

‘Spiritual Hyphen’: Bibliography and Elegy in Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*

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Abstract

Susan Howe’s poetic demonstrations of bibliographic issues have been the subject of recent critical attention. But *The Midnight*, Howe’s elegiac memoir of her mother Mary Manning, is a unique achievement that begs special consideration. In this book, an inherited library is her archive, and the paratexts she incorporates are cross-identified with personal history. Meditations on the materiality of the book paradoxically leap to the metaphysical, to real erasures and alternate possibilities of commemoration. The lace heirlooms of her book *Bed Hangings* figure in as major intertexts, and the composition itself opens and offers itself as a reactive web of interstices in the manner of lace, a two-sided work of edges which is, in Howe’s words, ‘hidden but open’ and therefore able to circumvent its own paradoxes. This gives form to one of Howe’s most perplexing obsessions: to *dialetheism* or the simultaneity of contradictory truths. This essay will examine the ways in which *The Midnight*’s composition and treatment of bibliography render it an optimal site for open elegy, that is, for the gesture toward a memory which remains expansive, undetermined, contradictory but true.