “cool- /aid” for a feverish child. The

¹⁰¹ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 141. (There is here a reference to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, its discrepancies of scale.)

exhortation “DRINK THIS” is answered by the reasonable phrase “ ‘you cannot make him drink,’ ” perhaps of the other parent, and as if taking a cue from its sense and rhythm, the poem digresses to make a brief rhetorical speculation on the limits of intentional language:

‘you cannot make him drink’

nor teach light
of its own arise

or make the sun come up?

Under “February 16/70” Marlatt writes: “Clayton (Eshelman): poets work to make the sun come up ...”

if so, it’s not a matter of pretending to divinity but
2 little boys playing & singing the sun up
writing a daily part of life & as essential
that the sun come up for me, in me, as for those
kids¹⁰²

Here poetry is defined as an indispensable performance, a diurnal life-promoting ritual. In “protest” the three rhetorical lines create a means through which “my will” can open into another sense of provision:

pacing impatient his
bubble’s breath to
break

lost sun light hill

HORIZON

merely, mere sea, offer
cool cool wave to
rest upon¹⁰³

¹⁰² Ibid., 124.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 141-142.

Inherent in the trope of water/sea is the sense of language's power as incantation, which is also its "fluidity," to which the writing subject finally relinquishes. Language in this sense becomes the "aid" that is refused as exhortation, and supplies a balance of phonetic weight between son/sun and mother/mere in relation to what signifies as language's signifying reach: "HORIZON." The following vowel-sound of "sea" retrieves from its adverbs "merely, mere" the morpheme "me" so that the subject has become diffuse in the poem's language. What is "lost" is that which intent would dissolve, so that the other, in this case the son, is only recovered in the absence of that authority as "lost sun light hill," retaining within its signifying presence a ghost of the subject's overbearing anxiety. Released by that presence, instead, is the assonantal charm that slips confinement, buoyed on the "cool cool wave to / rest upon" it escapes toward the other side of what signifies "HORIZON."

The "fluidity" by which the poem traces a breaking out of the "confinement of language" is figured in the anticipated "break" of "bubble's breath." This image recurs in the final poem of the sequence, "for Kit, your" this time as laughter:

chuckle, it
breaks at
larynx, a
bubble
 ticklish
 response upon

 (leaf rustle

you chuckle
like some windy tree

air current
breaks up thru

you 'break up'
seeping whole into
'the world',¹⁰⁴

Sound exceeds language as breath, and as laughter transcends the separation of body and surrounding "world." The consonant clusters of "chuckle," "larynx," "bubble," "ticklish," "rustle" locate the connection between sound symbolism in language and non-linguistic sound, such as chuckle and rustle, in the child's embodied response to the immediate surroundings. Marlatt again uses the present tense verb "seeping" to suggest the permeability between body and environment, and the disintegration of the human entity in the process of becoming "whole" by extending into "other, non-self places."¹⁰⁵ Involved in her consideration of "world" is the "course" and effect of an individual life, so that the extended into space is "out where the inner / man begins." This fluidity through which energies transmit becomes figured in the poem as a stream which both arises within the body and runs beyond it in space and time, and which the body momentarily affects and effectively enters:

irritable
leaf mimosa curling
water
 salts your
 laughter
 close to tears
 streaming

downstream leaf floats
minute boat calling

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 145.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 44.

at the bank where current
 holds some respite
 we say dallying

 the world of
 stream, rock, reed

 wind blows, boat
 calls
 into & out of
 small boy world
 we do not know ¹⁰⁶

The leaf-boat “calls” within the play of the poem’s language to the
 morphemic rhymes in “calling,” “dallying,” “small” so that it maintains a
 “response-ability” to the “current” upon which it floats, its present element,
 and to the “boy” who sails it, at the same time as it carries an allusion
 which is developed as the poem goes on, to a ship approaching land. The
 leaf-boat is in this sense a subject of language, an intrinsic part of the
 amorphous subject-object dynamic of the child’s experience:

what you find funny, near
 hysteria, the tree
 that thru you streams
 its face calling
 now you see me, see

 how does it look
 to you? the trees
 rustle, sing, & not
 wind which
 rustles leaves
 its trace only
 evident as ash
 of fire? ¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 145-146.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

The simple language of nouns and verbs is sympathetic to the child's immersion in the elemental activity around him, except in the introduction of "hysteria" and "evident." Perhaps the suggestion of excess in the former acts as prelude to the realm of myth into which the poem enters in the following lines. Between the transitive "rustle" and the intransitive "rustles," within the trees that echo the human "chuckle," that both act and are acted upon, comes the "trace / only evident as ash / of fire?" As the noun "leaves" accrues its meaning as present verb "leaves," the sound symbolism characteristic of the language so far acquires a different tenor which is not to do with the child's subjective world but with the writer's associative resources. The poet, or meta-subject, who observes and participates in the dynamic of "you" in "world" and who both guides and is guided by language, "its drift," discovers and admits a mythological freight through such signifiers as "tree," "streams," "leaves," "trace," "ash of fire." "Tree" becomes "ash," "ash" becomes "tree"; "tree" rhymes with "see" and "sea." The following lines of "for Kit, your," are a direct quotation, without reference, from Robert Graves's "historical grammar of poetic myth" *The White Goddess*:¹⁰⁸

'The ash
is the tree of sea
power ... of power
resident in water'¹⁰⁹

Marlatt's word "evident" end rhymes with Graves's "resident" so that at this point the individual life contemplated is implicated in and drawn

¹⁰⁸ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A historical grammar of poetic myth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 169.

¹⁰⁹ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 146-147.

through a poetic concourse in which myth and history intersect. Graves finds that “Ygrasill was the enchanted ash, sacred to Woden, whose roots and branches in Scandinavian mythology extended through the Universe”¹¹⁰ and that “ash roots strangle those of other forest trees.”¹¹¹ Marlatt makes a connection in her poem between Columbus and the Norse Odin (or Woden) who confronted the dreaded “Night Mare ... one of the cruellest aspects of the White Goddess.”¹¹² This is not inappropriate when we remember that Norsemen discovered America “five centuries before Christopher Columbus.”¹¹³ Marlatt’s poem in a sense entangles the child’s roots with these others of historical myth and mythological history as acknowledgement and confrontation of darkness and danger:

strangling other roots
little Woden, Wotan

rides thru time beats
thru the future
bearing
in your root will ancient
tree of the world

against its end

Woden ride
the Night
mare
Columbus astride
unknown sea to
the edge¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Graves, *White Goddess*, 57.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 169.

¹¹² Ibid., 26.

¹¹³ Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palson, trans. *The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America* (London: Penguin Books, 1965).

¹¹⁴ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 147.

The previous word “hysteria” links with “Night / mare” gathering as it does an echo of “mere” from previous poems in the sequence. Both mere and mare bear graphic and phonetic associations of both mother and sea, and the root of “hysteria” is the Greek *hystera* meaning womb.¹¹⁵ There is in this poem, then, both admittance of and invocation against the (maternal?) darkness inherent in history, myth and knowledge within and beyond the language in which the poet implicates the child’s existence as she offers a narrative of his presence. In this sense her act of language subjects him to its incommensurable significations. Yet the poem is also a spell against the inimical potential in human action on which the poet meditates throughout this sequence as she elects language as medium and agent of response and recognition, not subjugation. Through its invocations of Woden and Columbus, both associated with sea-faring, the poem returns to the intimate address with which it began, the particular attributes of the child and his interactions with tree, wind, stream and writer:

this point ticklish
 this bubbling hysteric
 source

this well-
 being

wind blows, wind
 calls
 one

particular leaf, you
 run downstream to meet
 my leaf, life

we also

¹¹⁵ *The Penguin English Dictionary*, 2d ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

Whereas the phrase “near / hysteria” is separated within commas, and suggests a state named yet not inhabited, “hysteric” is one of two adjectives describing “source,” the first of which “bubbling” returns the language to its onomatopoeic play. Graves makes an interesting observation in the same sentence from which Marlatt takes the quote in her poem. He writes: “... the other name of Woden, ‘Yggr’, from which Ygdrasill is derived, is evidently connected with *hygra*, the Greek for ‘sea’ (literally, ‘the wet element.’)”¹¹⁷ It is as if Marlatt has discovered a rhizome running out from the etymological roots of the poem, so that now “hysteric” is purged of negative connotations and directly associated with “well-being,” and the excessive resource of water.

V

It seems, then, that Marlatt’s landscapes, be they written of places in Canada, the United States, or, as we shall discover in Chapter Four, England, are intricately and intimately connected to her internal and relational weathers. However, as we have seen, she does not conceptually round-up aspects of the external world simply to construct and consolidate subjectivity. Rather her language hazards a representation of physiological sensations within a place. The history and ecology of such a place include the reifications she insinuates there. In the course of the following chapter I

¹¹⁶ Marlatt, *What Matters*, 147-148.

¹¹⁷ Graves, *White Goddess*, 169.

will compare the more recent landscapes of Marlatt's *Touch to my Tongue* to passages from Howe's *Hinge Picture*, followed by a discussion of the prose essay *Frame Structures*. I will consider the significance of horizontality in the writing under discussion, as "horizon" is an emblematic word in both Marlatt's *Columbus Poems* and Howe's *The Secret History of the Dividing Line*.

CHAPTER TWO

Breaking into *Genesis*: Howe's *Frame Structures*

Thread of the story scented with flowers

Susan Howe, *Secret History of the Dividing Line*

I

I have introduced the idea of horizontality and have also suggested that there is tendency towards the circular in Marlatt's writing. I will try, therefore, to ascertain how appropriate Deleuze and Guattari's model is for the construction of a comparison of these poets, or if, at least for Marlatt, it is too problematic. The closing paragraph of the previous chapter suggests that Marlatt's writing of the complexity of presence within a particular landscape represents a panoramic multiplicity. However, "multiplicity" is a less appropriate description of her "love poetry" which is also often "landscape poetry." With regard to the contrasting models of the horizontal and the circular, Deleuze and Guattari introduce a potential resolution of "[o]pen rings" whereby circular processes occur within an expansive horizontality:

The ideal of a book would be to lay everything out on a plane of exteriority ... on a single page, the same sheet: lived events, historical determinations, concepts, individuals, groups, social formations. Kleist invented a writing of this type, a broken chain of affects and variable speeds, with accelerations and transformations, always in relation with

the outside. Open rings . . . texts, therefore . . . opposed in every way to the classical or romantic book constituted by the interiority of a substance or subject. The war-machine against the State apparatus-book. *Flat multiplicities of n dimensions* are asignifying and asubjective. They are designated by indefinite articles, or rather by partitives (*some* couch-grass, *some of* a rhizome . . . ¹

In Howe's case, the "plane of exteriority" brings to mind initially the visual works she produced in the 1960s before she turned to writing. For instance her "Walls" installations include large moveable expanses of white ground upon which she placed, separate from one another and tiny in proportion to the dimensions of that ground, drawings, photographs, pages of text, each too small to read when the piece is viewed as a whole.²

The poems in *Frame Structures* are really about war, "[t]he war-machine" of ancient and more recent wars, the American Revolution, the Civil Wars, both of seventeenth century England and nineteenth century America, Old Testament wars, wars fought over territory and sovereignty. The Bible is a "State apparatus-book," central to the political and religious conflicts between Catholic and Protestant in England and Ireland, and seminal in the colonisation of America. The "war machine" in Deleuze and Guattari's formulation, works against the centrality of the "root-book,"³ destroying boundaries, toppling dynasties, creating chaos, forcing change and new orders.

¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 10.

² Photographs and documentation relating to these visual works are kept at the Mandeville Special Collections Library at the University of California, San Diego.

³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 5.

Deleuze and Guattari, then, consider that war is exterior to the “State apparatus”: “As for the war machine in itself, it seems to be irreducible to the State apparatus, to be outside its sovereignty and prior to its law: it comes from elsewhere.”⁴ Howe acknowledges the violence in her poetry although, as she says, “I want to find peace.”⁵ And she resists, in her typographical experiments and her critique of the various publications of Emily Dickinson’s manuscript poems, the standardising tyranny of the machine. To Howe, rather than to Marlatt, we can apply the idea of “horizontal” which, according to Lechte on Nietzsche, “refers to the impossibility of ever finding a scale that is adequate to difference. [It] opens up the ‘ideolectal’ (private language) end of the communicative process.”⁶ I am not suggesting that war is anything but anathema to the radical poets of late twentieth century America, after all Language Poetry developed in opposition to a State-apparatus which ruptured into the chaos of war. However, the fragmentation and dissolution of language in the practices of many radical poets might refer to the potential energy released through annihilation.

In the relationship of radical poetry to the order of late Capitalism there is not simply a by-passing of the realms of commerce and industry, but also a kind of infiltration, an infiltration, evidently, of boundaries between the institutions of bureaucracy and poetry, corporate business and art. And in the United States particularly there can be said to be a “poetry business” as so much of what is written, be it formalist or “avant-garde,” is located in

⁴ Ibid., 338.

⁵ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 177.

⁶ Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, 217.

and around universities, and so many writers who began by producing marginal writing have been contracted to major publishing houses. The poems collected in Howe's *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974-1979* are among her early writings, originally printed as chap books by small independent presses, and published as a volume by New Directions in 1996. Prefaced by a belated essay, their impact and collective effect is subtly changed within the context of the world of "vertical thought."

Before I proceed to discuss this volume in more detail I want to refer to another theoretical strand which has influenced both Marlatt and Howe. I noticed in the previous chapter that Marlatt, in her *Columbus Poems*, has taken ideas from Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* concerning the Norse mythological figure Woden and his connection to the ash tree and to sea-faring. There is evidence amongst Howe's papers in the Mandeville Special Collections library at San Diego, and in her poetry about Ireland, that she was interested in the Celtic "Tree Alphabet" which Graves introduces as "said to have been latterly used for divination ... and consists of five vowels and thirteen consonants. Each letter is named after the tree or shrub of which it is the initial."⁷ I will return to Howe's use of this alphabet in Chapter Four, but as the poems about to be explored concern warfare, I refer to another of Graves's chapters entitled "The Battle of the Trees," in which he points out that he is by profession a poet (like Marlatt and Howe,

⁷ Graves, *White Goddess*, 165.

“gender aside”) and that “the poet’s first enrichment is a knowledge and understanding of myths.”⁸

II

I proceed now to discuss two of Howe’s early poems in the context of the volume in which they are collected. The prose essay, discussed briefly at the beginning of Chapter One, prefaces four long poems in which themes of war and sovereignty, subjectivity and exile play against the text’s formal elegance. In them references to landscape signify within discontinuous narratives of colonial war; in *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*⁹ and *Secret History of the Dividing Line*¹⁰ New England is the site of conflict, and in *Cabbage Gardens*¹¹ it is Ireland.

The “place” of *Hinge Picture* is textual and patriarchal. Within its word-shapes Howe traces her sense of Calvinism in the New World – a landscape permeated and scarred by Puritan typology. The poem’s austere arrangements contain angles on violence, oppression, outrage and terror. Its sources in the first part are the North African and Middle Eastern settings of the Old Testament, and in the second Ireland and New England.

⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁹ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 57-72.

¹⁰ Ibid., 87-122.

¹¹ Ibid., 73-86.

Names of semi-mythological tyrants occur, such as Attila, Herod and Zingis and names from the *Book of Genesis* and the *Books of Kings*.

If there is a narrative it is tenuously discernible through the appearance and disappearance of an indefinite subjectivity, in a story of imperial war and a westward migration. Implied in the elusive pattern of scene, space and narrative is New England's beginning, with the arrival of Christianity in a place of terrifying emptiness. The provisional subject is part agent, part product of the mediating act between text and text, between the written and the act of writing. A dislocating, subversive point of view spies in the colonising discourse of the Bible and instates fragments of an alien mythology. If there is a ghost of the writer's self in these early poems, it haunts the complicated structures between a language of power and a voice displaced by power, between articulation and silence.

In my reading of this poem I will discuss the ways in which Howe's language works to suggest affiliations of namelessness and fugitive witness through its formal activities. An irregular rhythm of spaces throughout each unit of words, and the unprinted areas of page around their separate shapes, combine with the graphic elements to create a sense of both spatial and temporal distance, and of ambiguous or lost connections. Between the visual austerity of the poem and its facets of symbolic resonance there is a tension that keeps the language from submitting to a narrative logic, or to a subjective consistency. No determined correspondences occur in the narrative shards through which the linguistic subject "I" or "she" moves. However, this kinesics depends on a maker – I have been using verbs such

as “combine” and “create” – and the poem’s visual precision is the result of a technical discipline.¹² The importance of material visibility is evident in the poem’s title and its epigraph but what I want to suggest is that subjectivity exists as it evades coherence in syntactical constructs and becomes identified with points of invisibility. At the same time the formal look of the pages is one of precision and order in that the relationship of the geometric shapes of print are so elegantly placed upon their ground.¹³

Howe often includes a visual image at the beginning of her poems and here it is an oval reproduction of a photograph of a sailing boat on the surface of calm water, the points of its horizontal extremities meeting the horizon line between sea and sky. Above the black outline of its frame is the puzzling reference “Fig. 78. VIGILANT.” The boat is a symbol of imperial adventure, and in its physical form as wooden construction it has, like paper, an origin in trees. There is a couplet in *Secret History of the Dividing Line*: “we go to sea / we build houses,”¹⁴ that takes in the colonial enterprise of seafaring, but the source of the reproduced image is not given. The epigraph is from Marcel Duchamp’s working “note for the *Green Box*” and evidently where

¹² Alongside this idea of a kinesics of interactivity amongst the abstract components of language, I want to mention another notion of movement with reference to postmodern writing. Thomas Docherty in his essay “Ana-; or Postmodernism, Landscape, Seamus Heaney,” in *Contemporary Theory Meets Modern Poetry*, ed. Anthony Easthope and John O. Thompson (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), is discussing Heaney’s “The Grauballe Man” when he writes of the “cinematism of the postmodern”: “Bergson characterised ‘old philosophy’ as the belief that the flow of Being could be reduced to a series of ‘*coupes immobiles*’ or ‘stills.’ Deleuze follows Bergson in the rejection of the still and its replacement with the ‘*coupe mobile*,’ a ‘cut’ which releases the temporality or cinematic heterogeneity (*l’espace critique*) held within the apparently still or homogenous photographic image itself. ... [T]he still, or coupe immobile which enables a stable knowledge of the past, the pastness of the past, is a kind of epistemological myth, however necessary. ... 72-73.

¹³ It is worth bearing in mind that the word “geometry” derives from the Greek, “*geometrein* to measure the earth, from *ge* earth + *metron* measure.” *New Penguin English Dictionary*.

¹⁴ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 111.

Howe found her title for the poem: “Perhaps make a HINGE PICTURE.
(folding yardstick, book. ...) / develop in space the PRINCIPLE OF THE
HINGE in the displacement 1st in the plane 2nd in space.”¹⁵ This envisages
a physical articulation appropriate for the visual and performative aspects
of Howe’s poetry.

Hinge Picture opens with the word “invisible” so the poem starts with the
essential paradox of the written word, in that its presence stands in for an
absent referent. The shape of the text emphasises the expanse of the page.
In the centre of its rectangle is a small rectangle of words, the margins of
which are proportionate to the edges of the paper. Each word is clearly
separated from the one before, after, above and below it. Exact spacing,
distinct morphemes, and the varying horizontal and vertical spaces between
words, maintain the geometry and dictate line breaks. For instance,
“intellect” is broken into “intelle / ct,” and the initial letter of “hieroglyph”
is isolated at the end of the penultimate line, so hangs apart from
“ieroglyph,” the first syllables of the final line.

This pattern of words and spaces contains tensions of opposition and
reflection. The first line presents “angel,” an envoy of God, between
“invisible” and “confined”; absent from sight and accessible to a form of
control. At the centre of the page is the phrase “mirror clear,” a half

¹⁵ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 32. Janis Mink writes of Duchamp: “Later on in his life he would replicate many of his important works in doll’s house format and pack them up into fold-out boxes so that they could be handled and considered in close contact to one another. This is a radical change from the idea of a work of art that ends with its completion.” Janis Mink, *Marcel Duchamp 1887-1968: Art as Anti-Art* (Koln: Taschen, 2000), 43-44.

rhyme of the previous “lunar sphere,” and it is this second phrase that acts somehow as a pivot, or hinge, between the first and second halves of the stanza, between the upper and the lower parts of the page, between an idea of heaven and of earth.¹⁶ That part of the broken word ‘intelle’ at the end of the fourth line carries within its morphemes and phonemes at least two senses of transmission and communication. The more obvious is in the syllable “tell,” but another is implied by the following “e,” as the prefix “tele,” meaning “far” is usually attached to a name of an instrument for transmitting sounds, images, information from afar. This “intelle /ct” receives and reflects “God” and admits “a demon daring down.” The alliterative phrase with its indefinite article repeated from the lines above “a / demon darkened,” alludes, possibly, to Lucifer the fallen angel and the diabolic force so dreadful to the seventeenth century Puritan mind. The first phrase falls, between the indefinite article and the noun, from the third line to the next. There “demon” is a passive subject, acted upon, “darkened” under “a lunar sphere,” situated above the “mirror clear”; but transmitted through “the mute vocables / of God” it becomes active and powerful within the dislocated signals of humanity. Throughout the stanzaic unit the detached consonants, the aspirate of the penultimate line, and the repeated isolate “a” of the indefinite article, combine to create a kind of stutter. Of the three verbs, “receiving,” “daring,” “stuttering,” the last acts as both a stop and a continuation. The onomatopoeic plosives of

¹⁶ As a piece with both abstract and referential elements, this page of *Hinge Picture* reminds me of Georgia O’Keeffe’s water-color on paper, “Light Coming on the Plains III,” 1917, reproduced in Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (London: BBC, 1980), 312.

“stuttering” check the dynamic so that the spaces between words and letters emerge as potent sites.

The arrangement of words on the following page suggests a cross; the first and third fragments of poetry represent the top and stem respectively of its vertical part, the central lines the horizontal. These first lines lack a subject as the nomadic words enact both existence and absence:

lived promiscuousl
y
in moveable tent
s¹⁷

As if to disturb this initial absence the following five fragments on this and the facing page begin either with an article or a proper name: “She rises ...,” “Joseph dreamt /,” “LEAHIS ...,” “his blear-eyed ...,” “The hounds ...” It becomes apparent that the dislocated adverb “promiscuousl / y” is significant as the poem continues to draw upon recognised and half-recognised allusions in a sequence that switches as if arbitrarily between the past and present tense:

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.”¹⁸

There has been a switch from the narrative past to the narrative present between the verbs “lived” and “rises.” The narrative present “rises,” the infinitive “to trace,” and the present tense “singing,” describe actions of

¹⁷ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 34.

¹⁸ Ibid.

someone who at once makes marks and makes sound. Her “trace” suggests direction, as if the “military combination” is a battle plan. Alternatively her marks may superimpose a lost pattern, previously drawn and vanished from the sand. “She” may inhabit a Biblical landscape, or she may “sing” from a contemporary perspective of the land’s history. There is an odd sense of scale in that “[s]he rises” and from that elevation looks down or back “singing / ‘these little empires ...’” If the “combination” is between her agency and the ancient “empires,” her power over them resides in her power to *move* over them, unsettle them by her casual strategies, the disturbance of movement, sound and mark. The phrase, “were settled” contrasts with the above “lived promiscuously.” The former locates the focus of her actions as she disturbs structures established both in the land and in the language; we cannot link the latter as a clause to either subject, “She” or “these little empires” unless by tense.

Joseph dreamt
that the Sun
Moon and eleven Stars made
their Obeisance to him
his
brothers three
with him in a pit²⁰

²⁰ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 34.

The subordination of words to letters, spacing and stanzaic shape negotiates with the narrative familiarity. The capital “O” of “Obeisa” and the exposed “a” at the line end gives it the semblance of a proper name. In the Latin tradition names ending in “a” are feminine.²¹ “Obeisa” has a phonetic echo of obese, giving a connotation of largeness, and of obey, which comes from the same Latin root as obeisance: “*oboedire*, from OB-+ *audire* to hear.”²²

The fragment “thre” after “brothers” suggests three, until the next line displaces that half-sense of a fairy-tale constellation of siblings, back to the story from Genesis. Echoes of fairy-tales and nursery rhymes are persistent throughout this poem, often recounting acts of disobedience and alluding to the crisis of old orders. The first line of the following page, “LEAHISWEDDEDTOMEINTHENIGHT” again comes by way of Genesis, in which case “ME” is a trace of Jacob. Because of the lack of spatial differentiation, these capitalised letters that spell eight recognisable English words set in contracted linear sequence, offer a dimension within which new words can emerge with numerous possibilities of association. Each letter is a material sign that casts back and forth across the surface connecting with every other to create new graphic combinations: LE AH HIS DED TOME MEIN THEN HEN ENI HEAL DEWS MOT NIE GINE.

A double space below this line is suspended the following block of words:

²¹ At one point in the essay “Frame Structures,” Howe remembers the refined and cultured community to which her father’s side of the family belonged: “Bostonians frowned on names with too many vowels particularly vowel endings.” *Frame Structures*, 23.

²² It has been pointed out to me that the noun “obeah,” meaning “sorcery and magic ritual of a kind practised by some people in the West Indies (although it has a different root in the Carribean “*obayifo*, a creeper used in making charms”) has a visual and aural resemblance to “obey.” This also suggests an interesting (rhizomatous) correlation to Graves’s “tree-alphabet.”

his blear-eyed less
 attractive daughter)
 when sailing sleep
 westward through her
 pillars was a sign
 of being born²³

Its source is *Genesis*, 29, verses 16 and 17:

And Laban had two daughters: the
 name of the elder *was* Leah, and the
 name of the younger *was* Rachel.

Leah was tender eyed; but Rachel
 was beautiful and well favoured.²⁴

We can connect the possessive pronoun “his” to Laban, although here “his” daughter is “blear-eyed less” rather than “tender eyed” and if we can find significance in this difference it might be in the phonetic relationship between “blear” and “Leah.” The final syllable of the line half rhymes with the first: “his / less.” Without the initial letter both words retain a morpheme: h / is and l / ess, the latter being the feminine suffix in, for instance, princess, poetess, actress etc. Between “his” and “less” perhaps the echo of “Leah” in “blear” restores the named attribute of her eyes to herself through her name, that is, she is Leah-eyed.

The line “attractive daughter)” consists of an adjective, a noun and a closing bracket. There is a suggestion of something omitted, the missing bracket for instance, or perhaps the preceding adverb’s qualifying power. This line offers two contradictory ideas; one is a sense that each word possesses an autonomous significance so that both keep a positive integrity. The other is that those qualifying attributes in the line above are bearing the

²³ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 35.

²⁴ *King James Bible*, 34.

noun “daughter” into the open parenthesis. “Westward” describes the initial spread of Christianity from Judea to Rome; the later displacement of Protestantism; the European discovery and colonisation of the Americas and the eventual progression of the colonists’ self-proclaimed “manifest destiny” across what was to become the United States. In the context of the poem the significance of directional movement might make sense if we examine the relationship between volition and object in the following associations of syntax. For instance, “thre / w him” is a rhyme of the above “to him” and is picked up in the phrase “through her” by assonance of sound and sense. However, while “him” in both clauses is the grammatical object, “her,” when we read on, becomes a possessive pronoun and “her / pillars” become the object.

It is a characteristic of the English language that the masculine pronoun has a different form for the objective and possessive, i.e. his/him, whereas in the feminine case both forms are the same, her/her. I think that Howe, with the omission of a subjective assertion in this word block, exploits this difference. As “her” is a half-rhyme of “Leah” and contrasts with the possessive pronoun in the line “his blear-eyed less,” there is a suggestion that the feminine stands for itself, as buried, or implicit, subject in the movement of these lines. The phrase “through her” can suggest, then, that the feminine retains a potent invisibility in the language’s semantic structure.²⁵

²⁵ Another connotation is Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. If this seems spurious I would argue that it is a possibly revealing attempt to follow through Howe’s methods of opening language to alternative meanings: “At the blind point between what is said and meant, who is sounding herself? Words open to the names inside them, course through thought in

In its narrative aspect “a sign / of” hints at mythic initiation, the symbolism of which is connected to transformation. However, the event of “being born” is at once a process and a state, both “h / ieroglyph and stuttering.” It might be worth mentioning that H.D., a poet of an earlier generation, wrote from within and about the contexts of war, and was fascinated by “hieratic symbols.” In “Book 7” of *Helen in Egypt* comes the section:

Seek not another Star,
O Helen, loved of War,
seek not to know

too much; the painted script,
the scroll, the hieroglyph
is written clear,

the sail is set,
the ship waits in the harbour;
grieve not for Clytaemnestra,

for the Fates
have woven royal purple for her bed,
have un-crowned her unhappy head;

she sleeps call not, awake
no soul to doom
of old remembered hates;

the Nameless-of-many-Names
(Amen, you called him here)
will re-inform, habilitate, re-make

his own, even the lost, even the intemperate;
asleep? awake? a phantom or a dream,
Helen, the sails are set.²⁶

Helen, in this poem is “both phantom and reality”²⁷ and “*Again*, she herself is the writing.”²⁸ Much later in this long poem, the “*third Helen*” who “*for*

precarious play of double-enchantment, distance ...” Howe writes in *My Emily Dickinson* (82). The names Lear and Cordelia are overtly significant in Howe’s *The Liberties*, a poem I discuss in Chapter Four.

²⁶ H.D., *Helen in Egypt* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1961), 105-106.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

*the moment, rejects both the transcendental Helen and the intellectual or inspired Helen for this other 'numb with memory'”²⁹ is asked by Achilles: “are you Hecate? are you a witch? / a vulture? a hieroglyph?”³⁰ The instances in *Hinge Picture* where a name or a pronoun occurs or reoccurs, there is no settled allocation for that subject, is she/he, for instance, of ancient myth or story, an active protagonist in a present narrative, subject or object of transformation, the writer, the written, or both and potentially all at once?*

The suggestion of mythic transformation is developed in the following lines, in the story of a hunt:

The hounds of
the huntsman of
the emperor have
run down a curious
beast on all fours
a golden circlet
around his mouth
shines
like a star.³¹

In contrast to the preceding lines the grammatical relationship between subject and object is clear, as is the possessive hierarchy of “hounds,” “hunters,” “emperor.” Here the scene of mystical quarry is more reminiscent of medieval European Chivalric Romance than Old Testament myth. The “curious beast,” like the unicorn, might be an emblem of Christ, who later in the poem is “(a very active gesturing baby).”³² At the same time it represents the poet’s lyric game, “some still un mutilated musical

²⁹ Ibid., 258.

³⁰ Ibid., 261.

³¹ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 35.

³² Ibid., 53.

wild of the Mind's world.”³³ The confusion of mythic elements continues on the next page:

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 off³⁴

The metonymic assumption of “a woman whose breasts” is blocked in the following line “had not grown was cast.” There is a sense that this “cast” is of a hollow or concave surface. It is the negative or preliminary state “not grown” that is “cast” like a statue, or perhaps, a feature of landscape.

Again, she is “cast / up,” powerless against external flux and force, “up on a seashore in Europe.” She is physically formidable, yet the agent of her fate must be stronger as it has rendered her incapacitated. She represents in some sense, then, the female or matriarchal principle, her power superseded and dismantled; she has no breasts, tied hands, no head. Yet she does not seem wrecked, or prone for the body is “up”: “She was fifty feet tall / and her chest was seven / feet wide She had on a / purple cloak and her hands / ...” In these lines Howe seems to be reconstructing a broken monument out of its discrete parts: breasts, feet, chest, feet (also a unit of measurement), hands, back, head – absent, freakish, bound, taken, “cast up.” Taken together these elements combine to suggest a being mythical, regal, hermaphrodite (or androgynous), damaged yet positively

³³ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 105.

³⁴ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 36.

identified as “a woman.” The association of Venus (the Greek Aphrodite)³⁵ emerging from the sea is irresistible. *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* includes this section under Aphrodite:

According to Hesiod she sprang from the foam (*aphros*) of the sea that gathered about the severed member of Uranus when Cronos ... mutilated him. Her name Cypris ... and many of her attributes indicate her partially oriental origin and her kinship to the Asian goddess Astarte. This is borne out by the legend that she first landed either at Paphos in Cyprus or at Cythera (an island off the Laconian coast), whence her title “Cytherian” ...³⁶

It is not apt to labour these allusions, but themes of fragmentation, displacement, transference or dissipation of power implicit in the concept of dismemberment are persistent in Howe’s work. The physical separation of a part from an integral whole and the displacement of power from an established to another site by means of this interference is in a sense what Howe does with language. It is, in effect, a devastation of the organic. She tells Edward Foster “... [T]hese poems of mine ... fracture language” and “... I am concerned that so much of my work carries violence in it.”³⁷ These remarks refer to the ways in which her writing demonstrates a visceral engagement with cultural history as a kind of controlled outrage. In this way, myth and history, the distortions each forces on the other, are profoundly present in Howe’s experimental (postmodern) forms.

At this point in my reading of *Hinge Picture* I will exploit an opportunity to compare, quite directly, the ways in which Howe and Marlatt write the

³⁵ Aphrodite was the mother, Hermes the father of Hermaphroditos, “who became joined in body with the nymph Salmacis.” *New Penguin English Dictionary*, 652.

³⁶ Harvey, *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, 33.

³⁷ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 173, 177.

female body as landscape, although in the case of Howe the elements of place and body are indefinable, diffusively located in myth.

Marlatt's *Touch to My Tongue* (1984) is a long poem dedicated to her lover of that time, and sometime co-author, Betsy Warland, and which bears as one of its epigraphs a quotation from H.D.'s "*Thought and Vision*": "*The brain and the womb are both / centres of consciousness, equally / important.*"³⁸ There are lines in Howe's *Secret History of the Dividing Line*: "lunacy leapt to the tongue of my brain"³⁹ and "I cut out my tongue in the forest"⁴⁰ which together intimately link the visceral, the cerebral and the environmental, and compare vividly with the epigraph from H.D. and Marlatt's "Kore" below.

The tongue is an organ of language-transmission and of love-making, although in Howe's work its sensuous aspect is effaced by deprivation and bafflement. There are persistent themes of hunger and self consumption in her work, historical symptoms of oppression and exclusion I will return to in Chapter Four. Marlatt's poem, on the other hand, is about satiation, and she invokes the Greek myth of Demeter and Kore, (as perhaps Howe much more obliquely invokes the mythological Aphrodite) figuring herself and her lover as mother and daughter:

no one wears yellow like you excessive and radiant store-
house of sun, skin smooth as fruit but thin, leaking light.
(i am climbing toward you out of the hidden.) no one

³⁸ Marlatt and Warland, *Two Women in a Birth*, 8.

³⁹ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 101.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

shines like you, so that even your lashes flicker light, amber over blue (*amba*, amorous Demeter, you with the fire in your hand, i am coming to you). no one my tongue burrows in, whose flesh opens wet, tongue seeks its nest, amative and nurturing (here i am you) lips work towards undoing (*dhei*, female, sucking and suckling, fecund) spurt / spirit opening in the dark of earth, *yu!* cry jubilant excess, your fruiting body bloom we issue into the light of, sweet, successive flesh... ⁴¹

The form of *Touch to My Tongue* is a sequence of blocks of words; I include “Kore” in its entirety. Some of these passages are longer, e.g. “Climbing the canyon even as”⁴² and “Prairie”;⁴³ none are shorter although “Houseless,”⁴⁴ “Yes”⁴⁵ and “Healing”⁴⁶ are broken into four, two and two blocks respectively. They resemble to an extent, then, Howe’s methods of arranging formal shapes, although Howe is more likely to vary shape, spacing and positioning on the page within one poem, whereas *Touch to my Tongue* adheres to the above format throughout.

With this poem Marlatt incorporates a concept of earth into the intercourse of lovers and in that sense she views the landscape from inside out. There is no separation between writer and the other with whom she shares a view, or habitation, of landscape. There is no tension of perception in conflict with that of the other, as, for instance, there is in *Zocalo*, the writing of which is based on her travels in Mexico with a male companion.⁴⁷ There the Yucatan in Mexico is explored from a tourist’s situation, one who wills

⁴¹ Marlatt and Warland, *Two Women in a Birth*, 13.

⁴² Ibid., 15.

⁴³ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁷ Marlatt, *Ghost Works*, 1-74.

a potential acknowledgment of herself from its history and presence. In “Kore” the passionate intensity of shared experience summons the mythic from within the landscape, and in their mythic excess the lovers enter and inhabit “the dark of earth.” Although it works towards a kind of bodily “undoing” it is also towards a bodily completion, in contrast to the mutilated torso stranded in Howe’s poem. It is the contours of her body parts, the hollow of the absence of their attributes, which evoke elements of landscape and supply the “cast” of history.

In *Hinge Picture* the following group of couplets alludes to Herod’s slaughter of the infants on Christ’s birth and suggests that the rhythms of nursery rhymes embody memories of more ancient rituals:

365 boys
clothed in scarlet

followed the Magi
that carried the fire

that burned on the altar
that stood in the front of their army⁴⁸

The number coincides with the number of days of the Christian calendar, a feature of linear chronology, but the “boys” represent a cyclical procession marked by sacrifice, for they are “clothed in scarlet.”⁴⁹ The association

⁴⁸ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 36.

⁴⁹ Jacqueline de Bourgoing writes: “The Christian era represents a rupture in the conception of time: the incarnation of Christ occurred on a specific date in history, a precise point in time, and this fact gave new meaning to what followed. Time was ordered along an axis, with a central point, the birth of Jesus, a before and an after. For Christians, history is in motion in one direction, from a fixed beginning toward an understood end, the Last Judgement. Christian time lost the sense of cyclical and recurrent eras and became linear, unidirectional, and irreversible. The universal symbol of the circle that had characterised the eternal return of days, months and years in ancient religions was replaced by an arrow. This linear view of time soon began to infiltrate the collective consciousness; it created historical perspectives and served to distinguish clearly the past, present and future as discrete concepts. Humans began to situate themselves with

takes us back to the “purple cloak” and beheading of “a woman whose breasts” and to the word “menstruous” in the intervening lines positioned to the right of the centre of the page:

forbad
e cohabit
ation with
a menstruous
woman or
mating with
a beast⁵⁰

These taboos stand in oblique relation to the inevitable conjunction of religion and war: “the altar / their army.” On the opposite page against the right margin is a vertical list of the tribes of Israel (with Simeon missing) in the form: “The Gate of Reuben / The Gate of Judah” etc.⁵¹

Below this and against the left margin is a group of eight lines which suggest a landscape traversed, of natural boundaries and transitions: “passes,” “forest,” “pyranees,” “valley,” and of human constructions of defence and habitation, “bulwark,” “ramparts,” “city.” These features of landscape are both external to the pilgrims or “valiant magi” and internalised as “flesh and milk” and “white matter of the brain and spinal / cord ...” A missionary army, a “white” migration crosses from east to west.⁵²

precision in the succession of generations.” Jacqueline de Bourgoing, *The Calendar: Measuring Time*, trans. David J. Baker and Dorie B. Baker (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 64.

⁵⁰ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 36.

⁵¹ Robert Graves has compiled a similar list which includes both Simeon and the girl’s name Dinah, which Howe’s does not. Graves reckons the list to signify a secret Hebrew “jewel-sequence. . . which gave oracular responses ...” *White Goddess*, 270-271.

⁵² Howe, *Frame Structures*, 37.

The final capitalised word in the final line “cord a long white city ALBA” reinforces the previously re-iterated adjective “white,” a condition pertaining both inside and outside the body. *Alba* is from the ecclesiastical Latin, the feminine form of *albus* meaning “white.”⁵³ If there is a sense of a terrain, or body of land, the verbs and adjectives imply that it yields: “accessible passes,” “melt a moist valley,” “milk euxine bulwark.” The capital G of the repeated noun “Gate” in the lines above reappears here as the initial letter of “God” in a less explicit lexical pattern. Patterns of sound and sign combine to suggest the body, land and language turning inside out. It is as if, on this page, the lines below were a kernel dropped from the hard shell of those above.

In the notes following Marlatt’s *Touch to My Tongue* she supplies, with reference to “Coming up from underground,” alternative words for white and its signifiers, the etymological roots of which come from Old Norse, “*bleikja*” “*bleikr*” and “*blanda*”; and Indo-European, “*bhel*” and “*belo*.”⁵⁴ In this section she writes of her lover’s recovery from the removal of a gall-stone:

belo, bright, Beltane, ‘bight fire’. draw me in, light a new flame after your sudden descent into the dark, draw me close so i see only light your eye a full moon rides, *bleikr* in the old tongue, shining, white, ascent above horizon fringed with black reed, horsetail, primitive flicker on the rim of eons ascending this white channel we wander in, a⁵⁵

⁵³ *Alb* is “a full-length white linen vestment, with long tight sleeves and a girdle around the waist, worn by a priest at Mass.” *New Penguin English Dictionary*, 29.

⁵⁴ Marlatt and Warland, *Two Women in a Birth*, 24.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

Marlatt's is a highly personal love poem which recruits its power from the forgotten significations buried within contemporary language; Howe's is about historical processes of culture and, reflexively, about the processes of constructing cultural objects. Perhaps both are also about the vulnerability of landscape to human internalisations. According to Lew Daly, Howe's enthusiasm for the "creative word" is akin to mystical love. Writing about a later work *The Nonconformist's Memorial* he states:

In speaking in this interval between resurrection of the word and mere ascension from the flesh, the poet upholds no defense against the possibilities of loving and being loved when it comes to words, ravishment of and by the other being focused momentarily in the search of both the poet for words of address, and of words amidst chaos perhaps on her lips.⁵⁶

If Daly's premise of Howe's somewhat removed but not wholly secular way of enthusiasm, and if an idea of passionate intensity can survive such qualifications, then "the tongue of my brain" longs for a highly esoteric flesh. On the other hand, Daly links Howe's mysticism with a tradition of social revolution so that her passion is not detached from the exigencies of the contemporary political world:

Insight into the feminine political quest that Howe's work explores and in some way refounds, while legitimate and inspiring in its own right, should not leave one blind to Howe's commitment to scripture just because scripture is and has, since its inception, been used as a weapon by the very oppressors against which she is striving as a woman.

.....
We have a great deal to learn from Howe's hermeneutic access to the Prophets and the Gospels – as much about the repressed messages of the Bible as we do of our own presumptions about prophecy and gospel in precluding them from the very same political quest that Howe, in willing tandem with scripture, more courageously - because paradoxically - undertakes for us at this most dangerous time.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Daly, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 35.

This is a very useful point to make about a potentially baffling element of Howe's work. Part of her labour is to author a break-in to the seminal, oppressive and beloved texts of the Bible, which is perhaps why we encounter such a disturbing and intractable presence moving through *Hinge Picture*. Again, as Daly usefully points out, "Howe perhaps more than any other poet mines the mystical, transmigratory overlay of proper names."⁵⁸

As we have come so far with this poem a process in the language insinuates instability, shifting potentials in its structures whilst maintaining an elusive and allusive narrative that is located in the west's oldest myths. This is partly why names and nouns are such important markers, for they both anchor and refract the work's abstract dissidence. The names of creatures both mythical and extant in nature, "cat crow unicorn minotaur," of "herbs and trees such as / heliotrope pepper nettle," of "minerals such as salt adama / nt" and of "terrestrial and celestial / phenomena such as earth / wind cloud rainbow moon," a list both baroque and austere, make up the centrally placed column of words on page 38. This naming is connected to "the Flood"⁵⁹ and so to "the / Ark" on the opposite page⁶⁰ and to Adam who named the animals. His name is embedded here in that of the mineral "adama / nt" which is the only word in this block to be broken between two lines. Not only does its exposed vowel recollect the stuttering "a"s of the word block on page 33, but also the feminine form, the opened words "Obeisa / nce" and "Alba."

⁵⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁹ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 34.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 39.

In the absence of an internal or explicit rhyme scheme there are fragments of assonance and dissonance, graphic repetitions and reflections so that as an abstract piece the shape of each language unit becomes a prism of signs. On page 39 the rectangle of lines is again central and taller than the preceding, and within it is the first instance of a subjective indicator, the first person in possessive form. It is there as if as witness to the drama of dynastic conflict in the first *Book of Kings*:

myth my wonder tale is to
 be secret to lie prone
 along the skyline in re
 mote fastness along the
 hillside there to watch
 Elijah in ecstatic frenzy

The strict geometric arrangement of words, the precise juxtaposition of negative ground and surround to positive content, resonates with our cultural encounter with visual art. These lines of poetry do, in a sense, combine to construct a landscape which is biblical but with a (self) portrait concealed as part of that landscape “along the skyline,” which is the setting of a drama between heaven, “Yahweh ... rider of Heaven’s / vision ... the widewinged falcon,” and of earth, “as far as the / ancient city of JEZREEL.” While the constant emergence of the page insists on the abstract materiality of the whole picture, the subversive and anachronistic infiltration of “my / myth” into the Book of Kings suggests a profound internalisation both of landscape and of textual language, and represents the active unsettling of constellated settings involving myth, history, and

personal vision. The possessed “wonder tale” is the still point in a tumultuous drama. The adjectival noun “fastness” anchors the verbal energy surrounding it: “sing,” “driver,” “hurled,” “rider,” “dance,” “awake,” “widewinged,” “ecstatic frenzy / running,” while it is pivotal also, because without the suffix, it is an adjective with two opposite meanings; swift movement and arrest or confinement. Therefore “my / myth” participates in the quick of drama whilst its particularity is to be “re / mote,” as if buried, invisible.

Considering the references to sight so far in *Hinge Picture*, and of speech, or voice, it might be worth examining the semantic potential of the divided word “re / mote.” In its integral form it derives from the Latin *remotus*, which is the past participle of *removere*, to remove. If we think of *remote* as a product of remove, the word contains opposite meanings, movement and stillness, or settlement. As the dictionary defines it, “*removere*, remove, means ‘back to an earlier state or over to another condition,’”⁶¹ with the prefix denoting “back to” or again, and ‘to change location, station, or residence.’”⁶² But if “mote” derives from “move” it also has another independent meaning, which is “a particle of dust”⁶³ and alludes to the interference of vision. However the morpheme “mot,” also the French for “word,” includes speech. Its etymological history comes from the Gallo-Roman *mottum*, which is an alteration of the Latin *muttum* “(not) a word or syllable, ... uttered sound” from “*muttire*, to mutter or murmur.”⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁶² *New Penguin English Dictionary*.

⁶³ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*.

Perhaps “the mute vocables / of God,” and the converse exhortation to “sing to Yahweh” suggest that “re / mote” on page 39, is an association of “intelle / ct” on page 33, within which incidences of cultural experience and transference, and a mutable subjectivity might connect. Both dislocated words offer, as I have tried to demonstrate, semantic implications to do with sensory consciousness and spatial distance. In *Hinge Picture* incidents of subjectivity are successively caught moving out of the angles of narrative fragments of imperial war.

If there are few instances of the first person in this poem, there are only two of the second. Both occur within the space of three lines in the column of words on page 44, which begin “Herod fever itchin” and include:

have you cut the
golden eagle down
who ordered you to

Here in this “suspect structure of meaning” the emblem of the fallen empire is also emblem of America’s republican freedom. At the centre of the lines above, the subject of knowledge is unspecified. A broken king, or emperor, is a persistent memory throughout this poem. Behind Puritanical Christianity, behind the beheading of Metacomet in the seventeenth century Indian Wars, is the English regicide, the execution of Charles I. Far behind that is “the lost splendor of Isis,”⁶⁵ an aspect, according to Howe in her chapter “Architecture of Meaning,” of the iconography of

⁶⁵ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 82.

Elizabeth I. On page 48 of *Frame Structures* a new knowledge and an old order hover together in an entered and emptying space:

emperor
s body u
nder a
heap of
slain
knew him
by the
golden e
agles e
mbroidered
on his sho
e

The vowels are not so much exposed as detached and floating in this space within which an empire is collapsing. We cannot know who “knew” but the line “knew him” on this page is a central axis of gravity, as “mirror clear” is on the first, and it is a rhyme of “thre /w him” on page 34. Here the emblematic evidence “on his sho / e” joins (as does the nomadic “e”) “e /agles” to “emperor,” the air to the earth, and, as inscription, survives the disintegration of the apotheosized body.

These disparate points seem to coalesce in the poem’s most lyrical stanza on page 54, which also looks more familiar as a page of free verse poetry. With its aligned left margin and ragged right it might be valid to suggest that the “picture” is of land extending into the sea, and the sea breaking into the margin of land. Instead of units of broken syntax and fragmented words, a sinuous lyricism is maintained from line to line, so that until the

final four lines that sinuosity begins to lull the reader into an expectation of closure, or enclosure within a mythic and maternal place. Here “I,” partly sharing identity with the Virgin Mary, is at once absent-mindedly present within an ancestral home, and adrift beyond it. The setting is at once the *Book of Genesis* and Ireland, which contain the subject embedded in its “matter,” and are contained like an embryo by the embodied subject:

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
Clairvoyant Ireland
eras and eras encircled by the sea
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
There were giants on the earth in those days
feasts then on hill and fort
All night the borders of my bed
carve paths across my face
and I always forget to leave my address
frightened by the way that midnight
grips my palm and tells me that my lines
are slipping out of question

The figure of the island is suspended in the amniotic waters of the encircling sea, whose umbilical “grip” haunts the speaking/writing subject with the darkness of the historical scene of writing, which is Pagan and Catholic, the antithesis of the Puritan mind. Only once, in the penultimate line, does the spacing between words exceed the regular format, and the extended gap enacts a lapse of connection between the subjective language

and its constructed referents. Around this point, the sense of security becomes false and “frightened” and the enclosed space one of entrapment, psychic panic and dislocation. It is, perhaps, an internalised terror; the result of religious war. And, as in Marlatt’s “protest,” discussed in the previous chapter, there is the latent terror implicit in discrepancies of scale and power.

It is pointless and inappropriate to seek a tenable sequence in these structures in which associative links connect words, lines, line-units, in an automatic or surrealist logic. However, there does appear to be the maintenance of a concept of the elemental power of story, name, the history of a marked terrain, perhaps acting as “hinge” throughout the variously patterned pages of print. It is not useful to ask, therefore, who or what is “a motionless soul,” who and why is “a handsome woman running,” where “walls relief country of,” who “remembered the squeeze of a boundary,” or where? Is she archaeologist or object of archaeology? Names and phrases are collaged from Hellenic, Roman, Hebrew, Irish, and Protestant mythologies. Phrases indicating events of cultural disintegration, bodily dismemberment; of human impact upon landscape – “putting footprints in the sand” – accumulate to no conclusive end. Proper names in this poem, of which there are many and mostly Biblical, are, with the exception of Leah (visible over the implied Laban and Jacob), all male. Daly, in his reference to Howe’s use of proper

names, cites the example of Benjamin who writes, ““The theory of proper names is the theory of the frontier between finite and infinite language.””⁶⁶

Names of female agents are concealed under the allusion of setting or phrase structure. For instance, the lines to which I have already referred beginning, “She rises ...,” invokes Judith in the Apocrypha, or the “virtuous woman” of Proverbs 31; and the decapitated giantess “cast / up on a seashore in Europe,” through a kind of nebulous graft, presents an allusion to Judith’s act of beheading, with the intact image of Aphrodite (Venus). Lot’s wife and/or Eurydice will be:

swallowed in the cost of
putting footprints in the sand⁶⁷

The glimpses of distant, mythological landscapes lit like grainy, fitful cinematic images through the first part of the poem, begin to suggest a nearer history in the second:

Claim cloud cut in two by sharpness
of steel praefect satraps generals
emperor disorder in the dark confusion
of the night pursuit no more than a
moon-cast shadow and the recent secret
departure of mankind wander without
guide inhuman avarice of evening
the wood the rock the cave⁶⁸

Here there is the displacement of a warring populace by emptiness and absence, and a dissembled witness who marks that the elements are named by that absence. The “moon-cast shadow” is “no more” than itself, so that “more” is missing, commensurate with “mankind.” The lack of “a guide”

⁶⁶ Daly, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 35-36.

⁶⁷ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 46.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

is different, as a guide goes beside or before, it does not pursue or come after. It is perhaps the absence of god, or the Puritan devil, that which is perceived to be native or germane to “inhuman avarice of evening / the wood the rock the cave.” In the last line the named elements of landscape have an emblematic ring. To a white Anglo reader there are associations of the Biblical wilderness, the abominable wood, and the sites of Christ’s temptation and resurrection. The empty space is in contention with these designations and those who “wander without.”

The final stanza of *Hinge Picture* visually resembles the first, a small block of spaced words within which there is an association of sensory translation or confounding: “I heard light,” and the previous mark-making foot raises sound. The “hinge” here is opened through a gap between noise and language, suggesting the displacement of primal voice by colonising word. The poem ends eluding closure, with “the blessed Paul” first Christian missionary (who wrote to the Corinthians as “the epistle of Christ ... written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart.”)⁶⁹ at the door of its abstract “din ... which had been open and bolted it.”⁷⁰

Throughout these early poems there are allusions to “dividing lines,” most insistently, I think, the visual line that defines perspective and distance.

The “horizon,” in relation to a subject of language, locates that subject at a

⁶⁹ *King James Bible*, 2 Cor. 3 : 3. Paul also wrote: “For the body is not one member, but many. / If foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? / And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? / If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole body were hearing, where were the smelling?” 1 Cor. 12 : 14-17.

⁷⁰ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 56.

point on the ground and implies her distance from another point at the limit of vision. This relationship also implies a vertical/horizontal axis, for the human subject stands upright and the line dividing earth and sky defines the horizontal. In *Hinge Picture* human bodies, both dead and alive, are inserted or insert themselves, under that line.⁷¹ There is continual reference, too, to division, dismemberment, and cuts, as if the kinetics of integrated displacements implied in the title, juxtaposed with the material and conceptual fragmentation of the poem, represent the discrepancy between art and life. Art constructs an illusion; its account of connection, unity, and equation is a contradiction or denial of the chaotic reality of history. Further, the choices, methods and acts of constructing the illusion of an integrated “picture” are necessarily exclusive, imperious, and, in a sense, violent. That is to say, they are “live” acts.

III

If *Hinge Picture* is “about” religious and ideological succession and displacement, persistence and subversion (the Judean Bible and the Gospels, the feminine principle within patriarchy, the survival of Paganism in Catholicism, the repressed in Protestantism and Puritanism), perhaps

⁷¹ I am reminded of a passage in Jill Lepore’s *The Name of War*: “Ritual cruelty is a symbolic language and can be ‘read’ and then ‘translated’ into spoken or written language. Algonquians in New England often provided this translation themselves, leaving notes explaining their actions. ... And as the acts themselves make clear, New England’s Algonquians were attempting, in small, physical dramas, to turn the English world inside out and upside down. (Remember the Indians burying the English captives alive and taunting them, ‘You English since you came into this Countrey have grown exceedingly above the Ground, let us now see how you will Grow when planted into the Ground.’)” Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1999), 118-119.

Secret History of the Dividing Line is “about” illusion, transformation and loss; perspective, performance, discovery and war, and the point at which Puritanism (with its history) faced the New World.

Howe’s account of arrival is of a singular, spatial and cultural disruption. Centralised on the first page of *Secret History of the Dividing Line*,⁷² after its title and frontispiece, are two four-line rectangles of print, spatially confined and semantically unstable. The letter a, the first and final morpheme of “America,” floats either side of “land” at the end of the first line, while “Americ,” missing its final vowel, ends the fourth. The isolate “a” plays against its variant sounds:

mark mar ha forest 1 a boundary manic a land a
tract indicate position 2 record bunting interval
free also event starting the slightly position of
O about both or don’t something INDICATION Americ

made or also symbol sachem maimed as on her for
ar in teacher duct excellent figure MARK lead be
knife knows his hogs dogs a boundary model nucle
hearted land land land district boundary times un⁷³

The verb or noun “mark” is related phonetically and semantically to “mar.”

⁷² The title is from William Byrd’s *History of the Dividing Line* and *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, one official, one unexpurgated account not intended for publication, of a surveying trip undertaken in 1728 to establish the disputed border between Virginia and North Carolina. Both versions remained in manuscript form until 1842. Rachel Tzvia Back identifies the frontispiece of Howe’s poem as “Jean Dean Dubreil’s etching from *The Practice of Perspective*.” Rachel Tzvia Back, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 29.

⁷³ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 89.

This variation is continued in the capitalised “INDICATION,” in “made” and “maimed.” Made sounds like maid; “sachem” is a Native American chief, occasionally a woman. The order of words suggests that something attaching to him/her is “maimed,” be it body or land or tribe, perhaps by the oppression of “symbol,” whereas in the third line “his” seems in possession of livestock within a “boundary,” a property of land. If we read the first word of each line vertically, personal, cultural and historical implications in the sounding of language and the possession of land are obliquely suggested: “mark / tract / free / O made / ar / knife / hearted.” The word “land” is buoyed as an unsettled signifier. We can imagine that its repetition in the last line signifies perspectives of desire although as Rachel Tzvia Back has shown many of the words and phrases on this page of Howe’s poem are lifted, as if arbitrarily, from the right-hand margin of *Webster’s Third International Dictionary* under the entry for “mark.”⁷⁴

Humans “mark” the land in different ways, as the poem indicates when on the following page the seemingly arbitrary sequence of words and part-words quoted above are ordered into a narrative sequence:

THE LAST FIRST PEOPLE

We sailed north
it was March
White sands
and fragrant woods
the permanence
of endless distance.

When next I looked he was gone

⁷⁴ Tzvia Back, *Led by Language*, 74.

Frame of our Universe
Our intellectual wilderness
no longer boundless
west
when next I looked he was gone.

Close at hand the ocean
until before
hidden from our vision
MARK
border
bulwark. an object set up to indicate a boundary or position
hence a sign or token
impression or trace

The Horizon

I am another generation
when next I looked he was gone.

One may fall
at the beginning of a charge
or at the top of the earthworks.

For an instant your heart stops
and you say to yourself
the skirmishers are at it

wearing their wounds like stars the armies of the dead sweep over.

*My map is rotten and frayed with rain*⁷⁵

The connotations of the words “mark” and “march” become complex for the month is named after Mars, the Roman god of war. March is a name for “a border region; *esp* a tract of land between two countries whose ownership is disputed,” or an intransitive verb meaning “to have common borders or frontiers with another country: *a region that marches with*

⁷⁵ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 90. Tzvia Back identifies the second main source text for this poem as “*Touched by Fire: Civil War Letters and Diary of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr* (1861-1864), ed. Mark DeWolfe Howe, Susan Howe’s father – with Holmes’s “Memorial Day Address” of 1884 serving as an additional central beam in the structure of the poem.” *Led by Language*, 23.

Canada in the north.”⁷⁶ The morpheme “mar,” in the context of the poem. makes allusion to the sea, to sea-faring and maritime adventure. The capitalised phrase at the top of the page is taken from Olson’s study of Herman Melville,⁷⁷ and here it is highly ambiguous. There is irony in Howe’s quotation for it speaks of the inheritors of an already peopled space who perceived it as empty. As Tzvia Back points out, the first six lines are taken from William Carlos Williams’s essay on Ponce de Leon: “ ‘They sailed North. It was March. In the wind, what? Beauty the eternal. White sands and fragrant woods, fruits, riches, truth! The sea, the home of permanence, drew them on into its endless distances. ...’ ”⁷⁸ The six lines contain also a certain resonance with the opening lines of “Marina,” one of T. S. Eliot’s *Ariel Poems*:⁷⁹

What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands
 What water lapping the bow
 And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog
 What images return
 O my daughter.⁸⁰

All three texts are about imperial adventuring and both poems are about the death of a daughter’s father, although the difference in Howe’s text is that it is the daughter who writes. One implication for this case of the oblique and mediated allusion to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, is that Miranda has infiltrated, as agent, Prospero’s books.

⁷⁶ *New Penguin English Dictionary*, 850.

⁷⁷ Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967).

⁷⁸ Tzvia Back, *Led by Language*, 30.

⁷⁹ Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 101-111.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

In a way comparable to what Marlatt is doing in *Columbus Poems* as she explores the eponymous connections between her son's given name and that of Christopher Columbus, Howe tries "the frontier between finite and infinite language"⁸¹ by way of "Mark," the name of both the poet's father and her son. She records this as a kind of dedication at the foot of the third page: "*for Mark my father, and Mark my son.*"⁸² Howe's poem includes the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, the subject of her father's biography, but she constructs openings and spaces within and across that intertext so that a dimension inside "earthworks" for instance, or within the "dividing line" can be imagined. In Howe's poem MARK is her father's name *and* "the earthworks," the border region between life and death, between the human and the elemental/mineral, as well as that which indicates possession. Most explicitly it is the mark of language that indicates the valences of human presences and disappearances: "*My map is rotten and frayed with rain.*"

In this long poem there are two pages that demonstrate graphic ideas of "the dividing line." One has a straight black line running horizontally and centrally across it, with the poem's title in capitals printed either side. The words are read against this line, both upside down and right way up, when the book is held one way or the other. This page is set between two pages of poetry:

⁸¹ Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 323-324.

⁸² Howe, *Frame Structures*, 91.

O
where ere
he He A

ere I were
wher
father father
O it is the old old
myth

march

month of victims and saviors

girl on the dirt track

yea order of knighthood
Brim⁸³

In its first dumb form

language was gesture
technique of travelling over sea ice
silent

before great landscapes and glittering processions
vastness of a great white looney north

of our forebeing.
Died of what?
Probably Death.

I know all that
I was only thinking –
quintessential clarity of inarticulation

family and familiar friends of family

pacing the floes nervously

climbing little ridges

the journey first
before all change in future

westward and still westward
matches coughing like live things⁸⁴

⁸³ Ibid., 93.

In *Secret History of the Dividing Line* the “dumb form” of language is inscription upon the surfaces of land and sea, and the trace it leaves is of arrival and traversal. The precisely placed wayward and unstable signifiers are a graphic presence recalling the first crossing of an unwritten terrain. And it is a presence that re-presents other presences; Howe recasts the first of the following sentences as a heading on the second page of writing: “We are the last ‘first’ people. We forget that. We act big, misuse our land, ourselves. We lose our primary” are Olson’s words. Peter Middleton makes the observation that:

Contemporary poets who write about glaciers and ice ages are usually working across a textual field designated by Charles Olson, for whom ice was a sign of the Pleistocene Era, in which we still live, whose inception was marked by the ice ages which have left behind the geographical conditions that form the ground, literally and figuratively, on which the history of Europe and much of North America depends.⁸⁵

Middleton also makes the point that “Olson himself is a figure of the male poetic authority which Susan Howe finds it necessary to question. It is an authority which derives in part from its very confidence about its references, its references to official knowledges of history and science.” Howe’s search for knowledge in this poem about war is different: “Set out to learn what fear was,” “I knew what war was” and “I learned things / fighting off various wolves that hung around the door.”⁸⁶ Within the poem’s intertextual “universe” of martial strategy and conquest her subject of knowledge is the lost child and/or the parent searching for (attempting to

⁸⁴ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁵ Peter Middleton, “On Ice: Julia Kristeva, Susan Howe and avant garde poetics,” in *Contemporary Theory Meets Modern Poetry*, ed. Anthony Easthope and John O. Thompson (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 87.

⁸⁶ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 100-101.

protect) the lost child, “Trembling fathers futile in the emptiness of matter /
howl ‘wilderness’” who is not innocent, “belly that will bear a child
forward into battle,”⁸⁷ who exist/s at a point along the dividing line,
between matter and its reflection, between one element and another,
between action and its unconscious.⁸⁸ In this case the subject of knowledge
who participates in warfare is multiple, man and woman, parent and child,
hero and victim, (“victims and saviors,”) moving through the world’s
fictions:

Set out to learn what fear was
little footsteps of a child
directions she had taken

under a bush crying bitterly
or nearly perishing with cold⁸⁹

Often I put my hands on the table
and already tired

bit into my stomach.

Flakes of thick snow
fell on the open pages

tickled the heels of even the great Achilles.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Ibid., 110.

⁸⁸ William Carlos Williams, retelling the Norse saga of “Red Eric,” writes: “Then it was that Freydis, Eric’s natural daughter, came out from her cabin. Seeing that the men were fleeing, she cried: Why do you flee from these wretches, when ye should slaughter them like cattle? Had I a weapon I would fight better than any of you. // Lagging behind the rest as they ran, because of her belly, she being with child, she found a dead man in front of her. It was Snorri’s son, with his head cleft by a stone, his naked sword beside him. This she took up and prepared to defend herself. The Skrellings then approached her, whereupon she stripped down her shirt and slapped her breast with her bare sword. At this the Skrellings were terrified and ran down to their boats.” William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain: Essays by William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1956), 4-5.

⁸⁹ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 100.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 104.

Most of the intertextual references Howe makes in these poems are from the works of male writers as part of a deliberate and subversive exploration of the surfaces of American literary history. The subversive intelligence that infiltrates scenes of war in this poem and *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*,⁹¹ is clairvoyant with a feminine androgyny:

There on the deck, child in her arms
was the girl I had been before

She waved
then threw her child to me⁹²

I went naked to my husband
in the hug of a wave horizon rolled youngly from nothing

I told him to lie down and put his mouth in the dust.⁹³

There are many references to children being lost or disappearing as if in a dream of profound anxiety, and/or, as Cixous describes such dreams as “metaphors for the state of potential creation.”⁹⁴ As she says:

A woman who writes is a woman who dreams about children. ... We will bring forth into the light of night innumerable children. Sometimes the child is the size of a leaf and it crumbles to pieces. Sometimes it is just a small piece of paper you put on the bed that is suddenly lost. You do not know whether it is the child who faded or whether you forgot the child.⁹⁵

And Howe writes at one point in *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*, “A newborn infant / sat in the hollow / of my pillow.”⁹⁶ Cixous goes on to describe three dreams about children, the first one of which seems to include

⁹¹ Ibid., 57-72.

⁹² Ibid., 62-63.

⁹³ Ibid., 66.

⁹⁴ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 74.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 65.

another line from Howe: “Suddenly, there he was. My friend picked him up: he was dead! – Dead? Died of what?-Died of death no doubt.- ...”⁹⁷ In the interview with Edward Foster already cited, Howe speaking again of “the singularity. ... a sudden leap into another situation,” claims that “I almost never put the word *death* in my poems. ... I have always felt death to be the unspeakable other.”⁹⁸ Perhaps *Secret History of the Dividing Line* is about colonial war and also about the (colonial) writing woman’s event of giving birth to death: “AND THIS IS THE FRUIT OF YOUR LABOR / / *for Mark my father, and Mark my son.*”

The woman who writes, in this writing of a place of war, does not align her work with the heroic epics of written history: “Although my pen was leaky as a sieve / I scribbled ‘Arm, Arm!’ / ‘Ear.’ Barked the Moon.”⁹⁹ Her pen will not spell out a linear trace but is an instrument of fluidity, or maybe scattering, dispersal, so that as the scribbled word resounds in space, intertextual echoes might call out of the future.

The frontispiece to *Secret History of the Dividing Line* in this New Directions volume is a landscape of sorts.¹⁰⁰ In fact it is two landscapes, one above the other; reproductions of black ink on white ground. These are diagrammatic representations of regimental lines of trees, in full leaf, placed alongside perspectival grids, which demonstrate an illusion of

⁹⁷ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 74.

⁹⁸ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 177.

⁹⁹ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 63.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

depth. The dotted horizontal line across each oblong emphasises the flat plane of paper. There is no reference attached to these reproductions.

Robert Pogue Harrison writes in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation*:

[T]he founding of ‘forest mathematics,’ a technical science by which foresters could calculate the volume of wood in a given topography. ... Algebra, geometry, stereometry, and xylometry came together to form *Fortwissensschaft* (forest science) of sustained-yield forestry.

The United States in particular is the ‘child of Enlightenment’ in this respect. Its approach to forestry is based largely on the French and German models. But then again, the United States is the child of more than one parent. It has Puritanism, Enlightenment, Romanticism, and more as part of its heritage.¹⁰¹

Howe’s insertion of this visual reference to “forest mathematics,” if that is what it is, questions the East Coast tendency to “search for arborescence and the return to the Old World,”¹⁰² and comments upon the colonial mapping of America - the contested “child.”

There is another visually impressive page in *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, this one divided horizontally across its centre with a perfectly straight thin black line. Upon the upper side of this line, placed centrally, is the capitalised word “MORNING”; below it, the upper points of the letters touching the lower edge of the line, is the legend SHEET OF WATER AT THE EDGE OF WOODS, also capitalised and positioned centrally.¹⁰³ It is an elegant piece of concrete poetry which imparts an image of water and woods at sunrise, as it reminds on another level that the “sheet” is of paper, and the depths and reflections are absent, implied. Howe plays with the

¹⁰¹ Pogue Harrison, *Forests*, 122-123.

¹⁰² Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 21.

¹⁰³ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 113.

illusory and metamorphic aspect of water elsewhere in the poem: “‘What’s in a lake?’ / ‘Glass and sky’ / / Calling the glass / partners in this marriage”; “It is winter / the lake is frozen over.”¹⁰⁴

The trope of horizontality, or “the dividing line,” runs through the text:

“technique of travelling over sea ice / silent”, “westward and still westward.”¹⁰⁵ The protagonists are heading west, facing “endless distance” yet her ambivalent attachment is to “arborescence”: “my fir coat dragged behind me on the pavement”; “bed of leaves / mirage into deep sleep.”¹⁰⁶

It seems the volition is one of unstable equilibrium, with all the contradiction that the phrase implies: “no time, no space, no motion / arrow itself an illusion”; “body backward / in a tremendous forward direction.”¹⁰⁷ She is, like Marlatt’s “month of oak in England looking two ways. spanning two worlds”¹⁰⁸ except that she is of America. And being of the “New World” Howe’s “arborescence” is not nostalgic, for her identification is with that which has undergone the “singularity” of “predation” and “capture,” and this is partly the significance of what Albert Gelpi has termed her “daphne absorption.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 95.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 108-109.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 11-112.

¹⁰⁸ Marlatt, *How Hug a Stone*, 34.

¹⁰⁹ Gelpi, “Genealogy of Postmodernism,” 517-541.

In the prose essay “Frame Structures”¹¹⁰ Howe, in a sense, collaborates in the cultural processes of framing by refocusing these early poems through the lens of a belated account of her genealogy, which hunts the ghostly presence of subjectivity with the aid of its material history. However, this materiality is itself unreliable, consisting of the stories of a narrator who refers to their collective form as a “postmodern version ... a record of mistakes.”¹¹¹ Again, the materialised subject becomes diffuse across the plane of language, which is at once transparent, reflective and opaque. This subject, both hunter and alibi of the hunted, (“from vague / infinity of / background / that haunts / or hunts / an object,”)¹¹² operates within and against a vast network of power. Partly, Howe’s essay concerns the ways in which the civilising operations of speculators and educators define, and distort, inner and outer landscapes, and her personal memories are articulated as a dissident or excessive trace across these “official knowledges.”¹¹³

The opening passage of the essay is entitled “Flanders” so that the reference to a field of war is immediately both reinforced and displaced by the opening words “On Sunday, December 7, 1941,” the day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour. As the sentence proceeds, however, the memory becomes specific and personal:

¹¹⁰ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 1-29.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 119.

¹¹³ Middleton, “On Ice,” 88.

I went with my father to the zoo in Delaware Park even now so many years after there is always for me the fact of this treasured memory of togetherness before he enlisted in the army and went away to Europe.¹¹⁴

The peculiar and menacing tension is conveyed through the recollection of her perception of the captive bears, so that personal fear is identified with hyper-sensitivity beyond reason. Although her memory of particularities may be unreliable even within the work's defining unreliability, she relies upon connections made between the ante-rational faculties of imagination, sympathy and sensory intelligence, to write against official history:

Animals sense something about ruin I think he said our human spirits being partly immaterial at that prefigured time though we didn't know then how free will carries us past to be distance waiting for another meeting a true relation.

Historical imagination gathers in the missing.¹¹⁵

The long sentence accrues meaning in the absence of the "checks and balances" of punctuation and logical syntax, so that a space beyond "modern rationalism" is invoked. Howe refuses the Cartesian dualism of spirit and matter; difference exceeds definition as written memory represents the absence of what it remembers, and what cannot be remembered. But language as material figure opens the past and the future as projected spaces of sanctuary and possibility. "Historical imagination" is both latent and imminent, an exiled potential, a source of alternative myths and access to occluded truths.

¹¹⁴ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 3.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Both Howe and Marlatt refer to a sense of the “missing.” For Howe it is a space in which “historical imagination” might dwell and recover what recorded history eliminates. It is anathema to the rule of law and the symbolic order and it is implicated in all that modern rationalism achieves. Its arena is Western civilisation’s wilderness, a nether landscape with which Howe, as a woman writer, identifies. The “missing” is for Howe, then, an active force and a potent space entered through gaps and angles and buried significations in language; it lies beyond the symbolic and is often, if not always, a site of buried trauma.¹¹⁶ For Marlatt, as we have seen, the “missing” is what she decides to lose as she works to turn the negative space it connotes into a positive attribute: “& so to be present, to a place I could take on as home.” This distinction between the two writers may, to a significant extent, be to do with their respective internalisations of “home,” for whereas Marlatt precariously belongs within her landscapes, and seeks community through a kind of feminist diaspora, Howe’s writing is intrinsically responsive to New England’s history.

In the section of “Frame Structures” entitled “Craigie Circle” Howe recalls that in 1942 she and her younger sister went with their mother to live in Boston to be near relatives while their father was away in Europe:

We moved into a ground floor apartment at 6 Craigie Circle.
is a small deadend road where Craigie and Berkeley streets

¹¹⁶ Peter Nicholls, “The Poetics of Opacity: readability and literary form,” in *Psychopolitics and Cultural Desires*, ed. J. Campbell and J. Harbord (London: UCL, 1998). Nicholls writes of the unreadability of some postmodern poets, including Howe, in the context of post-Freudian theories of repression. Nicholls cites the work of psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, who discern in the language of their patients “antisemantic” and “demystifying” elements. Language is here “cryptic speech” about buried trauma, using “ [t]he words in which the event resides, if only as pressure points left by its refusal of expression. ...”

intersect near Huron Avenue. Huron refers either to an Indian tribe or to the second largest of the Great Lakes the one just north of Lake Erie or to both at once.¹¹⁷

The provenance of civic naming is part of the successive displacement of origins. Later in the same section, in a sentence of conventional syntax, she goes on to explain how Longfellow came to live in Craigie House.¹¹⁸ The passage in which Howe records her memory of visiting the place as a child describes an odd drama in which the stage is an enclosure over meadows sacrificed to progressive individualism, and a construction partitioning private space. Howe's history is peopled with literary ancestors of one kind or another, and Longfellow is the partly comic, partly ironic spirit in the company of poets and ghosts in the public/private space of Longfellow House. The house is a spatial frame as on another dimension is the page of writing – one which gestures towards the incommensurability signified in “space.” In this sense the frame “we map ourselves in” is saturated with what we define ourselves against and the “objects ... arranged in position”¹¹⁹ are turned one way within a pervasive element amenable to sense and sight, analogous to what Howe calls elsewhere in “Frame Structures” “the field of history.”

Another ironic take on the mapping of the self in time and space, is suggested in the title of a subsequent section “The Angel in the Library,” in which Howe contemplates the material records and remnants of history, comparing the material itself, both result and source of archival researches.

¹¹⁷ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 7.

¹¹⁸ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, author of *Hiawatha*, the long poem that popularised a romantic image of native Americans to Anglo readers.

¹¹⁹ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 9.

to “bourgeois Victorian women.”¹²⁰ Howe is a professional writer and researcher yet brings with her the ghosts of those “Victorian women” who incite us to consider the presumptuous subject intruding into a sanctuary of objects. If we remember Irigaray’s proposition that “woman is still the place, the whole of the place in which she cannot take possession of herself as such,” we can suggest that Howe is ironically exploiting an implicit transcendence in “angel” to conjure herself as both subject and object.¹²¹

Honored, looked to for advice, shielded from the rabble by guardians of “tradition” / “aesthetic taste,” available only to particular researchers (husbands or bachelor machines) and caretakers (librarians cataloguers secretaries) so long as they are desirable (readable not too tattered) capable of bearing children (articles chapters books) rearing them (aiding research), they remain sheltered at home (museum collections libraries).¹²²

There follows an unpunctuated sentence in italics which speaks of the relationship of boxed archival material and living and embodied producers of “papers” so that perhaps this is another take on the writing self, although Howe would not, I think, refer to herself as among “*some cultural icons who walk abroad the windows all open as to what is being said from a great distance flesh and blood yes human from head to foot so that we cannot reinter them beyond and apart.*”¹²³ However, there is a curious semantic blur between Angel and icon, a blend of apotheosis and

¹²⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹²¹ Alongside the Victorian feminine ideal of the angel at the hearth, we can place Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history”: “His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.” Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 259-260.

¹²² Howe, *Frame Structures*, 18.

¹²³ Ibid.

petrification. The writing human participates in present speech and steps in life beyond the mesh of that blur which has been made of his (will be made of her) material remains. In this sense Howe makes a connection between bodies and papers and between life (“our human spirits being partly immaterial”) and writing. The written is a partly material spirit, a human “flesh and blood” gesture which persists amongst “*what is being said from a great distance*” in space and time, and a partly material deposit interred.

The word “icon” comes from the Greek, meaning “image” or “copy” and has a sacred significance. A cultural icon is constructed out of both material and immaterial effects and Howe attempts to trace the life beyond the icon by foregrounding particular and selected appearance of iconic elements: “The materials are arranged according to a scheme of order I couldn’t make out.”¹²⁴ She goes on to describe her search for the source of “a reproduction of an early American painting, ‘Congress Voting Independence’” which she considered as a possible cover design for the front cover of *Frame Structures*. However, the location of “*the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 80: 74-9 (January 1956)” from which the reproduction she saw in “the authorized edition of John Adams’ *Diaries*” was sourced, proved too deeply embedded in the stacks of Yale’s Sterling Library Franklin Collection Room to penetrate at that time:

I produced the required proof of professional departmentalization so [a librarian] brought me the “Congress Voting Independence” piece. Mulcahy referred to two other articles

¹²⁴ Ibid., 19.

by someone called Hart. I decided to continue postponing my cover idea because it was a hot midsummer day the Benjamin Franklin Room doesn't have air conditioning and the librarian looked impatient. I knew that even if one of the Harts was in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXIX (1905) I would still have to locate the room where bound volumes of *The Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* are currently being sheltered from the public gaze, to find the other.¹²⁵

The process is represented as an aborted mission to disentomb, revivify and re-contextualise something potentially vital and fortuitous; a particular reference to a definitive event in American history. Its renewal remains latent, however, for there is not enough air and Howe does not locate one "Hart" or "the other" this time. Howe's research seems to resonate with Frankenstein's experiments with the dead, and at another point in "Frame Structures" she refers briefly to Mary Shelley's novel when she remembers one of several notorious ancestors on her father's side:

John d'Wolf, "Norwest John," another early venture capitalist, sailed to Russia by way of Alaska. He spent time in New Archangel, Kamchatka, before crossing Siberia on a sled in winter. Even if Captain John d'Wolf isn't the fictional Captain Robert Walton in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, he married Mary Melvill [sic] Herman Melville's aunt, and so made his way into "The Affidavit" chapter of *Moby-Dick*.¹²⁶

Inexorably bodies make their ways into books and lives persist secretly therein. Margaret Homans makes an interesting point about *Frankenstein* as the work of a woman writer, when she understands the monster's birth as "an allusion to the virgin birth":

It is this figure, whose birth is also the literalization of a masculine God's Word, who serves as the distinct prototype for the reanimation of corpses ... Christ literalizes God's Word through the medium of a woman, Mary, who passively transmits Word into flesh without being touched

¹²⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 21.

by it. Literalizations again take place through the medium of a more recent Mary, who passively transcribes (or who seems to) ... the words of her more illustrious male companions.¹²⁷

An angel hovers behind, an icon transmutes and masks, the life of the woman writer. God and the male author stand over and above her, who transcribes, researches and intrudes. There is a deliberate irony in Howe's inability to penetrate the particular bound volume she seeks in the Sterling stacks, documentary evidence of the weakness of the (female) flesh, in her "record of mistakes."

Alongside this idea of the material/immaterial content of texts is the metaphor of language buried within and written across the land. In "Th'expende of Spirit in a waste of shame,"¹²⁸ Howe records that during her reading of Mary Rowlandson's Captivity Narrative, *The Sovereignty & Goodness of God, Together, with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed*, she "ran across Weetamo, squaw-sachem of the Wampanoags, Queen of Pocasset ... and sister-in-law of the Narragansett sachem, Metacomet."¹²⁹ She goes on to relate that King Philip's War (1675-77) ended when Metacomet was captured and killed by the Christian militia, his body quartered and hung from separate trees and his head exhibited in Plymouth where it remained for twenty-five years. Apparently Weetamo escaped "until on August 6, 1676, she was drowned while trying to float by raft to her kingdom of Pocasset. The tide washed her body up on land that

¹²⁷ Margaret Homans, "Bearing Demons: *Frankenstein* and the Circumvention of Maternity," in *Romanticism*, ed. Cynthia Chase (London and New York: Longman, 1993).

¹²⁸ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 20-23.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

eventually became the Howe farm.”¹³⁰ In the following passage Howe affects an idea of reconstruction through sounding fragmentary elements of language, as if by doing so she somehow catches the broken and lost language of Weetamo, who, persisting beyond the boundaries of surveyors and land-owners, also partially inhabits, (or is partially detained) in Howe’s American surname:

Mow(e) rhymes visually with how(e) and aurally with moo. Of course there would be mowed lawns around the house because the soul is conceived to be a facsimile of the body. Fields where cows graze are closer to primordial verbal material ... In the nineteenth century Weetamoe was a working farm owned by gentleman farmers. Just think of your ears as eyes over mirrors Weetamoo.¹³¹

By placing metaphorical footprints on the owned and mowed lawns is Howe crossing a (Christian) conception of the facsimile of Weetamo’s body? If Howe’s name contains an echo of the last syllable of the native sachem’s recorded name, the colonial cows echo that echo. Within the textual are recovered animal, vegetable, mineral, and indigenous human, so what is the nature of the “primordial verbal material” Howe in her writing divines?

John Palattella observes a correspondence between Howe’s work and ethnographic revisionism that presents “culture as a predicament, a contested reality: Western images and stories are not the authoritative allegorical models for reading the histories of other cultures, but are elements whose meanings are bound up in syncretic relationships with

¹³⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹³¹ Ibid.

other cultural histories.”¹³² In North America, existing cultures encountered by the colonists were increasingly decimated by the westward encroachment of the Protestant Word and the inception of a new American mythology. Of Timothy Flint’s exploitation of a form of cultural syncretism, in his manipulation of the life story of Daniel Boone, Howe notes: “Out of America’s text-free past, sounds spelled *kain-tuck-kee* are an Indian place.”¹³³ Palattella states:

... a distinct voice is traceable through a geography only because it “originates” from relationships between multiple histories. To trace a voice is to transverse a historical palimpsest, a geography of writing whole and multiple.¹³⁴

Howe’s Protestant pragmatism involves a re-ordering and a breaking up of language, an infiltration of the “language of the world” into the “language world” of potential meanings. And it is “the world” she seeks in the texts, the indeterminable evidence of human experience buried within and scored across “the field of history.” Weetamoo is not a voice, however but a name, one which in its oblique echo of Howe’s own is presented as a form of silence. As Erica Nanes points out with regard to *Thorow*: “Howe represents ‘Cherokee’ as ‘Charrokey,’ a way of reminding readers that all transliterations of Indian names into English exemplify the imperialism that

¹³² John Palattella, “An End of Abstraction: An Essay on Susan Howe’s Historicism,” *Denver Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (Winter 1995): 79.

¹³³ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 97.

¹³⁴ Palattella, “End of Abstraction,” 81-82.

led to the seizing of Indian land.”¹³⁵ I will return to the question of Howe’s attitude to Native American presence in Chapter Four during my discussion of *Thorow*.

V

I have written a lot about the library rather than the landscape in the last section, but if we remember that Howe’s father told her she would “be trespassing if I went into the stacks to find ... [the] out-of-the-way volumes from Widener library [I needed ...]”¹³⁶ and that in the sub-chapter of “Submarginalia” entitled “An Idea of Wilderness”¹³⁷ she writes of writers, not of land, this is not inappropriate. However, as has been pointed out, Howe’s highly sophisticated sense of books and words implicitly acknowledges the sacrifice of trees. Her identification of the woman writer in America as “the Wilderness,” implies an identification too with the sentient nonhuman world. By way of explication of these aspects of her work and as prelude to the following chapter, I cite Pogue-Harrison’s notion of the “forest” as “Shadows of Law,” a figuration that can be read alongside Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the “war-machine,” exterior to the economy of the “state apparatus.” It is the condition of “exteriority” and outside-ness that is interesting in this context:

¹³⁵ Erika Nanes, “The Reviser in the Word Forest: Susan Howe and the American Typology of Wilderness,” *Journal X: A Journal in Culture and Criticism* 2, no. 1 (Autumn 1997) : 32.

¹³⁶ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 18.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 30-36.

With respect to the medieval social order that was reorganizing itself on the basis of new feudal and religious institutions, the forests were *foris*, “outside.” In them lived the outcasts, the mad, the lovers, brigands, hermits, saints, lepers, the *maquis*, fugitives, misfits, the persecuted, the wild men. Where else could they go? Outside of the law and human society one was in the forest. But the forest’s asylum was unspeakable. One could not remain human in the forest; one could only rise above or sink below the human level ...¹³⁸

Remember that one of Howe’s conceptions of writing is as expression of “the law”; she speaks to Charles Bernstein of a “split personality” in her poetry, a “voice of authority arguing with [a] voice of enthusiasm or inspiration ... infused with grace.... [There is] no use for print in a way ... we need law and we don’t ... the moment a word is put on the page there is a kind of death. ... [T]here is always a contradictory voice.”¹³⁹

If writing is a courier of the law, and if the forest is the shadow of the law, and if between the light of substance and the darkness of shadow falls the contradiction of inspiration and death, the figure of Hope Atherton, his semi-nomadic wanderings in Howe’s *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, is a figure of that contradiction.

¹³⁸ Pogue Harrison, *Forests*. 61.

¹³⁹ Howe, *LINEbreak*.

CHAPTER THREE

The Wood for the Trees; the River and Sea: Howe's *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* and Marlatt's *Steveston*

Contradiction is the book of this place.

Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*

This place full of contradiction

Daphne Marlatt, *Touch To My Tongue*

I

In this chapter I discuss Howe's *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (1987) with particular reference to the section entitled "Hope Atherton's Wanderings," and Marlatt's *Steveston* (1974) with further reference to *Salvage* (1991).¹ *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* and *Steveston* share no obvious resemblance in either form or content except that in each a subject is both incorporated and dispersed within an idea of a particular location. The narrating persona of *Steveston* hardly asserts her subjectivity, or does so diffusely through a perspective responsive to proliferation. She is at once documentary observer, protagonist interlocutor, environmental researcher, enigmatic watcher, ghost hunter, social historian, and poet. In "Hope Atherton's Wanderings" Howe's language obstructs the conception

¹ Daphne Marlatt, *Salvage* (Red Deer, Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1991).

of a locatable subject and constructs an idea or experience of disorientation.

Both poems include visual elements and evidence of documentary source material. *Steveston* was written between 1972 and '74 as Marlatt participated in an aural history project conducted amongst the mainly Japanese-Canadian community of Steveston, a town situated on the estuary of the Fraser River just south of Vancouver. Marlatt is the editor of *Steveston Recollected*² the documentary result of this, one of several research projects, funded initially at federal then at local level, on the histories and cultures of various ethnic groups in British Columbia. Marlatt's collaborative project in this case is contemporary and social, an archive in the making, whereas Howe's sources are historical, remnants of New England's past, tracked down in solitude through "the stacks at Sterling Library ... [which] has an aura of death."³ In its complete editions Marlatt's poem retains some of the black and white photographs fellow researcher Robert Minden took for the project, so that although Marlatt rejects the term "documentary" as descriptive of her poetic, there is an aesthetic tension between the photojournalistic aspect of the images and the language-centred writing.

Steveston's epigraph " 'seeking to perceive it as it stands ...'" is from James Agee and places the work in relation to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the 1930s collaboration between writer Agee and photographer

² Daphne Marlatt, ed., *Steveston Recollected: A Japanese Canadian History* (Victoria: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1975).

³ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 167.

Walker Evans, who were commissioned by a New York magazine to record the lives of sharecroppers in the Southern United States.⁴ There is in the 2001 third edition of *Steveston*, as in the 2001 sixth edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, an explicit differentiation between written text and photograph, as the photographs are grouped together before the writing in the Walker/Agee volume and after it in the Marlatt/Minden. Marlatt's poetry is not implicitly visual in the way Howe's written texts emphasise the emblematic, sometimes iconic, character of language. To contrive a distinction we could say that Marlatt writes "the phenomena of perception,"⁵ her language marking a complex sensory response to the world, where Howe's phenomenology is of the text, made at the sight (at the site) of language. The materiality of each, therefore, has different implications. The ambiguities of Howe's position in relation to the texts she incorporates into her textual fields are different in kind, I think, to the tribute *Steveston* pays to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The recent editions of the latter two books display a resemblance, as the front cover of each reproduces a photograph of a man, of similar pose and expression, which represents an aspect of the work's objectives. *Steveston*'s references to both the precedent work and to its own documentary content gesture towards a social world prior to the text.

Howe's work does not admit this sense of a shared priority, although the autotelic nature of her texts does imply, perhaps paradoxically, the extra-

⁴ James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 6th ed. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001).

⁵ Douglas Barbour, "The Phenomenological I: Daphne Marlatt's *Steveston*," in *Figures in a Ground: Canadian Essays in Modern Literature Collected in Honor of Sheila Watson* (Saskatoon: Prairie Books, 1978), 178-179.

textual. Her writing alludes constantly to an “otherworld” or an out-of-world so that her scrutiny of the documents of New England history is complicated by a religious or mythical dimension. Howe does not slant this dimension towards Puritan dogmas of grace and government in an ironic way, rather her work is agonistic within and towards the force of that legacy. She seems to affirm the presence or possibility of “grace” on maverick terms, yet according to Lew Daly, her terms partake in a struggle between mysticism and law, which is “the struggle for language”:

The poet struggles in an abyss between her thirst for a necessarily loveless, but unequivocally redeeming end of history, and acquiescence to the violence of history that love, while being pure, transcends only in passing or as a fugitive ultimately damned. Howe gestures toward pure hierarchy – or the suprahierarchical, above both legal violence, as Weber defined it, *and* essential love as mystics have experienced it. But in the same motion by which she nevertheless escapes subordination to the status quo of silencers in the throes of a violent love for ghosts who broke the law, the poet resurrects a love of God.⁶

Hope Atherton, wandering “on the east side of the Connecticut River”⁷ is perhaps one of those “fugitive[s] ultimately damned” whose chance of transcendence or redemption is conditional upon his outside-ness, his decomposition in the remnant New England woods.

On the other hand, it is possible that the environmental settings of the wood in Howe’s poem and the river in Marlatt’s allude in different ways to an allegorical dimension. It is less likely, however, that the effacement of the subject within the place of language in the work of these contemporary poets corresponds to “the void of ... temporal difference” between subject

⁶ Daly, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 37-38.

⁷ Howe, *Singularities*, 5.

and world which Paul de Man suggests Romanticism came to acknowledge through allegory.⁸ For consciousness to project its imaginative faculty into the physical world and to recover it as subjective language is a feat of the Romantic ego. Coleridge redefined Imagination so that what had been a capricious faculty became, in his terms, creative and transformative, and henceforth the human mind contested with the mind of God. According to de Man, the contemplation of a “divine will” in Nature was an ontological stance which writers such as Wordsworth and Coleridge worked through. The Romantic identification of the self with the non-self, which had been apprehended in terms of the eternal and expressed by means of the symbol, came to be renounced in the “allegorization of the geographical site ...”⁹ To imagine, then, becomes charged with possibilities, free of symbolic constraints but subject to a typology of temporality which must admit the “negative self-knowledge” of death.¹⁰ Both Howe and Marlatt renounce Romantic paradigms of difference between self and other, the human and not human through uses of language which disturb its habits of mediation, and write sites of language in subversive relationship to “allegorization[s] of the geographical site.”

Yves Abrioux, in his study of the Scottish poet Ian Hamilton Finlay, identifies a modern rediscovery of allegory which is linked to a concern with hermeneutical process:

The recent renewal of interest in allegory can be explained by the way the allegorical figure’s obviously artificial nature

⁸ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2d ed., (London : Methuen & Co., 1983), 207.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 208.

draws attention to the act of interpretation.¹¹

Allegory is a potent tool in the hands of the post-Romantic artist. Its artificiality underlines the historical and cultural fracture that Romantic symbolism sought to overcome by a process akin to denial.¹²

This “process akin to denial” is perhaps what de Man means when he writes that “the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification” for “a subject that has sought refuge against the impact of time in a natural world to which, in truth, it bears no resemblance.”¹³

Strategic in the face of that truth was the “rediscovery of an allegorical tradition.”¹⁴ It is easier to demonstrate a concern with artifice in Howe than Marlatt, because her poems draw attention to themselves as problematic objects, puzzles that invite but ultimately defy resolution. I think any act of interpretation regarding *Steveston* risks suspension in the poem’s phenomenological response to environmental multiplicity, and its affirmation of cyclical process.

In the context of modern poetry, Ezra Pound demonstrated in his Imagist phase an anti-Romantic correlative between subjective thought and objective thing, and in *The Cantos*¹⁵ a visually dynamic poetry which manipulates tensions of spatial and temporal depth across its material plane. The correspondence between self and world in the first case is not of a subject and its reflective refuge, with or without the “void” between, but of subject and object related through the juxtaposition of distinct identities.

¹¹ Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer*, 2d ed. (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), 213-214.

¹² *Ibid.*, 293.

¹³ de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 207.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁵ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, London: Faber and Faber, 1964).

This problem of relationship is more relevant to my consideration of Marlatt at this point than the concept of the poem as a collage of space, time and sound, which more obviously applies to Howe. Marlatt's poems are not imagist, however, but generate language as a potential and protean force carrying material, historical and political significations. *Steveston* begins with a capital I as the first letter of the transitive verb "Imagine": "Imagine a town running."¹⁶ As part of the initial verb in this case, "I" becomes indistinguishable from the kinetic potential and proliferation of the poem's movement. Her writing is mindful of the separation of self and not-self which Pound insisted upon as part of the Modernist antithesis of Romanticism. Although Marlatt's language seeks to define and redefine the self in relation to the human-made and the non-human, the instability of the first person in *Steveston* and elsewhere, serves to decentralise and democratise the point of view.

Howe's writing suggests much more a reconstruction of parts assembled from a fallen monument in which such fragments as "I" and "God" are (as if) randomly sorted and saved. If Pound retained the idea of a higher unity to which selected remnants of ruined orders might ultimately aspire, Howe's work eschews a unifying agenda recognising that structures of language are only conditionally adequate. If the linguistic structures of Protestant patriarchy conceal and repress traces of the forbidden and banished, the records of its permutations are for Howe vital source material. From within these she seeks to recover what is "missing." And if

¹⁶ Marlatt, *Steveston*, 11.

“I” presents a puzzling absence throughout much of what she shores of this material, then the absence of God, in this poem, is a puzzling presence.

In the present secular, post-Romantic West the idea of God is one that Howe contends with as an element of her Puritan heritage, whereas for Marlatt rejection of Christian ideology is fundamental. But if the formal complexity and opacity of these poems is a particular expression of late twentieth century Western culture, the (parodic) subject of language who survives in them to negotiate a way through the material (new) world, re-collects as s/he goes an element of the earliest English poetry. The secularisation which the Enlightenment inaugurated, and the Romantics both rejected and developed, succeeded centuries during which a Christian hegemony came to define Western culture. But before Christianity permeated the cultural institutions in Britain, an oral culture and a Pagan world view became modified and appropriated through the labour of Christian scribes.

Among the first Anglo Saxon poems transcribed from the oral to the written form are the elegies *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.¹⁷ Here the subject whose story is told is the “wraecca,” a masculine noun (Anglo Saxon is a gendered language) meaning “wanderer, exile.”¹⁸ As Michael Alexander writes, these poems “pursue the problem of the *wraecca*’s plight beyond the usual physical and ethical aspects to the threshold of a

¹⁷ Michael Alexander, ed., *The Earliest English Poems*, 3d ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 40.

¹⁸ Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 5th ed. (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), 364.

metaphysical question ... the salvation of the individual soul.”¹⁹ We have come a long way since heroic monologues modulated towards subjective speculation and the transition recorded by monks in the leaves of the “Exeter Book” over a thousand years ago, yet the “metaphysical” puzzle of self, world and time persists.²⁰ If, as Alexander suggests, the intellectual contradictions of the early English elegies *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* are due to the fact that “Christianity had not been fully assimilated into poetic tradition,”²¹ by the time Howe writes “Hope Atherton’s Wanderings” poetic discourse is acutely aware of the cultural implications of both Christian imagery and poetic tradition.

In the early twentieth century Pound translated *The Seafarer*²² from Anglo Saxon with, as Hugh Kenner puts it, “the boldness and resource to make a new form, similar in effect to that of the original, which permanently extends the bounds of English verse.”²³ Pound’s translation begins with the lines:

May I for my own self song’s truth reckon,
Journey’s jargon, how I in harsh days
Hardship endured oft ²⁴

Pound incorporates into his Modernist poetic the formal qualities of assonance and alliteration, a compositional characteristic of early English poetry, the roots of which are oral and recitative. In this “new form” the shape of the poem is still underpinned by a central voice, coherent and self

¹⁹ Alexander, *Earliest English Poems*, 43.

²⁰ Ibid., xiii.

²¹ Ibid., 43.

²² Ezra Pound, *The Translations of Ezra Pound*, with an introduction by Hugh Kenner (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 207-209.

²³ Ibid., 9.

²⁴ Ibid., 207.

verifying: “my own self song’s truth.” Pound exploits the original’s ambiguity, even invulnerability, towards the consolations of Christianity, as references to “his lord” and “My lord” suggest earthly rather than heavenly allegiance in a voice that does not cry to God. The voice of Pound’s *Seafarer* projects its ontological loneliness forward into the twentieth century, and the translation discovers a sense of scale between the body’s internal rhythms and the mind’s aspirations within vast external forces. Its narration of exposure and endurance is very different in effect to the spiritual grandiosity of the Romantic sublime:

Nathless there knocketh now
 The heart’s thought that I on high streams
 The salt-wavy tumult traverse alone
 Moaneth always my mind’s lust
 That I fare forth, that I afar hence
 Seek out a foreign fastness.²⁵

II

In Howe’s long poem *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* the section “Hope Atherton’s Wanderings” is constructed largely from alliterative and assonantal patterns that are more abstract than semantic. The assurance of a valid witness is difficult to find in the poem and its formal shapes are arrangements of incoherent and baffling language. One such shape is the stanzaic word block of between eight and twelve single-spaced lines situated, in the poem’s first edition, centrally on the page.

Prest try to set after grandmother
 revived by and laid down left ly
 little distant each other and fro

²⁵ Ibid., 208.

Saw digression hobbling driftwood
 forage two rotted beans & etc.
 Redy to faint slaughter story so
 Gone and signal through deep water
 Mr Atherton's story Hope Atherton²⁶

This poem, which is about being lost, opens with a line that makes “grandmother” an orienting landmark for one ostensibly representative of a patriarchal religion and a colonising force. One impression conveyed by the first three lines is of someone trying to keep up and locate bearings from within an exposed and insecure body. This is partly due to the absence of pronouns so that whoever is “revived by and laid down left ly” is not distinguished linguistically from other agents or objects surrounding him/her. No sense of direction offers its assurance, rather everything surrounding this witness moves randomly and obliquely: “Saw digression hobbling driftwood.” Incongruous amongst words of one or two syllables, the latinate “revived” (“*revivere* to live again”) and “digression” (“*digredi* to step aside”) foil interpretation.²⁶ For instance, “driftwood” could be the object upon which “digression” acts, but in that case who or what is digression’s agent and how connected to the priority of “Saw,” which could be a past participle, a present tense verb or a noun? A saw can disconnect wood from a tree, set it adrift, and in the process create acoustic reverberations. The verb “hobbling” is one that recurs in the third stanza in the line “War closed after Clay Gully hobbling boy” so that we get the sense that “Hope Atherton’s story” is one in which impediment steers a course. However, if we experience the poem as acoustic reverberation

²⁶ Howe, *Singularities*, 6.

²⁶ *New Penguin English Dictionary* (2001).

rather than as object of interpretation subtle variations of phonic rhyme emerge: “Prest try ... to ... left ly ... fro ... story so ... Soe tow ... grew ... so ... boy ... no ... clue ... Who ... soe grew ... boy ... Follow ... powder ... boy ... no ... wanton ... Soe ...”²⁷

Howe omits any orienting signals of sameness and difference in “Hope Atherton’s Wanderings” whose “story” rather than subjectivity both disintegrates and formulates within the poem, one pieced from a continuously deferred source. The typographic symbol of the ampersand reminds the reader of the story’s existence as print and the sight of this and abbreviated words play against references to its depth. If the lost story is “signal[ed]” through “deep water,” Howe’s printed language is a notation of the muffle, amplification, echo of unrecoverable sonic shapes. On another level this allegorical “deep water” is the geographically specific Connecticut River, referred to in one of the source documents, from the surface of which Howe drew her poem out.

Once within the ordered disorder of language of the first seven stanzas a coherent subjective phrase emerges: “Kinsmen I pray you hasten,” with nothing to indicate that such a prayer is heard, let alone answered. Like Pound’s *The Seafarer* “Deprived of my kinsmen” Hope prays to these absent companions rather than to God. On the last page of “Hope Atherton’s Wanderings” he addresses a familial rather than a warrior constellation, “Loving Friends and Kindred:- / When I look back,” and

²⁷ Howe, *Singularities*, 6-7.

although its representatives may be present, that they reciprocate his spirit of conciliation and “Hope” is not affirmed.²⁸ It is also an ironic spirit, though, for Howe’s “minister of the gospel” is a disseminator of Truth lost without his book. He is in this respect, perhaps, an aspect of Foucault’s idea of “the dispersion of man ... in profound ... correlation with ... the death of God”²⁹ in that Howe’s poem contracts Atherton’s story and Western intellectual history. And as the contemporary woman poet infiltrates his “story” and exploits the ambivalence of his name “Hope for the artist in America & etc,” irony, “the trope of detachment,” is complicated by a kind of identification.³⁰ Paul de Man recalls us to a hermeneutical link between irony and allegory in that in both “the relationship between sign and meaning is discontinuous, involving an extraneous principle that determines the point and the manner at and in which the relationship is articulated.”³¹

I have suggested that the wood in *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* might refer to an allegorical or typological meaning even if it is derived from the poem’s resistance to such strategies of representing ideological truths. Hope Atherton is an aspect of the outlaw, the fugitive risking his humanity to the forest beyond the city walls. Pogue Harrison makes an interesting observation which resonates with the Puritan typology of wilderness:

²⁸ Ibid., 16.

²⁹ Michel Foucault, in *Posthumanism*, ed. Neil Badmington (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 27.

³⁰ Pogue Harrison, *Forests*, 114.

³¹ de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 209.

the abomination of forests in Western history derives above all from the fact that, since Greek and Roman times at least, we have been a civilization of sky-worshippers, children of a celestial father. Where divinity has been identified with the sky, or with the eternal geometry of the stars, or with cosmic infinity, or with 'heaven,' the forests become monstrous, for they hide the prospect of god.³²

Howe identifies a state beyond the symbolic law of the father as the banished feminine in American history: "We are the wilderness" she has said,³³ as if the rise of women's writing in North America might coincide with the return of the repressed from within the colonised landscape itself. For Howe wilderness is marked with the typology that negates it. "We have come on stage stammering ..." she adds, suggesting that if the voices impeded within language are received onto the page, the page conceives the acoustic and visual depths of the stage. Unlike Pound's translation, Howe's method aspires to articulate the extra-linguistic and the silenced. The page, in Howe's work, is a *stage* of history, the *sets* or settings of which refer to its substantial origins in "Nature" as it presents a cultural drama.

If Howe's text presents correlations of acoustic and visual elements perhaps the reader should occupy a space somewhere between the auditorium and the art gallery, both public rather than private venues. And if the poem exhibits language forms which both frame and constitute an abstract and dynamic field, inherent within its forms and constituent of its field and frame are the silence of the unspoken and the blank of the

³² Pogue Harrison, 6.

³³ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 181.

unmarked. In this sense Howe's poem demonstrates absence as material presence, the arena filled with its outside.

This aspect of Howe's work can be linked back to her association with the 1960s New York art scene and her interest in Ad Reinhart's black paintings. According to Lucy R. Lippard, "While he claimed to be aiming for emptiness, [Reinhardt] in fact offered emptiness as content: the meaningful void ..."³⁴ The "meaningfulness" is in its resistance to meaning. Robert Hughes writes "Reinhardt loathed the mysticism that clung to interpretations of the New York School in the fifties. ... He was an extreme reducer, always looking for the edge where art ceases to be art, because only there ... could one find what art is."³⁵ The motif of the cross in Reinhardt's black paintings is apparently not redolent of the Christian mystery, neither is it a Protestant gesture of demystification, but serves as an optic grid across which to test the effects of closely related pigments on canvas. One could suggest, though, that the tension between iconicity and neutrality which this barely visible motif implies is a provocative element. The paintings are about "the discipline of looking" says Hughes, for "Reinhardt's black paintings ... are a vindication of art's right to be experienced at first hand, because at second hand there is nothing to experience."³⁶ In other words, the work's "aura"³⁷ is essential. Howe says

³⁴ Lippard, *Overlay*, 78.

³⁵ Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (London: Harvill Press, 1997), 558.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 223.

this of the abstractness of language: “First I was a painter, so for me, words shimmer. Each one has an aura.”³⁸

The paradox of Howe’s work in relation to its audience is that its resistance to readability provokes sustained attention in order to seek in it possible meanings. There is the significance of the intertext, for instance, as Howe’s writing contains many fragments incorporated from a range of mostly anonymous sources. Her opening statement in “There Are Not Leaves Enough To Crown To Cover To Crown To Cover”:³⁹ “For me there was no silence before armies” is from a Wallace Stevens poem “Martial Cadenza” written during the Second World War and published in his 1942 volume *Parts of a World*:

It was like sudden time in a world without time,
This world, this place, the street in which I was,
Without time: as that which is not has no time,
Is not, or is of what there was, is full
Of the silence before the armies, armies without
Either trumpets or drums, the commanders mute, the arms
On the ground, fixed fast in a profound defeat.⁴⁰

Elements of a Classical order and a Romantic pantheism are behind Stevens’s poem, and although he balances his sense of the eternal with a modernist irony, the central image of “The evening star, ... / That in spring will crown every horizon,” keeps faith preserved from the destructive forces of “the world it lit”: “Not the symbol but that for which the symbol stands, / The vivid thing in the air that never changes, / Though the air

³⁸ Susan Howe, in *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*, ed. Robert Frank and Henry Sayre (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 209.

³⁹ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 9.

⁴⁰ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 217.

change.” The silence in Stevens’ poem contends with an idea of the eternal, “as if life came back,” for the self, “Still walking in a present of our own.”⁴¹ Howe, of the generation born into the war during which Stevens wrote “Martial Cadenza,” and writing forty years later, seems explicitly to place herself as a subject of history within a world which refutes the credibility of a universal transcendence. However, the representation of Stevens’s words in Howe’s piece might reserve the possibility that art transcends war, or at least a contention with that possibility. If Howe uses language to imply what it excludes it also implies what it includes, although it is un-stated and inherent as a “contrary silence.”⁴²

On the other hand, this application of the phrase “contrary silence” from Aristotle is complicated by another, the “semi-silence” from Foucault. In assuming a meaning in Howe’s revision of Stevens I am expressing a “wish” Foucault cautions against, a wish:

that it should never be possible to assign, in the order of discourse, the irruption of a real event; that beyond any apparent beginning, there is always a secret origin – so secret and so fundamental that it can never be grasped in itself.⁴³

Again, a resemblance can be discerned between the closing paragraph of Howe’s “There Are Not Leaves Enough To Crown To Cover To Crown To

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1987). Barnes includes this passage from Aristotle: “they say that as the heavenly bodies move in a circle they produce a concordant sound. Since it seems unreasonable that we do not hear this sound, they say that the cause lies in the fact that the noise is with us from the moment of our birth so that it cannot be distinguished by reference to a contrary silence (for sound and silence are discriminated by reference to one another).” (*On the Heavens* 290b12-29).

⁴³ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 27.

Cover” and the closing paragraph of William Carlos Williams’s prose essay “The Founding of Quebec”:

I write to break out into perfect primeval Consent. I wish
I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices
that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate.⁴⁴

The land! don’t you feel it? Doesn’t it make you want to
go out and lift dead Indians tenderly from their graves, to
steal from them – as if it must be clinging even to their
corpses – some authenticity, that which –
Here not there.⁴⁵

Howe’s tone apparently repudiates the irony and the rhetorical scope of Williams. It is subjective and declarative. “There Are Not Leaves Enough To Crown ...” is about the “historical consciousness” the Second World War forced upon those born into it, so that Howe’s unequivocal empathy responds to Williams’s urbane rhetoric: “History, history! What do we know or care?” But Howe admits: “North Americans have tended to confuse human fate with their own salvation. In this I am North American,”⁴⁶ and the fact of that identity places her in a particular relationship to the history Williams writes. Howe’s work skews the search for significance and origin by using intertextual fragments as decoys against which assumptions of discourse founder. Foucault formulates a necessary “dispersion” with which Howe seems to comply:

all manifest discourse is secretly based on an ‘already-said’; and ... this ‘already said’ is not merely a phrase that has already been spoken, or a text that has already been written, but a ‘never-said,’ an incorporeal discourse, a voice as silent as a breath, a writing that is merely the hollow of its own mark. It is supposed therefore that

⁴⁴ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 14.

⁴⁵ William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain: Essays by William Carlos Williams*, 3d ed. (New York: New Directions, 1956), 74.

⁴⁶ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 14.

everything that is formulated in discourse was already articulated in that semi-silence that precedes it, which continues to run obstinately beneath it, but which it covers and silences.⁴⁷

Howe's contention with this notion of the "already said" is perhaps analogous to Stevens's contention with the eternal. If Foucault's method "refuses to be allegorical" perhaps Howe *refuses* to *refuse* to be allegorical, and looks both ways, at the singular "monument" of discourse and its figments of "something else."⁴⁸ In her texts configurations of other texts are deliberately glossed; as she writes "Things overlap in space and are hidden."⁴⁹

The word "gloss" returns us to Howe's preoccupation with visual and surface effects. There are spaces between text and inter-text which can be conceived as partially visible overlay, and those between word and image within a text which present tensions of visibility. The differences between the material characteristics of the 1987 Awede chapbook version of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*,⁵⁰ and the version included as the first long poem sequence of the 1990 *Singularities* collection, published by New Directions,⁵¹ might indicate an aspect, for instance, of racial positioning in Howe's thought. This is no more explicit, however, than in her syntactic echo of Williams.

⁴⁷ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 27- 28.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 155.

⁴⁹ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 12.

⁵⁰ Susan Howe, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (Awede, 1987).

⁵¹ Howe, *Singularities*, 1-38.

The Awede chapbook's front and back covers, frontispiece and two transitional pages inside, are decorated with a red motif on the off-white ground of the page, of curved arrows, tipped at both ends. On the front cover of soft card, two such arrows curve towards each other nearly surrounding but without enclosing a void, as the four points do not meet. On the frontispiece they make the same shape but contain the title of the poem and the author's name; on a subsequent page, one two-pointed arrow arches over the title of the first sequence, on another its mirror image curves under the title of the second sequence, the print being black throughout. The back cover displays the arrows curving away from each other so that the tips point towards the vertical edges of the book, with the publishers name printed centrally beneath the gap between them. This decorative motif suggests an allusion to a Native American symbolic. In the *Singularities* edition the effect of the decorative elements is very different, being rectilinear rather than circular, figurative rather than abstract. The front cover of the volume as a whole, its frontispiece and the frontispiece to the first long poem, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, include details of an illustration which is given no reference. It looks like a reproduction of a seventeenth century wood-cut, a rather crude drawing without perspective or scale, depicting a battle between colonial militia and Native Americans.

The covers of the volume are pale pink framed in black. On the front cover the lettering of the title and the author's name are red, the frame of the illustration and its constituent marks are black upon the pink ground. The

reproduction placed vertically between the title and the author's name is a rectangle slightly deeper than wide which represents, on the right hand side, six militiamen in coats and black hats firing muskets over a river where shapes of bodies and canoes are obscure amongst the wavy lines, suggesting water. Above it calligraphic semicircles of smoke rise up from three black marks representing gun barrels; more circular smoke sits over the black hats of the militiamen.

On the left hand side of the picture, visually balancing this group on the opposite bank of the river is the representation of a fort flying an outsize flag which bears insignia of a cross at each corner, with a larger one in the centre. Around this central black cross four shapes are arranged. They resemble ideograms of birds in flight, or bows and arrows pointing at the four sections of the cross. The tip of one of them is joined to the tip of the cross, perhaps more through imprecision than design. Representations of three bodies lie on the bank outside the fort, one suggesting an Englishman, one a swaddled infant, and the head of one whose body ends at the left hand frame. A face looks from each of the two windows of the fort, and a figure with long hair, which might represent a Native American, stands outside it under the flag.

The first repetition of this illustration on the main title page is entire, but elongated horizontally, so that it is wider than it is deep; the second is on the title page of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* where a smaller "landscape" rectangle frames a detail of the same illustration: the Native bodies and their canoes in the water, and the bodies of the child and the

man on the bank above. If the black insignia of the flag, besides the red typography, is the most visually prominent feature of the front cover, its most visually obscure area is selected to reappear here. Centralised above this picture stands the title of the poem in bold type, and beneath it in much slighter font the “sound forms” of Howe’s epigraph: “from seaweed said nor repossess rest / scape esaid.” The marks depicting the turbulent waters of the river acquire through their graphic juxtaposition a mysterious association with these assonant syllables. Perhaps, in this juxtaposition there resides some retrace of the connection, if there is one, between Williams’s “dead Indians” and Howe’s “voices that are anonymous ...”

As to the “scripture” the Awede version differs in certain respects from the one included in *Singularities*, most obviously in that it lacks the prose introduction included in that 1990 New Directions publication. In the addition of this introduction entitled “The Falls Fight,” Howe offers a more comprehensive historical context for the poem, and inserts a clue to her position in relation to the material from which, apparently, it grew.⁵²

“The Falls Fight” refers to an event in New England’s history of Indian wars, one that occurred in the direct aftermath of “... King Philip’s War so-called by the English and shortly before King William’s War or Governor

⁵² Peter Nicholls has shown how obfuscating Howe can be with regard to her sources: “Howe’s source for the story, she says in an interview, was a history of the town of Hadley, though she seems to have sent Perloff an excerpt from a history of Hatfield. ... Either way, the documents from which the first six stanzas of *Articulation* are drawn can also be found in another text that Howe must have used, George Sheldon’s *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts*, first published in 1895-96 (she must have used this work, because *Articulation* takes items not only from the relevant manuscripts but also from Sheldon’s commentary on them). When we refer to this source we are in for a surprise, for the main passage used by Howe for her first six stanzas is headed “Escape of Jonathan Wells”; it has nothing at all to do with Hope Atherton! ...” Peter Nicholls, “Unsettling the Wilderness: Susan Howe and American History,” *Contemporary Literature* 37, no. 4 (Winter 1996), 595.

Dudley's War of the Spanish Succession by Europeans ..."⁵³ Howe gives a detailed account of the documented circumstances of a night of May 17th, 1676, which she has taken from a source she identifies first as "the chronicler" and then as "the historian." Because her source is unspecified and only generically identified, there is a sense of a nebulous archive behind these apparently verified facts, which might contain the idea of a "secret origin." Howe writes:

The chronicler writes: "They soon discovered their mistake but being in no position to make an immediate defense were slain on the spot, some in their surprise ran directly to the river, and were drowned; others betook themselves to their bark canoes, and having in their confusion forgot their paddles, were hurried down the falls and dashed against the rocks. In this action the enemy by their own confession, lost 300, women and children included."

What the historian doesn't say is that most of the dead were women and children.⁵⁴

Howe doesn't say where the evidence for her own assertion of this elided fact comes from, but because the "chronicler/historian" is not in her account authorised by name, the history he/they (I'm assuming gender) chronicles relinquishes through her account the assurance of righteousness and truth. Howe repositions the "chronicler" in relation to the "the dark side of history" to which he has consigned "the enemy," the "lost," "women and children."

Hope Atherton is one name in an account crowded with names:

"Squakeags, Pokomtucks, Mahicans, Nipmunks, and others ... Captain Turner of Boston. Captain Holyoke ... Ensign Lyman ... Benjamin Wait

⁵³ Howe, *Singularities*, 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

and Experience Hinsdale ... 'The Reverend Hope Atherton, minister of the gospel, at Hatfield, a gentleman of publick spirit, accompanied the army.'"⁵⁵ He was both "of the gospel" and became for a time "lost." Part of Atherton's fate was to survive what the "six or seven" others of the militia who were with him did not, the ordeal by fire visited upon them by members of various Native tribes they encountered in the woods along the Connecticut River, "until" Howe writes "Indians later told the historian: 'Death delivered them from their hands.'"⁵⁶

Howe does not explicitly compare her surname with the Christian name Hope, although she makes much of that name towards the end of this preface:

In our culture Hope is a name we give women. Signifying desire, trust, promise, does her name prophetically engender pacification of the feminine?

Pre-revolution Americans viewed America as the land of Hope.⁵⁷

The name is "epicene," an emblem of ambivalence. It belongs to a minister amongst militia who fell amongst the Indians. Hope lost in the wilderness is free to "hobble" or "digress." It is the documentary remnant of this accident, and most of all the name at its centre, that is the graphic catalyst for Howe's poem:

Hope's epicene name draws its predetermined poem in.
I assume Hope Atherton's excursion for an emblem foreshadowing a Poet's abolished limitations in our demythologized fantasy of Manifest Destiny.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Words such as “predetermined,” “assume” and “emblem foreshadowing” are odd within a poetic that repudiates closure. Hope foreshadows Emerson who foreshadows Howe, who “draws [her] predetermined poem” out. Perhaps the “abolished limitations” of the “Poet’s” ongoing status as cultural outsider is comparable to the freedom of being lost in the abominable forest. If the Poet emerges to tell her/his story, like the testament of Hope Atherton, it is given little credence. The “fantasy of Manifest Destiny” has a Puritan matrix and having sloughed off its alibi in God remains potent. As a woman poet writing against the Lacanian “Law of the Father” Howe’s response to that symbolic is contradictory, because if she rejects the matrix she retains an idea of “grace,” or transcendence, but on changed terms. Her experimental disruptions of the symbolic order “abolish limitations” of signification and release the writer and the reader into a language-scape which is disorienting and unstable. As Lyn Hejinian puts it: “the desire ... stirred by language ... located within language ... is androgynous. It is a desire ... to create the subject by saying, and even a feeling of doubt ... that springs from the impossibility of satisfying this desire.”⁵⁹ Again a line Rosmarie Waldrop attributes to “the voice of a young woman” in her long poem *A Key Into The Language of America*, gives an idea of the instability and alternative notion of freedom Howe’s Atherton might represent: “*Wilderness like a form of drunkenness or acting like a boy. The ground begins to slip.*”⁶⁰ In a sense, then, “Hope” in this

⁵⁹ Lyn Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure,” in *Postmodern American Poetry*, 657.

⁶⁰ Rosmarie Waldrop, *A Key Into The Language of America* (New York: New Directions, 1994), 6. On coming across this sentence in “Chapter VIII On Discourse and Newes” in Waldrop’s poem: Why speake I not, I should have asked, counting on articulation of sound forms in waiting,” I assumed Howe had taken the phrase for her title from this source. However, as *Articulation* was published seven years before Waldrop’s *A Key*, the

poem responds to the memory of the infant self in “There Are Not Leaves Enough To Crown To Cover To Crown To Cover,” where Howe writes of the chaotic arena of war in which, “I had just learned to walk.”

Howe talks about the status of the prose in relation to the poetry it precedes in an interview with Edward Foster, where she says that it is separate but should “answer the poem and not merely explain it.” She goes on to say about a later poem *The Bibliography of the King’s Book; or, Eikon Basilike*.⁶¹

I felt when I finished the poem that it was so unclear,
so random, that I was crossing into visual art in some
sections and that I had unleashed a picture of violence
I needed to explain to myself. The end breaks out of
all form completely. You could read the last page
several ways.⁶²

These observations could be applied to several pages from all three poems collected in *Singularities*, particularly *Thorow*⁶³ and *Scattering As Behavior Toward Risk*⁶⁴ where lines, phrases, words and fragments of each demonstrate contradiction in their random arrangements. This effect may be an expression of, or commentary upon, violence, or both at once.

Howe’s phrase “a picture of violence I needed to explain to myself” raises the possibility that her pages are also dark mirrors, products of less

borrowing must be the other way. Both Howe and Waldrop are deliberate practitioners within “a complex field of discourse,” in which each individual text signals its exposure to a multitude of other texts, each “a node within a network.” (Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 26.) Rather than suffer a Bloomian “anxiety of influence,” these writers assert intertextuality as both condition and method.

⁶¹ Susan Howe, *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (New York: New Directions, 1993), 45-82.

⁶² Howe, *Birth-mark*, 164.

⁶³ Howe, *Singularities*, 56-57.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 66, 69-70.

conscious manipulation than might be assumed. It suggests, too, that the prose preface included in the *Singularities* version of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, might represent a failure of nerve as much as a concession, or a foil, to readability. The phrase “I assume ...” at the front of the concluding sentence of “The Falls Fight” admits to an act of textual appropriation and introduces an authorial position vis-a-vis the following sequences, entirely absent from the 1987 first edition of the poem, as the Awede version stands without its prefatory answer.

In the poetry sections of “Hope Atherton’s Wanderings” after the first seven single-line-spaced “word squares”⁶⁵ the regularity of form begins to break up, first into three “squares” of fewer words and more space. For instance:

Soe young mayde in March or april laught
 who was lapd M as big as any kerchief
 as like tow and beg grew bone and bullet
 Stopt when asleep so Steven boy companion
 Or errant Socoquis if you love your lives
 War closed after Clay Gully hobbling boy
 laid no whining trace no footstep clue
 “Deep water” he *must* have crossed over⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Brian Reed considers the generic hybridity of Howe’s texts in terms of their formal originality. He suggests, with reference to Marjorie Perloff’s recognition of “‘postlinear poetry,’ W. J. T. Mitchell’s study of the ‘image text,’ and following Rachel Blau DuPlessis,” that one of Howe’s characteristic forms, although “arranged into more-or-less rectangular shapes” can usefully be termed “word squares.” Here a precise term in geometry, the “square,” is loosely applied to Howe’s formal experiments with geometric rather than prosodic priorities in constructing poems. Brian Reed, “‘Eden or Ebb of the Sea’: Susan Howe’s Word Squares and Postlinear Poetics,” available from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/current.issue.14.2reed.html>; 2004.

⁶⁶ Howe, *Singularities*, 7.

rest chondriacal lunacy
velc cello viable toil
quench conch uncannunc
drum amonoosuck ythian

scow aback din
flicker skaeg ne
barge quagg peat
sieve catacomb
stint chisel sect

Mylord have maize meadow
have Capes Mylord to dim
barley Sion beaver Totem
W'ld bivouac by vineyard
Eagle aureole elses thend⁶⁷

There is an impression of an indefinite combination of disparate languages become extinct or altered, their remnants and echoes suggesting new forms, although the predominance of consonants prevents elision, and emphasises the distinctiveness and separateness of each word. In her essay “The Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson,”⁶⁸ Howe includes selected phrases as section headings from Roger Williams’s 1643 *A Key*

⁶⁷ Ibid., 10-11.

⁶⁸ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 89-130.

into the *Language of America*.⁶⁹ Williams's work translated into English and preserved the "sound forms" of the Narrangansett language in print, a colonial production.

From the reprint of the 1936 fifth edition of Williams's glossary I can see that "suck" is a Narrangansett suffix denoting the plural, as in "Anawsuck. *Shells*." ("Of *their* Coyne,")⁷⁰ or "Wenisuck. *Old Women*."⁷¹ There is a semantic connection, involving thirst and orality, between "quench" and "suck" in the English language. There is a half rhyme between "quench" and "conch"; an auditory association between "conch" and "drum" (the sound of the sea/of the drum; whereas in English "concha" is "something shell-shaped; *esp* the largest and deepest concavity of the external ear");⁷² "conch" sounds like the first syllable of the English pronunciation of conscious; "uncannunc" sounds like uncanny but ends with a Narrangansett phoneme which seems to refer to animal skins and coats, such as, to give further random examples from Roger Williams, "Tummockquashunck. *A Beavers coat*. Nkequashunck. *An Otter's coat*. Mohewonck. *A Rakooneskin coat*."⁷³

The word for "*An English Coat or Mantell*" lacks this suffix: "Maunek: nquittiashiagat." The doubling of consonants in Howe's poem resembles the English transcriptions of Native speech sounds and suggests a kind of

⁶⁹ Roger Williams, *A Key into the Language of America: or, An help to the Language of the natives in that part of America, called New-England*, reprint of 5th ed. (Bedford, Mass.: Applewood Books, 1936).

⁷⁰ Ibid., 156.

⁷¹ Ibid., 27.

⁷² *New Penguin English Dictionary*.

⁷³ Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, 119.

acoustic reverberation in the mind's ear. The part word "ythian" I associate with Old English verb endings such as in "swerian *swear*, losian *escape, be lost, perish*"⁷⁴ There is an Anglo Saxon word "ythan," (in the typing of which I have substituted the Modern English equivalent *th* for the obsolete "thorn" symbol) meaning "*lay waste, destroy*."⁷⁵

The repeated word "Mylord" is reminiscent of a feudal social constellation, again earthly as much as heavenly. Displaced amongst American elements such as "beaver totem," and at least two prepositions, "Mylord" perhaps represents an orienting ancestral figure in Hope Atherton's wandering mind. Howe may not have intended these particular semantic associations but through such we might construe an idea of a consciousness digressing through, or hobbling upon, an unstable archaeology of successive cultures.

Between the second and third of these stanzaic shapes there comes an isolated couplet: "Otherworld light into fable / Best plays are secret plays."

The earlier Awede edition places each of these word squares and the couplet centrally on a separate page. These two lines in their isolation are carefully misaligned as the lower one is slanted at an angle to the one above, and overprints it where "B" of "Best" tilts across "th" of "Other."

New Directions fit two "word squares" to each page and rationalise the couplet to stand evenly and straight above the following five-line "square."

Brian Reed implies that such standardising practices might deprive the work of an important dimension when he says:

⁷⁴ Mitchell and Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 353, 336.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 365.

The “Otherworld light” refers, at least in part, to the primal whiteness of the page that Howe has rendered so noticeable. This whiteness thereby enters “into fable,” in other words, into Hope Atherton’s story. It does so, however, as a “secret,” since in its pure potentiality it cannot be directly articulated – attempting to do so would grant it determinate form, hence violating the very open-endedness that made it valuable in the first place. “Best plays are secret plays.”⁷⁶

The word “fable” is not a simple substitute for “story,” as it conveys an overlap or overlay of the natural and the supernatural, the human and the animal, as in *Aesop’s Fables*, in which animals speak. In any case, the more conventional format New Directions applies to *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* dispenses with the visual overlap, contracts the plays’ ground and stops up the light’s space. The “otherworld” and the “secret” elements are displaced and marginalised, and the hint of erasure in the overlay of letters is absent. A more explicit mark of erasure in the preceding “square” is retained by New Directions, although the line through the words “sieve catacomb” continues across the space between them, whereas Awede separates a line across “sieve” and across “catacomb.” In both versions the words remain clearly legible so that the idea of erasure becomes a visual paradox, presenting not a disappearance but a double presence, an exemplary contradiction. Its occurrence at this point in the poem seems random, as the words preceding and following those *sous rature* are no more or less reliable or dispensable.

However, some of these words suggest a place of treacherous ground, in that they obliquely refer to objects and elements associated with the

⁷⁶ Reed, “*Eden or Ebb of the Sea*,” 9.

negotiation of water: “scow” is “a large flat-bottomed usu unpowered boat used chiefly for transporting ore, sand, refuse, etc. [Dutch *schouw* ferry boat]”; “skaeg” resembles “skeg ... a small fin fixed to the rear end of a yacht’s keel ... [Dutch *scheg* ...]”; “quagg” resembles “quag ... a marsh or bog ... [origin unknown].”⁷⁷ Following such as these, the words under erasure are those which suggest submergence to a place under water or ground. A boat or a “barge” like a “sieve” will sink below the surface. In this aspect the language works in a way analogous to a hieroglyphic system, where ideas are demonstrated through pictographic and phonographic signs.

In *Singularities* Howe comes to “assume Hope Atherton’s excursion for an emblem foreshadowing ...” so that in its belated preface the poem is construed as a visible (pre)figuration of the “Poet” in the United States. At the same time, though, this “assumption” points away from the visual towards the allegorical, albeit as a trace ironically traced. In this there is a cultural complaint.⁷⁸ The emblem and the allegory are not disconnected, as Yves Ambrioux points out with regard to the work of Ian Hamilton Finlay, suggesting that the effect of the “emblem” “is that of ‘free-floating metaphor’, lying between allegory and hieroglyph.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ *New Penguin English Dictionary*.

⁷⁸ David H. Higgins, in his introduction to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, suggests that “the forest represents error, Dante’s own, but also that of Everyman. It may also represent Florence in 1300, or Christian Europe in which the citizen wanders bereft of sound leadership and government.” Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C. H. Sisson, with an introduction by David H. Higgins, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.

⁷⁹ Abrioux, *Visual Primer*, 213.

As the poem progresses after the ten “word squares,” interrupted by the isolate couplet between the ninth and tenth, comes a page more conventionally formatted, with seven couplets and a final line. After negotiating linguistic thickets and clearings and swamps the reader comes upon a page of comprehensible syntax, or, as if in a moment of lucid despair, Atherton becomes “a Poet,” beside or above himself in place, space and time. Or, as if the poet Howe looks out from the academy over the wilderness, her vision framed and consolidated by “knowledge.” She sees “the figure of a far-off Wanderer,” a figment of the “already said,” if not Hope Atherton then Daniel Boone, or the Wandering Jew of medieval legend, condemned to wander over the earth until Christ’s second coming; or “The Wanderer” of Anglo Saxon poetry; or Adam, of whom Kristeva writes “wandering (*nad*, and that brings him close to feminine impurity, *niddah*).”⁸⁰ Therefore the reassurance of format and syntax is illusory, revealing only a sense of distance and scale at odds with the preceding pages, within which it is impossible to chart the landmarks of Hope Atherton’s story. For instance the poetry on page 9 of *Singularities* reads:

Rash catastrophe deaf evening
 Bonds loosd catcht sedge environ
 Extinct ordr set tableaux
 Hay and insolent army
 Shape of so many comfortless
 And deep so deep as my narrative
 Our homely manner and Myself
 Said “matah” and “chirah”
 Pease of all sorts and best
 Courtesy in every place
 Whereat laughing they went away

⁸⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 92-93.

After reading Howe's account of "Hope's baptism of fire" in her introduction we can make a tenuous connection, through such words and phrases as "catastrophe," "catcht sedge," "hay and insolent army," to her references to that incident. However, although "my narrative" refers to itself in the midst of itself, there is no syntactic route by which to chart a temporal difference between "Myself" and that narrative, or between "Myself" and "environ," or "so many comfortless," in the lines above.

On page 12 the couplets suggest a discursive range. The capital I of "Impulsion" (in contrast to Marlatt's "Imagine") alludes to an American search for origin, and Howe's survey of its elements includes Dark Age Christian entangled with pre-Christian myth, European folk and fairy-tale (the origins of which are Pagan and oral) and agricultural and military practices carried over from the Old World to the New:

Impulsion of a myth of beginning
The figure of a far-off Wanderer

Grail face of bronze or brass
Grass and weeds cover the face

Colonades of rigorous Americanism
Portents of lonely destructivism

Knowledge narrowly fixed knowledge
Whose bounds in theories slay

Talismanic stepping-stone children
brawl over pebble and shallow

Marching and counter marching
Danger of roaming the woods at random

Men whet their scythes go out to mow
Nets tackle weir birchbark

Mowing salt marches and sedge meadows

The assonance, alliteration and rhyme of the second couplet describe evidence of human in-dwelling and give an idea of the layering of mysticism and wilderness. The “Grail face” covered in “grass and weeds” suggests a kind of vegetable reversion, towards a symbiosis of Pagan Green Man and Arthurian Christianity. However, the verbs suggest trespass and discord. An idea of history is told in the present tense, with the horizon line of its perspective “a myth of beginning” and its foreground “Mowing salt marches and sedge meadows.” These “marches” and “meadows” are not beyond the frame of the academy, however, but within it. Howe’s line is taken from William Cronon’s ecological history of New England, *Changes in the Land*, specifically from the chapter “Taking the Forest” in which he describes settlers’ methods of clearing the land.⁸¹ The title of this chapter is also that of the second part in the Awede version, the third in Singularities, of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*. The poem, then, contracts cultivation to culture, land to text. Again, Howe’s line “Whose bounds in theories slay” is collaged from a passage in Cronon’s chapter entitled “Bounding the Land,” where he discusses the laws English settlers devised in order to expropriate Native land:

Indian sovereignty was not recognised. The Massachusetts Bay Company was careful very early to instruct its agents on this point, telling them ‘to make composition with such of the salvages as did pretend any tittle or lay clayme to any of the land.’ Indian rights were not real, but pretended, because the land had already been granted the company by the English Crown.

As the English understood these transactions, what was sold was not a bundle of usufruct rights, an abstract area whose bounds in

⁸¹ Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 108-126.

theory remained fixed no matter what the use to which it was put. Once the land was bounded in this new way, a host of ecological changes followed almost inevitably.⁸²

By these invisible or at least inconspicuous references Howe creates a kind of abeyance which in this instance refers to a political and social world. However, the insertions of such subliminal fragments of academic prose and English nursery rhyme, create a polysemy resistant to interpretation.

Three stanzas following extend words and spaces across the page in rectilinear arrangements, which play with the idea of the poem as its own mirror and frame. The final page, in apparent contrast or contradiction to the preceding abstractions, resembles classic free verse and offers an unexpected semblance of transparency and elegiac closure. The pages of the second section, "Taking the Forest," look at a glance more obedient to traditional form, being mostly couplets interspersed with single lines, with only two of the twenty-six pages of poetry of single, double-spaced lines, without any couplets. The figure of Hope Atherton is not discernible in this second section, the scope of which extends beyond "the geographical site" into more abstract realms, intersections of philosophy, metaphysics, fable and history.

To explicate these intersections, Howe's "prefatory answer" implies a certain slant on cultural history towards the content of her poem. In the *Singularities* version of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, Howe includes two quotations from elders of New England's history. One,

⁸² Ibid., 68.

attributed to Increase Mather: “ ‘Land! Land! Hath been the idol of many in New England!’” sits under the title of her prose introduction “The Falls Fight,” as an epigraph; the other, “‘Prophesie is Historie antedated; / and History is Postdated Prophesie’” is from John Cotton, and comes between Howe’s account of the circumstances and aftermath of the Falls Fight, and before the apparently more subjective meditations upon the significance of Hope Atherton’s story and name. Cotton’s chiastic phrase, despite its visionary scope, forecloses all time as divine will and this form of determinism is not so different from the hegemonic reach of the Enlightenment’s “secular ideal.”⁸³ Pogue Harrison assesses the ways in which “Reason” both eludes and dictates the course of modern history, indicating that the “secular ideal” which succeeded the Puritan mindset and against (but within) which Howe writes, incorporates the ideological determinism it displaced: “The future remains Enlightenment’s true heritage, while the present lags behind its republic of reason. ...Enlightenment is that which has already happened and not yet happened. ... To adopt the ambiguous metaphor used in reference to the cultural heritage of the United States – Enlightenment is the ‘child of Enlightenment.’”⁸⁴

There is a variety of conflicting mythologies and ideologies combining to “create” the land of New England, and the complex fusions and fluctuations of its history continue “‘*Postdated Prophesie*’” in Cotton’s term, or “Portents of lonely destructivism” in Howe’s. The Puritans’

⁸³ Pogue Harrison, *Forests*, 114.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

inherent sense of property rights and increasing desire for earthly wealth effaced the Native sense of the land as sacred and alive, and imposed an Adamic master narrative, an ideological imperative for symbols of origin and transcendence on the extending landscape. Richard Slotkin, of whom Howe has said “[he] ... brought Native Americans and popular narratives into academic consciousness,”⁸⁵ writes in *Regeneration Through Violence* about the creation of an American mythology and remembers “what artists like Melville and Faulkner ... prophesied: that myths reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate, or strike down the living.”⁸⁶ Slotkin traces the historical reasons for the profound antagonism between Puritan and Pagan, “symbolic poles of the American Englishman’s world,” and points out the connection between Thomas Morton’s forbidden attempts to revive English fertility rituals and the figure of Robin Hood or “Robin of the Wood, a traditional English version of the archetypal ‘King of the Woods’ and a figure of increasing importance in the Americanized literature of the colonies.”⁸⁷

Slotkin relates an incident which suggests the horrifying ambiguity Hope Atherton acquired through his disappearance into, and subsequent re-appearance out of, the Connecticut woods. It was not that he became transmuted into a resemblance of Robin Hood, but a more thorough presentiment of the evil Puritans feared in themselves, “a spiritual likeness to the Indians.” In 1675, a year after the Falls Fight, English troops

⁸⁵ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 167.

⁸⁶ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 5.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

massacred a large band of Narrangansett Indians and took among the prisoners what Mather describes as ““a wretched English man that apostatized to the Heathen, and fought with them against his own Country-men.”” Here was the perfect emblem, Slotkin writes, “of the backsliding peculiar to America.”⁸⁸ Hope Atherton’s immersion in the river was like a baptism of darkness and barbarism, through which he becomes a contagion of the wilderness itself.

The first epigraph in *Singularities* and that to the third poem sequence, *Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk*, refer to disintegrations and singularities; one describing an act of attempted re-collection, the other an intention of obliteration:

*She was looking for the fragments of the dead Osiris,
dead and scattered asunder, dead torn apart, and thrown
in fragments over the wide world.*

D. H. Lawrence

I haue determined to scater the therowout the
Worlde, ad to make awaye the remembraunce of them
From amonge men.

*William Tyndale’s Pentateuch,
“Deuteromye,” XXXII. 26*

Howe’s attention and intention in her work is towards what is lost, even from the scope of what Foucault describes as “the new history,” or “a *general history*” as opposed to “a *total history*”: “A total description draws all phenomena around a single centre – a principle, a meaning, a spirit, a world-view, an overall shape; a general history, on the contrary, would deploy the space of a dispersion.”⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁸⁹ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 11.

As we know, Howe's idea of the singular is connected to events in history which precipitated incommensurable change, such as the arrival of European Christians in the New World. One such moment is imagined by William Carlos Williams, when Ponce de Leon reached the shore of Guadeloupe:

It was paradise. A stream of splashing water, the luxuriant foliage. A gorge, a veritable tunnel led upstream between cliffwalls covered by thick vines in flower attended by ensanguined hummingbirds which darted about from cup to cup in the green light. But the soul of the Carib was on the alert among the leaves. It was too late.⁹⁰

Williams expresses a spirit of irony, a "meaning" in Foucault's terms, which posits imperialist Christianity as a foregone tragedy, its aspirations implying both eternity and death, "It was paradise. ... It was too late."

Williams's spirit differs from Howe's partly because her "meaning," as we have said, is complicated by ambivalences of difference and distance. The encroached upon "wilderness," the excluded "feminine," are cultural zones which remain open to many forms of silence. For Howe the singular event occurred on the coast of New England, early in the seventeenth century, with the first pilgrims:

To be released from bonds ... absorbed into catastrophe of pure change.

"Flee, save your lives, and be like the heath in the wild."

Here is unappropriated autonomy. Uncounted occupied space. No covenant of King and people. No centralized State. Heavy pressure of finding no content. Openness of the breach.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Williams, *In the American Grain*, 40.

⁹¹ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 49.

Articulation of Sound Forms in Time is about “no content” and New England, and the mutability of not only selfhood, but ethnicity, gender, even species, which started with that “catastrophe of pure change.” Howe’s “Taking the Forest” suggests that the arrival of European language, knowledge, memory, methods of farming and warfare was both devastating in effect and dwarfed by the “uncounted occupied space.” The consequences for the land itself were profound, both because of sudden and catastrophic ecological changes set in motion by the settlers, and because the survival in those settlers of a buried pantheistic or pagan sensibility, warped and distorted by Puritan ideology, made the land fearsome, oppressive and therefore vulnerable. Hope Atherton lost in the woods and straying beyond the linguistic bounds of “knowledge narrowly fixed knowledge” scares out feminine presences which inhabit a realm of cultural exclusion:

Threadbare evergreen season
 Mother and maiden
 Singing into the draft

Keen woes centuries slacken
 woe long wars endurance bear

In forest splinter companion

essential simplicity of Thought
 wedged back playmate of Remote

Hares call on Pan
 To rhyme with reason revels run⁹²

Girl with forest shoulder
 Girl stuttering out mask or trick

aria out of hearing

⁹² Howe, *Singularities*, 24.

Sound through cult annunciation
sound through initiation Occult

Enunciate barbarous jargon
fluent language of fanaticism

Green tree of severance
Green tree girdled against splitting

Transmutation of murdered Totem

Foresters move before error
Forgotten forgiven escaping conclusion

Oak and old hovel grow gossamer⁹³

The “Girl stuttering” is a kind of a rhyme with the “hobbling boy” of “Hope Atherton’s Wanderings,” in the native woods and the wilderness of Connecticut. This “setting” in turn is analogous, in Howe’s allegorical scheme, to the “stage” of American culture onto which “We [women]... expelled from the Garden of the Mythology of the American Frontier ... have come on to stammering.”⁹⁴ The couplet “Green tree of severance / Green tree girdled against splitting” alludes to both Pagan and Christian mythology, but “girdled,” (of which girl ded is a sort of anagram) could refer to a method of land clearance practiced by the settlers as described by William Cronon:

Once trees had been cut for such immediate needs as fencing and house building, early settlers tended to use the simplest and least labor-intensive technique for destroying the rest: *girdling*. Bark was stripped in an encircling band from each of the larger trees, and grain, generally maize, was planted Indian-style in mounds beneath them. Removing their bark prevented trees from leafing and eventually killed them, thus allowing enough light to reach the ground for crops to grow. Undergrowth was burned in early spring to suppress the original veget-

⁹³ Ibid., 31.

⁹⁴ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 181.

ation, and trees were removed as they eventually rotted. At the end of several years, a cleared field was the final result.⁹⁵

Through the re-compounding of Howe and Cronon here, the Greek myth of Daphne emerges and the slow death of trees described above acquires an embodied suffering. The destruction is not only of New England forests at that point in history, but of an acceleration of “Pagan worlds moving towards destruction” within the “Meditation of a world’s vast Memory.”⁹⁶ Practices at once obsolete and ancestral, concurrent and alien, are implicated in the “Transmutation of a murdered Totem,” a singular act of sacred desecration bringing chaos and change. Implicated at the epicentre of that transmutation, Howe’s Hope loses definition and becomes of the unknown, “forgotten forgiven escaping conclusion.”

In “Taking the Forest” defining structures of syntax and narrative are subsumed in patterns of alliteration and assonance, so that each line or couplet is propelled by internal tensions of sound. For instance the line “Oak and old hovel grow gossamer,” although it functions as a subject-verb-object clause, is shaped, in the absence of narrative context, by the rhythm of assonance. Although the line describes a process in nature, it is not as a witnessed particular, as the poem is constructed as an explicitly artificial plane of language, across which emblematic statements are placed.

⁹⁵ Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 116.

⁹⁶ Howe, *Singularities*, 35, 33.

A semantic structure underlying this long poem's formal and phonic elements is hinted in the recurrence of lines and lexical fragments from one part to another. For instance, the line "Otherworld light into fable," one part of a couplet in "Hope Atherton's Wanderings," is placed in a different constellation in "Taking the Forest."⁹⁷ Again, the inconclusive couplet "name of wildflowers / roost in neighboring" on page 29 has an oblique bearing on the names of wildflowers included on page 37. Whilst it maintains its overt artifice, the poem includes many phrases of enigmatic lyric beauty:

Last line of blue hills
Lost fact of dim outline
Little figure of mother
Moss pasture and wild trefoil
Meadow-hay and timothy

She is and the way She was
Outline was a point chosen
Outskirts of ordinary

Weather in history and heaven
Skiff feather glide house
Face seen in a landscape once.⁹⁸

Howe's poem of Hope's story escapes conclusion, as the "epicene" name mutates through various linguistic formations in the pages of "Taking the Forest." The idea of a lost figure is broken within a treacherous setting of language, as "History" emerges and disappears throughout in various emblematic aspects, perhaps as a "free floating metaphor ... between

⁹⁷Ibid., 11, 35.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 37.

allegory and hieroglyph”: “Corruptible first figure,” “Puck’s face of earth / Sign and laughingstock Puck,” “Bound Cupid sea washed,” “Mother and maiden,” “an Assassin / shabby halo-helmet,” “forseen form from far off,” “Spinoza the lens grinder,” “Talker / and intellectual attacker,” “Naked figure moving in color all flower,” “Girl with forest shoulder,” “Emancipator at empyrean centre,” “Eve of origin Embla the eve,” “Firstborn of Font-sea,” “Negative face of blank force,” “Bridegroom” “Little figure of mother,” “Face seen in a landscape once.”⁹⁹ *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* could be described as Howe’s attempt to make a necessary return, to adumbrate an effect of “abolished limitations,” in a tragic story of human migration and dwelling.

III

Daphne Marlatt’s methods are different. I have raised the idea, after de Man and Abrioux, of allegory as a rhetoric of temporality, which Howe “blasts open” in her heterogeneous language of temporal immersion. The heterogeneity of the language includes the intertextual fragments of mostly male canonical writers, with whose words her own are in dialectic exchange. She writes of history and an “otherworld” here, as if the “infinite miscalculation of history” continuously erupts and opens through the present.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 17-37.

A sense in which allegory might apply to *Steveston* is in the enlargement of the world in which we conduct our lives, and in connection with the conventional figuration of the river of life entering the sea of death, eternity, or rebirth. However, although Marlatt's phenomenological response to the "geographical site" resists typological access, in the element of "chance" a potential space- a shadow-life - is opened. There is a parallel or obverse dimension given scope as elusive aspect of the visible: "Always there is this shadow, long, that underlies the street and twins it, running it to ground."¹⁰⁰

I have traced modernist elements in Howe's texts with reference to Pound, Stevens and Williams, in response to deliberately covert uses Howe makes of their work. Marlatt's tribute in *Steveston*, to the social document *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is more explicit and transparent. There is no such conscientious reference to Williams's long poem *Paterson* but it is an obvious literary precursor, as Chris Hall has demonstrated.¹⁰¹ The Canadian *Steveston* can be compared to the American *Paterson* in that they are poems of a particular locality, both of which use the analogy of a river running through it to the sea to explore a human community and a local history; for Williams the Passaic and for Marlatt the Fraser. Both poems are motivated by this image of processional and cyclical movement, so that the language of each asserts, more or less intermittently, an onomatopoeic quality of pouring and expansion.

¹⁰⁰ Marlatt, *Steveston*, 31.

¹⁰¹ Chris Hall, "Two Poems of Place: Williams' *Paterson* and Marlatt's *Steveston*," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 2 (1984) : 141-153.

Both Williams and Marlatt exploit document, anecdote and lyric invention to construct an ecological account of their localities. In both poems, the elemental and human, the communal and the personal, intersect continuously. Williams invites the reader “To make a start, / out of particulars,”¹⁰² Marlatt to “Imagine a town,” a place of language, and for both writers the attention is to the material word and world. Williams’s genius loci is the giant “Paterson” who lies at the foot of the “Passaic Falls” and whose dreams inhabit the city; he is a figure of origin and potential and in this sense is comparable to Olson’s Maximus:

Off-shore, by islands hidden in the blood
 jewels & miracles, I, Maximus
 a metal hot from boiling water, tell you
 what is a lance, who obeys the figures of
 the present dance¹⁰³

Williams was writing *Paterson* and publishing the work serially between 1946 and 1961, while Olson was beginning to write poetry, producing the first of his *Maximus Poems* in 1950 and continuing until shortly before his death in 1970. If Williams’s voice cannot be said to share the “ecstatic” dimension that Crown claims for Olson and for Howe, his construction and excavation of self in place incorporates and includes an extensive community.

Paterson, like *Steveston*, describes an historical fire, which in the former “started in the car barns of the street railway company” and in the latter “in the / Chinese mess hall ...” For Marlatt the fire is an element of chance in the locality’s cyclical processes of life and death, yet in *Paterson* it

¹⁰² Williams, *Paterson*, 3.

¹⁰³ Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 5.

becomes an eternal fire that consumes material words, the same fire that “- burnt Sappho’s poems ...” in the Library of Alexandria, which “make / moulds, layer after layer // for the dead” and which are “revived even by / the dead.” In this sense Paterson is metaphor for a classical archive, a site of metamorphosis, as well as representing a twentieth century American city.¹⁰⁴

Whereas *Paterson* is both city and man, and both Paterson and Maximus are archaeologists of the self in place, the directing subject or “intentional consciousness”¹⁰⁵ of *Steveston* is less distinct within “the physical matter of / the place,”¹⁰⁶ which is also the poem’s language. In other words, the “intentional consciousness” that writes the place constructs a site of imagination through the processes of language. “Imagine a town running” is how the poem begins, and throughout seeks to keep pace with its human and environmental “multiplicity” and interconnectedness. One of the ways in which the writing subject affirms her common humanity rather than her individual subjectivity, is in the poem’s attention to the physical and elemental environment, and the human body’s immersion in and exposure to it. In this sense the “geographical site” is not a repository for the self and does not shade into Romantic allegory, rather the subject in place motivates an imaginative integration of sentient bodies and creatures, other selves and other species. Marlatt resists allusions and *Steveston* is different in intention from *Paterson* and Olson’s *Maximus Poems*, the latter an extensive and widely allusive account of the poet’s home town, of

¹⁰⁴ Williams, *Paterson*, 119.

¹⁰⁵ Barbour, “Phenomenological I”, 178.

¹⁰⁶ Marlatt, *Steveston*, 19.

Gloucester, Massachusetts. Olson's vocation, as he saw it, was that of poet and historian, a "very difficult" calling, the guiding principle of which is "'istorin, to 'find out for oneself.'"¹⁰⁷ The distinction between finding "out for oneself" and "seeking to perceive it as it stands," is an important one; the poet's search for himself (on his own volition or behalf), compared to the quasi-documentary impulse to seek an appropriate methodology of perception, for the sake of what is perceived.

In a relatively early critical response to *Steveston*, in 1978, Douglas Barbour introduces his discussion of Marlatt's poem with a section entitled "Towards a Sense of Phenomenology as a Poetics," in which he invokes, by way of reference to W.A. Luijpen's emphasis on a "return to the things themselves," the importance of Williams and of Olson. Of the Canadian practitioners of "phenomenological" poetry ("Nelson Ball, bill bissett, George Bowering, Penny Chambers, Victor Coleman, Frank Davey, Robert Hogg, Dennis Lee, Gwendolen MacEwan, David McFadden, Daphne Marlatt, Steve McCaffery, bp Nichol, Michael Ondaatje, and Fred Wah") Barbour observes that:

[T]hese writers are obsessed by and engaged with not only the phenomena of perception, their own lived lives and the very art they practice as these occur, but also the 'landscape that is language itself' emerging as process ...¹⁰⁸

What is essential about *Steveston*, the town imagined as language, is process and movement. The poem begins:

¹⁰⁷ Butterick, *A Guide to the Maximus Poems*, ix.

¹⁰⁸ Barbour, *Phenomenological I*, 178-179.

Imagine: a town

Imagine a town running

(smoothly?

a town running before a fire
canneries burning

(do you see the shadow of charred stilts
on cool water? do you see enigmatic chance standing
just under the beam?¹⁰⁹

The inclusion of “you” inserted here does not recur often throughout the poem. It is as if Marlatt acknowledges the participation of the reader in her text at the start, just as within her text the place acknowledges the writer’s presence and attention. The place, its voices, the writer and the reader are here poised before the language moves on and distinct perspectives intersect and coalesce in its flow. The clausal syntax of these first lines is open-ended and interrogative, so that the reader is offered an indefinite space through which to enter the life of the poem. As Howe’s title *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* presents a puzzle of monumentality and dispersal, speech and writing, so Marlatt’s line “a town running before a fire” presents ambiguities of stasis and movement, event and chronology. In both poems a generative interactivity is available to the reader. If Howe’s “narrative in non-narrative”¹¹⁰ obstructs a reader’s preconceptions, Marlatt’s narratives within narrative induce immersion in the processes of telling.

¹⁰⁹ Marlatt, *Steveston*, 11.

¹¹⁰ Howe, *Singularities*, 40.

In *Steveston*, the writer/reader relationship once established shifts into a narrative context only to be deflected by another open-ended parenthesis, this time a direct question which both develops the relationship and continues to insinuate it into the elements of the narrative setting: a town built of wood over water, reliving its calamity of fire. There is the town running smoothly or not, an organism with diurnal rhythms, its human, animal and elemental interactions with the complex systems of industry; and there is its underside, a shadow life which both resides in the spaces between nameable things and potentially exceeds them. Lived history and this implicit realm co-exist despite the apparent closure of tragedy:

He said they were playing cards in the
Chinese mess hall, he said it was dark (a hall? a shack.
they were all, crowded together on top of each other.
He said somebody accidentally knocked the oil lamp over, off
the edge¹¹¹

Marlatt's language works to supply a belated access, an escape for the trapped lives in the indeterminate building. In its repetition, the noun "hall" is another question placed within open parenthesis, and its connotations of shelter and expanse collapse in the alternative "shack." In the next line the repetition of the phoneme "all" re-presents the situation so that "they were all, crowded together on top of each other" like a haul of fish. One narrative level drops into another beyond "the edge":

where stilts are standing, Over the edge of the
dyke a river pours, uncalled for, unending:¹¹²

¹¹¹ Marlatt, *Steveston*, 11.

¹¹² Ibid.

With that “unending” transition, inside becomes outside “where stilts are standing” in the “running” town, figuring a dialectic tension between fixture and process. As the phrase “off the edge” is nearly repeated in “Over the edge” the poem continues to extend its levels outwards and downwards. In the adjectival phrase “uncalled for, unending” there is a phonetic recollection of the human hall/all, while it continues, through assonance, the river’s movement in the verb “pours.” A sense is given in the repetition of the negative prefix “un,” that the overcrowding, the entrapment, the human “running,” are underpinned by elemental forces which can undo structures and constructions through force of difference, indifference and endurance. In *Steveston* Marlatt figures “chance” as surviving in a transitional space between the human and the elemental environments. Where stilts and pilings shadow the water, she gives an imaginary form to “enigmatic chance standing” which begins, in its own way, to move:

where chance lurks
fishlike, shadows the underside of pilings, calling up his hall
the bodies of men & fish corpse piled on top of each other (residue
time is, the delta) rot, an endless waste the trucks of production
grind to juice, driving thru

smears, blood smears in the dark
dirt) this marshland silt no graveyard can exist in but water swills,
endlessly out of itself to the mouth

ringed with residue, where
chance flicks his tail & swims, thru¹¹³

The phrase “calling up his hall” collects the previous hall/all/uncalled, into an odd image which has a hint of fairytale, or fable, in which a fish has the

¹¹³ Ibid., 11-12.

last word. At the same time the poem's documentary eye observes that the "Imperial Cannery" levels the remains of its raw material and its labour force into an environment that is constantly renewing itself. This cyclical renewal defies the effects of industry on the lives it exploits, the death, entrapment and waste, just as the larger narrative of the poem, one of multiplicity and interconnectedness, carries the individual narratives along in long lines of cumulative syntax. The metaphor for this larger narrative is the river up which "the fish re-enter time" towards their spawning ground, "their proper place to die ..."¹¹⁴ In "Pour, pour" the sentences accumulate detail, add clause to clause so that a complex of human history and the life cycle of the salmon is described, which continues despite over fishing and pollution.¹¹⁵

Chance is not a fish, however, it is "fishlike," a protean linguistic vehicle. We can compare Howe's "word squares" in "Hope Atherton's Wanderings," their formulations of corrupt and isolate remnants of successively vanished languages, with Marlatt's cumulative clauses which saturate and describe an idea of shared embodiment in temporal space and spatial time. "Chance," the parallel dimension, a spiritual or magical life-force, both resides in and exceeds the material sediment mixing fish and human, and all that lives, dies and decomposes in Steveston's industrial ecology. Hope Atherton, as a definable figure, is effaced and reverts in a setting of abstract language towards the extra-linguistic wilderness, whereas *Steveston* contracts "bodies ...time ...delta" in a narrative

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 15.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 15-16.

structure which both confirms an idea of history as cyclical and includes the exterior “gap.” Yet if Howe’s poem constructs substitute forms for irretrievable testimonies, Marlatt’s constructs writing as the speech and response of witnesses.

Despite her assumption of “the dream” of others Marlatt maintains a tone of detached empathy in her attempt to “perceive ... as it stands” a community in its context.¹¹⁶ In the section “Steveston as you find it:” “you” is at once the writer in relation to the place and the reader in relation to the poem, so her subjective detachment is finely balanced and displaced in the language. Marlatt’s strategies to keep faith with sensory experience successfully implicate the reader, in so far as the writing collects and transmits linguistic impressions of physical and elemental atmospheres to a degree that is almost a sensory irritant. This is partly because the language repeatedly expresses discomfort in its own response:

It’s been raining, or it’s wet. Shines everywhere a slick on the surface of things wet gumboots walk over, fish heads & other remnants of sub / or marine life, brought up from under.¹¹⁷

This is not to suggest a reader-response of mere frisson, but a cumulative engagement with the life of the poem, which comes of the poet’s transitory

¹¹⁶ In *Steveston Recollected*, Marlatt’s commentaries on the Japanese-Canadian fisherman she talks to and observes are revealing: “There is a literalness to their speech that stays close to what is known or obvious, public knowledge. They don’t wish to speak of the *experience* of fishing, introspective as that must seem to them. What counts is what you can do, however skilfully, in the face of necessity.” 2.

“The bird’s fluttering distracts, and Mr Kokubo seems to be hovering at the door, wondering no doubt what I’m wondering, or what I see ...” 25.

“The simplicity of a man who knows what he is doing, just as he knows the elements of his trade – sea, fish, weather. 25.

¹¹⁷ Marlatt, *Steveston*, 19.

immersion in the life of the place. She has to own up to a subject position which implicates I/you/we in a system of exploitation that, to an extent, is the poem's content:

We orient

always toward the head, & eyes (yes) as knowing, & knowing us, or
what we do.
But these, this, is "harvest." These are the subhuman facets of life we
the town (& all that is urban, urbane, our glittering table service, our
white
wine, the sauces we pickle it with, or ourselves), live off. These torsos.
& we throw the heads away. Or a truck passes by, loaded with offal for
what
we raise to kill, mink up the valley.

That's not it. It's wet,

& there's a fish smell. There's a subhuman, sub / marine aura to
things.¹¹⁸

If the head represents perception and wisdom the discarding of the fish heads is a sacrilegious act, and, in this comparative reading, obliquely evokes the "murdered Totem" of Howe's "Taking the Forest." Here Marlatt marks the doubling of signification in the repetition of "eyes" as "yes," a phonemic transposition which is both an echo and a reappearance, rather like the effect of "i / ce" in Howe's *Pythagorean Silence*.¹¹⁹

The section "In time" remembers that Steveston's liminal territory is a site of successive settlement, displacement and relocation. It begins with a description of the combined processes of moving river, rooted trees and human industry. An eco-system is acknowledged in which natural growth

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 35. Divided as it is between lines, the second of which is merely a sibilant, the word "i / ce" suggest an echo or ghost of "I see." To appreciate a graphic effect, such as the caesura in the word "i / ce," one has to see how it looks in order to hear how it might sound.

and flow and industrial modifications, act upon and react against one another. Two of the three sentences end with the preposition “to” so that aspiration moves these processes “in time,” as the rhythms of the language keep pace with the capacities of breath. In this way the writer/reader is implicated and involved in a narrative of place in which she/he is apparently absent; each sentence, with its extensions, pauses, repetitions continues for as long as can be spoken before drawing another breath. Each one is a long breath-line which transgresses and extends the poetic line, so that present embodiment is the starting point and guiding principle of this reading of history:

how the river washes them bare, roots trees
 put down, knotted & twining into the wash of the Gulf, tidal, in, in &
 out
 to the mouth, the gulf all trees, roots, clumps & knottings of men’s nets
 wash out to. Washing from east to west, how the river flows, washing
 its
 filth downstream & silting islands of work men dredge their channels
 thru,
 grassland, sedge. The work it takes to keep men busy, dredge at it, all
 day long to keep a channel through, street, straight thru (west) to ...¹²⁰

As with Howe, the ampersand insists on the surface dimension of print in tension with the concepts of depth and distance which the language describes. If we call it poetic prose or prose poetry, Marlatt’s grouping of lines above is a more conventional visual shape than the pages of “Hope Atherton’s Wanderings.”

As has been said in the introduction, the formal differences in the work of Howe and Marlatt can be considered by way of a contradiction, which

¹²⁰ Marlatt, *Steveston*, 29.

Olson's ideas on projective verse demonstrate between the rhythms of breath and the rhythms of the machine, to which type-written or word-processed poetry defers. In Howe's poem the spacing between words and lines determines the pattern so that it is more explicitly mechanical than physiological, while this presentation of visual space also represents an abstract plane of time. Marlatt's tensions of contraction and release are devised through use of repetition, punctuation and clausal variation in a narrative context.¹²¹

Howe's construction of words seems devised as a play of free association which obeys a "theme,"¹²² both chaotic and architectural. The line "Body perception thought of perceiving (half-thought)"¹²³ suggests the presence of a form receding into its most nebulous processes. Present embodiment is intrinsic and involved in temporal relationship in *Steveston*, while in *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* embodiment is diffuse, scattered, recurring only as fragments detached from, and surviving, the absent body. Therefore, artifice and disjunction are disconcerting qualities which confront the reading subject, whose "Body perception thought" are never quite mirrored in her text. Marlatt, on the other hand, finds semblances and metaphors, the physical form and its negative effect, for what is beyond

¹²¹ In an interview with Brenda Carr in 1990, Marlatt says: "[T]he movement of the river out towards the sea, where it disappears, was a movement into the invisible that had to do with birthing and dying, and that in fact the two were metaphors of each other. So that that which remained invisible and unspoken, women's part in the town, was also crucial – just as the movement of the river, which I was fascinated by and was trying to imitate in the rhythms of the poem, was not just background. Much later when I was working on *Touch to my Tongue* and heard the rhythms moving like the rhythms in *Steveston* I realized they were orgasmic ... but throughout that book ... I was writing my way to a reversal of that focus, a sort of figure/ground reversal." *Beyond Tish*, 103.

¹²² Howe, *Singularities*, 13.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

articulation or definition; such as “fishlike,” “chance” or the “shadow, long, that underlies the street & twins it.”¹²⁴ If there are few orienting markers of geographical relativity or spatial scale in “Hope Atherton’s Wanderings,” in *Steveston*, a topography in which the local ecology exists within a larger context of migration and succession is established:

This chugging of an Easthope moving east to west, waiving sandbar,
mudflat,
thru marsh you can’t see past, as earlier steamer for Mrs Steves, “But
ma’am
no one lives there!” To be made *here*, island of grass seen as pasturage,
dairy farm. & then an island settlement, a settlement mentality that
settles down a street that doesn’t go straight thru, pacing the river’s
winding edge, that says oblivious, good soil here we’ll put our roots
down.
And the river runs away with them, flood, storm, all manner of lost
belongings gone, anchorless on out to sea ...

The edge, the edge. Settled by it. Camped rather. Cluster of
fishing shacks temporary as those Japanese who slept on boats arriving,
each
season, for the fish, to stay, stray into settlement, believing still they
were only here this year, sending money home & staying on to the next,
& the next,
& the natives, whose longtime summer ground this was, coming to fish,
whole
bands whose women & children end by working the canneries, staying
in Indian
tenements, & it all settles down into an order of orders, the Chinese
tyee boss, & the cans hammered out by his men, orders of cash handed
down
thru the messhall, the gambling & fires, fire and flood.¹²⁵

The precarious nature of early “settlement” vulnerable to its position on
“the edge” and defined by that place of transition, in time “settles down
into an order of orders” which includes the establishment of industry.

Capitalist priorities affect the ecology and the primitive human connection

¹²⁴ Marlatt, *Steveston*, 31.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

to land; “*here*, island of grass seen as pasturage,” is displaced by processes of subordination and exploitation. The emphasis on “here” recalls Carlos Williams’s sentence “Here not there” and Howe’s “*Here*, is unappropriated autonomy,” and describes the event of arrival. However, the miraculous “here” is a place of expropriation and despoliation and describes the poem as a node of subjectivities, through which writer, reader, place and its inhabitants intersect.

If we consider the complex ethnic mix of First Nation, white European, Chinese and Japanese immigrants represented in this Anglophone poem about the place in which they meet, we must recognise that there are several prior languages of which it cannot speak. In an interview published in 1991 Marlatt speaks of “[t]he twinning of the language field” as a way of describing the difference between the site of writing and the place of social, political, environmental daily life. It involves an imaginative translation between the lyric and the extra-linguistic. If the extra-linguistic potential in Howe’s work relates silenced language to a pure space of the unwritten-upon, in Marlatt we get the sense that there is a latent realm which exists within and beyond human communities. Again it is given form as metaphoric language rather than formal emptiness. In this section of the poem, the verb “twinning” in the first stanza/paragraph is partially echoed in the noun “twin” in the sixth and the present verb “twins” in the seventh, so that the phenomena involved in the following passages are also “of roots trees put down ... into the wash of the Gulf” :

Is there a gap? There is discontinuity as

Moncton,
 cowed in its quiet normalcy, intends a straight line the health inspector's
 Packard drives down, & he unfolds, huge, & climbs out & crosses into
 Christine's.
 & the fishermen sit with elbows on the counter, sipping coffee & talking,
 or
 not talking, & nod. & the fisheries men greet him, & the truckers know
 him,
 & Christine who is small & not Christine, who is quiet & Chinese,
 smiles &
 brings him coffee as he packs himself, somehow, into the booth. Have
 you seen his brother? he has a twin, the trucker says, just as huge.

Always there is this shadow, long, that underlies the street & twins it,
 running it to ground. As the river, at Atlas camp, throws up sand that
 cuts
 the line Moncton extends (in mind) to the end. A line that lies, like
 Moncton straight ahead, ignores this shadow that wavers & wanders,
 collecting
 islands of lives, leaves them stranded or suddenly, after some years
 visible as,
 time passing, picking stucco off the wall outside Hiro's, or drinking pop
 & trading bubblegum cards. It lengthens slowly around them, slanting
 past Island
 Cleaners, past the Richmond pool hall, past River Radio. Puddles,
 clouds shining in them. So that this air of establishment, this density that
 is
 cementblock Steveston Hardware or the old brick DRUGS now L& L
 Discount,
 settles in the unseeing eyes of the old man in the pool hall, awash in beer
 & sentiment, into history, into what he clings to now as evidence (in
 time -)
 of "his" story. ¹²⁶

The concept of "twinning" is figured as entity and as obverse of a negative,
 as in "& talking, or not talking ...," "& Christine who is small & not
 Christine"; as the twin whose absence implies the presence of a speaker
 and listener, the "you" who is also the recording narrator: "Have you seen
 his brother? he has a twin, the trucker says, just as huge." Then there is
 "this shadow, long, that underlies the street & twins it," and "the line
 Moncton extends (in mind) to the end." Both the line and the shadow seem

¹²⁶ Ibid., 31.

aspects of this other excessive force, although the line is more closely responsive to the psychic and effectual lives lived in the place, as an image of constraint and constriction, rather than potential. It is a thin, limited aspiration: “A line that lies, like / Moncton straight ahead, ignores this shadow that wavers & wanders, collecting / islands of lives ...” In the final sentence “density” is not “destiny” and “sentiment” is not “sediment,” although each word suggests an alternative phoneme and meaning, so that a tension between identity and difference, presence and absence is carried. The “old man in the pool hall” is susceptible to other aspects, of fable as “the old man and the sea” (pool haul), and of the place as an emblem or ghost of its eponymous founder. The typographical marks of parentheses and inverted commas create a visual and conceptual parallel between the phrases “(in mind) to the end.” and “(in time -) of ‘his’ story.”

Marlatt’s use of inverted commas around the possessive “his” creates a microcosmic anagram of the macrocosmic “history,” and so continues the notion of time in mind and mind in time, and the distortions of subjectivity and determinism. It also prefigures an explicitly feminist critique of language which Marlatt developed during the following decade, and which I will discuss briefly with reference to *Salvage*. At this point, though, I will compare Marlatt’s method of parallelism, twinning and mirroring in the lines above with another of Howe’s “word squares” from “Hope Atherton’s Wanderings”:

Posit gaze level diminish lamp asleep(selv)cannot see

is notion most open apparition past Halo view border redden
possess remote so abstract life are lost spatio-temporal hum
Maoris empirical Kantian a little lesson concatenation up
tree fifty shower see step shot Immanence force to Mohegan

blue glare(essence)cow bed leg extinct draw scribe upside
even blue(A)ash-tree fleece comfort(B)draw scribe sideup¹²⁷

This page is partly repeated and partly mirrored across the one following, in both versions of the poem; the first line of each is identical, the central block of words is reversed and contracted in its second presentation, that is, it begins with “Mohegan” and ends with “*is*” and runs without any horizontal spacing to separate the words, except a single one before the final syllable. The final couplet is identical except that the final word of each is reversed so “sideup” ends the first line above “upside.” The vertical spacing is identical.

In Marlatt’s lines verbs imagine relative space between things, describe movements of bodies and minds into that space, and construct a balance of the transitory and the permanent: “intends ... drives ... unfolds ... climbs out & crosses ... sit ... sipping ... talking ... greet him ... know him ... smiles & brings him ... packs himself ... underlies ... running ... throws up ... cuts ... extends ... lies ... ignores ... wavers & wanders, collecting ... leaves ... passing, picking ... drinking ... trading ... lengthens ... slanting ... shining ... settles ... unseeing ... he clings to ...” What is

¹²⁷ Howe, *Singularities*, 14.

visible or visual about these poems, then, works differently. The effect of Howe's lines is partly created by the combined reverberations of each unconnected word, that is, their visibility recruits an acoustic dimension so that an adequate response to un-readability might confront them. In this way the pages demand that the reader supply a responsive space, analogous to a mirror or echo-chamber, provisional and conditional, according to the reader. As products of mechanical reproduction they retain an effect perhaps analogous to the "special presence" Greenblatt suggests for Tyndale's Bible. Marlatt, on the other hand, supplies descriptions of visibility and invisibility which combine to accrue no less mystery than Howe's different forms of excess. Perhaps the implications of these different forms, can be compared as ideals or ideas, even allegories, of utopia.

In the later section of *Steveston* "Or there is love,"¹²⁸ penultimate in the poem's original edition, the woman whose story is told is based on Tsuneko Johnson, the "*sansei*" Marlatt refers to in "A Note on the Transcripts" in the documentary publication *Steveston Recollected*.¹²⁹ Johnson's words defining her own sense of difference, and included in Marlatt's poem, are taken almost verbatim from the published transcript of a recorded interview: "'I'm not really in / the Japanese community, I don't belong to Buddhist Church, I don't / send my kids to Sunday school.'" ¹³⁰ Three photographs of this woman are included in Minden's collection following the poem, one of which shows her seated in a domestic interior

¹²⁸ Marlatt, *Steveston*, 53-55.

¹²⁹ Marlatt, *Steveston Recollected*, xiv.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

under a large painting of a seated woman, and two of which show her standing in a doorway with her two children. In the first portrait their poses are stiff, their expressions solemn, in the second taken “a few moments later” they are relaxed together and smiling.¹³¹

In “Or there is love,” the writer/protagonist is more closely identified with this character, perhaps because of their similar age, the other woman’s unconventional life-style, and her work as an artist. Marlatt’s experience as an immigrant resonates with the different experience of this third generation Japanese Canadian. What was indicated as invisible and excessive, both vital and mysterious, in “In time,” in the following passage is emergent as a force that is recognised. Because it is not denied within the inhabited place, it implicitly determines each line in the poem’s flow. The opening pronoun may refer to the researchers “we” who went to document Steveston, but its rhyme with “she” suggests that the poet’s identity as one of a group of outsiders finds a positive and differentiating reflection in this individual:

we’d house ourselves in, all this wind & rain.
Confuse us. Driving lines that shift, the floor does, ground or
under sea, to cast, at low tide what lies uncaught, uncovered
traces only, of sun & the moon’s pull.

Unseen, how lines run
from place to place, How driving from town she follows the water’s
push, the fields, drained by ditch to river to, the sea at,
where she lives ... “At the end of the road,” she says
Steveston is. At the mouth, where river runs under, in, to the
immanence of things.

To live in a place. Immanent. In
place. Yet to feel at sea. To come from elsewhere & then to discover

¹³¹ Robert Minden, *Steveston*, 98-99.

love, has a house & name. Has land. Is landed, under the swaying
trees which bend, so much in this wind like underwater weeds we think
self rises from.¹³²

In Marlatt's representation of an individual at home with her history she projects an ideal of self and community into her portrait of Tsuneko Johnson. There is confusion and coalescence of experience and identity in this section of the poem, in its images of a viable ecology. The writing inscribes memories of travel and estrangement as it responds to processes of access, interaction, and belonging. "She" becomes the focus for an idea of dwelling without exploitation; like the "uncaught" salmon, or, as if in childbirth. Within and beyond her body, "she follows the water's / push."

If *Steveston* has an element of the Romantic impulse to find the self verified in the non-self, it is not so much in Marlatt's representation of the natural and non-human environment, as in her use of the inaccessibility of others. Near the poem's end in its original edition, she begins to conclude: "This is the story of a town, these are the people, whose / history locates inside of dream ..." ¹³³ and it is in her attempt to pursue that interior which shifts or lifts *Steveston* from the genre of documentary to that of poetry. The narrator of its multiple narratives is as much akin to Dylan Thomas's persona in *Under Milkwood* ¹³⁴ as "the writer/historian [who] record[s] the thoughts, feelings, and life-stories of the individuals who are the very substance of ... history." ¹³⁵ However, the relationship between the poetic

¹³² Marlatt, *Steveston*, 53.

¹³³ Ibid., 57.

¹³⁴ Dylan Thomas, *Under Milkwood: A Play For Voices* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1962).

¹³⁵ W. J. Langlois, *Steveston Recollected*, xiii.

and the photographic portraits in the jointly authored text of *Steveston*, subverts the predominance of either imagination or realism.

There is a bleaker tone to the section Marlatt wrote in 2000 for the 2001 third edition, “generation, generations at the mouth,”¹³⁶ in that it emphasises the destructive effects of the human on the non-human environment rather than their inter-dependence. In this last section the first sentence is a lament for the salmon, which, if caught end as garbage, if uncaught “can’t find their way back” because of pollution clogging the river mouth. As in “Imagine: a town” there is here a question without a direct answer, although Marlatt seems to suggest by that indirection that a human gift for reciprocity must be regained: “what is the body’s blueprint? / / return what is solid to water, the first peoples said - / returned, every bone intact / generates the giving back of race, kind, kin.”¹³⁷ In this relatively recent piece of writing Marlatt makes a connection between linguistic structure and living practice, as if oppression and exploitation are linked to a failure to move cyclically and psychologically beyond an inimical linear progress:

what is the mouth of the river now? a toxic O of emptiness? teeming
hole of
ever-becoming we create? re-entry. re-turn. verbing the noun out of its
stuck
edges and into occurrence, currents, *curre*- ... we’ve lost the verb in our
currency, a frozen exchange streaming emptiness¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Marlatt, *Steveston*, 61-62.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

She does so in a reflexive way not present in the earlier text of the poem, and the despair expressed most explicitly here is subverted in the last line as the poet imagines an alliance with “the possible,” an important concept for Howe too, figured as “the Chinook, / the coho rivering just offshore ...” If the noun “currency” is the inevitable development of “currents,” movements of life and language get snarled again in the imperatives of late capitalism. With associations of *coeur*, French for heart, and *cure*, Marlatt hazards an opening through “*curre- ...*,” a sound form with a silence in its wake, providing the possibility for hope.

IV

By the time Marlatt comes to write the poems collected in *Salvage*, (1991) the space reserved for the negative and the “recessive” in *Steveston* has become demystified and named. “There are no longer any real fish” poem v begins, and “imagine her in her element” begins the next.¹³⁹ Marlatt explicitly makes the extinction of the real fish a metaphor for the political oppression of women in society. As she says in her “Foreword” to the volume, the poems here demonstrate a raised consciousness:

The title section ... brings two decades together in a double exposure, with the first “take” consisting of poems from the early seventies ... These poems were subsequently exposed to a second “take” based on my feminist reading and thought of the late eighties ... Most of the poems have changed radically, although as in a palimpsest, early sentences, even whole stanzagraphs surface intact in these new versions, their

¹³⁹ Marlatt, *Salvage*, 21-23.

“drift” altered in unforeseen directions.

We could say, then, that Marlatt intends to supply her own “already said,” recalling Foucault, and re-writes and writes-over mistakes of subject position which the “double exposure” reveals. In “Reading it” the writer examines romantic paradigms and the collusion of feminine identification with blindness and silence:

so the moon was shining, so what defence was there
against his merriment? “you try so hard,” haunting the
wharves at night “to see it”

moon a shade off full tonight
past the blackness of this present shed (receding) tide ...¹⁴⁰

The following “stanzagraph” describes a different picture of illumination and unconsciousness:

under monoglare off the Esso barge
we stare down on the body of a man sleeping flat out in the
blue of portable tv, “this,” he says, “is the real”

This image of a body flattened into the surface reflections of a postmodern world is strangely adequate as a version of Hope Atherton, broken up through the language ground of Howe’s poem. Howe treats the name of that figure as a volatile element within her linguistic “setting.” Again a couplet from “Taking the Forest,” “Recollection moves across meaning / Men shut their doors against setting”¹⁴¹ is comparable to the following lines from ‘Reading it’:¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹⁴¹ Howe, *Singularities*, 33.

¹⁴² Marlatt, *Salvage*, 28-29.

interrogates presence and demonstrates the linguistic associations of madness with motherhood, “*Mad ma(i)d mad(e) her cultural collaboration in a real that violence co-opts she’s at / the ready.*”¹⁴⁷

In different ways, then, Marlatt and Howe construct both formal and metaphorical spaces. In the aestheticism of Howe’s poetry there hovers a distance verging on the hermetic and in this sense the work sustains the modernist distinction between high culture and culture as society.

However, as Jameson discusses the historical “mutation of the sphere of culture in the world of late capitalism”¹⁴⁸ he suggests that this distinction has been exploded in the suffusion of the economy throughout all cultural realms “to the very structure of the psyche itself,” so that the maintenance of the lofty mirror of art becomes untenable. Perhaps questions of aesthetic idealism raised by the difficulty of Howe’s poetry, alongside the question of a feminist utopia emergent in Marlatt’s work, can be answered by pointing out the potential (prerequisite) accessibility of the otherwise “mysterious” spaces constructed within the poetry. Howe’s spatial arrangements can be described as mirrors but not to reflect the distance between here and utopia, rather more analogous to Alice’s resource of an accessible looking glass which once entered is disturbing, “a true world / fictively constructed.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Marlatt, *Salvage*, 42.

¹⁴⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 48.

¹⁴⁹ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 54.

CHAPTER FOUR

Old World Horizons, New World Shores: Marlatt's *How Hug a Stone*, Howe's *The Liberties* and *Thorow*

Tree-talk, tree-breath branching out to you, and your breath

Daphne Marlatt, *Readings from the Labyrinth*

Winds naked as March
bend and blend to each other

Susan Howe, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*

I

In my final chapter I discuss Howe's *The Liberties*, Marlatt's *How Hug a Stone* and Howe's *Thorow*. I return to ideas raised in the introduction concerning the relationship these writers have to nationhood, colonial history and family history. In both Howe's *The Liberties* and Marlatt's *How Hug a Stone*, set in Ireland and England respectively, the habitual *elsewhere* of the Old World becomes *here*, the *here* of North America temporarily both *home* and *elsewhere*. Howe's *Thorow* is about being American, and about the white writer's eye in the landscape of New England; her earlier long poem *The Liberties*, on the other hand, takes its name from an area of Dublin and centres on certain key names, both historical and fictional.

An important point to make in a comparison of *Thorow* and *The Liberties* is that Howe's attitude towards patriarchy is complicated. As an American intellectual her relationship to the nation's Protestant and colonial history is centred in the printed word, the political and religious texts of the founding fathers and their descendants, the sermons and tracts of men such as William Bradford, Cotton and Increase Mather and Jonathan Edwards. But what interests Howe is the shadow, to borrow Pogue Harrison's term, of this patriarchal ideology, the spirit of antinomianism in contention with church authority, the forms of religious/political dissent evident in trial documents and captivity narratives. At the same time, as an American citizen of Irish descent her history is connected to that of a colonised and displaced people and the complexities of Anglo-Irish genealogy. This, in Howe's writing, is implicated in the cultural dichotomies of gender: father/mother, he/she, the patriarchal and the feminine, which not despite but because of her ideal of transcending gender, are basic themes in her work. These involve questions of cultural violence, both collective and practiced as military strategy according to rule of political and martial laws, and less tractable forms of violence inflicted, and self-inflicted, on the subjugated (feminine) body. Both Howe and Marlatt, in writing poems of place/s in *The Liberties* and *Howe Hug a Stone* respectively, find exemplary aspects of the feminine - fictional, mythical and historical - in order to rescue and redeem suppressed voices and to map a viable maternal heritage.

Marlatt and Howe persistently question the effects of language on the feminine body. In *The Liberties* Howe writes of woman as text where she has one of the protagonists say: “How did we happen – because we were written,”¹ and Marlatt in *How Hug a Stone* equates freedom with escape from the tyranny of language: “other kids were climbing free as they went in their unwritten world”² and “be unnamed, walk / unwritten, de-scripted, undescribed. or else compose, make it say itself, make it up.”³ It is interesting that Marlatt attempts to arrive at or uncover the site of an unwritten (preliterate (feminist)) ideal whereas Howe writes the agony of language, of composition and decomposition, as inescapable beside the untenable unattainable desire for blankness, the white page.

If Howe’s poetry creates possible extensions of cultural space in order to baffle and elude the appropriating reach of postmodern culture as, in Jameson’s terms, the “logic of late capitalism,” to defy the imperatives of its myth making technologies by working on the resonant, untapped angles of ancient myths, neglected stories and subaltern voices, Marlatt’s language actively re-enters the lateral realms her poetry progressively opens, working with the voices, bodies, maps and places she incorporates into it, determined within the landscapes of advanced capitalism to linguistically unearth strata of a buried and restorative feminine principle. But if “Nature” and the “Unconscious”⁴ are offered sanctuary in these

¹ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 197.

² Marlatt, *How Hug a Stone*, 16.

³ Ibid., 35.

⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 49.

spaces of postmodern poetry, Nature paradoxically must recover itself as the material repository of story, allegory, poetry, song and, even, ideology:

Florimell flees away into the forest

Hide there
an illusion (fiction)

Beauty of the world
becoming part of the forest⁵

mouth against the world
world changed back into song

Treadable tender
those paths to the lost path⁶

In the following discussion of Howe's *The Liberties* and Marlatt's *How Hug a Stone* I will be asking how these writers construct a relationship between the writing, that which the writing construes as the culturally silenced, and that which is actually beyond language i.e. Nature. If Howe as a woman has claimed identification with "wilderness" we must remember that it is as the written that women as objects and characters are historically and fictively trapped, "women in the flight of time stand framed" Howe writes in "The Book of Cordelia."⁷ In that case the formal spaces of potential freedom and sanctuary must be created by the agency of the "framed." The arena of women's writing creates its space of the

⁵ Howe, *Pythagorean Silence*, in *Europe of Trusts*, 107.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁷ Howe, *Europe of Trust*, 178.

outside, the exterior, beyond the frame. She must recruit “crucial words outside the book / those words are bullets.”⁸

This however brings us again to the problem of defining the real differences between woman and wilderness, writing and silence. Susan Knutson in her study of the works of Daphne Marlatt and Nicole Brossard, *Narrative in the Feminine*, sees Marlatt’s *How Hug a Stone* as:

not only a symphony of voices but ... also a hall of mirrors in which the i-narrator narcissistically explores her own image and confronts that which she both rejects and fears. The embedded mirror texts record the challenges faced by the i-narrator in her effort to put her values into practice.⁹

Sarah Harasym in her essay “ ‘Each Move Made Here (me) Moves There (you)’ ” defines the problem as being uncomfortably close to the old ethics of imperialism, that is that “the discourses of the world’s privileged societies dictate to a large extent the configuration of ‘the rest of the world.’ ”¹⁰ Her title is taken from the “Wisconsin” section of *What Matters* and she uses it as a starting point for a consideration of the “limits of feminism” as she sees demonstrated in Marlatt’s writing. Her criticism centres upon the tendency of French feminist theory, such as that of Irigaray and Cixous, in its emphasis on fluidity and transgression to conflate and sublate differences, especially in relation to the non-Western “other.” The writer of *écriture féminine* is always in a position of relative power. She takes issue with Marlatt’s ideas of the body of language and

⁸ Ibid., 178.

⁹ Knutson, *Narrative in the Feminine*, 90.

¹⁰ Sarah Harasym, “EACH MOVE MADE HERE (me) MOVES THERE (you),” *Boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture* (Duke University Press), 18, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 111.

the “textuality of the birthing process” and points out that the practice of feminist discourse “to sublate and/or erase through the notion of woman’s *jouissance*, the political, social, and historical differences among and within women in the world,” is for the benefit of the writing subject.¹¹

Nicky Marsh in her essay “ ‘Out of my Texts I am not what I Play’ ”¹² (a line adapted from Howe’s *Pythagorean Silence*) lays a comparable charge at Howe in the context of her representations of Native American presences, an argument I will come to consider with regard to *Thorow*. A related question to bear in mind as I proceed with this final chapter is: to what degree does a subjective appropriation implied in (feminist) excess, apply to representations of the physical environment?

II

Howe’s *The Liberties* is dedicated to her maternal grandmother and namesake, Susan Manning, but it is also about the woman we know as Stella, the long-term companion and correspondent of Jonathan Swift. In Howe’s poem Stella finds a new companion in Cordelia, King Lear’s third and youngest daughter. Talking to Edward Foster, Howe recalls that she began writing the poem after visiting her mother in a Dublin hospital and afterwards walking in St Patrick’s Cathedral where both Swift and Stella are buried:

I was trying to get the place, a for-

¹¹ Ibid., 105.

¹² Nicky Marsh, “Out of My Texts I Am Not What I Play: Politics and Self in the Poetry of Susan Howe,” *College Literature* 24, no. 3 (October 1997) : 124-137.

eign place that was home to my mother, on paper. I thought I could understand [her] that way – I might go back to my grandmother It was interesting to find that Swift was constantly wrenched between England and Ireland when he was a small child. It helps to explain the fracturing of language in his writing ...¹³

The pillar of words on the first page of “THEIR / Book of Stella” describes part of the architecture of the cathedral, the top lines being “dilapidation at erected original / irish granite south was added” and the base, “land Famine wisdom is a fox / Liberties unperceived”¹⁴ The third section of the poem returns to the stonework of the cathedral to describe the substantial transposition of material, and the stylised delineation of the natural world involved in its interior: “(WHITE MARBLE) leaf fame shadow leaf ... calyx dual double tendril meridian planar point (TUFA),”¹⁵ which, according to Tzvia Back, “certainly is an allusion to the white marble bust of Swift in a niche of St. Patrick’s, just above where Stella was interred.”¹⁶

Hester Johnson was first of all Swift’s pupil and then his companion; they never lived together but may have secretly married. Howe tells and speculates on this story in “Fragments of a Liquidation,” the first section of the poem. As Stella, Hester is the object of Swift’s *Journal to Stella* and recipient of the letters that make up that book.¹⁷ In Howe’s account in the

¹³ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 165-166. Howe explains: “That part of the city is called The Liberties. It is also built on top of Viking ruins, and at the time there was a good deal in the press about how to save the ruins from being built over by developers.”

¹⁴ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 159.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁶ Tzvia Back, *Led by Language*, 99.

¹⁷ Although as the much earlier accounts of the story by Sir Walter Scott in 1814, and J. K. Moorhead in 1924 indicate, both published in the 1955 Everyman edition of Swift’s *Journal to Stella*, the exact nature of her object-hood was never plain. Moorhead states: “The word ‘Stella’ was not written in the *Journal*; which was, moreover, not even

first part of *The Liberties* “Stella” is “an allegorical nickname” given by Swift to Hester and “by that name she is known to history.”¹⁸ However, her letters to him have not survived so that Hester’s voice, though not her names, has been erased from history.

Published in the same year, 1983, there are uncanny parallels in *The Liberties* and *How Hug a Stone*. Both poems share the trope of the plot and the script as metaphor for the determining reach of written history. In “God’s Spies” Cordelia says: “In history people are all dead. / The plot *was* this – the fantasy *was* this - / Her spirit flew in feathers.”¹⁹ In both poems there is persistent imagery of birds and of stars. At one point in *How Hug a Stone*, the narrator recalls the words of a medium in Vancouver: “do you understand this please? her passing was swift , so swift. your mother loved birds. as i was talking i saw the swift, you know the swift of England? a ‘blue’ bird?”²⁰ In Howe’s poem the word “swift” - the name of the writer, a description of movement, the name of a bird - is a site of metamorphosis: “Swift, you are swift” the protagonists say together, then together again “Blind to a father’s need.”²¹ A potential transformation from the written (“of feathery wings – soft and tremblingly swift - / How did we happen – because we were written”)²² to the fugitive, will carry with it the repressed (the suffering) of its creator/captor and the blindness, the guilt, they share.

addressed to Stella in any exclusive sense.” The letters were ostensibly directed to Rebecca Dingley, Hester’s (or Esther as the earlier accounts name her) companion in Ireland when Swift was Dean of St Patrick’s Cathedral, during the reign of Queen Ann. Although Swift and Stella may have secretly married they never lived together. Jonathan Swift, *Journal to Stella*, ed. J. K. Moorhead (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1955), xv.

¹⁸ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 149.

¹⁹ Ibid., 187.

²⁰ Marlatt, *How Hug a Stone*, 40.

²¹ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 188.

²² Ibid., 197.

Howe's bird imagery in *The Liberties* begins towards the end of the first part with a quotation from one of Swift's letters to Stella set just above its final word, the capitalised "TRAVELS":

*As for Patrick's bird, he brought him for his tameness,
and now he is grown the wildest I ever saw. His wings
have been quilled thrice, and are now up again: he will
be able to fly after us to Ireland, if he be willing –*²³

This bird is a living source of pens for writing and its capacity for flight is transmitted through its quills. The first line of the following page is: "her diary soared above her house" so that the pen Stella appropriates for her own use (for writing that has not survived) is also a magic wand giving the power to both write language and to slip its frame. It is a reminder of Emily Dickinson's sentiments against publishing: "Possibly – but We – would rather / From Our Garret go / White – Unto the White Creator – Than invest – Our Snow - ." ²⁴ Howe's Stella is of "Our Snow," in a realm of exteriority, devastated and colonised:

trackless near sea	relating to sea	
a sea of arms in my	dispeopled kingdom	
autumn till summer	homeland till dusk	
	or whatever	
plague	famine	pestilence
there in me	them in me	I
halted	I heard footsteps	²⁵

At its oldest and closest to its Pagan roots the Christianity of Ireland arrived with the missionary saints and retained those roots through the establishment of Catholicism. Dean Swift was Church of Ireland, an outpost of the Protestant High Church, so his presence and that of the recipients of his letters was colonial. In "THEIR / Book of Stella" a

²³ Ibid., 157.

²⁴ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 2d ed. (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1975), 348-349.

²⁵ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 160.

sympathy of dissent insinuates the mystery of transubstantiation into an idea of a landscape blessed by the saints. The lines imagine a reward of faith (focused historically through the rituals and threats of an authoritarian church) maternal enough to nourish the body as well as the soul, for bodies starving in a landscape, which is the destination of the dead:

fearsad bell high stone wall
 evensong
 the blue of sweet salvation
 such roads between the uplands
 over the lowered cols
 eden eaden brow of a hill
 as many lives
 as there are loaves
 and fishes
 and O
 her voice
 a settled place
 table spread flesh and milk
 in mystery
 in the room
 in the sunlight
 about the dead
 who come from west-the-sea
 raiment
 shirt-clad and light-clad ²⁶

The “voice” in the lines above might be that of either a medium or a ghost; Mary, grandmother, mother, Stella, self, but it expresses sympathy for the oppressed. The word “settled” is exposed at the centre of the page like a bird, but it also alludes to a process of colonisation, a deal made in the interests of the powerful landlords, as Elizabeth I “settled” Scottish Protestant’s in sixteenth century Ireland.

²⁶ Ibid., 161.

Centralised on the following page are just two lines: “She must be traced through many dark paths / as a boy.” Throughout this poem there are oblique links between tropes of hunger, androgyny, escape and disguise. In the writing of a citizen of the wealthiest nation on earth, these inscriptions of female agency and self-determination, food and famine, suggest a figure of the anorexic in conflict with a disempowering (super-powerful) culture. We must, though, put this image in the context of Howe’s poem which alludes to a national history of displacement and famine, and seeks to trace the cultural deprivation of the feminine.

Terry Eagleton, in his book *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* writes that “Jonathan Swift was passionately concerned with defending the Anglican establishment and coolly indifferent to divine mystery.”²⁷ Eagleton cites Edmund Burke’s remarks on the failure of the Anglo-Irish hegemony to impose its spiritual will on the Irish people, expressing the perception that “governing classes survive only by enjoying the affection of their inferiors, and that a loveless sovereignty is politically bankrupt.”²⁸ The contradictions of love, loyalty, resentment and silence involved in the colonial situation are in macrocosm the embodied contradictions of Howe’s *Stella*. This neat correlation, however, falls into the open trap that construes an historical situation as metaphor of the suffering self. Howe is less deceived, as her language deploys resonance, analogy, echo, and dramatic silence to suggest otherness and subterfuge rather than identity and reflection.

²⁷ Terry Eagleton: *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

Swift's Stella, Howe's Stella (Cordelia says to Stella in "God's Spies": "Swift, you are swift")²⁹ is subject to the contradictions of the colonial situation. She shares in the conflict Howe recognises as an effect of Swift's dual commitment to a life in England and in Ireland, a schizophrenic state of being, causing a "fracturing of language." As "Stella" is just one of the many names Swift had for Hester Johnson, and as she survives for us only through his writing, she is part of what is fractured, the part Howe in the writing of her poem attempts to reset, set free.

In "THEIR / Book of Stella," because she is thin she can "crawl between thwarts," become a "small boy bird of the air" in a space between captivity and "obliteration."³⁰ This aspect of androgyny is perhaps part of a difficult strategy towards Howe's ideal of transcending gender, towards a " 'nature of the future' ".³¹ Susan Knutson, in her study of Daphne Marlatt and Nicole Brossard, *Narrative in the Feminine*, cites Monique Wittig's work on female subjectivity and linguistics noting that:

She has used the grammatical feminine generic, but prefers to disrupt the masculine generic by theorising future beyond gender. ... This vision of a post-gender future can be compared to Woolf's argument in a *Room of One's Own* that only the 'androgynous mind,' 'man-womanly' or 'woman-manly,' is truly creative.³²

Knutson continues to cite Woolf's observation that the narrative first person, the capital I in the writing of some male authors is so vigorous and assured that it inhibits possibilities in the textual elements surrounding it.

Woolf writes:

²⁹ Ibid., 199.

³⁰ Ibid., 163.

³¹ Ibid., 205.

³² Knutson, *Narrative in the Feminine*, 85

One had a sense of physical well-being in the presence of this well-nourished, well-educated, free mind, which had never been thwarted or opposed, but had had full liberty from birth to stretch itself in whatever way it liked. All this was admirable. But after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, something like the letter 'I.' One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Whether there was indeed a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure.³³

The idea of the “well-nourished” (male) ego in comparison to the figure, obliquely present in Howe’s text, of the anorexic female is interesting. As poets of “nothing” Stella and Cordelia partially recall those human beings subjected to an unjust land system by their colonial masters, but also the non-human “other” of nature, prior to the “sovereignty of consciousness.” Howe’s representations of Stella and Cordelia propose an evolution towards escape from the Crown’s sanctuary, from hegemonic expropriation, towards a cultural transcendence of culture, and the “structure of subjectivity.”³⁴ Or, perhaps the motive is regressive, towards a childhood before they were written. In the latter case it would be part of a drive towards self-annihilation in order to gain the self. There would be a kind of transfiguration. Julia Kristeva writes of “Food loathing [as] perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection.”

“I” want none of that element, sign of [the parents’] desire; “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it. But since the food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I put myself out, I abject myself within the same through which “I” claim to establish *myself*. ... it is this that they see that “I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death.³⁵

³³ Ibid., 86.

³⁴ Eagleton, *The Great Hunger*, 28.

³⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

However, the conditions for the refusal of food and the conditions of famine are very different. At one point in “The Book of Cordelia” comes the line “Lent is where she lives”³⁶ and again “(as if nothing / has happened / what is eaten is gone. If I wasn’t lucky I’d starve.)”³⁷ Female subjectivity within postcolonial situations is doubly complex, but as Harasym and Clarke point out, the situations of the dispossessed cannot be recruited as metaphor for the oppression articulated by western feminists. In *The Liberties* the trope of emaciation is demonstrated as ellipsis; the girls are names, made of language. Cordelia, the child of Lear exiled by her father for her speech “Nothing” inhabits the tower of history, poetry and fairy-tale: “I am maria wainscoted.”³⁸ She mirrors and is mirrored by, or is the alibi for, whoever is stranded at the foot, or at the head of the eaten-away ladder:

I can re
trac
my steps
Iwho
crawl
between thwarts
Do not come down the ladder
ifor I

³⁶ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 171.

³⁷ Ibid., 175.

³⁸ Think for instance of Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “Mariana,” in *Victorian Prose and Poetry*, ed Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 396-406; “Rapunzel,” in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Fairy Tales*, trans. Margaret Hunt (Ware, Hertfordshire: Omega Books, n.d.), 252-256; and, in the context of Anglo Irish settlement, W. B. Yeats, “The Tower,” in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1978), 218-225.

haveaten

it a

way³⁹

Her ladder is of “rings / of light,” “thorn,” “ruins.”⁴⁰ The “HALLUCINATION OF THE MIRROR” which closes the “Book of Stella” and opens the “Book of Cordelia” is the attenuated self but also the agent who makes “a / way,” creates a route out of absence. These figures, who act together in the second part of the long poem, which takes the form of a play, are versions, also, of the “Two sisters at work under an oak / spinning and weaving Idea / and Echo wavering so” in *Pythagorean Silence*.⁴¹ They exist and act in the space of language Howe has excavated for her “Play / of possibilities.”⁴²

In a transcript of her talk on Gertrude Stein, “Grammar and Landscape,” Lyn Hejinian makes the point that Stein understood “landscape in terms of plays – at first in the theatre, and in terms of temporal rather than spatial problems, but more and more as writing rather than theatre, and in response

³⁹ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 179.

⁴⁰ This ladder is a relation of the one in Emily Dickinson’s poem:

Doom is the House without the Door -
‘Tis entered from the Sun -
And then the Ladder’s thrown away,
Because Escape - is done

‘Tis varied by the Dream
Of what they do outside –
Where Squirrels play – and Berries die –
And Hemlocks - bow – to God –

Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, 229.

⁴¹ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 48.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 58.

to local landscapes ...”⁴³ Landscape, in Stein’s perception, is not a static, receptive ground for illusions of the eternal, but “an empty form,” according to Hejinian, “or rather a form free of predictions, a somewhat vibratory field of reversible effects.”⁴⁴ Howe’s interest in theatrical space is informed by her own early experiences as a scene painter and actress at The Gate Theatre in Dublin,⁴⁵ and her mother’s work as director in the theatre, both in Dublin and at Harvard. Howe remembers the impression she gained of the director’s power to create and control illusion:

I can’t remember the first play she directed but I remember the Agassiz Theatre and how frivolous the name Idler seemed in wartime most of all the heavy curtain in itself a spectacle whose task it was to open at a certain moment in connection with distancing tactics directed by my mother. Her thought over here mapping the deep area where no stage set was ever permanent actors being one character then another according to movements she blocked out.⁴⁶

The austerity of the landscape of the textual stage in “God’s Spies” is a visual illusion made of language. It represents a complex of familial, personal and literary significations. This “wilderness” is the “wild field”⁴⁷ of *King Lear*’s (self) exile, and the Protestant wildernesses of Ireland and New England, the nations Howe (analogous to Swift in this sense) is split between. Into the configuration of Cordelia and Lear, Howe inscribes the story of her own relationship with her father. On the final page of the play Stella says “Yes, yes ... (*With a measuring gesture*): Mark ... How deep?”

⁴³ Lyn Hejinian, “Two Stein Talks,” Register of the Susan Howe Papers, Mandeville Special Collections Library (UCSD Libraries, San Diego, California), mss: 201, box 68, folder 13; unpaginated.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Howe, *LINEbreak*.

⁴⁶ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 16.

⁴⁷ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1997), act 3, scene 4, line 109.

so that her father's name is encoded in these lines.⁴⁸ Stella's silence and Cordelia's "nothing," their destinies of premature decline and "obscurity," are elements in the set of "God's Spies."⁴⁹ The deaths of both Stella and Cordelia, one historical the other dramatic, are prior to the deaths of Swift and Lear.

This play of three voices, Stella, Cordelia, and the ghost of Jonathan Swift, forms the second part of *The Liberties*. Its setting is "A wilderness," and the play's title, although it is a quote from King Lear (Lear to Cordelia when reconciled: "We two alone will sing like birds i'the cage. / / And take upon's the mystery of things / As if we were God's spies. ..."),⁵⁰ recalls also the Puritans on their errand into the wilderness, watchful for signs. The stage scenery is described: "A painted waterfall on the backdrop cascades from painted rocks to form a stream at the base. The stream bisects the stage"⁵¹ presents a cultural construct "wilderness" as extreme stylisation. Cordelia's props are "a knapsack and a shepherd's crook," Stella's is "a large book ...filled with fold-out maps, alphabets, and pictures."⁵² These lend to Cordelia a nomadic allusion to Christ, (significantly their names share the same first letter) while those of Stella, (whose initial is the same as Howe's Christian name) indicate her status as a pupil, or possibly a scholar, and provide her with means to make marks and to orient herself in space.

⁴⁸ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 199.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 175.

⁵⁰ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, act 5, scene 3, lines 8-19.

⁵¹ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 183.

⁵² Ibid.

The scenes in the play are differentiated as consecutive days of the week, starting with “MONDAY, *evening*.” At “FRIDAY, *sunrise*” the stage set transforms from wilderness to the interior of a cathedral, “Trees become pillars, the rock a white pulpit” identified as “ST. PATRICK’S CATHEDRAL, DUBLIN. Into this scene enters the “ghost of Jonathan Swift fantastically dressed in wild flowers”⁵³ in the guise, therefore, of the Pagan Green Man, a wild man of the woods. Stella, who cannot see him, recites a self-deprecatory poem in praise of Swift then takes a pistol from her shirt “points it at her left breast and shoots” but although “blood spurts from the wound, the only color on stage” she does not fall.⁵⁴ She does not fall because the gun is of herself, which she symbolically draws from within her clothes and uses to penetrate beneath them. As an emblem of power this gun is a version of Dickinson’s “Loaded Gun”⁵⁵ and the bullet one of “words outside the book.”⁵⁶ The sanctuary of Howe’s play, the agency of the “loaded” pen (or quill), absorbs and transfigures Stella’s act of self annihilation. The ghost weeps and “Cries to heaven” then “walks through STELLA” where she is seated on the pulpit steps as it climbs to “the sounding board.” Swift’s ghost recalls Hamlet in his “silent sermon” of “words / words / words” before it exits, preceded by a dove and the interior of the cathedral changes back into “WILDERNESS.”⁵⁷

⁵³ Ibid., 189.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 192.

⁵⁵ Dickinson, “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –,” *The Complete Poems*, 369. The section entitled “Architecture of Meaning” in Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson*, contains an important interpretation of this poem, pp. 75-138. Howe makes an explicit connection between Dickinson’s poem and *King Lear*, by positing the setting of both as an abject place, where those abandoned to it might regain self-sovereignty: “Lear’s kingdom of exiled Love, is the mythic realm Gun and Owner have been roaming together.” 101.

⁵⁶ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 178.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 192-193.

The American wilderness and the Irish wilderness were both of British sovereignty at different points in its imperial history. Eagleton writes in his chapter “Ascendancy and Hegemony” of how the Irish clan chiefs, in negotiation with the Tudor English administration of Elizabeth I, discovered that instead of consolidating and securing their hereditary claims to land, the terms to which they submitted resulted in “the most wholesale dispossession of a native landed elite that the Europe of the age had witnessed.”⁵⁸ Howe remembers that: “Amerindians found to their cost, trust in the code word ‘sovereign’ could mean all or nothing.”

And that:

Power is pitiless once you have put it on.
The poet is an intermediary hunting form beyond
form, truth beyond theme through woods of words
tangled and tremendous. Who owns the woods?
Freedom to roam poetically means freedom to hunt.⁵⁹

As Pogue Harrison explains, the divine right of monarchs before the English Civil War extended to his or her dominion over nature; the king or queen personified all aspects of the kingdom: “By privileging certain places as forests the king declares them off-limits to the encroachments of history. ... Sanctuaries of original nature must continue to exist.”⁶⁰ These sanctuaries provided the monarch with exclusive hunting grounds; “original nature” yielded royal deer. In “God’s Spies” the girls make several references to their own sylvan mutability which is a quality of their profound sympathy with the object, or, rather, the hunted world:

CORDELIA (Remembering): I knew a child –

⁵⁸ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, 30.

⁵⁹ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 79-80.

⁶⁰ Pogue Harrison, *Forests*, 74.

In Howe's "Book of Cordelia" the name Lear is a shadow or rhyme of Lir, of Irish legend: "Lir was an ocean God whose children turned into swans,"⁶⁵

children of Lir
lear
whistling would in air ha
nameless appear –
Can you not see
arme armes
give tongue
are you silent o my swift
all coherence gone?⁶⁶

In the Irish legend "The Children of Lir," of the ancient race of the "Tuatha De Danaan," their jealous stepmother turned them into swans for nine hundred years, until they could "hear the sound of a bell pealing out a new faith."⁶⁷ When that day comes, as Marie Heaney tells it:

A new age had dawned in Ireland and the Tuatha De Danaan had been displaced by another race. A new religion had spread across the country, brought by Saint Patrick and his monks, and the people now worshipped the Christian God. The old Gods had gone underground.⁶⁸

That Howe is familiar with the mythology of the Celtic tree alphabet and its links to a pagan calendar is evident in *The Liberties*. The opening "airy grid,"⁶⁹ as Tzvia Back refers to the arrangements of words in the third part of the poem "Formation of a Separatist, I," is a landscape of words into which a (Christian?) knight has entered:

Crops

⁶⁵ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 172.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 176.

⁶⁷ Marie Heaney, *Over Nine Waves: A Book of Irish Legends* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), 37-55.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁹ Tzvia Back, *Led by Language*, 98-99.

his horse
drew his sword
swung his sword
said he would slash and slay
1. only air most lovely meath
longside lean soaring in mist
matin sky breathing longside weir
herd naming yew colt cottage
lesson laracor aye midhe heron
stirring inlaid () enclosure
 stellar
breach boyne churn surely blade
pierce side clearly meadow my
here foam pen still yew 1.⁷⁰

The distinction between the graphic characters “I” and “1” indicates that the “Separartist” is both subject and object of the “formation,” and that formation could be a process of formal deployment, political or religious dissent, or character (personality) development. The word “midhe” repeated amongst the formation of separate words on the following page could be a shortened form of “midheaven,” a compound noun used on an astrological chart to indicate “the point where the ecliptic intersects the meridian.”⁷¹ ⁷² This is appropriate to the word “stellar” positioned directly under the empty brackets, the phonetic equivalent of Swift’s name for Hester. The empty space might stand for the difference between her several eponymous associations, or for the eclipse of one body or being by another.

⁷⁰ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 204.
⁷¹ *Oxford English Dictionary* (2004).
⁷² Terry Eagleton discusses the word “ascendancy” in terms of the Protestant Ascendancy in seventeenth century Ireland. He includes a note which “reminds us of the astrological resonance of the term.” *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*. 34.

And the word “midhe” rhymes, visually at least, with “sidhe” a name for the topographical remnants (“the mounds and earthworks known as the *sidhes* that are scattered all over the country”) of the ancient race of Ireland who went underground after their defeat by the invading Milesians, before the coming of the Christian saints.⁷³ The word, “midhe,” then, is another inscription of the horizontal axis between earth and sky frequent in Howe’s work. It is a reminder, too, of Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizome” which “has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*.” Again, it alludes to the Irish language displaced and buried under the spread of English, which, Eagleton concedes, was “One medium of British power ... the Irish steadily assimilated.”⁷⁴

This “grid” is followed by four others of comparably spacious arrangements, the first two headed with the letter S, the following with the letter C. The land as text is the “memory written in meadows”;⁷⁵ or the landscape of the text is a page bearing the copied words of a child learning to write (“Say Stella when you copy next, / Will you keep strictly to the text?”)⁷⁶ Some of the other (apparently arbitrary) words under the first heading S are “asymmetry ... imagery ... puzzle ... paradigm ... polyphonic ... mathematic ... easter ... snow ... 1668 ... estersnowe ... enclosure ... ‘nature of the future.’” On the following page are such words as “rebuke ... churn ... alpha ... bet ... 1772 ... broken ... pierce ... sum ... hester ... Liberties ... print ... pen ... i ... yew.” A form of the words

⁷³ Heaney, *Over Nine Waves*, 55.

⁷⁴ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, 30.

⁷⁵ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 167.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

“easter” and “snow” reappear in the compound “estersnowe” and then again as the name “hester” Stella’s given name. The final syllable of “estersnowe” might rhyme with how(e) or no; it could be read as ester’s no or easter’s now.⁷⁷

The “airy grids” under C are constructed of words such as “darker medium ...swallow ...hue ... crisscross ... wild ... flame ... no ... mum ... machination ... 3” on the first page; on the following “love ... milk ... pasture ...sister ... willow ... verbatim ... leaves ... intonation ... benediction ... lips ... O ... wal ... no.”⁷⁸ On each of these five pages, vertical columns of words are formed against the left margin of the arrangement.⁷⁹ In the formations under C a column is formed against the right margin also, the last made out of six lines of the word “words” and four lines of the word “no” so that, when the page is read either from left to right or from top to bottom, the final word is “no.” That this “no” is both a rhyme of “snow” and the first syllable of Cordelia’s definitive “nothing” is affirmed in the riddle on the following page. It is also, as Tzvia Back points out, “Lear’s voice ... [his] thrice repeated ‘no no no’ lifted from his final famous speech over Cordelia’s body.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Ibid., 205. It might also allude to the Fenian Easter Rising of 1916.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 207-208.

⁷⁹ These pages are similar in form to parts of Robert Duncan’s “The Fire, Passages 13.” (Robert Duncan, *Bending the Bow* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), 40-45.) In this poem come the lines “From the wood we thought burning / our animal spirits flee,” which makes me think of Howe’s line, already referred to, “The woods are on fire,” and again “Animals sense something about ruin I think he said our human spirits being partly immaterial ...” from *Frame Structures*, 3.

⁸⁰ Tzvia Back, *Led by Language*, 83.

Howe includes the puzzle of her own name within those of Stella and Cordelia in the textual/conceptual setting of Ireland. This riddling is a kind of parodic version of the sequences Graves gives example of in his chapter “The Song of Amergin,” which he says are “frequent in ancient Welsh and Irish poetry ... all variants of the same calendar theme”⁸¹ and which potentially both conceal and reveal their “esoteric meaning.”⁸² Howe’s reads:

I am composed of nine letters.
 1 is the subject of a proposition in logic.
 2 is a female sheep, or tree.
 3 is equal to one.
 4 is a beginning.
 5 & 7 are nothing.
 6 7 & 8 are a question, or salutation.
 6 7 8 & 9 are deep, a depression.

THE KEY

e n i g m a s t i f e m i a t e d c r y p t o a t h
 a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y
 z or zed
 graphy
 reland

I ⁸³

Howe’s name is dissembled throughout her geo /graphy of Ireland with those other textual names Stella and Cordelia, as graphic enigmas, cryptograms in the “f e m i a t e d” formation of her text. A name is an enigma, a lexical talisman if you like, and the proposition “I am composed of nine letters” comments on the influence of the sight, sound and spelling of language upon the structure of subjectivity. “I am” not made entirely of

⁸¹ Graves, *White Goddess*, 205.

⁸² Ibid., 207.

⁸³ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 209.

letters however, as there is the problem of embodiment. “*What are eyes for? / What are ears for?*” are questions posed under this riddle and its key.

A distinct body in this landscape is that of Christ, “O dulcis Jesu, Fili Maria” “blood and water streaming / swift to its close / ebbs out / out / out / of my pierced / side / *not in my native land.*”⁸⁴ The lines following these make a plainer declaration of relationship to place: “Across the Atlantic, I / inherit myself / semblance / of irish susans / dispersed / and narrowed to / home” closing with a converse variation of the one above “*not in your native land.*” Between Ireland and America she is native to neither, lacking both authenticity and integrity, a “semblance ... dispersed.”⁸⁵

Questions of anatomy and identity are consistently asked through, if not the absence then the narrowing and the dispersal of, physical selves. The final part of *The Liberties* is another short play, entitled not Lear but “HEAR” the setting of which is “Portrait with green patch. Hut with ribbons. ... An altar dressed for sacrifice.” Five characters are listed: “SENTRY,” “SCAPEGOAT,” “BRIDE, BRIDEGROOM [and] PARENTS.” However of these only the “SENTRY” appears in the following pages of text, along with a “HEATHEN PERFORMER,” who is of “no description. Pagan cry of desolation,” and “SOJOURNER,” “BASTARD” and “FOOL,” perhaps natives of the wilderness, although Sojourner says “Peace at my tears for I am a stranger.” Amidst the lines under “HEATHEN PERFORMER,” e.g.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 212.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 213.

the repeated “names creeping out everywhere” and “stone spears and forest syllables,” appears another “airy grid” on the penultimate page of writing.⁸⁶

Within the first three lines on this page the words “antimony” “antinomy” and “atomies” make a descending diagonal, the first between “1” and “one,” the second between “2” and “two” and the third between “splash” and “dare.” Among the words below these are “Liberties,” three tree names “willow whitethorn yew,” the letter “C,” the symbols x and =, numbers 1. 2. 3. and their equivalent linguistic signifiers. The final line is “poesie sign wave 9” which might refer to the legend already mentioned of the coming of the Milesians.⁸⁷ The noun “antimony” could relate to the “sword” and “spears” and the variations of the verb “pierce” in Howe’s poem, as it signifies “a silver-white metallic chemical element used *esp* as a constituent of alloys to give added strength and hardness.” The noun “antinomy” means a contradiction between principles; a paradox, and so is a cognate of antinomian and can be connected to “a Separatist.” “Atomies” could be the plural of “atomy” an archaic word for “a skeleton or emaciated person”⁸⁸ so connects with the motifs of hunger we have been discussing, and through its graphic and phonetic links to atom/ic also recalls the terrifying Cold War spectre suggested in the lines “L E A R / leans on his lance he / has holes instead of eyes / blind (folded) / bare (footed) / nuclear (hooded).”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ibid., 214-217.

⁸⁷ Heaney, *Over Nine Waves*, 53. Their leader, Amergin, made a pact with the De Danaan kings by which it was agreed that they should first retreat from the Irish shore “over the distance of nine waves” before making their advance.

⁸⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary* (2004).

⁸⁹ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 174.

The end-piece of *The Liberties* is the tiny reproduction of an eighteenth century representation of an island similar in type to the semi-imaginary maps included in Swifts *Gulliver's Travels*, first published in 1726.⁹⁰ The island, drawn in black ink is enclosed within a frame of three rectangles, with a single line at a slight angle from the horizontal running through the eye-shape of the island.⁹¹ The word "IRELANDS EYE" hovers above it, a visual/ phonetic pun and a reminder of the Ireland/I conundrum touched on in my introduction. Howe writes of the distance between Ireland and America in terms of a sea-crossing, thus placing the poem's narratives in relation to histories of exploration and emigration, and to historical discrepancies of distance and power.

III

Marlatt's *How Hug a Stone* begins with an oddly impregnable idea of England, self-contained in a different way to the little cartoon map which is the end-piece of *The Liberties*. Marlatt's epigraph weaves William Blake's famous line "England's green and pleasant land" into a personal prophecy, a kind of summary of the plot to follow:

"you'll cross to England & you *will* walk in

⁹⁰ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1967), 52, 120.

⁹¹ This image is strangely reminiscent of the opening sequence of Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali's surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou*, in which a close up shot of a human eye-ball being slit horizontally with a blade is intercut with an image of a cloud crossing the moon. Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali, *Un Chien Andalou* (France 1929), <http://www.bfi.org.uk/incinemas/releases/films/bunuel/>; Internet.

“‘England’s green and pleasant land’ & she’ll
go home with you, though she has been already.”
Vancouver, 1975

The original social and religious radicalism encoded in Blake’s “Jerusalem,” written in the early 1800s during the Napoleonic Wars, has, through Edward Elgar’s orchestration of Hubert Parry’s musical score of 1916, accrued a freight of Edwardian patriotism. This is appropriate, for Marlatt’s (her)story is in contention with that imperial history, her “will” against its weight, as she seeks to instate, or excavate, a different ideal, one more sympathetic, perhaps, to Blake’s subversive spirit. Susan Knutson sees the epigraph as a device of narrative anticipation and foreclosure which posits the words of the “medium” in Vancouver as “the primary, framing narration.”⁹² However, this inaugural voice mediates between the new world and the old, the living and the dead, so that while it offers a sense of *faits accomplis*, it opens up and guarantees a dialectical tension between those entities. Blake’s “clouded hills” are recalled again, later in the poem, in a different voice, overheard on a train between Exeter and Reading. Its question, although rhetorical, subtly implies the conditions for life’s renewal within the apparently eternal “green”: “if it wasn’t for the clouds England wouldn’t be so green, you see, it would be all dry grass now wouldn’t it?”⁹³

The distance between America and Ireland is defined in *The Liberties* as a division or transition of sea, so aligned with prior eras of travel, whereas

⁹² Knutson, *Narrative in the Feminine*, 91.

⁹³ Marlatt, *How Hug a Stone*, 62.

the protagonists' crossings in *How Hug a Stone* are the height of contemporaneity, by air from Canada to England and back again. This book length poem, ostensibly a series of diary entries, gives an account of the journey made in June 1983, when Marlatt was 39, from the West Coast of Canada to the South-West of England, with her 12 year old son. They fly from Vancouver to Gatwick, as Marlatt writes it in her "Intoduction," as "two living letters in reply" to her grandmother's "faithful" correspondence, proposing by that distinction new and potential conceptions of flesh and stone. This poem about spatial distances and temporal differences means to interrogate the past through the re-visiting of a family history closely implicated in the demise of the British Empire. Marlatt's language counters the sediments of an ideological order whose time is past but whose residual imperatives threaten to block possibilities of the present and future.⁹⁴

How Hug a Stone is written from the perspective of one who is as if dispersed (to borrow a word from Howe) across an atavistic realm. It is a meditation on religion as well as history, an inquiry into how and why and how it happens that inimical power "plots" direct the trajectories of relationship between individuals, between individuals and their sense of the sacred, between individuals and the nation state. It is also a meditation on

⁹⁴ It is worth pointing out that this journey was made in the year following Canada's Constitution Act of 1982, when towards the end of Pierre Trudeau's Liberal government Canada finally became a sovereign country, "with only the most symbolic of linkages to the British monarchy remaining." Scott W. See, *The History of Canada* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 179. This new Constitution, although it consolidated and empowered Canada as a State in the international arena, left certain groups within its national borders, including Women's Groups and First Nations, disempowered and dissatisfied. 180.

the implications of death. The narrative matrix is that of the writer's mother's life and death, her struggles against the conventions of a privileged background and the survival of her resistant spirit. Caught in the roots of a colonial family history, outraged, she became not insane, but "lost." This condition of being "lost" is at once a metaphor for potentially creative transgression and the description of a frightening but necessary state of being part of an unquantifiable event, a "happening," within incommensurable differences: "& I can do nothing but ... beat out the words, dance out names at the heart of where we are lost ..." ⁹⁵ Her mother's largely unspoken sufferings of loneliness, frustration, interrupted dreams and rebellion are subtly asserted in *How Hug a Stone*, which is at once a travel journal, a memoir of her mother, a prayer for her son, a record of voices, a poem of places, *and* an effective feminist critique of patriarchy/Christianity/imperialism/global capitalism, "plotted" through these various generic strands.

If for Howe, history is an "infinite miscalculation," ⁹⁶ Marlatt wonders: "what if history is simply the shell we exude for a place to live in? *all wrapped up*. break out before it buries us. stories can kill." ⁹⁷ The stories she is working to deconstruct and neutralise, and in that dismantling to "invent" a provisional "narrative" so that "we can see where we're going" and that "we happen," are imperial narratives with their fore-closures of war. ⁹⁸ The political is the personal; as Howe observes "Laws are relations

⁹⁵ Marlatt, *How Hug a Stone*, 78.

⁹⁶ Howe, *Singularities*, 17.

⁹⁷ Marlatt, *How Hug a Stone*, 51.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

among individuals”⁹⁹ and Marlatt writes “war runs through all of our lives.”¹⁰⁰ In Marlatt’s account of this visit to England, at a time before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dismantling of the Soviet Bloc, where a woman, Margaret Thatcher, led a Conservative government which advocated a return to “Victorian values,” her de-scripting of the fatal “old story”¹⁰¹ encompasses a register of what has happened to aspects of the feminine through the ascendancy of Christianity in the Western world.

In the passage entitled “departure,” of “1. Crossings-over,” the dynamics of a provisional gathering takes place within the “improbable” condition of flight, “thanks to 23,000 gallons of fossil fuel.” What is “crossing-over” here includes versions and re-versions of dwelling in, and moving between, colonial and post-colonial situations. Exemplary and ironic, the “elderly English lady” (detective) of the opening paragraph, suggests to these Canadian citizens a particular idea of a class-bound Englishness, an obsolete and intriguing “version of what we fly to.” This anachronistic presence is countered by the actual presence of “an elderly man,” a fellow passenger on the plane. These two elders, one a participating witness, the other representing a generic *nom de plume*, are paradoxical dwellers at the threshold, dwellers in transit carrying (carried by) the “absurd” conjunctions of air travel:

an elderly man sitting at the back says we have just left land,
Baffin Island he means, now all is ice floes on black water,
crazy paving they have pulled the blinds on. for the movie
begins. Agatha Christie version of what we fly to, dense with
intrigue. take intrigued attention to a star system elderly

⁹⁹ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Marlatt, *How Hug a Stone*, 27.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

A signal of authorship in place of authority is quietly given in the phrase “Baffin Island he means” where Marlatt assumes an interpretation on the man’s behalf. There is an ironic allusion in that assumption to colonial desire, the object “land” being physically behind them, figuratively between them. This is the first mention of “land,” made here in a context of its distance; land as changeable perspective in a poem that works towards immersion in its physicality and a revised departure. The description of what they fly over “ice floes on black water” anticipates the poem’s account of landscapes and places where instability and darkness, a sense of mystery and terror, underlie the apparently pastoral, peaceful and mundane. It is also a metaphor for the slippery, fluid strength of the language Marlatt uses to sound out viable echoes, connections and resonances in her writing, in response to places and people her mother knew.

Behind the “... elderly English ...” are the “remnants of Old English” the Anglo-Saxon (mixed in with “*Anglo-Indian* ... music of futility ...”)¹⁰³ fragments of which Marlatt draws into her patterns of names, roots, rhymes and associations, in the construction of her narrative. For instance in the section “grounded in the family” there is “hostage ... hostess ... mother ... *moththe, math-, /* ... moon ... man ... moths ... *ghost-ti-, ... ghostly*”¹⁰⁴ and in “narrative continuity” the “remnants ... even *moth, snake, stone*” are

¹⁰² Ibid., 15.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 28.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 17.

a “word henge to plot us in the current flow.”¹⁰⁵ Successive clauses which attempt to place the subject in a contingent relation to its objects: “... my mother, small in a henge of emotion, removed somewhere, no stars to plot this course, only foreboding & hope against her father’s words, against the script, learning how to fly”¹⁰⁶ suggest the grammatical strategies by which Marlatt instates the potential and animate in place of atrophy and stasis.

In the Turnstone edition of Marlatt’s text, on the page following the first section “Crossings-over” and visible through the semi-opaque paper, is reproduced the first of several sections of map. These could be reproductions of one they travelled with, as routes are marked in heavier black lines and some place names referred to in the text, are circled. The map, then, is a kind of hazardous script, a language of place names; a plot the writer voluntarily enters into and thereby, in a real sense, “risks” herself and, more especially, her son. The networks and names on the pages of map suggest the treacherous ground of her family history in this at once familiar and alien landscape, while they register a concourse of speech, the dialects of Devon and Anglo-Indian that her Canadian son finds so strange.

As she travels, Marlatt the writer as narrator, as inventive plotter, is always present, visibly and actively turning the spoken into the written. Her writing is part of a performance and the element of chance is carefully exploited. For instance, the short section headed “magpie augury” gives a sense of how Marlatt as persona positions herself in the midst of event.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 45.

The “magpie rhyme” is apparently spontaneously recited to her by her aunt:

... fast, as we speed down high-hedged lanes in time for tea
& my uncle’s arrival from his doctor’s schedule, home to greet
us foreign members of his family.

magpies in a field, she & my cousin tell me, tell you what to
expect. their long tails, their flashy black-&-white wings. how
many did you see?

& i’m intrigued, writing it down. odd-numbered *sorrow*, *girl*,
silver (only silver) & yet, she is the one with the untold story.
you hardly ever see seven, my aunt admits. as I listen to the
words that tell it.¹⁰⁷

In this listening and writing down there could be an active mis-hearing, a deliberate re-writing, as the traditional “magpie rhyme” ends, at least in all the versions I’ve come across, not with the line “*seven for a story yet to be told*” as Marlatt has recorded it, but “seven for a secret never to be told.”¹⁰⁸ Such strategic interference is part of a struggle against “old stories,” against language as gospel, against metaphorical language written in stone where stone is metaphor for silence, immobility and eternal death. It is Marlatt’s riff, her improvisation: “so as not to be lost, invent: one clear act in all that jazz.”¹⁰⁹

An important counter to a threat of monologue in this poem is its variety of voices, dialects and pitches, as it catches language on the move. In the section headed “June near the river Clyst, Clust, clear. Clystmois / this holding wet & clear,” there is an oblique reference to Ophelia, but it refers

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰⁸ Geoffrey Grigson, *The Shell Country Book* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1962), 180. Mark Cocker and Richard Mabey, *Birds Britannica* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005), 402.

¹⁰⁹ Marlatt, *How Hug a Stone*, 15.

more generally to the feminine principle in English folk-lore and cultural history:

It's haysel, haymaking time, "Sweet an' dry an' green as't should be, An full o' seed an' Jeune flowers." tedding & cocking going on, shaking, turning, spreading. haytrucks go lorries lumbering by these twisty lanes lined high with hedgerow, no seeing over, cow parsley, stinging nettles, byways. Jeune the young, green June delayed by rain. June why do you punish me? "Take heede to the weather, the wind, and the skie." indeed, make hay while the sun shines you write, while the moon is on the wane, he wanes, my son redeyed & watery, phlegmatic in the face of phleum pratense grass of the meadow, timothy spikes erect a masculine given name, god honouring. not her who is cut, full of young vigour, from the living book, from the play of light & shadow, nothing less than herb-of-grace, rue i find, there with the queen's pinks in the clock that is a garden.¹¹⁰

Here the writing catches the currency of present voices and bears in mind "that 'folklore is a storehouse of archaic belief,' and that the 'astounding uniformity of folklore motives ... transmitted from the Stone Age until now,' arises from a common urge to identify the human life cycle with the season."¹¹¹ Persistent references to a dimension of prehistory are indispensable to the narrative trajectory in this poem, along with other constellations involving youth/age, old/new, male/female, here/there. For instance, embedded in the text is a play of meaning on the words "Jeune/June." The French equivalent of "young" may come close phonetically to the West Country pronunciation of June, but "Jeune" and "jeune" refer also beyond these English meadows to the New World, and to Canada's bilingual resources. This parallel linguistic dimension, available to the *elsewhere* that is not England, is, however, rooted in the continual

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 25. This passage evokes a visual memory of the medieval calendar paintings known as Books of Hours.

¹¹¹ Michael Dames, *The Avebury Cycle* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 18.

Confederate and Separatist struggles to emerge from a history of European colonialism. Marlatt attributes the qualities of youth and vigour to the *elsewhere* of *home* which is Canada as the final words of the text anticipating departure make clear: “free we want to be where live things are.”¹¹² Until then, the youth of the narrator’s son, temporarily caught up in the antipathy of the native vegetation, is identified with the “masculine” aspect of the grasses, but also with the influence of the traditionally feminine moon: “he wanes.” A reminder of Ophelia’s madness and death is raised in the lines “not her who is cut, full of young vigour, from the living book, from the play of light & shadow, nothing less than herb-of-grace, rue i find, there with the queen’s pinks in the clock that is a garden.” The impression created by these allusions is comparable to that of the closing couplet of *The Liberties*: “Tear pages of a calendar / scatter them into sunshine and snow” as both link text with cycles of nature, agricultural rhythms, and ideological overlay.

Throughout this poem Marlatt explores feminine potential, both concealed and abdicated, in established cultural icons and in cultural personae assumed. Aspects of the constrained and constraining female, (apart from the unmentioned Mrs Thatcher) inaugurated in the “Agatha Christie” film shown on the plane from Vancouver, continues in the Reading garden of the writer’s stepmother, where “grounded in the family” the writer apprehends again a figure from childhood in the form of a garden statue

¹¹² Marlatt, *How Hug a Stone*, 79.

“... the lady lies. stone white she hears our steps ...”¹¹³ Then there is “my grandmother imperious”¹¹⁴ and “monolithic in mauve, composed, continuing”¹¹⁵ who “... *is giving back my early self to me in photographs she sees drained of meaning in stranger’s hands*”¹¹⁶; there is the “landlady” at Combe Martin whose prophecies are informed, and whose experience is confirmed, by Christian scripture: “*The Truth That Leads to Eternal Life*, my landlady handing it to me gift-wrapped.”¹¹⁷; and her mother’s oldest friend “Jean who has trimmed her lamp to ‘sensible’” but who “unearths” necessary distractions for Kit and provides the conditions for his recovery.

Also it is Jean who directs the writer to the site she seeks:

she is the gate-keeper. tall, sane, with a body mine resembles much more than my mother’s. childless, she is my mother’s closest school friend, whose memory i’ve come to trace, who was there in the innermost circle – (she says it isn’t Stonehenge i must visit but Avebury).¹¹⁸

The solidity of words and the familiarity of sounds are “plotted” against an undertow of “panic, pan-ic (terror of the wild),” a word that registers the profound fear of a “wild” that is of England, deep within “England’s green & pleasant land.” This powerful instability of land and language is connected to the faceted and shifting identities, potentialities and sacrifices of the female characters, located in both the human and iconic. The “panic” is an ontological terror connected to maternal responsibility, once for her mother, who takes her daughters too close to the waves, and now for

¹¹³ Ibid., 17.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 27.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 22.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 49.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 66.

herself as a mother, as she feels she has led her son too deep into the force-field of an intractable family story:

Pilgrim night

the terror of being, alone on your own in the dark. the terror
of dragging your child along in the panic woods in the night
crying, having a child when you *are* a child – terror a kind of
trembling in the heart ...

there is no limit. something in me is in shock, like a bird
beating wildly against a branch – lost, panicked. why are we
going through this?¹¹⁹

Aspects of the male principle, represented by the “step-brother” who “has
named every flower in all four directions contained by a / brick wall” and
who “lures *moththe, math-*, / worm. ... wants to fix them in their families,
... wing-pulled-open, pinned ..., mortified ...”¹²⁰; the uncle “*changeable
as the weather – my mother’s brother for sure - minotaur at the heart of the
family maze*”¹²¹; and the memory of “dry-humoured Grandpa, slipping me
keys to doors / he had shut,”¹²² act as agents of an established dispensation.
The uncle, if “changeable” has nevertheless, as a doctor and a man of
science, achieved “a tenuous authority,” and directs his fury at the
inexplicable and the unjust towards the Christian God: “ ‘at His doorstep I
lay certain / unexplained events.’ ”¹²³

The writer’s son, however, is still a child and as such is both her dependent
companion and, in a sense, her guide. Because she recognises that his

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 71.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹²¹ Ibid., 23.

¹²² Ibid., 46.

¹²³ Ibid., 33.

experience of the people and places they encounter are completely new, and he apprehends them, unlike her, without guarded memories or a conscientious agenda, Marlatt records his responses as revisions, or correctives, or alternative narratives within her own. His body is associated obliquely throughout with the potential for flight, movement, invention, although it succumbs to the debilitating effects of hay-fever and a serious viral infection. He is “allergic to the nearest thing we have to a hereditary home”¹²⁴ Marlatt writes, and later when he becomes worse: “how can he be allergic to the very grass?”¹²⁵ Yet in his extreme vulnerability she finds his potential for self determination and escape only provisionally (but possibly) thwarted. For instance in the section headed “Combe Martin, house martin, Martinmas, Saint Martin, martial swords & plowshares” he is: “in sandals, *sandalie*, the shoe of a Lydian god i buy him in a shop on High Street full of boxes. no cape, nothing else to change into in the phone kiosk.”¹²⁶ Later, in “Lynmouth, mouth of the Lyn, mouth of the precipice” the chaos Marlatt senses under the order of things, seems suddenly to overwhelm her son: “dread, *draedan*, pain that grabs him in the right shoulder. ‘what is it?’ ‘i feel like Alien’s trying to be born out of me.’”¹²⁷ Marlatt’s rational sense of having escaped this old world is threatened by a superstitious “dread” that she is both wilfully and inadvertently entering a realm of sacrifice.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 24.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 51.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 53.

The placing and re-placing of words in this poem creates the impression of an ad-lib, adventitious script which, however, works towards a setting in which stones are ritually set. Marlatt's feminist anthropomorphism takes place within a sustained linguistic strategy of overturning, finding alternatives, exploiting "some confusion about the name":¹²⁸

she lives stands for nothing
but this longstanding matter in the grass, settled hunks of
mother crust, early Tertiary, bearing the rootholes of palms.
they bring us up, in among stone-folds, to date: the enfolded
present waits for us to have done with hiding-&-seeking
terrors, territories, our obsession with the end of things.

how hug a stone (mother) except nose to lithic fold, the
old slow pulse beyond word become, under flesh, mutter
of stone, *stane*, *stei*-ing power.¹²⁹

The opening words of the above passage pose a contradiction in terms of the finally specific attribution of significance that follows: "*she* stands for nothing but ... mother." The stones are not neutral elements, weathered evidence of a cyclical ritual practiced by Neolithic farmers the particularities of which we cannot know, but represent a mythological essence, a physical repository where the so far provisional, hazardous language of loss, interrogation and desire is allowed to coalesce. This "nothing" for which "*she* stands" might be analogous to the "nothing" of Howe's Cordelia, a negation of the feminine *The Liberties* does not seek to compensate or avenge so much as to demonstrate as agony, or outrage. *How Hug a Stone*, on the other hand, seems to covertly enlist a mythologizing of history in order to affirm the earth as feminist. Susan

¹²⁸ Ibid., 26.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 75.

Knutson has drawn attention to the invisibility of the intertext in *How Hug a Stone*. It is not that Marlatt incorporates without reference here but that the references are not included in the published text. Knutson writes:

The bibliography should have been published, for it would have permitted readers to move more quickly into the most thoughtful level of the poem. Together with the manuscript notes, also housed in the Literary Manuscripts Collection of the National Library of Canada, the bibliography confirms that, on one level, *How Hug a Stone* encodes critical readings of Michael Dames's *The Avebury Cycle* and Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*.¹³⁰

How critical is the reading she encodes, though? Does she not rather collude in Dames's thesis that "the architecture of the entire cycle was designed to be read as a sequence of visual images of the Neolithic deity." In *The Avebury Cycle* Dames writes of "local revelation" and believes Avebury to be a site where seasonal ceremonies were practiced in honour of the earth personified as maternal. He construes the monuments at Avebury as representing "body-architecture," effective by means of a "preliterate ... operation of images." He takes issue with professional archaeologists who refuse, due to lack of hard evidence, to impute meaning to "how the monuments relate to each other." For instance he cites a "Professor Daniel [who] states categorically, 'The history of ideas begins with writing: there is not and never can be a history of prehistoric thought.'" ¹³¹ Dames, on the other hand, sees the arrangement of stones as being made to "describe and contain the divine narrative" which was nothing, of course, to do with Christianity as Stukelely in the eighteenth

¹³⁰ Knutson, *Narrative in the Feminine*, 95.

¹³¹ Dames, *Avebury Cycle*, 11.

century had determined, but to do with the (apparent to him) prehistoric recognition that, ““Man is in nature already”” so that “the creators of Avebury ... did not so much insinuate the superhuman images *into* the landscape, as draw forth images already there.”¹³²

On the other hand, Marlatt’s “nothing” might stand to refute the patriarchal myth of the feminine. This denies women equal status as historical subjects whilst endorsing an essential female power located in the earth of prehistory, instead of in the structures of contemporary society. Marlatt cannot endorse Dames’s theory as an essentialist ideal, because it is essentially sentimental; his contradiction is to promote an imaginary matriarchy as the basis of a “master story”:

When arranged in a grand chain, as they frequently were, symbols activated by rites told the community’s master story, the narrative which embraced all others, the Myth Cycle. This explained, regulated and perpetuated the existence of the population in harmony with God.¹³³

Marlatt finds a provisionally adequate setting, or meeting place, for the tenuous but necessary reconciliation between mother’s ghost and living daughter, at a site where the presences are mineral, and beyond words. The word “settled” here indicates a place of a more benign order than does Howe’s “settled place” in her “Book of Stella.” What Marlatt does is to represent the landscape in terms of her object of desire, rather as she writes in *Touch To My Tongue*, of “unnamed female folds of hill,”¹³⁴ “undefined,

¹³² Ibid., 13.

¹³³ Ibid., 14.

¹³⁴ Marlatt and Warland, *Two Women in a Birth*, 15.

hidden ground,”¹³⁵ and “intimate clefts of earth.”¹³⁶ The mineral is framed to reflect the lesbian. Interestingly, Howe in *The Liberties* makes a different connection between the mineral and the Sapphic in the lines describing the material construction of the interior of St. Patrick’s Cathedral: “lesbian cyma base cut / arc eleventh seventh summer wedge hour incision / (POROUS STONE).¹³⁷

In *How Hug a Stone* a significant part of the experience of England they come to re-visit is at its edge, on a particular stretch of coast and so subject to the inundations of the sea. The sea is a conventional metaphor for death (into which the rivers of life flow) and in this case into which the ashes of the writer’s mother were scattered, after her request: “... on a different coast off a different rock ...bits of porous bone, fine ash. words were not enough. & the sea took her.” However, the shore in Marlatt’s poem does not provide a metaphoric border between the mother’s life and death dwelling, although “in caves. she is in caves. but i don’t feel her here.”¹³⁸ Yet, if she is not *in* the sea, she belongs in a company *of* the sea, which extends a mythic palimpsest across the landscape of Avebury:

that bears us in

this *kiel*, to *ku-*, to, a hollow space or place, enclosing object,
round object, a lump. mound in the surrounding sea of grass.
ku-, *kunte*, to, wave-breaking womb: Bride who comes
unsung in the muse-ship shared with Mary Gypsy, Mary of
Egypt, Miriam, Marianne suppressed, become/Mary of the
Blue Veil, Sea Lamb sifting sand & dust, dust & bone, whose
Son ...¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹³⁷ Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, 203.

¹³⁸ Marlatt, *How Hug a Stone*, 55.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 72. She might also have written “star of the sea” for, as Marina Warner explains: “... the slip of a scribe’s hand introduced into Marian literature and art one of its most

The architectural model in *The Liberties* is the Christian Cathedral, in *How Hug a Stone* it is the Neolithic stone circle, and for Marlatt successive aspects of the feminine have become (to connect it back to her own mother's ashes scattered to the Pacific) lost at sea with the ascendancy of Christianity. These are the "versions of history that are versions of her" which the narrator finally reads into the anthropomorphised stones, before figuratively inheriting the power of flight from the name itself "*Avebury awi-spek winged from buried (egg.*" Both the family history and the cultural distance that England is made to signify in this poem are a matter of language: "how hug a stone (mother) except nose in to lithic fold, the / old slow pulse beyond word become, under flesh, mutter / of stone *stane*, *stei*-ing power."¹⁴⁰

IV

A passage from the third section of *How Hug a Stone*, where Marlatt writes of Ilfracombe, constructs an idea of dislocation and perplexity amongst the paraphernalia of commercialism: "bits & pieces of a town to be put together from / a geography that doesn't quite fit, living on in spirit, what it / was, only ever, the beady eye of Moira & her finger falling, / there, on the line that says, that stops, *rewind*. & the penny / falling into its slot

suggestive and beautiful metaphors. For an early copyist wrote *stella maris*, star of the sea, instead of *stilla maris*, [a drop of the sea] a mistake that persisted ..." Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Picador, 1976), 262.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 73-75.

forever.”¹⁴¹ The queasiness of “a geography that doesn’t quite fit” is comparable to the sense of misplacement, in Howe’s perception and question, of the opening prose section of *Thorow*: “Everything graft, everything grafted. And what is left when spirits have fled from holy places?”¹⁴²

This passage of writing seems one of the most direct and prosaically straightforward in Howe’s work. It describes a piece of recent personal history involving aspects of the contemporary world many readers will recognise. Here the writer gives an account of her initial experience of place during a “writer-in-residency” at the “Lake George Arts Project” before the “first panic of dislocation” teaches her “to keep out of the town,” to look beyond its opportunist ugliness and vulgarity. Howe’s listing of the features of decadent capitalism, the trinket shops, fast food outlets, amusement arcades and theme parks is another way in which this paragraph is so uncharacteristic. A few lines of transitional prose demonstrate how necessary is her rejection of this overlay on the landscape in her search for what is buried and effaced, an empathetic and imaginative search towards the land’s “primal indeterminacy.” A descriptive, anecdotal prose acknowledges the conurbation, the features of which the writer calls “a travesty,” followed by a brief narrative of her subjective recoil from it. A process of *movement* into and with the elements, and a relinquishing of the finite subject are taking place, even as the syntax becomes insistently

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 44.

¹⁴² Howe, *Singularities*, 40.

subjective: “I moved into the weather’s fluctuation. Let myself drift in the rise and fall of light and snow, re-reading re-tracing once-upon.” ¹⁴³

The lower half of this page is entitled “Narrative in Non-Narrative” a more spacious and semantically ambiguous prose than the block of writing above it. The lines quoted below suggest Howe’s negotiations between an attention to the events of a particular geography and a concern that her writing within it might honour what language has displaced:

I thought I stood on the shores of a history of the world
where forms of wildness brought up by memory become desire
and multiply.

Lake George was a blade of ice to write across not knowing
what She.

Interior assembling of forces underneath earth’s eye. Yes,
she, the Strange, excluded from formalism. I heard poems
inhabited by voices.

In the seventeenth century European adventurer-traders
burst through the forest to discover this particular long clear
body of fresh water. They brought our story to it. Pathfinding
believers in God and grammar spelled the lake into *place*. They
have renamed it several times since. In paternal colonial sys-
tems a positivist efficiency appropriates primal indeterminacy.

In March, 1987, looking for what is looking, I went down
to unknown regions of indifferenciation. The Adirondacks
occupied me. ¹⁴⁴

In this contested space there is the “I,” which might stand for the writing subject, Susan Howe; then there is the mysterious “she, the Strange, excluded from formalism” who is “interior” both to the poet, and to the place, something overlooked by “They” the namers and successive “renamers” of the lake; and there are the European surveyors and “adventure-traders,” the disseminators of a “paternal colonial system” who tread paths to the measure of “god and grammar.” At the heart of this

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

complex of interests is a differentiation between primal voice and written form, between unsurveyed space and chartered land, between “forms of wildness” and “positivist efficiency.” Paradoxically, while Howe seems to seek a place prior to the writing of it she apprehends the figment of its “wildness” during her incumbency as writer-in-residence, and then proceeds to explore the contestations of nature/Native American/white colonial by way of reference to the writing of a canonical white male writer. What she is acknowledging in Thoreau is his approach towards “what is looking” and his relationship to the environment in which he conscientiously sustained himself. I have said that the first person in this “narrative in non-narrative” is Howe, but not, perhaps, as directly as at first assumed. Is it Howe through Thoreau or vice versa?

In the “Ponds” chapter of *Walden* comes the following passage:

There are few traces of man’s hand to be seen. The water laves the shore as it did a thousand years ago. A lake is the landscape’s most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature. The fluviate trees next the shore are the slender eyelashes which fringe it, and the wooded hills and cliffs around are its overhanging brows.¹⁴⁵

As Erika Nanes¹⁴⁶ points out, it is this willingness to anthropomorphize and to find a Transcendental equivalence in nature that Howe seeks beyond, but through (thorow) a potential reading of Thoreau. Howe intercepts Thoreau’s animism to suggest a more disturbing energy in nature. The latent “forces underneath,” are manifest in the exclusion of “She.” In

¹⁴⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (London: Walter Scott, 1886), 185.

¹⁴⁶ Erika Nanes, “The Reviser in the Word Forest: Susan Howe and the American Typology of Wilderness,” *Journal X: A Journal in Culture and Criticism* 2, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 19-34.

Thoreau's use of the male/female dialectic in his relationship to the natural environment, "man's hand" / "slender eyelashes," he, as the perceiving subject, distances himself from the interventions of progress. He enjoys its invisibility as aspect of the place while he colludes without reserve in the colonial identification of land with feminine mystery and receptivity.

Howe refuses this projection and as she repeats its colonial name as mark of its history, she refuses also the romantic renaming of the lake that James Fenimore Cooper explains when he writes in his "Author's Introduction" of the 1850 edition of *The Last of the Mohicans*:

Looking over an ancient map, it was ascertained that a tribe of Indians, called "Les Horicans" by the French, existed in the neighborhood of this beautiful sheet of water. As every word uttered by Natty Bumppo was not to be received as rigid truth, we took the liberty of putting the "Horican" into his mouth, as the substitute for "Lake George[.]"... instead of going back to the House of Hanover for the appellation of our finest sheet of water.¹⁴⁷

Cooper also tells the history of the place, the displacement of Native inhabitants by French then British invaders. His act of fictional renaming is ostensibly a gesture of sympathy for "the wilderness" yet his grammar betrays an authorial imperialism exercising the "liberty" of appropriation. The subject of Howe's sentence goes by its current English name yet her syntax resists transparency in a way Thoreau's and Cooper's prose does not. For Howe, the lake is both resistant and receptive, but it is neither yielding nor penetrable; its surface is solid, mutable and dangerous.

¹⁴⁷ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), viii.

Cooper's noun "sheet" is one conventionally applied to descriptions of both water and paper, and Thoreau's depiction of Walden Pond's reflective expanse suggests a gratifying plenitude. Howe's "Lake George" is a writing tool to write across (or be written across with) what writing consistently misses. The sentence is indeterminate but not incomplete; it concludes with a period: "Lake George was a blade of ice to write across not knowing what She." The written surface and the instrument of inscription are one, and subject to transformation; ice melts into water. Writing melts into that which it writes over; the "not knowing" subject blends with the "unknown" element.

The concluding sentence of W. Scott Howard's essay "'writing ghost writing': A Discursive Poetics of History" is interesting in this context, although as the title indicates he is examining a different work, and in relation to theories of Jacques Derrida and George Bataille:

Howe formulates the gift of language as an animal gaze, an unfathomable depth of non-consciousness, that mirrors the primal immanence of "water in water" ... within the visceral textuality of a "paper being still wet with ink" ...¹⁴⁸

Is "She," then, the excluded feminine or the projected feminine, and where is she in relation to the "forms of wildness" beyond wilderness? As the first sentence of "Narrative in Non-Narrative" suggests the subject stands as a kind of double of herself: "I thought I stood" so that she is and is not "on the shores of a history of the world," an indefinite history of

¹⁴⁸ Howard W. Scott, "'writing ghost writing': A Discursive Poetics of History; or, Howe's 'hau' in Susan Howe's 'a bibliography of the king's book; or, eikon basilike,'" *Talisman* 14 (Fall 1995): 119.

possibility. She places herself beside herself, to refer to Paul Naylor's definition of "parataxis,"¹⁴⁹ so that her contemporaneity does not distort, in a linear hierarchy, what history has obliterated and what the contemporary recovers as parody.

In *Thorow* phenomena are called up in a fragmentary language that names discrete elements of landscape, "the most palpable of natural things"¹⁵⁰ and at the same time retains "a remote, almost allegorical non-mimetic feel."¹⁵¹ If Howe's landscapes are elemental and enigmatic they are also contested cultural, therefore political arenas. Instead of a directive presence mediating a way into a referential space of language, there is a mutable perspective, a persistently vanishing subject. An authorial evasion of authority subverts linear coherence, syntactic closure, any sense of a settled

¹⁴⁹ Paul Naylor, *Poetic Investigations: Singing the Holes in History* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999). In the first chapter of his book, "Susan Howe: Where Are We Now in Poetry," Naylor looks at the tradition in twentieth century American poetry of what he calls "pure poetry," looking particularly at the work of Wallace Stevens, Jack Spicer and Susan Howe. He is inquiring into the intended "imaginative space or landscape" these poets construct. He concludes that Stevens is the most "pure" because his landscapes, specifically in "The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain," are not so much responses to "real" places as imaginative spaces composed by and for "a single unitary speaker." Stevens's work has affinities, therefore, with the Romantic lyric, the insistent "I" that Marjorie Perloff compares to the disassembled and transmuted "presence" in Howe's work. When Naylor turns to Spicer, he reads the work as being concerned more with the power of language, the poet's medium, than with the poet's transformative powers. For Spicer, language comes in from outside, it is historical and societal, and is not necessarily compliant to a privileged intention. Naylor reads Spicer's "A Diamond" as following a "poetic logic" that does not, as in the Stevens poem, promise to resolve contradiction. Spicer's logic differs from that of Stevens in that it is "disjunctive" rather than "hypotactic," or hierarchic, in syntax. Reading Howe, Naylor recognises Howe's desire to revise the landscape as unpolluted by colonial incursion and that she acknowledges her undeceived attempt to do so. Naylor sees Howe as being more open to the "world of historical fact" than either Stevens or Spicer, and alongside the one's poetic logic of hypotaxis, and the other's of disjunction, he places Howe's "different logic of ... parataxis." Naylor explains this as " 'placing beside,' [which] refers to the arrangement of related clauses in a series without the usual connecting words or signal to the reader." Because of this paratactic structure it is difficult to tell "where we are" in the landscapes of Howe's poetry, although it is certainly a place of language. pp. 43-70.

¹⁵⁰ George F. Butterick, "The Mysterious Vision of Susan Howe," *North Dakota Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (Autumn 1997) : 312.

¹⁵¹ Nanes, "Reviser in the Word Forest," 28.

point of view. This deployment of an elusive subjectivity raises questions about authorial agency *vis-à-vis* her material.

Erika Nanes begins her essay “The Reviser in the Word Forest” with two paragraphs that could be the opening of a fictional narrative. The first sentence reads: “A woman wanders alone through the woods.” The setting is a place in historical time and the figure in the landscape is, figuratively, a time traveller, a contemporary writer exploring “a landscape still unsurveyed, still free of the mappings that would later arrive. ...” Nanes makes direct statements about the identity and motives of this character: “She has come to the wilderness to renounce progress.” With the first sentence of the third paragraph Nanes acknowledges that “the place I am” is a text about texts: “The woman is Susan Howe, wandering through the wilderness of the early “New England ... the place I am.”¹⁵² There is an apparent contradiction between Howe’s continuous evocation of historical and literary precedents and Nanes’s image of her in material contact with a landscape they had yet to encounter.

Thoreau, being of his time and a descendant, as Howe is, of the colonising culture, was subject to the prevailing prejudices that both romanticised and dehumanised Native Americans. As both Nanes and Andrew Schelling¹⁵³ point out Thoreau worked periodically as a surveyor, and as such contributed to an inexorable process that obliterated Indian places and Indian names. Nanes reads Howe’s linguistic representations of

¹⁵² Ibid., 19.

¹⁵³ Andrew Schelling, “Reading Thorow,” *Talisman: A Journal of Contemporary Poetics* 4 (Spring 1997), 115-118.

“wilderness” as, in part, an attempt to “purify,” “re-invigorate,” redeem a landscape, and an attempt to write beyond an acculturated inability to see it as anything but a ground for ideological aspirations. To elude a characterisation of “wilderness” either in the terms of the dualism of Puritan typology, as Biblical Babylon and Biblical Eden, or the Transcendentalist vision of nature as a “ground of being” for the imagination, Howe attempts, so Nanes infers, to revise those inscriptions of wilderness with another, not innocent of meaning so much as allowing a proliferation of meanings.¹⁵⁴

In her discussion of *Thorow*, Nanes cites one of Howe’s tactics for subverting the Transcendentalist dualism between human subject and natural world “by avoiding mimesis.” Instead by eschewing conventional, subject-based syntax and its concomitant grammatical hierarchies, “Howe reinvents the typology of wilderness ... it becomes not the site of a single subjectivity’s encounter with ... itself but rather that of an expanded definition of subjectivity, one that finds identity to be necessarily polyvalent.”¹⁵⁵ What resides in “wilderness” or geography for Howe is language, and what Anglophone texts “about” that geography in part represent is the imperialist misspelling of displaced voices.

Marjorie Perloff, like Nanes, wonders about the place of “the ‘real’ Susan Howe” in works such as *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* and perhaps the following paragraph is equivalent to Nanes’s strange narrative of

¹⁵⁴ Nanes, “Reviser in the Word Forest,” 19-22.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

anachronistic wandering in the New England woods. Nanes states that “She has come to the wilderness to renounce progress” although she goes on to show how sophisticated Howe’s poetic methods are. Perloff represents Howe not so much as a solitary figure at odds with her time as one who takes part in contemporary struggles and recognises that they are embedded in a complex of historical injustices:

Howe has been called impersonal, but one could argue that the “muffled discourse from distance” the “collusion with history” in her poetry, is everywhere charged with her presence. She is not, after all, a chronicler, telling us some Indian story from the New England past, but a poet trying to come to terms with her New England past, her sense of herself vis-a-vis the Colonial settlers’ action, her re-creation of the Hope Atherton story in relation to Norse myth as well as to contemporary feminist theory.¹⁵⁶

Howe’s retreat from the brutal architecture of contemporary commercialism is not motivated by nostalgia for a pastoral peace. The landscapes that “occupy” the subject are traversed and defined by trace-events, of war and oppression. When she writes “landscape” into her text it is in a language that, in its disruption of the formal logic of prosody and metrics, in its emphasis on page space, gaps between words and lesions within words, enacts displacement and effacement but also instates a different formalism, one that requires a different formality of reading. The reader is *looking* for what is missing. It is necessary to reposition oneself in relation to the language on the page to include a responsive perception of all the poem’s elements, as if one viewed a sculpture, or a pictorial collage.

¹⁵⁶ Marjorie Perloff, “On Hope Atherton’s Wanderings,” *Modern American Poetry* [journal on-line]; available from http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/howe/hope.htm; Internet.

Howe's austere and exact forms of writing include blanks and misspellings, which imply absences and invisibilities. If, within this landscape/language, "she," the female principle, is one of these manifest absences, Howe does not eschew form in her project of recovering a "scape" of her domain, outside formalism. The writer, rather than seeking to release an excess of self, seeks to construct the conditions for a recovery of what that self would displace. What is outside must, in a sense, appropriate her: "The Adirondacks *occupied* me."¹⁵⁷ Howe, like the adventure-traders brings memory and desire to the place and, as Naylor points out, her desire must encounter theirs, for they *discovered* the lake, at once casting over it their colonial spell. Yet that *spelling* tells "our story," one the writer attempts to break (through).

The equivocations of Howe's subject position are complicated, for while she consistently evades authorial imperialism she invests in the authority of the printed word and partakes of the privileges of the published author. Her work is difficult to the point of exclusivity. Nicky Marsh elucidates problems of differentiation and subject position in Howe's writing, specifically in relation to "The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs Mary Rowlandson."¹⁵⁸ Marsh claims that Howe's reworking is a "racialized text" because she seems to privilege the subversive strategies of Rowlandson within and against the authority of imperial patriarchy at the expense of Native Americans:

¹⁵⁷ Howe, *Singularities*, 40.

¹⁵⁸ Howe, *Birth-mark*, 89-130.

In Howe's reading of texts it is not gender, but the meanings *beyond* gender that are constructed as essentially pre-discursive. Howe's unacknowledged whiteness is not a result of her acknowledged gender but a result of her desire, at times, to dismiss her own subjective presence. This desire to unleash the indeterminacy of language, to relinquish herself into her text, prevents her, at times, from acknowledging the full implications of her own cultural positioning.¹⁵⁹

That is to say that the oppression of white women by western patriarchy is not the same thing, or even analogous to, the racial and religious devastation of one ethnic group by another. From the perspective of post-colonialism and feminism Susan Howe's work is resistant to categorical analysis. If her concerns are with gender but more with "meanings *beyond* gender which are constructed as essentially pre-discursive" it is pertinent to inquire into the ways in which Howe's writing evades, if it does, subjective and cultural assumptions. And if this strategic evasion is meant to enable a recovery of the voices silenced by "historical acts" how is its effect implicated in the "blindness" Marsh detects? To an extent Howe's writing can be read according to Adrienne Rich's feminist project of revision and rescue of buried voices, although, as Kornelia Freitag reports it in an essay of 1995, Howe "has long been overlooked by feminist literary criticism because her fractured and collaged texts do not comply with feminist theories of difference and authenticity."¹⁶⁰

I think it is fair to say that Howe's racialised text, if such it is, does not necessarily prove that her subject position as a subversive writer is

¹⁵⁹ Marsh, " 'Out of My Texts I Am Not What I Play,'" 135.

¹⁶⁰ Kornelia Freitag, "Writing Language Poetry as a Woman: Susan Howe's Feminist Project in *A Bibliography of the King's Book, or Eikon Basilike*," *Amerikastudien-American Studies* 1 (1995), 45-57.

disingenuous or obtuse, for in her writings she does acknowledge, again and again, her cultural inheritance; her Puritan New England paternal, and her Anglo-Irish maternal, heritage. Howe's readings of admired authors are intensely personal so that she is bound to recover strategies of feminist subversion in Rowlandson's works and fail to fully interpret the accounts of Native American actions. Howe is writing as a woman and her use of language is not only an expression of her gendered status but is also evidence of her participation in a *cultural* activity. English is the language of the coloniser and develops its forms in a history of imperialist expropriation. When Marsh alludes to Howe's questionable project of finding "meaning *beyond* gender" we have to carefully acknowledge not so much, perhaps, the gender-based perspective of the work, as the cultural status of these highly text-based texts.

Rachel Tzvia Back, in her book length study of Howe's poetry, considers that what Marsh perceives as Howe's "blindness" is misplaced. Back states:

I believe that Howe's choice *not* to speak Native American narratives in her poetry emanates from her ethically charged recognition that those narratives are not hers, and speaking them would be an act of cultural appropriation.¹⁶¹

This is a fairer assessment, although it is important to remember Marsh's insight whilst reading Howe, of the "fundamental differences between historical acts and textual silences." What does Howe imply, for instance, when she includes Native American words in her texts? Do they serve as

¹⁶¹ Tzvia Back, *Led by Language*, 195.

“simply markers of difference ... an invasive translation”¹⁶² or does the spelling in her poetry of the received sounds of a displaced language through the vowels and consonants of the English alphabet acknowledge that such a translation is an agent of displacement? In *Thorow* orthodox English spelling is taken to be a variant form of invasive translation and by its breaking down in places Howe suggests its potential for anarchic or transgressive significances. I believe that in *Thorow* Howe tries to acknowledge her own and Thoreau’s different positions as writers in a landscape; they are both “Part of their encroachment” where the possessive subject is equivocal in that contentious environment:

To Lake Superior to view
that time the Shannas & Dallaways
Home and I hope passage
Begun about the middle next
to Kittaning

Eating nothing but hominey
Scribbling the ineffable
See only the tracks of rabbit
A mouse-nest of grass

The German Flatts
Their women old men & children
Numerous than I imagined
Singing their War song
I am
Part of their encroachment

¹⁶² Marsh, “ ‘ Out of My Texts I Am Not What I Play,’ ” 135.

Speed & Bleave me &
A Good Globe to hang in a hall
with light

To be sent in slays
if we are not careful
To a slightly place
no shelter
Let us gether and bury
limbs and leves
Is a great Loast
Cant say for us now
Stillest the storm world
Thought

The snow
is still hear

Wood and feld
all covered with ise

seem world anew
Only step
as surveyor of the Wood
only Step¹⁶³

The two word line “I am” records subjective consciousness but does not quite indicate whether that subjectivity is a part of or apart from that which is encroached upon. Is it passive or active, German, aboriginal, English or

¹⁶³ Howe, *Singularities*, 47-48.

none of these? Perhaps what is encroached upon is the land marked with place names and burials under the snow that transiently holds the marks of rabbit tracks, sleigh marks and surveyor's steps. One encroaches upon another and some marks vanish with the snow and others remain so that the surveyor's step has consequences beyond the illusion of a new world. And her spelling of ice "ise" nearly, but not quite, includes "i see." Perhaps it is important here to return to the themes of disappearance and textuality.

In an interview with Ruth Falon in 1989, Howe was asked: "If you had to paint your writing, if you had one canvas on which to paint your writing, what might it look like?" to which Howe replied "Blank. It would be blank. It would be a white canvas. White."¹⁶⁴ Perhaps this idea of blankness or whiteness is related to Howe's imaginary ice and snow, "a blade of ice to write across" or the "Wood and feld / all covered with ise // seem world anew," an element that both conceals and receives, reveals and vanishes. Certainly Howe's sense of both landscape and history are explored through a kind of deployment of meta-languages, in that her poetry is riddled with fragments of other texts. And so the absence of language imagined as transcendence of language, an ideal of whiteness, is a condition of cultural privilege.

Perhaps we can say that Howe's attempt is to read through the textual complexity of New England by reifying cultural and environmental degradations as text, in the gaps, fractures and indeterminacies of her

¹⁶⁴ Susan Howe, "Speaking with Susan Howe," Interview by Ruth Falon, *The Difficulties* 3, no. 2 (1989) : 17-27.

printed works. Perhaps this is one sense in which Howe's places are unpeopled; they are cleared spaces, with connotations of a violent prelude to reclamation. The emptiness of, for instance, the "Vast oblong space / dwindled to one solitary rock" of *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*¹⁶⁵ or "great landscapes and glittering processions / vastness of a great white looney north" of *Secret History of the Dividing Line*,¹⁶⁶ are lines made across a conceptual site of inception.

V

As this thesis has explored, Susan Howe and Daphne Marlatt develop particular uses of nature and landscape in their work. "Nature" for both writers is incorporated into their (post)modern expressions of displacement and disintegration, which at the same time construct figurations of damage and recovery. Their conceptual sympathy for "Nature," however, does not rely on "romantic anachronism" but is, as I have tried to demonstrate, more likely to be "bound up with the emergence of an evolutionary viewpoint on cosmological process" to repeat Oelschlaeger's words. By this, I understand that an aspect of eco-feminism in these writers should be taken seriously. They do not, for instance, betray a covert pride in the careful separation of writer and nature, but deliberately assert a kind of pragmatic solidarity. In other words their identifications with nature are both to

¹⁶⁵ Howe, *Frame Structures*, 59.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

affirm a mutual threat and a threatened integrity, *and* to affirm mutable and multiple identities.

If there continues to exist something in the idea of “landscape” which promises to preserve a realm of Nature and the Unconscious for the imagination, do we expect a space of (Romantic) sanctuary from poetry; that it might compensate for the loss of “a meadow” in Duncan’s words, a “huge harmony” in Howe’s? Perhaps what is sought is an affirmation that is essentially sentimental, just as Dames’s evocation of an archetypal “feminine mystique” from within the landscape is misplaced. William Cronon points out that:

On the one hand, people in Western cultures use the word “nature” to describe a universal reality, thereby implying that it is and must be common to all people. On the other hand, they also pour into that word all their most personal and culturally specific values ...¹⁶⁴

This psychic attitude is an aspect of the “Judeo-Christian tradition,” as Cronon says, which designates “nature as Eden.”¹⁶⁵ Within this tradition there is a distinction between our conception of “nature” and of landscape, although the latter is a cultural “frame” of the former. Gary Snyder writes about the western construction of “landscape” as a form of appropriation in itself:

Perhaps one should not talk (or write) too much about the wild world: it may be that it embarrasses other animals to have attention called to them. A sensibility of this sort might help explain why there is so little “landscape poetry” from the cultures of the old ways.

¹⁶⁴ William Cronon, ed. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 51.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

Nature description is a kind of writing that comes with civilization and its habits of collection and classification.¹⁶⁶

There is in Snyder's conscientious respect for the otherness of whatever may be implicated in our words "nature" and "landscape" a form of cultural designation. For him "from another side, wilderness has implied chaos, eros, the unknown, realms of taboo, the habitat of both the ecstatic and the demonic. In both senses it is a place of archetypal power, teaching, and challenge."¹⁶⁷ It is, therefore, an alternative cultural resource, or a resource for "alternative" culture.

Marlatt's writing conceives an access to a shared space between nature and culture. To move into this "reciprocal" realm, what she calls an "in-between space" is a definitively feminist action and in that sense, paradoxically, also exclusive:

It is also the space of what is indefinite, intermingled, shared, like the air we share with trees. In this oxygen-carbon dioxide exchange, we experience reciprocity. The reciprocal then is responsive to the terms of exchange, transforming and returning what is taken in, sustaining a vital polylogue that is shared. Like talk. Like the relations between a feminist writer and her audience – but the old terms won't do. Tree-talk, tree-breath branching out to you, and your breath, each of you, informing, sending back your own addenda, further leaflets in exchange.¹⁶⁸

The "air we share with trees" is not converted by trees into language, of course, so there is a "vital" disparity in this reciprocity. The tree is a vehicle, a metaphor for human desire, as in "the old terms," it is an

¹⁶⁶ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild: Essays by Gary Snyder* (New York: North Point Press, 190), 21-22.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶⁸ Marlatt, *Readings from the Labyrinth*, 115.

exemplary “search for arborescence.”¹⁶⁹ The above passage demonstrates the contradictory circularity we have discussed in Marlatt’s writing, the consolidation of subject position she acquires through recognition of difference, of “multiplicity.” Howe, I think, is wary of consolidation and her writing incorporates chaos into its formal and conceptual structures, thereby demonstrating a different kind of paradox. Her comprehension of imperial displacement aims to include not only the female and the aboriginal but the colonised landscape itself. “[H]umankind and environment” are not generalised in Howe’s writing, and “dwelling” has complex implications.¹⁷⁰ The New England landscape is a written-over landscape, translated through colonial literary discourse and cartographic charter.

In his discussion of the function of poetry in contemporary culture, the English writer Jonathan Bate explains the implicit problem of trying to think intelligently about the human relationship to nature in the present:

Much of the work in feminist and post-colonial theory has been done by people who are beneficiaries of the cultural revolutions of which that work is a part: women and people of colour. There is even a certain suspicion of those who take it upon themselves to ‘speak on behalf of the Other’ ... The ecocritic has no choice but to speak on behalf of the Other. The ecocritical project always involves speaking for its subject rather than speaking as its subject: a critic may speak as a woman or as a person of colour, but cannot speak as a tree.¹⁷³

As a beneficiary of consolidated and established cultural privileges Bate significantly designates “woman,” “person of colour,” and “tree” as a

¹⁶⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 21.

¹⁷⁰ Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 73.

¹⁷³ Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 72-73.

group of subject/object entities, and as two of which the subject “critic” may speak. There is a trace in the syntax of his prose of that humanist objectification of the other in relation to the universal subject that feminism and post-colonialism have worked to deconstruct. Marsh detects a sense in which Howe might collude in the objectification of otherness in her culturally specific position because that position is disguised within that process. Yet against the assumption of “definition in opposition” to which Bate refers, Howe’s texts can be understood as objects that make explicit the processes of the production of culture from nature, in that her arboreal metaphors are conscious of the material origins of literature in vegetation. In this sense her texts are “fabricated from their subject matter” and acknowledgements of the “necessary union of culture and nature.”¹⁷⁴ Marlatt’s metaphor is in contention with the obvious truism that a writer “cannot speak as a tree,” while Howe’s “landscapes” are composed of a language that opens towards an agonistic space of culture and nature, where new mythic embodiments might be born.

¹⁷⁴ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), 19.

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