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Susan Barbour

'Spiritual hyphen': bibliography and elegy in Susan Howe's *The Midnight*

Introduction

The Midnight, published by New Directions Press in 2003, comprises several earlier books by Susan Howe including *Bed Hangings* (Granary Books, 2001), *Bedhangings II*, and *Kidnapped* (both Coracle, 2002) in addition to new poetry, prose, illustrations, and doctored photographs. The long poem also constitutes an elegiac memoir of her mother, Mary Manning Howe, the Irish actress, writer, and émigrée who died in 1999. Those familiar with Howe's oeuvre will know her for her anarchic poet-scholarship where she investigates the annotations and marginalia of authors' archives – in works such as *My Emily Dickinson*, *Pierce-Arrow* which is concerned with the philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce, and *Souls of the Labadie Tract* which is in part about the letters of Wallace Stevens. Her interest in marginalia and paratexts takes on a new dimension in *The Midnight* where her 'archives' are the family library she inherits, and each individual book is treated as an object of found art. 'Why shouldn't I?', writes Howe,

In all transactions of life we have to take a leap. My mother's close relations treated their books as transitional objects...to be held, loved, carried around, meddled with, abandoned, sometimes mutilated. They contain dedications, private messages, marginal annotations, hints, snapshots, press cuttings, warnings – scissor work...When something in the world is cross-identified, it just is. *They* have made this relation by gathering – airs, reveries, threads, mythologies, nets, oilskins, briars and branches, wishes and needs, intact – into a sort of tent. This is a space children used to play in. The country where they once belonged. A foreign audience will always be foreign. Here I am alone at home – in the middle of an afternoon – snooping. Any amount of probabilities can be ransacked. (*The Midnight*, p. 60)

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This family library is her new archive, and the gaps and discontinuities that held Howe's fascination throughout her career are now found in each book-object's transitional history, its 'cross-identifications' with its owners' personal histories. The lace heirlooms of *Bed Hangings* figure in to this maternal elegy as major intertexts.¹ And marginalia are, in this work, not only a method of emancipating authors from critical and editorial reductionism, but of observing an indeterminate memory, one made in the image of one's own expanding consciousness.

In recent years, several scholars have explored Howe's poetic demonstrations of bibliographic issues, either as a middle-voiced craft of composing from the archives of other poets, or as a narrative of the resistance imposed by the institutions that guard, maintain, reproduce, and normalize texts and documents.² *The Midnight*, Howe's most autobiographical work as well as her most explicitly bibliographical, has to date received little critical attention. Stephen Collis, in his 2004 review of the book, observed how her autobiographical turn imposed – rather than institutional impediments – 'the more visceral and immediate restriction of interpretational difficulties when faced with the idiosyncratic and ephemeral markings of her books' marginalia and insertions'.³ Catherine Martin, in her 2006 reading of *The Midnight*, observed the openness of Howe's elegy, noting that 'memorializing risks ossifying' but that 'this poem, whose investigation of memory is performative rather than thematic, involves the reader in the obsessive and unfinished work of mourning'.⁴ But the precise method by which this openness is achieved, namely through a meditation on the materiality of the book, has not been fully explored. *The Midnight* is a unique achievement for this reason. Not only does it explore the elegiac potential of the book as object, but it gives form to her obsession with antinomy and *dialetheism*, or the simultaneity of contradictory truths. In a 2009 essay focused on Howe's use of factual documentation, Marjorie Perloff observed the dialectical thrust that underlies *The Midnight*, noting that 'when *documentary* reaches a certain density, it morphs into its opposite – the hyperreal of "factual telepathy."⁵ But how does this dialectical thrust function within considerations – not of factual documentation – but of meditations on the book as a material object?

The Midnight, a poem concerned with dismantling the semiotics of the book, 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.⁶ Meditations on the materiality of the book paradoxically leap to the metaphysical, to real erasures and alternate possibilities. Howe has demonstrated the instability and potentiality of the book as a vestibule for meaning time and again in her oeuvre by examining the paratexts and

marginalia in the archives of authors. By virtue of its limitations and edges, the book consecrates an imaginative space for that which transcends (or has been omitted from) its printed form. *The Midnight's* engagement with marginalia fulfils Howe's earlier notions that 'margins shelter the inapprehensible Imaginary of poetry' and that they can constitute 'a conversation with the dead'.⁷ The openness and potentiality of the margin and other paratexts therefore afford a unique space for elegy: observation of singular traces becomes a spontaneous rite of remembrance. 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 towards a memory which remains expansive, undetermined, contradictory but true.

Deliberate hesitation

Howe's attitudes towards bibliography are expressed most explicitly in *A Bibliography of the King's Book or, Eikon Basilike* (1989; republished in *The Nonconformist's Memorial* in 1993). She begins her discussion by citing Webster's definition of 'bibliography':

A bibliography is 'the history, identification, or analytical and systematic description or classification of writings or publications considered as material objects'. Can we ever really discover the original text? Was there ever an original poem? What is a pure text invented by an author? Is such a conception possible? Only by going back to the pre-scriptive level of thought process can 'authorial intention' finally be located, and then the material object has become immaterial. ...Pierre Machery's description of the discourse in a fiction applies to the discourse in this bibliography: 'sealed and interminably completed or endlessly beginning again, diffuse and dense, coiled about an absent centre which it can neither conceal nor reveal'.⁸ (*The Nonconformist's Memorial*, n.p.)

Such allowance for impenetrability stands diametrically opposed the assumptive practices of bibliographers who seek to embalm one single, final conception – at the expense of its other incarnations. The one method finds access to the intangible by focusing on material objects and fallibility, while the other parades conjecture under the banner of the absolute. Here we begin to appreciate why materials – hand-writing, drawings, scribbles, and other idiosyncrasies of book-objects – conjure flashes of what Howe calls 'poetry telepathy' with authors.⁹ Oblique articulations of this method are evident throughout Howe's later work. In *Souls of the Labadie*

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Tract (2007), for example, Howe writes of the apprehension of the mystical through a rumination on the materiality of the books in the Sterling library:

In Sterling's sleeping wilderness I felt the telepathic solicitation of innumerable phantoms. The future seemed to lie in this forest of letters, theories, and forgotten actualities. I had a sense of the parallel between our always fragmentary knowledge and the continual progress toward perfect understanding that never withers away. I felt a harmony beyond the confinement of our being merely dross or tin; something chemical almost mystical that, thanks to architectural artifice, these grey and tan steel shelves in their neo-Gothic tower commemorate in semi-darkness, according to Library of Congress classification.

Here Howe shows how she approaches a 'perfect understanding' through 'always fragmentary knowledge' or acknowledgement of what cannot be known. The scriptive levels of thought process and creation, that is, the material manifestation and its variations, are paradoxically what lead to the mystical element of authorship because they encompass chance, expansion, incompleteness, and array.

That Howe apprehends this mysticism and potentiality while in the library is an effect of her interstitial existence as a 'poet-scholar'. Her poetic essays and bibliographic poems mirror the transitional space between the two modes. In *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), Howe found, not surprisingly, a strong resonance with the variance and preponderance of Dickinson's dashes. Howe described them as a kind of caesura, a unit of 'deliberate hesitation' that was integral to the rhythm and force of the poem's argument: it was a convention that Dickinson's early editors considered idiosyncratic and, in most cases, superfluous; but for Howe, in an age of 'aggressive industrial expansion and brutal Empire building', Dickinson 'audaciously invented a new grammar' which defied the 'sexual, racial and geographical separation at the heart of Definition' (*Dickinson*, p. 21). Howe further suggested that 'dashes drew liberty of interruption inside the structure of each poem':

Hush of hesitation for breath and for breathing. Empirical domain of revolution and revaluation where words are in danger, dissolving. . . only Mutability certain' (*Dickinson*, p.23).

It is precisely this dash and this challenge to 'Empire building' and empiricism that interests Howe in its potential for subverting authorial habits and moving towards open-ended, undefined spaces, in margins, edges, and borders. In a section of the projected *Arcades Project* provisionally labelled 'N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]', Walter Benjamin described what he called a 'dialectical image':

When thinking reaches a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions, the dialectical image appears. The image is the caesura in the movement of thought. . . . The dialectical image is, accordingly, the very object constructed in the materialist presentation of history.¹⁰

The Midnight is just such a caesura-image. Interstices are formed by juxtaposing different texts and photographs of paratexts from her Uncle John's library. Thus the book becomes a bibliography. Insofar as it also reflects upon its own evolution, it may also be considered to be an *autobibliography*, a reflexive discourse which comments on its own textuality, intertexts, subtexts, pretexts, and contexts. It is therefore both a meditation on its own practices as well as a reification of what it describes.

This sanctioned hesitation over how a book means finds a physical trope in *The Midnight*. In the non-paginated front matter before the ostensible body text of *The Midnight* begins, a recto and verso in the first signature reproduce photographically both sides of an interleaf, such as was formerly placed in books to separate and protect lithographic images from the print on the opposing page (Figure 1).¹¹

The reader is presented with the title-page of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* seen through the interleaf, and then, over the page, the back of the interleaf onto which the reversed image of the title-page appears to have transferred. Immediately following the interleaf (still in non-paginated pages), Howe presents us with the following prose poem:

There was a time when bookbinders placed a tissue interleaf between frontispiece and title page in order to prevent illustration and text from rubbing together. Although a sign is understood to be consubstantial with the thing or being it represents, word and picture are essentially rivals. The transitional space between image and scripture is often a zone of contention. Here we must separate. Even printers and binders drift apart. Tissue paper for wrapping or folding can also be used for tracing. Mist-like transience. Listen, quick rustling. If a piece of sentence left unfinished can act as witness to a question proposed by a suspected ending, the other side is what will happen. Stage snow. Pantomime.

'Give me a sheet.

which is followed on the verso by a second prose poem:

The counterfeit presentment of two papers. After 1914, advances in printing technology rendered an interleaf obsolete. Mischief delights in playing with surfaces. Today each spectral scrap intact in a handed down book has acquired an enchanted aura quite apart from its

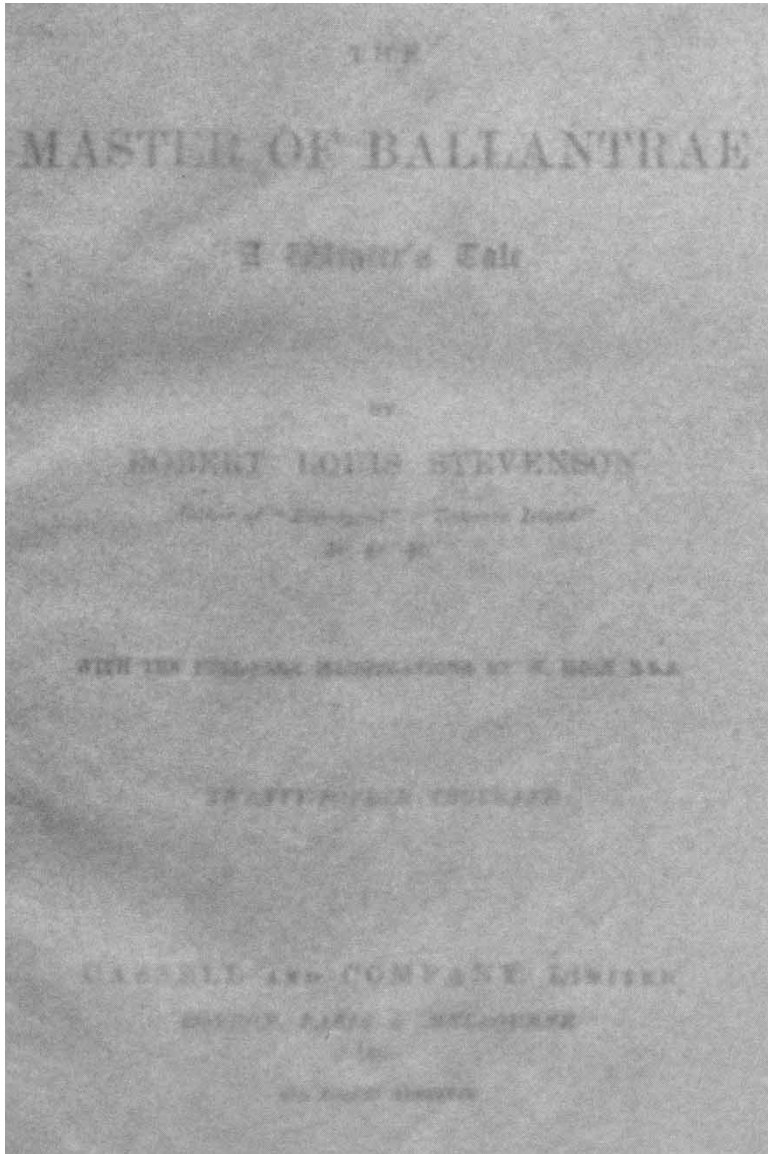


Figure 1. *The Midnight*, p. x © New Directions Press 2003

original utilitarian function. Wonderfully life-like, approaching transparency, not shining; this pale or wanly yellow, tangible intangible murderously gentle exile, mutely begs to be excused. Superstition remains – as spiritual hyphen. Listen, quick rustling. In second

character, freed from practical obligation, I'm not asleep, just leafing.
Miniature scenery. Etiquette.

On your side, with pleasure'. (*Midnight*, pp. xi–xii)

'The counterfeit presentment of two papers' refers to the doctored photograph, an image and its mirror image, that mimic the two sides of an interleaf. It is also an allusion to *Hamlet* (III.iv.54) and the rivalry between brothers. 'I'm not asleep' designates midnight, the moment which is neither AM nor PM, as a time caught between days, where consciousness slips between wakefulness and dreams, and a time not of conventional reading, eyes following words on the page, but of 'leafing', of semi-conscious mental processing as the page is being turned. The use of the deictic in the book's title makes its own contribution to this threshold-play. Whereas *My Emily Dickinson* suggested with its possessive pronoun a singular experience of a specific author's oeuvre, the title *The Midnight* is a way of nominating and thereby validating a liminal non-entity. *The Midnight* is about the pause and the movement, the suspense and the disjuncture, indeed the 'spiritual hyphen', that interrupts and conjoins blocks of signs. And the 'etiquette' is the grace demanded of the reader to be alert without interpretive or assumptive intention. It is also, finally, a promise from the writer to be on the side of the reader – and of the dead to be on the side of the living – thus inviting active and multiple participations of textual encounter.

The introductory poem thus provides instructions not only on how to read this book, but on how to think about the given ways in which all books carry and impart meaning. The reproduced interleaf is a *skeuomorph*, that is, a design feature carried over to one artefact from a similar and prior artefact even though its function is no longer necessary (just like the audio 'click' of a mechanical shutter on a digital camera). By forcing contemplation of what was hitherto assumed, automatized, or taken as given, *The Midnight* exposes some of the hidden ways in which books convey meaning. This physical misprision makes the metaphysical associations stand out in relief, encouraging us to participate in, as we read, a deliberate hesitation over not only how a book can mean – in spite and because of its constrictions – but over how a deceased author or book-owner can be remembered through their physical traces and metaphysical vestiges.

Textuality: textiles and contexts

In crafting this subtle and tangential elegy of her mother, Howe exhibits the potentiality of the book's particulars, down to the very words it employs. 'Veridical and delusive definitions shade into one another', she

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writes, and ‘All words run along the margins of their secrets’ (*Midnight*, p. 48). All claims to definitive meaning are really just references to historicized quotations woven into the fabric of language, and denotations of English words – like the dictionaries which contain them – are multiple, evolving, and inextricably linked to a local history. In an early poem in *The Midnight*, Howe writes:

Go too – my savage pattern
on surface material the line
in ink if you have curtains
and a New English Dictionary
there is nothing to justify a
claim for linen except a late
quotation knap warp is flax
Fathom we without cannot
(*Midnight*, p. 8)

It is only when the context is immediate and automatized (and the example quotation late) that lexical weaves are imperceptible and present the finish of linen. ‘New English Dictionary’ is a reference to the work which is now known as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but was originally the Philological Society of London’s *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, first proposed in 1859, and which bore numerous combinations of the two different names on the title-pages and spines of its various fascicles and volumes well into the twentieth century, attesting to the sometimes uneasy relationship of academic and commercial interests between the Philological Society and the delegates of the university press.¹² Howe’s ‘savage pattern’ is a process of weaving and unweaving which exists to counter normalizing forces. Nevertheless, the ‘warp’, a gridwork that makes the weaving possible and one which is constituted by commonly accepted meanings – an idiom of sorts – must be in place somehow in order for us to ‘fathom’, to reach for and relate to perceptions that transcend the language of daily exchange between the living.

Dictionaries, in *The Midnight*, are not exempt from Howe’s bibliographic pastiche. ‘To describe Camlet I will/look into Chambers/and Postlethwayt’, she writes (*Midnight*, p. 15). In *Chambers’s Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language*, ‘camlet’ is simply defined as ‘a cloth originally made of camel’s hair, but now chiefly of wool and goat’s hair’.¹³ The entry in Malachy Postlethwayt’s 1766 *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, however, is nearly an entire double-columned and close-set page long, beginning ‘CAMLET, or, as some spell it, CAMBLET, a plain stuff, composed of a warp and woof, which is manufactured on a loom with two treddles, as linnens and stamines

are...’, and proceeding to an extremely detailed account of the historical socio-economic conditions of cloth-making.¹⁴ By citing, respectively, the commercial publisher and the sole author of the two very different dictionaries to which she refers (and alluding to the disparities of connotations therein), Howe reminds us that *no* particle of the text – physical or conceptual – carries definitive meaning and that *every* particle – physical or conceptual – is tied to history. The texts therefore become both denotatively open yet contextually grounded.

Books – especially of verse – rarely exist in one incarnation. Howe herself has made a career out of recombining her texts. *The Europe of Trusts* (1990), *Singularities* (1990), *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (1993), *The Birth-mark* (1993), and *Frame Structures* (1996) each contain works that appeared previously, in different compilations, formats, and editions. *The Midnight*, as mentioned above, is no exception to this. Howe calls our attention, both through the content of her verse and the textual practices of her book, to the *textuality*, to the way she weaves together citation and found text as well as her own previously published material. Reading it, we can never guess at the pre-scriptive level of her weaving or presume which weave is most ‘authentic’, but in contemplating the materials, we perceive the weave and experience the trace of a consciousness.

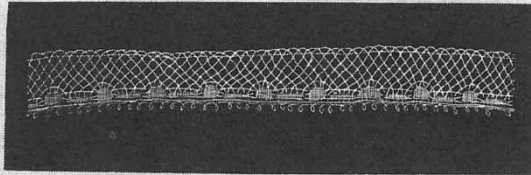
The textual openwork in *The Midnight* results in an intricate pattern of edges and lacunae. The poems in the first section, ‘Bed Hangings I’, were drawn from an earlier publication of Howe’s in collaboration with artist Susan Bee, entitled *Bed Hangings*. *Bed Hangings* presents Howe’s poetic texts in a dense and sophisticated dialogue with Bee’s black and white images of illustrations taken from other books as well as line-drawings which often subvert the former’s original meanings. In *The Midnight*’s ‘Bed Hangings I’, the texts appear verbatim but condensed as a series of block-sized poems about 2 inches by 1 inch, centred on each page and without illustration. Before the first of these poems we find only one image, taken from Bury Palliser’s 1902 *History of Lace*, that provides a snippet of historical detail about the stitch that is pictured (*Midnight*, p. 2; see Figure 2).

Howe invites us to consider the history of lace-making, the artists behind the craft, their lexicon, and the hands through which these materials passed, as an analogy to the crafts of bookmaking and text-production. As a semi-translucent veil that was pulled aside before bedtime, this hand-weaving is, like the tissue interleaf, outmoded but rich with history, silent but instrumental. As Howe mentioned in a 2007 reading of *The Midnight*, lace differs from embroidery in that there is no underside revealing the knots.¹⁵ It is lace’s singular translucency and hidden openness that interest Howe; it becomes a vehicle for what vanishes. By allowing for two-ways

Lucifer has winged homøvep past
 To other lands liberticide
 Lucifer has winged homøvep past

Eugénie. The exertions of the sisters have been most successful. In 1842 they received the gold medal for

Fig. 99.



AVE MARIA.—Dieppe.

having, by the substitution of the Valenciennes for the old Dieppe stitch, introduced a new industry into the depart

Figure 2. *The Midnight*, p. 2 © New Directions Press 2003

truths and contradictions, she can, like a lace-maker, create a masterful openwork of edges drawn together which filters rather than blocks the light.

Directly above the epigraphic image pictured here is an overlay of typescripts which combines the epigraphic texts on the first two pages of *Bed Hangings*.¹⁶ This overlay/interweaving allows for multiple readings. Although Howe has stated herself that ‘visual scattering produces aural stringency’, suggesting yet another interstitial space (an audio-visual phonotext), her comment underscores the notion that the imposition of linear order sacrifices holistic significance.¹⁷ And why Lucifer? Bed hangings filter out light, and Lucifer, as the false bringer of light and the morning star that rises from the east, may function here to cast out Manichean dichotomies by constituting the antipodal position (indeed a singularity) to the threshold of midnight.¹⁸

Each poem in *The Midnight* gains significance due to its new overlay of juxtapositions and paratexts. But this book, as a transparent, two-sided text, is also a site for vanishing. For the poems in *Bed Hangings* possessed their own singular significance, no longer included. See, for example, how Bee’s illustration of one of its poems concretizes and instantiates abstract lines such as ‘present present *presentness*’ (Figure 3) – a context which is absent in *The Midnight*. The text is full of gaps, excisions, and sacrifices. But it also offers alternative sites of semantic reactivity. Howe’s compilation therefore demonstrates how the contents of a book are reactive both intratextually, within the weave of each text’s immediate contexts,

Present present *presentness*
High mahogany bed roods &
raills do ring loop ties back
A sets down and C takes up
conformity to that uniformity
Ownership and ownership it
is a maxim of logic the Double
of the object is that I desire it



Figure 3. *Bed Hangings*, n.p © Granary Books and Susan Bee 2001

and metaleptically, retroactively imparting new frame structures to its various precursors. Figure 4

The selection of Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* for the skeuomorphic interleaf threshold in *The Midnight* is significant. According to the List of Illustrations, the interleaf reproduced here was obtained from the 1894 Cassells edition (*Midnight*, p.175). In this edition of the tale, Stevenson includes a preface in which an unnamed editor recounts how the story was handed to him in manuscript form by a friend named Johnstone Thompson, W.S. The manuscript was allegedly found in the papers of an old business partner with the endorsement that it could be put in print 100 years from its conception, which marked the date of the actual book's first publication, 20 September 1889. The preface bears no relevance to the story itself, but it includes an important exchange in which Mr. Thompson says, 'Here....is a novel ready to your hand: all you

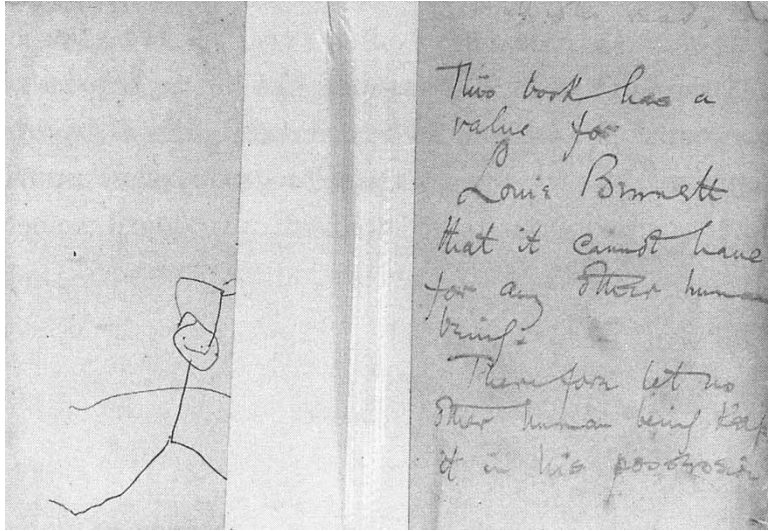


Figure 4. *The Midnight*, p. 59 © New Directions Press 2003

have to do is to work up the scenery, develop the characters, and improve the style'. The editor responds, 'My dear fellow...they are just the three things that I would rather die than set my hand to. It shall be published as it stands'. Mr. Thompson comments on the manuscript's baldness, and after the editor argues that there is 'nothing so noble as baldness', Mr. Thomson finishes the preface by remarking, 'we shall see'.¹⁹

The book's complicated publishing history (for subsequent editions intermittently included or omitted this preface) substantiates Howe's unstated claim in her oeuvre that texts are unstable and exist in a plurality of versions, all of which are integral to the life of the text and each of which is singular in both its form and issue. As to Mr. Thompson's remark, we are caught in a Liar's Paradox in which we do not know which portions of the text he meant to imply were found in the manuscript and which may have been edited in. Howe writes, with regard to her own text (and under the heading '*The Liar Paradox*'), 'why am I so fictitious and active?' to which she responds, 'Simply because there's no one in the world and never has been anyone in the world like you. Not-me – though you and I' (*Midnight*, pp. 61–62). Not only is the content an admixture of writing and editing, thereby making authorship multiple and cooperative, and each issue a unique textual event, but the event of reading itself is a meeting of author and reader whose boundaries are blurred and whose occurrence is an unrepeatably drama.

Increasing consciousness of the book as a dynamic and intertextual phenomenon rather than a static artefact provides one index of the shift

from modernist to postmodernist literary textuality. Invoking Yeats's observation that 'English literature, alone of great literatures because the newest of them all, has all but completely shaped itself in the printing press', Jerome McGann posits that 'in truth the history of modernist writing could be written as a history of the modernist book', and that within that history, 'Ezra Pound would appear ... the crucial point of departure'. As well as chronicling the complex, layered publication history of *The Cantos*, McGann invokes Pound's first book, *Hilda's Book*, of which there was only one copy: handmade, vellum-bound, and a gift to his then fiancée, H.D.²⁰ This volume, in McGann's view, displayed Pound's awareness of 'the late nineteenth century's printing revolution that Pre-Raphaelitism had done so much to inaugurate and advance'. 'Though a gift to H.D.' writes McGann, 'the book is an act of homage to Pre-Raphaelitism and the ideal of the troubadour poet it passed on to him'.²¹ But for Howe, whom McGann subsequently discusses in detail (not in relation to H.D. or Pound but rather as one example of 'the post-modernist book'), *Hilda's Book* was much more than a homage to the individuals who revolutionized print and who made its mechanical reproduction possible. An oversight in McGann's analysis of Howe's epigraph to *Pythagorean Silence* is telling. In demonstrating the legacy of modernism's attention to the materiality of the text and postmodernism's reliance on intertextuality, he cites the epigraph's deliberately disrupted typeface and finds within it allusions to Blake's *Milton* and Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. But the epigraph, which ends in the lines

Bark be my limbs my hair be leaf
Bride be my bow my lyre my quiver²²

provides a wonderful link to the H.D.-Pound nexus and the history of the modernist book of verse. 'The Tree', the poem in *Hilda's Book* that later became the first poem of Pound's *Personae* begins, 'I stood still and was a tree amid the wood', and then invokes the Ovidian metamorphosis of 'Daphne and the laurel bow' [sic].²³ This paronomastic slippage between the homonyms *bough* and *bow* – two words etymologically related but distinguished by historical usage – as well as the Daphnean metamorphosis (Pound's nickname for Hilda was 'Dryad') are stitches that Howe uses to weave *Pythagorean Silence* together with its modernist precursor – not only as printed object, but as a gift between poets that is crafted out of love.

Elegiac singularities

According to Howe, history is an actuality 'in and against' which poets are always working. 'If history is a record of survivors', she tells us, 'poetry

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shelters other voices'.²⁴ In Howe's earlier work, the sheltered voice was often the marginalized or partially erased voice of a deceased author. Works such as 'Melville's Marginalia' (1993), *Pierce-Arrow* (1996), and the more recent *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007) explore the elegiac space of the margin in manuscripts of each book's respective subject (Melville, C.S. Pierce, and Stevens). As mentioned previously, *The Midnight* constitutes an autobiographical turn in that it examines the paratexts and markings in her family library. But if we look closely at Howe's oeuvre, we find that this exploration of heirloom marginalia in fact had a precursor. In her Introduction to *Frame Structures* (1996), Howe included a snippet that foreshadowed her later endeavour:

My mother says her mother loved another man anyway but he was a Catholic so Susan Bennet married Protestant John Fitzmaurice Manning on the rebound. When she died in her eighties the other man's picture was beside her bed. If this is true I wonder if anyone has paid attention to the many marginal markings in *Swinburne*, the only book of his I have seen over here. 'Yea, hope at highest and all her fruit,/And time at fullest and all his dower,/I had given you surely, and life to boot,/Were we once made one for a single hour./But now, you are twain, you are cloven apart,/Flesh of his flesh, but heart of my heart;/And deep in one is the bitter root,/And sweet for one is the lifelong flower'. He has underlined 'flesh' 'flesh' and 'heart of my Heart' and drawn a pencil slash down the right hand margin of this stanza from 'The Triumph of Time'.

The startling revelation that her grandmother may have – unbeknownst to her grandfather – belonged emotionally to another man her whole life long is communicated here through three lines and a slash in an inherited *Swinburne*. The poetic details of a life peek through the veil of printed text. It is unmediated, translucent elegy which Howe seeks, and so we find her, after her mother's death, turning to 'dedications, hints, snapshots, press cuttings, warnings – scissor work' (*Midnight*, p. 60) of her maternal uncle's library in order to find these elegiac singularities, these paratextual idiosyncracies which work 'in and against' a locus of memory.

Howe addresses the unique power of this space directly in a passage in *The Midnight* where she remarks that 'the relational space is the thing that's alive with something from somewhere else' (*Midnight*, p. 58). She illustrates its reactive activity first by including anecdotes about several of her own literary obsessions, Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Thomas Carlyle, and then by segueing (elliptically) into the autobiographical:

My great-aunt Louie Bennett has written the following admonition on the flyleaf of her copy of *The Irish Song Book with Original Irish Airs*, edited with an Introduction and Notes, by Alfred Percival Graves 1895): To all who read. This book has a value for Louie Bennett that it cannot have for any other human being. Therefore let no other human being keep it in his possession. (*Midnight*, pp. 58–59)

The passage is followed by a photograph of the fly-leaf itself, Aunt Louie's admonition clearly having been ignored:

Below the photograph Howe writes, 'Disobeying Aunt Louie's predatory withdrawal, or preservative denial, I recently secured the spine of her *Irish Song Book* with duct tape. Damage control – its cover was broken. So your edict flashes daggers – so what' (*Midnight*, p. 59). It is the 'predatory withdrawal' and 'preservative denial' which Howe finds objectionable in bibliographic and archival methods. Here we see the personal hindrances which correspond to the institutional restrictions Howe encountered and recounted in her work on Dickinson. But she does what she always does, that is, she carries on in spite of them and to spite them, incorporating the narrative of her resistance into her poetry.

Howe's interest in bibliography has poignant parallels with elegy. Deliberate hesitation over paratexts and marginalia constitutes an elegiac observance; it has the effect of rendering someone's living memory more expansive and undetermined. When Howe first came across *A Bibliography of the King's Book or, Eikon Basilike*, she felt 'struck by the ironies implicit in the very idea of a bibliography, which is a search for origins on paper' (*Birthmark*, p. 174) and stated that the 'absent centre' in *Eikon Basilike* is 'the ghost of a king' whereas 'a poem is an icon' (*Birthmark*, p. 177). When asked what was left in words themselves if the icon led us merely to a ghost, Howe responded,

That's it. It's the singularity. It's a catastrophe of bifurcation. There is a sudden leap into another situation. The ghost (the entrance point of a singularity) is the only thing we have. And a ghost represents death. There is death. I almost never put the word *death* in my poems. It would be too easy. I have always felt death to be the unspeakable other. (*Birthmark* 177)

The unexpected juxtapositions of *The Midnight* repeatedly offer a 'catastrophe of bifurcation' in the construction of the image of a person. This long poem is, finally, our brush with the ghost of Howe's mother; her appearance is always allusive. In the singularities the ghost leads us

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to, however, the memory of the beloved – as well as the authorial consciousness that conceives it – becomes something else; it is indeterminate, expansive, other to itself. It is through a method analogous to anarchic bibliography, that is, bibliography which presupposes no origins, then that Howe composes this unique song of mourning.

Dialetheism

In a poignant prose interlude under the heading ‘*What there isn’t*’, Howe writes an anecdote of the psycho-architect Frederick Law Olmstead, designer of Central Park, the Niagara Falls reservation, and a staggering number of smaller parks and grounds in America including the legendary MacLean Hospital where Olmstead was hospitalized at the end of his life (Howe refers to him only as the first-born son of his mother, Charlotte Hull Olmstead). He suffered numerous traumas as a child and was of the opinion that rural scenery was, ‘in medical phrase, a prophylactic and therapeutic agent of value’.²⁵ Howe quotes a fragment of Olmstead’s in which he recounts that his mother died when he was so young that he ‘had only a tradition of memory rather than the faintest recollection of her’; when asked if he could remember her he would respond, ‘Yes; I remember playing on the grass and looking up at her while she sat sewing under a tree’, and then confessed, ‘I now only remember that I did so remember her, but it has always been a delight to see a woman sitting under a tree, sewing and minding a child’ (*Midnight*, pp. 66–67). Howe immediately follows this with a black and white photograph of a woman and three children sitting under a tree. In the List of Illustrations, we discover it is a photo of Mary, Susan, Christabel, and John Manning, circa 1912 (*Midnight*, p. 176). In the subsequent prose anecdote about Olmstead, Howe tells us that he had called to mind an ‘autobiographical fragment’ or tradition of memory relating to his mother ‘as an antidote to insomnia’. However, she reminds us, ‘In relation to detail every first scrap of memory survives in sleep or insanity’. (*Midnight*, p. 68)

In the deftly oblique prose poem that follows, entitled ‘After AMTRAK what?’, Howe permeates the veil of her own poetics and faces the sublime of ‘every first scrap of memory’. The poem begins with a photo of the interleaf from *The Master of Ballantrae* curled over the title-page upon which a small magnifying glass is posed. The interleaf curls such that it is impossible to know if it is turning forward or beckoning back. Howe writes:

June 26, 2001, Guilford, Connecticut. 2 a.m. The train whistle makes sleep impossible. AMTRAK. Simply match the noise to a

bona fide physical object. Take notes on ways of overpowering noise, its lights and processes. Leftover light. Whether it spreads easily up and down. If this train stops in Boston it stops in Massachusetts. If I had closed the window you wouldn't be looking at sound. Land water sand – it's all in the eye of the mind. June is a month of deep shadows and unkempt thickets of full-blown wild white roses. In the evenings their scent passes over air of heaven and furniture of earth. Just because there is overlap, some neighbors with a realist bias consider them weeds without forethought; nonrational, unconfined. To enter night's character and moonlight's character I will scatter arguments here and there half-hidden; premises are omitted this way. We won't wander again over Divine Choice Theory of Actuality in the Connecticut River Valley, nor history in embryo after exile, when nonnormal worlds come into their own symptoms, namely, nothing – that is Bishop Berkeley's forest and this is New Quarry Road. June is the month when local hemlocks used to be glorious but in 1985 winds of Hurricane Gloria blew a tree blight from Japan to Eastern Connecticut and now most of them are dead or dying. Other things being equal all transport may break down. Anyway – a plane will get you there quicker. (pp. 68–69)

June 26, 2001. Two hours after midnight. On the second anniversary of her mother's death (Mary Manning Howe died on June 25, 1999 in Cambridge, MA), Howe confronts a shrill insomnia. She must choose whether to accept the painful conditions of her environment as objectively real (thus 'matching' them to a 'bona fide object') or to identify them as a mirror of her own grief-afflicted imagination (a metaphysical position which might amount to insanity). In a brief interlude of philosophical discursus that is both dense and evasive, Howe enters 'night's character and moonlight's character' through half-hidden arguments and omitted premises. Her apophysis ('we won't wander over again. . .') presents several important philosophical stances. 'Divine Choice Theory of Actuality' is a term Robert Merrihew Adams uses to describe Leibneizian notion that God, after surveying an infinite number of worlds, deemed the one we live in as the best.²⁶ In Howe's emotionally fraught state, such optimistic determinism provides the consolation that grief and regret would be gratuitous since the loss was an actuality determined by divine choice. 'History in embryo after exile' is most probably a reference to Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1917) and his proposition that Western civilization at the turn of the millennium (another midnight of this book) is in the process of exhausting itself of its own possibilities and that a few isolated visionaries are beginning, embryonically, to intrude the vision of the next epoch.²⁷ 'Nonnormal worlds' refers to a

technical device where logic fails to hold and contradictions are true.²⁸ But all of this – actuality, the philosophy of history, non-normal worlds – is chalked up to ‘Bishop Berkeley’s forest’. George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne, was an Irish metaphysician who attacked representationalist materialism, arguing that ‘ordinary objects are ideas’.²⁹ Are we to assume that Howe abandons any claim on the metaphysical at this point? Does the figurative expression of ‘Bishop Berkeley’s forest’ mean she will swerve to the opposite extreme of the dialectic, towards a language describing bona fide objects?

In fact, nothing is negated. Howe’s stance *at* ‘New Quarry Road’ indicates literally that she has arrived at her destination in Connecticut. It also, however, shows that rather than maintaining or negating a philosophical viewpoint, she maintains a practice of poetic inquiry. In a letter to Paul Metcalf, Howe writes, ‘It strikes me as odd that your address is Quarry Road and mine is New Quarry Road – because that’s what we both do; *quarry*’.³⁰ At that point, her focus turns back to her environs, to the dying landscape of blighted roses (an Olmsteadian prophylactic), after which she retracts abruptly, offering a characteristically dry, if not glib, quip about travel logistics: ‘Anyway – a plane will get you there quicker’. The irony being, of course, that her existential quandary, which was spawned by the screeching half-light and passing landscape of the railway, would never have materialized on a plane, which leaves her to ask, ‘*After AMTRAK, what?*’

At this point of retraction, where Howe is at a cognitive standstill saturated with tensions, she introduces a photo of a John Manning’s taped-up copy of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* which has been opened to Chapter I, ‘Down the Rabbithole’.³¹ *Now* comes the moment where Howe introduces the all-important two-way truth: ‘I thought *Bed Hangings* was finished’, she writes, ‘before running across the term, “Dialetheism”, coined by Graham Priest and Richard Routley (aka Sylvan)’ (*Midnight* pp. 69–70). Graham Priest, the London-born contemporary analytic philosopher at the University of Melbourne, is a specialist in non-classical logic and has co-authored texts with Richard Routley, who changed his name in 1983 to reflect his commitment to environmentalism. (One notes the wordplay here between ‘Priest’, ‘Sylvan’, and the rhetorical contexts of pontification and landscape architecture.) Priest has surmised Dialetheism as follows: ‘the whole point of the dialetheic solution to the semantic paradoxes is to get rid of the distinction between object language and meta-language’.³² The metaphysical and materialist dialectic has been evaded. Instead of escaping to the metaphysical where there are no things but in her own ideas, or, conversely, matching internal experience to bona fide objects and materials at the risk of knowing that in that world, things can and will go missing, Howe leaps through a rabbit

hole, a singularity – one which, as a resident of New Quarry Road, it appears she has dug herself. But what does Dialetheism have to do with *Bed Hangings*?

As a text which concerns itself with the production and history of two-way, translucent textiles, *Bed Hangings* is immediately resonant with Dialetheism's bivalent nature. But beyond lace-making metaphors, the mention of *Bed Hangings* at this singularity in *The Midnight* is a gesture towards textual self-cannibalism and its consequent versioning and indeterminacy. Such an autobiographical exposure highlights the contradictions inherent in New Bibliographic searches for authenticity by showing how physical and conceptual phenomena intersect to form an unstable artefact – an artefact we refer to by the metonymy 'the book'. 'Thinking is willing you are wild' writes Howe, 'to the weave and not to material itself' (*Midnight*, p. 17). Howe reacts to this catastrophe of bifurcation by weaving; she spins the text of *Bed Hangings* into a new text called *The Midnight*. Integral to her weaving is the construction and deconstruction of an apparition which is made in the image of her own expanding consciousness. Bibliography, like elegy, presents many catastrophes of bifurcation in the material-metaphysical dialectic, and Dialetheism allows for the contradictions to co-exist. Howe continues her explanation:

A di-alethia is a two(-way) truth so it's the view that there are true contradictions. Just the way there can be one local place-name and another name used by strangers. For this logical thicket Meinongians will arrest a particular nonexistent cobweb tract noting its relation to distant objects everywhere. Still – others say nonexistent objects are never particulars. If at the heart of language lies what language can't express, can it be false to say that the golden mountain which exists exists? (*Midnight*, p. 70)

Alexius Meinong (1853–1929) was an Austrian philosopher known for his Theory of Objects which states that any hypothetical object (a golden mountain is his example of choice) has a kind of being which he calls *absistence*; unlike existence it cannot be negated because it always already is, even though it is only in the mind.³³ The question posed in this passage is central to Howe's poetics: can it be false to say that the inexpressible exists? Within the interleaf, the scrap of lace, the margin, or the woven text, such things as ghosts *seem* to exist – in the same way that the tissue interleaf allows for the apprehension – or projection – of otherworldly qualities. But what is the value of such hypothetical postulation? 'O light and dark vowels with your transconsistent hissing and hushing', writes Howe, 'I know you curtain I sense delusion. Fortunately we can capture for our world some soft object, a fuzzy conditional, a cot cover,

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an ode, a couplet, a line, a lucky stone – to carry around when camping' (*Midnight*, p. 70). In these lines, Howe suggests that we itinerant, earthly inhabitants can find some material or textual relic of another world as consolation for what we have lost in this one. Like the maternally inherited Anglo-Irish songs and lullabies which figure into *The Midnight*, these relics offer solace to those surviving the loved one as they move from one singularity to the next. Howe's role as weaver is to integrate the warp of everyday material language with the fathom of meta-language. In such an open-work, the edges of each singularity are drawn together into an intertextual finery. She has the unlocatable perspective of a poet who is actively absenting herself, moving through her thoughts, a memory-in-progress. It is within the fiction of the stitching, finally, of the book's own materials, where perception achieves its greatest potential for expansion, where contradictions can be true, and where it cannot be false to say that one can brush with ghosts.

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Notes

- 1 *Bed Hangings* marked a shift in Howe's attitude towards using textiles as a metaphor for women's writing. In *My Emily Dickinson*, Howe found feminist criticism such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's to limit perceptions of women writers to caricatures of 'spider-artists' or individuals doomed to 'stitching' – either in the form of suicide or clandestine word-weaving (*My Emily Dickinson* [Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985], p. 14). Howe discusses her subsequent fascination with sewing and lace-making in a reading of *The Midnight* at The Kelly Writers' House, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, February 15, 2007, available at <http://sriting.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Howe.html>
- 2 See, for example, Stephen Collis, *Through Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 2000); Kent Lewis, 'The Poetics of the Bibliography' in *A Bibliography of the King's Book; or Eikon Basilike*, *West Coast Line* 27 (1993), pp. 118–127; and Jerome McGann, 'Composition as Explanation (of Modern and Postmodern Poetries)', in Rothenberg and Clay (ed.), *A Book of the Book* (New York: Granary Books, 2000), pp. 228–245.
- 3 Stephen Collis, 'Drawing the Curtain on *The Midnight*', *Jacket* 25 (February 2004), available at <http://jacketmagazine.com/25/collis-s-howe.html>

- 4 Catherine Martin, “‘Double Play of Double Meaning’: Dreams, Repetition and the Importance of the Noh in Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*”, *Textual Practice* 20.4 (2006), pp. 759–775 (772).
- 5 Marjorie Perloff, ‘The Rattle of Statistical Traffic: Citation and Found Text in Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*’, *Boundary 2* 36.3 (2009), pp. 205–228 (228).
- 6 Susan Howe, Poetry Reading. Kelly Writers’ House, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, February 15, 2007, available at <http://sriting.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Howe.html>
- 7 Susan Howe, *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (New York: New Directions Press, 1993), n.p. and *The Birthmark* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 29.
- 8 Howe invokes the renegade French critic yet again in *The Birth-Mark*: ‘A printed book enters social and economic networks of distribution. Does the printing modify an author’s intention, or does a text develop itself? Why do certain works go on saying something else? Pierre Macherey says, in *A Theory of Literary Production*, ‘The work has its beginnings in a break from the usual ways of speaking and writing – a break which sets it apart from all other forms of ideological expression’ (*The Birthmark*, n.p.; Howe cites Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, p. 52).
- 9 In ‘Melville’s Marginalia’ Howe writes, ‘I saw the pencilled trace of Herman Melville’s passage through John Mitchel’s introduction and knew by shock of poetry telepathy the real James Clarence Mangan is the progenitor of fictional Bartleby’. *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*, n.p.
- 10 Gary Smith (ed.), *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 43–83 (67). The relevance of this particular contribution of Benjamin’s thought to Susan Howe’s work is detailed in Paul Naylor, ‘Writing History Poetically: Walter Benjamin and Susan Howe’, *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 28.3 (1995), pp. 323–338 (326).
- 11 Drawing upon Will Montgomery’s observation that ‘transitional objects’ refers to the psychology of D.W. Winnicott (Will Montgomery, ‘Inheriting the Library: Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*’, *Poetry Review* 94.1 (2004), p. 95), Catherine Martin discusses Howe’s use of ‘an intermediate or transitional space’ which helps in the ‘difficult, potentially painful transition’ of the inchoate child subject to a relatively independent interaction with an ‘autonomous, external world’ (‘Double play of double meaning’, p. 764).
- 12 See Charlotte Brewer, *Treasure-House of the Language: The Living OED* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 261, for an account of the relationship between the two names for the dictionary.
- 13 Thomas Davison (ed.), *Chambers’s Twentieth-Century Dictionary of the English Language* (London and Edinburgh: Chambers, 1914), s.v. ‘camlet’.
- 14 Malachy Postlethwayt, *The Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, third edn., 2 vols. (London, 1766), vol. one, s.v. ‘camlet, J&P Knapton’.
- 15 Susan Howe, Poetry Reading. Kelly Writers’ House, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, February 15, 2007, available at <http://sriting.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Howe.html>

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- 16 Susan Howe and Susan Bee, *Bed Hangings* (New York: Granary Books, 2001), n.p.
- 17 Susan Howe and David Grubs, Seminar, The Birkbeck Institute, London, UK, October 5, 2009.
- 18 In her 1990 *Talisman* interview with Edward Foster, Howe explained that she had been reading the Mathematician René Thom: 'In algebra a singularity is the point where plus becomes minus. On a line, if you start at x point, there is $=1$, $=2$, etc. But at the other side of the point is -1 , -2 , etc. The singularity (I think Thom is saying) is the point where there is a sudden change to something completely else. It is a chaotic point. It is the point chaos enters cosmos, the instant articulation. Then there is a leap into something else' (*The Birthmark*, p. 173).
- 19 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae: A Winter's Tale* (London: Cassell, 1894), pp. ix–xii.
- 20 The text of *Hilda's Book* was later reproduced by H.D.'s literary executor, Norman Holmes Pearson, who appended it to H.D.'s *End to Torment* (New York, NY: New Directions Press, 1979).
- 21 Jerome McGann, 'Composition as Explanation (of Modern and Postmodern Poetries)', in Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay (eds.), *A Book of the Book: Some Works & Projections About the Book & Writing* (New York: Granary Books, 2000), pp. 228–245 (228).
- 22 Susan Howe, *Pythagorean Silence* (New York: Montemora Foundation, 1982), n.p.
- 23 Ezra Pound, *Personae: The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*, Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (ed.) (New York: New Directions, 1990), p. 3. A further use of epigraphs to invoke the H.D.–Pound nexus and modernist book-making occurs in Howe's *Singularities* where she quotes from *Trilogy*: 'under her drift of veils, / and she carried a book'. Susan Howe, *Singularities* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), p. v.
- 24 Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), pp. 158–159.
- 25 Micheal Sperber, 'Frederick Olmstead: Brief Life of the Psycho-architect: 1822–1903', *Harvard Magazine* (July–August 2007), available at <http://harvardmagazine.com/2007/07/frederick-law-olmsted.html>. The Olmstead fragment which Howe includes in *The Midnight* is also quoted in Sperber's article.
- 26 Robert Merrihew Adams, 'Theories of Actuality'. *Noûs* 8.3 (1974), pp. 211–231.
- 27 Oswald Spengler and Charles Francis Atkinson. *The Decline of the West* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1934).
- 28 Graham Priest (ed.), 'Editor's Introduction', *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 38.4 (1997), pp. 481–487 (482).
- 29 The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Entry on George Berkeley, available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/berkeley/>
- 30 Modern American Poetry Online. About Susan Howe's Poetry. Comment from Paul Metcalf, available at http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/howe/about.htm

- 31 Howe seems to also be saying, like Alice at the end of the text on the right-hand page that is pictured, ‘and what is the use of a book, without pictures or conversations?’ (*Midnight*, p. 69).
- 32 Graham Priest, ‘Boolean Negation and All That’, *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 19 (1990), pp. 201–215 (208).
- 33 Meinong’s philosophy is explained in a book co-authored by Graham Priest and Richard Routley, *Exploring Meinong’s Jungle and Beyond: An Investigation of Noneism and the Theory of Items* (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publications, 1982).