

Susan Howe's Renaissance Period: Metamorphosis and Representation in *Pythagorean Silence* and *Defenestration of Prague*

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The American poet Susan Howe is perhaps the best-known of the generation of poets that came to attention under the banner of "language poetry." Her work has been widely anthologized and it has drawn a considerable amount of critical commentary. The "language" label, like most such tags, was unpalatable to most of the poets who came under it. It did after all mask a diverse range of poets. But, even given such reservations, it was clear from the start that Howe's poetry was out of step with certain general tendencies within language poetry. We know from the correspondence that Ron Silliman was criticized by some language poets for including Howe in his influential 1986 anthology *In the American Tree*. In a 1985 letter to Howe, Silliman expresses his reading of the relation between her work and language poetry:

I do think one of the most important aspects of this writing [i.e. language writing], from the perspective of literary history if nothing else, is that it is anti-romantic, anti-mystical and anti-lyric (tho there are exceptions ...) And your writing does seem to me to be at odds with this larger tendency. How you work with this tension in your poetry seems to me one of its most compelling dimensions.¹

For her part, Howe undeniably valued the radicalism and intellectual commitment of these writers and formed close relationships with two of the protagonists, Lyn Hejinian on the West Coast, and Charles Bernstein on the East. Howe's correspondence with Hejinian was one of her two most

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¹ Letter of 7 Dec. 1985 (MSS 0075). All correspondence cited is archived at the Susan Howe Papers, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego. My thanks to the library and to Susan Howe for permission to cite this material. Parenthetical references adopt the MSS classification used at UCSD.

Summary: The article discusses the metamorphosis and representation of ideas in the poetry of Susan Howe. The reflection focuses on the motifs drawn from the literature of the Renaissance. The poems include "Pythagorean Silence" and "Defenestration of Prague" which were published at the beginning of the 1980s. It is stated that her version of the metamorphosis is a passing-into-stasis that retains spirit within a physical universe

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substantial letter-writing relationships of the 1980s. That the other was with John Taggart, a poet aligned with Robert Duncan and one, like Duncan, in the anti-language camp, suggests the breadth of the territory that Howe's poetry occupies. In her response to Silliman, Howe acknowledges that she is a lyric writer, that she believes in what she calls the power of "Mystery in poetry" and that she is deeply committed to the past. She continues,

Unlike you I think Shakespeare IS a GREAT writer. Yes – I will use that terrible word GREAT. I know all the problems of that word too – because it has particularly shut women out – but I think too that the enigma of Power – that includes the idea – great – is as puzzling as the structure of the atom ...²

In what follows I will discuss this "puzzling" enigma of power in relation to the texts of the past, to the role of the woman writer and to the kind of contract with the reader that is implied by Howe's poetry. In particular, I want to address an aspect of Howe's work that has received relatively little attention: her use of motifs drawn from the literature of the Renaissance.³ I will be concerned with her adaptation, via Ovid, of the notion of metamorphosis and of her use of the aesthetics of the masque and of Renaissance pastoral.

While many of Howe's peers in the American avant-garde were, broadly, adapting a post-Williams or even a post-Thoreauvian paradigm that reflected a scepticism about English literary tradition, Howe frequently engages with major canonical texts: Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, the Bible. And while a good deal has been made of Howe's revisionist approach to literary history and her involvement with marginalized figures, little has been said about her profound sympathy for texts which could hardly be less marginal.

Such texts are prominent in two important and relatively early poems, *Pythagorean Silence* (PS) and *Defenestration of Prague* (DP), both first published at the beginning of the 1980s.⁴ Although some key issues in Howe's poetics are concealed in their refractory lines, neither of these long poems has received the attention devoted to the work produced later in the 1980s and in the 1990s.

² Letter of 27 Dec. 1985 (MSS 0011).

³ See, however, Brian McHale's *Obligation toward the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004). McHale discusses Howe's use of Shakespeare in *Pythagorean Silence* and Spenser in *Defenestration of Prague*.

⁴ Subsequently collected in *The Europe of Trusts* (containing *There are not Leaves Enough to Crown to Cover to Crown to Cover* (1985), *Pythagorean Silence* (1982), *Defenestration of Prague* (1983) and *The Liberties* (1980)) (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1990). Page references are given in the text.

Howe's anachronistic achievement in these poems is to present late twentieth-century anxieties about identity and authority through a Renaissance filter without doing violence to either set of perspectives. By "Renaissance" I will often mean a Renaissance understanding of classical notions – notably ideas attributed to Ovid and Pythagoras.

My reading of *Pythagorean Silence* is organized around the dominant "Pythagorean" strand in the poem-sequence: the transformative metaphysical motif of metempsychosis. The poem opens with an allusion to Ovid's Daphne, turned into a tree as she seeks to escape the amorous attentions of Apollo:

we that were wood
when that a wide wood was

In a physical Universe playing with

words

Bark be my limbs my hair be leaf

Bride be my bow my lyre my quiver (PS 17)

The etymology of "wood" takes us to "possessed by a devil," and, via Latin and Old Irish, "seer, poet", or "going beyond all reasonable bounds."⁵ "When what a wide wood was" rehearses the scene-setting stage directions at the beginning of Milton's *Comus*, which specify a "wild wood." However, the key to this sequence is Daphne's metamorphosis from human to plant form. Pursued by Apollo, her conversion into a tree is an imprisonment that opens on to the role of the poet, as Howe notes in a letter to Taggart:

The image of turning into a tree I took from a lovely and utterly haunting small painting by Pollaiuolo of Daphne turning into a laurel. ...

... bark (dog bark loud noise) is in the word bark of a tree. Transformation – and I think of Daphne becoming a laurel (the poet's tree) as a beautiful thing (unlike Dante and Shakespeare, who put people trapped in trees in hell). So I am bride with my bark, married to the danger and turning and singing it, playing it. With the play on bow (violent) and musical and on quiver – trees make arrows, arrows go in quivers, a string quivers when playing music and of course the rapture in quiver on and on ...⁶

⁵ OED.

⁶ Letter of 13 Nov. 1981 (MSS 0011). One of Howe's source may have been Norman O. Brown, "Daphne, or Metamorphosis," in his *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991; first published 1970). The essay reflects on parallels with the Apollo and Daphne tale in texts by authors including Petrarch, Bacon, Rilke, Yeats, Joyce and Gide, among many others. In the 1991 reprint Brown appends the lines that open *Pythagorean Silence*.

I read this transition in the context of later metamorphoses in the poem series, as a specifically Pythagorean transition, a metempsychosis, as a soul passes from one physical host to another. This might be read as an analogue of the process of poetic creation, a version of writing that amounts to a continual recasting of the texts of the past. The conclusion to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* contains an account of the beliefs of Pythagoras that, in the Ovid of Arthur Golding's influential 1567 translation, retrospectively casts the long foregoing series of transformations in a Pythagorean light. For Golding, in his introductory epistle, "The oration of Pithagoras implyes/A sum of all the former woorkes."⁷ The soul is described as follows in his version of Ovid:

And even as supple wax with ease receyveth figures straunge,
And keepest not ay one shape, ne bydes assured ay from chaunge,
And yit continueth always wax in substance: so I say
The soule is ay the selfsame thing it was and yit astray
It fleeteth into sundry shapes.⁸

Howe's version of the metamorphosis is a passing-into-stasis that retains "spirit" within a "physical Universe." Her account of Daphne's transformation cannot be disentangled from the theme of violence that pervades her 1980s poems: the classical role of the poet being to praise the exploits of the heroes of war. In "Bark be my limbs my hair be leaf" the speaker is apparently both Daphne and Howe. Yet there is a shift in the following line, "Bride be my bow my lyre my quiver." In Golding's translation these are close to the words spoken by Apollo to Daphne, as he explains how she will adorn his hair, his "harpe" and his quiver – and those of all victors.⁹ Dryden succinctly writes, "Be thou the prize of honour and renown;/the deathless poem, and the poet, crown./Thou shalt the *Roman* festivals adorn,/And after poets, be by victors worn".¹⁰ This formulation in turn recalls the title of the preface to *The Europe of Trusts: There are Not Leaves Enough to Crown to Cover to Crown to Cover* (itself a line from Wallace Stevens's characteristically evasive meditation on the public role of the poet, "United Dames of America").

⁷ In Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Arthur Golding (1597), ed. John Frederick Nims (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 288–89. The extent of Ovid's Pythagoreanism is a matter of some dispute and modern commentators see Golding's reading on this point as inadequate. See Raphael Lyne, *Ovid's Changing Worlds: English Metamorphoses, 1567–1632* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 25 and 52.

⁸ Ovid, trans. Golding, XV, 188–92. References to Ovid (translations), Shakespeare (Alexander text), Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Eliot are given by line rather than page number.

⁹ Ovid, trans. Golding, I, 694.

¹⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. John Dryden et al., ed. Samuel Garth (Ware: Wordsworth, 1998), I, 554–57. See below for discussion of Ophelia's "coronet."

In *Pythagorean Silence*, Howe's lines represent a complex, half-ironic appropriation of Ovid's account of Daphne's metamorphosis which is at once "married to the danger and turning and singing it, playing it." The speaker takes for herself Apollo's emblematic bow, lyre and quiver. Daphne, and not Apollo, becomes the figure of the poet. Howe's lines – "Bark be my limbs my hair be leaf/Bride be my bow my lyre my quiver" – demonstrate her poetry's tendency simultaneously to inhabit and to question the discourses in which her poetry is framed. Her relationship with power – or "danger" – is frequently coloured by this affiliation with authority that "turns" to "play" it.

There may also be an allusion to Robert Duncan's Vietnam-era book *Bending the Bow* here: the introduction and the poem "Bending the Bow" both refer to the bow and the lyre of Apollo.¹¹ Moreover, in her use of Ovid, Howe is developing a tendency in the work of the key Anglo-American modernist poets: Pound, Eliot and HD. Pound's *Personae*, for example, opens with "The Tree": "I stood still and was a tree amid the wood,/ Knowing the truth of things unseen before;/Of Daphne and the laurel bow/ And that god feasting couple old/That grew elm-oak amid the wold."¹² The myth is also referred to in "A Girl"¹³ and sections III and XII of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley";¹⁴ in his "Notes on Elizabethan Classicists" Pound describes Golding's Ovid as "the most beautiful book in the language."¹⁵ Several of HD's early poems, such as "The Garden," touch on the motifs of the tree and of erotic pursuit, and consecutive poems in her early book *The God* – "Adonis," "Pygmalion," "Eurydice" – are based on book X of the *Metamorphoses*.¹⁶ Pound (in cantos IV, LXXXVII, LXXXVIII and LXXXII) and Eliot (in *The Waste Land*) both made use of the Tereus and Philomela story, with its bleak conjunction of violation, metamorphosis and song.¹⁷

Howe's writing of this period approaches the theme of Ovidian metamorphosis through the lens of a late twentieth-century interest in issues of

¹¹ Robert Duncan, *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968), iv, 7.

¹² Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems*, ed. T. S. Eliot, revised edn (London: Faber, 1948; first published 1910), 31. ¹³ Ibid., 75 [1912]. ¹⁴ Ibid., 175; 180 [1920].

¹⁵ Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays* (London: Faber, 1954; first published 1917), 238n.

¹⁶ HD, *Collected Poems 1912–1944* (New York: New Directions, 1983), 47–55.

¹⁷ *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber, 1972; first published 1922), 25–51; II, 98–103; III, 203–6. See Charles Tomlinson, *Poetry and Metamorphosis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 152–62, especially 158ff for analysis of the Tereus–Philomela tale in the Cantos. See also Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, *The Metamorphic Tradition in Modern Poetry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955) and Sarah Annes Brown, *The Metamorphosis of Ovid from Chaucer to Ted Hughes* (Duckworth: London, 1999), Ch. 10. See also note 41 below on Howe's use of motifs from *The Waste Land*.

gender, power and poetic speech. She is commemorating a Pythagorean movement of “spirit” but she is also asking what happens to women during time of war. In her reading of Ovid both the feminine and the poetic, through the laurel tree, become an adornment – even an endorsement – of the martial ethos, the celebration of victors. Her poem asks at its outset how a contemporary American woman poet can speak a language that somehow resists this ethos. Howe’s mutation of Ovid at the beginning of her poem is a reorientation of an earlier text – a central text for Western poetry – that she causes both to hymn and to query the role of the poet. Howe seeks in this passage, and in the poem that follows, to explore the entanglement of the lyric poet in the wreckage of war – what she has called the “sadism” of recent history and the “fiery impossibility” of Vietnam.¹⁸ She hopes to find through poetry a language which will be neither consigned to silence nor coopted by an incipiently bellicose discourse.

MIMIC REPRESENTATION: DEATH, SHAKESPEARE AND LYRIC POETRY

Howe’s oblique engagement with Pythagoreanism in her poem-sequence is organized around the separation of body and soul.¹⁹ Her poem is particularly interested in the borderline – death – at which, conventionally, spirit is free of its carnal burden (even if, in the scheme of metempsychosis, momentarily). This is a violent, tensile space that becomes an analogue of the strangeness and volatility of poetic language. Death is also a borderline that her poetry transgresses in its pursuit, through the motif of metempsychosis, of the ways in which the present can harbour the elusive voices of the past. “In my poetry, time and again,” Howe has written, “questions of assigning *the cause* of history dictate the sound of what is thought.”²⁰

In *Pythagorean Silence* the line “mimic presentation stained with mortality” (PS 45) encapsulates the poem’s various treatments of the link between death and representation. Spirit is always shadowed by the impermanence of the tangible carnal world, which is present in “mortality.” Howe is writing here of embodied consciousness. The line “mimic presentation stained with

¹⁸ Susan Howe, *Frame Structures: Early Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1996), 28.

¹⁹ This may betray the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Chicago: Gateway, 1962), a key work for Howe, according to her letters to Hejinian (12 Feb. 1978, MSS 0074) and Taggart (7 Mar. 1982, MSS 0011). *Pythagorean Silence* contains many references to pre-Socratic thought.

²⁰ Susan Howe, *There are Not Leaves Enough to Crown to Cover to Crown to Cover*, in *The Europe of Trusts*, 9–14, 13.

mortality" binds the multiple representations of mental processes to the mortal body and the material world. It is as if, in the world of the poem, death is the condition of the enabling transformative motifs of metamorphosis and metempsychosis.

Prominent among the cited material in *Pythagorean Silence* are passages drawn from Shakespeare, notably *Hamlet*.²¹ Central to these are two references to Ophelia. Like Ovid's Daphne she is a virgin who undergoes a poetic metamorphosis – Gertrude's account of her death applies the metaphor "mermaid-like." This metamorphosis, again, has repercussions for poetic language. The first occurrence runs:

Their words are weeds wrapped around my head
Roses are withered – it grows rigidly dark
Body and Soul (PS 32)

The first of these lines adapts Gertrude's speech describing Ophelia's death (*Hamlet* IV, vii, cited below) and brings about an identification of Ophelia with one of the poem's speakers. The weeds around her head develop the image of Daphne and the "my hair be leaf" of the poem's epigraph. The meeting of martial and lyric duties symbolized by Daphne's laurels becomes Ophelia's "coronet" of "weeds" and her "weedy trophies," silent in death. The two women follow similar routes as they pass out of humanity and into silence. The "weeds," echoing "words," represent a deathly counterpart to the laurels of the victors. However, out of that silence comes another poetry that bears witness to the experience of the history's victims.

Attributed to Pythagoras was a system in which the world was held to be divided according to ten fundamental oppositions: right/left, male/female, straight/crooked, light/darkness, good/bad and so on. Howe has remarked that she is interested in the equation of femininity with darkness, yet her "Promethean aspiration [is] to be a Pythagorean and a woman."²² Howe's poem is at once aligned with the "dark," "feminine" aspect of the Pythagorean contraries and critical of the boundaries that safeguard questionable dualisms in this way. In this sense the Pythagorean "silence" represents an

²¹ See page 23, in which *Hamlet* I, iv is mined and in which, with "scatters flowers," Howe links an early speech by Polonius to Ophelia's flowers. See also 42–43, in which Hamlet's "crawling between earth and heaven" (III, i, 128) is refigured as "... How lust/(these were the ghost's words) crawls//between heaven and earth" in a sequence that meditates on death and insubstantiality in Shakespeare's play.

²² See Susan Howe and Tom Beckett, "The *Difficulties* interview," *The Difficulties*, 3, 2 (1989), 17–27, 18.

attempt to speak from the place of Ophelia or Daphne, a place which is not “rigidly dark.”²³

“Withered,” in these lines, may allude to the violets (held to represent faithfulness) that withered, in Ophelia’s words, when “my father died” (*Hamlet* IV, v: 182). But “Roses are withered” initiates another set of associations (besides the children’s rhyme): Laertes describes Ophelia as the “rose of May” (*Hamlet*, IV, v: 154) and Ophelia, in turn, offers him rosemary, “for remembrance” (*Hamlet*, IV, v: 173). *Ros marinus*, moreover, is the rose of the sea. So Ophelia’s drowning can be interpreted, in the light of these associations, as a passing of the insubstantial phenomenon of memory into the primal element of water.²⁴ “Rosemary” brings together “rose” and “may/Mary” and, as Philippa Berry notes, Ophelia’s flowers bring, though their May Day associations, a quality of pagan fecundity to her death.²⁵ Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s death lies behind these associations:

There on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
Clamb’ring to hang, an envious sliver broke;
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element; but long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.²⁶

For a transitory moment, as she passes into death, Ophelia almost metamorphoses into a siren or a creature “native” to the water.²⁷ In the moment of transition there is a redemptive transformation but she inevitably subsides into the mud. Ophelia’s loss of her “coronet” (for Berry a “metaphorical defloration”)²⁸ and the clothes that are “spread wide” strengthen the force of the fertility associations and allow the motif of childbirth to run against that of the passage from life to death. Ophelia sings old songs as she drowns

²³ ‘Pythagorean silence’ also refers to the ascetic discipline of the Pythagorean initiates, who were supposed to take a vow of silence.

²⁴ Philippa Berry, in *Shakespeare’s Feminine Endings: Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies* (London: Routledge, 1999), 71, makes the *Ros marinus* suggestion.

²⁵ Ibid: 27, 71.

²⁶ *Hamlet* IV, vii, 173–84.

²⁷ Berry, 27, notes the sexual connotations of “mermaid,” a term applied to prostitutes in Shakespeare’s time.

²⁸ Ibid.

and, in alluding to this speech, Howe may here be drawing an implicit parallel with her own selection from older texts. Moreover, as her "lays" are also "lauds" (and hence religious), there is a mingling of the Christian and the secular that corresponds to the Mary/May combination suggested by "weeds." Ophelia's "fantastic garlands" offer a momentary recovery of Daphne's laurels: the poet enters a revised civic role. In the figure of Ophelia, then, Howe is imagining the glancing effect of words exhumed from silence. She is identifying with a death-bound mermaid caught at the point of metamorphosis who offers a brief opportunity to recover the lyric potential of poetry.

The metaphysical ambition of Howe's allusion, moreover, is heavily underlined in her text with the words "Body and Soul." Later in the poem the line "I lay down and conceived" (*PS* 44) resonates with the associations of fertility around Ophelia's death but Howe is also suggesting that the "lay" that precedes "muddy death" is a resurrection-before-the-fact, a metamorphosis in which "spirit" emerges in song. In Ophelia's death Howe focusses on this transitional moment of metamorphosis itself, the bridge between living and inert matter. In both Ophelia and Daphne she associates this bridging point between Being and non-Being with the potential for poetic speech. When Howe in her preface to *The Europe of Trusts* asserts her wish to "tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate" she is organizing a lyric poetry of history around this transaction between the dead and the living.²⁹

At the end of the final section of *Pythagorean Silence*, fifty pages on, Ophelia makes another appearance: "weeds shiver and my clothes spread wide" are the last words of the poem (*PS* 84). Again the identification is direct, with Gertrude's "her clothes" becoming "my clothes." The weeds which she wished to hang on the "pendent boughs" are placed alongside "shiver", a pun on the "envious sliver" that broke beneath her weight. With "shiver" the cold weather that is the poem's background climate is finally linked to the coldness of the grave, a point at which the words/weeds (*PS* 32) break apart. In her letter to Taggart, Howe asserts that Daphne can divert herself from the ambitions that Apollo has for her, and here too she finds a redemptive moment in Ophelia's death.

The broken mode of utterance that "shiver" implies shatters the narcissistic suspension offered by Shakespeare's "glassy stream" and echoes the earlier line "pantheon of history shivered into/ruin" (*PS* 61–62). Narcissus's perception of a singular self is destroyed as he metamorphoses into a flower,

²⁹ Howe, *There are not Leaves Enough to Crown to Cover*, 14.

while Ophelia's flower-strewn lay both beckons the fantastic, imaged in the mermaid, and shivers her siren song into the historically layered polyphony of Howe's poetry.

DEFENESTRATION OF PRAGUE: DOUBLES AND MASQUES

This "shivering" of representation can be approached in a different way through the question of perspective in Howe's poetry. *Defenestration of Prague* roots itself in an exploration of ideas of representation in the Renaissance imagination, seeking to think questions of power and literary form alongside one another. While Shakespearean material is present in the poem, *Defenestration of Prague* is less concerned with tragedy than *Pythagorean Silence*. Instead comedy, the masque and pastoral are its modes. It has an interest in lightness and surfaces that is unusual in Howe's writing of this period. Howe focusses in particular on Spenser and, rather less visibly, the work of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones in the masque tradition.

In interview Howe acknowledges Spenser to be the seed for *Defenestration of Prague*: "Edmund Spenser led me by a very long and crooked route to the actual defenestration in Prague ...".³⁰ Howe is referring to an incident in 1618, when Bohemian Protestants tossed two Catholic councillors and their secretary out of a window, thus precipitating the Thirty Years War. (Most of the nations of Europe, both Protestant and Catholic, became embroiled in the conflict.) There are, as far as I can discover, no direct references in the poem to the defenestration. However, at the fringes of Howe's text is a similar questioning of the role of the poet to that which is explored through Daphne and Ophelia in *Pythagorean Silence*.

Howe's engagement with her sources asks questions of the implication for Spenser's poetry of his involvement in the "planting" of Ireland – fragments from Spenser's 1596 tract *A View of the Present State of Ireland* find their way into *Defenestration of Prague*.³¹ Behind the text lurks a preoccupation with the doubled identity of the landowning class that was to become known as the "Anglo-Irish" and which would preside over the period of "Protestant Ascendancy." Howe's mother was Anglo-Irish and her father American, and Howe herself has spoken of the "civil war of the soul" that has guided her

³⁰ Howe and Beckett, 24.

³¹ See DP 93–94 and Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1633), ed. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997). The *View*, begun three years before Spenser's death, argues that a strong hand should be used against those in this "most barbarous Nation in Christendome" who opposed English rule, 172.

writing.³² In *Defenestration of Prague* such ideas of doubling and identity are obliquely addressed at a level that is far removed from the personal. Spenser's female character Florimell, for example, is taken up in Howe's poem, which refers both to her and to her double in *The Faerie Queene* (a witch creates a counterfeit Florimell). Moreover, play with masks, masques and deceptive appearances occurs throughout *Defenestration of Prague*.

In her treatment of *The Faerie Queene*, rather than subjecting Spenser's poem to a reading that would simply brandish evidence of a latent barbarism, Howe finds instead a kind of freedom in its ability to construct an imaginary pastoral world. In interview she has said,

In Spenser's allegory, symbolic things become real and reality melts into sound outsensory distance. This poem of the Mind is a pastoral *free* place. In Book II, Canto VIII, the author, *who is also an invader*, asks: "And is there care in heaven? And is there love?"³³

Although the mutual implication of culture and colonialism is a key theme for Howe,³⁴ her reading of *The Faerie Queene* appears more responsive to the role of artifice in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture. The blurring of the line between real and ideal orders is a central theme of *Defenestration of Prague*. Questions of authority and of moral probity coded as English are everywhere in Spenser, but the degree to which the rhetoric of colonial adventure denudes Spenser's poem of its poetic integrity remains a subsidiary concern for Howe. Instead, *Defenestration of Prague* revolves around figures of insubstantiality and elusiveness and probes territory in which an event and its representation have become indistinguishable.³⁵ The most prominent representative of the evasive "mystery" of Howe's conception of poetry is Florimell, a beauty whose chastity is continually threatened in Spenser's poem.

There are several parallels to be drawn between the presence of Florimell in *Defenestration of Prague* and the treatment of Daphne and Ophelia in *Pythagorean Silence*. All of the women are pursued by amorous males. As with the two virginal women of *Pythagorean Silence*, Florimell's chastity is central to her literary identity. Like Ophelia, and Daphne (daughter of the river god Peneus), Florimell is associated with water: she is held in an undersea dungeon by Proteus and she is linked by Spenser to "Venus of the fomy

³² Janet Ruth Falon, "Speaking with Susan Howe," *The Difficulties*, 3, 2 (1989), 28–42; 37.

³³ Howe and Beckett, 25 (Howe's emphasis).

³⁴ See also the epigraph, from Dr. Johnson, of Howe's *Cabbage Gardens*, in *Frame Structures*, 74, and the preface to her *Thorow*, in *Singularities* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1990), 41–42.

³⁵ See also Howe's treatment in *Eikon Basilike*, collected in *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (New York: New Directions, 1993), of the execution of Charles I as theatre.

sea.”³⁶ Florimell’s flight is, moreover, at one point directly compared to that of Ovid’s Daphne.³⁷

Reading outwards from these associations, the unattainable object of Petrarch’s affections, Laura, was often compared to Daphne. Howe is exploring a conventional mode of figuring the feminine in order to ask what happens when a woman becomes the speaker and not the addressee of lyric poetry. If past “poet-invaders” such as Spenser and Raleigh mapped “virgin” land, how might Howe’s “poetry unsettled by history” both preserve and interrogate that tradition?³⁸ The poem probes the connections that fascinate Howe in Spenser and Raleigh – the traffic, that is, between what Howe in interview describes as “allegory, iconoclasm, colonization, punning, and an idea of the feminine.”³⁹ Through Raleigh, Howe finds in her investigation of literary history a point of connection to the colonial experience in America – a theme she would explore more thoroughly in *Articulations of Sound Forms in Time* (1987) and *Thorow* (1990).⁴⁰ As a poet immersed in that tradition she is to an extent implicated in the colonial adventure – an irony that contributes to the obliquity of the poetry.

In the poem Florimell represents an “idea of the feminine.” Howe appears to find a resistance to translation in the character that is analogous to her poem’s pursuit of meaning – a pursuit that is both playful and troubled. On each of the three occasions that the elusive Florimell appears in Howe’s poem, it is in the context of the difficulties of mimesis: “Florimell flees away into the forest//Hide her there/an illusion (fiction)” (*DP* 107), or “Florimell embarks blindly/(being lost)//to interpret the world” (*DP* 109), and “Florimell and her false double/True and false beauty” (*DP* 135).

In these lines Spenser’s character is lost both to herself and to her pursuers. At one level Howe is dramatizing the figure of femininity in lyric poetry, with its Petrarchan narrative of pursuit and endlessly deferred possession. At another she is communicating a broader difficulty about separating world and representation. Can Florimell and her “false double” be distinguished? Through the allegorical figure Howe allows the poem to dissolve into a play of fictive worlds. The aspiration to distinguish between “True and false beauty” gives way as “Words and meaning meet in//feigning” (*DP* 107). Howe’s poem understands falsehood to be a condition of mimesis. Its response to this is to revel in the dreamlike forest scenes it establishes. Yet,

³⁶ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596), in *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (Oxford: 1970), IV, xii, 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, III, vii, 26.

³⁸ Howe and Beckett, 25–26.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁰ Both poems are collected in *Singularities*.

despite the lightness of the text's meditation on appearances, there is an accompanying anxiety about the points at which poetry and the world appear to be at odds, when the assertion of colonial power meets its literary expression. These include the dissonance between Spenser's appreciation of the natural beauty of Ireland and the stylized pastoral of his poem, and that between Lord Grey – the despotic Lord Deputy of Ireland, under whom Spenser served – and Artega, the *Faerie Queene's* representative of justice. While the accent is on fantasy, beneath the play of fictive worlds the text knows itself to repress a violent Real.

The stage for Howe's investigations – as in much of *Pythagorean Silence* – is the forest. While numerous literary antecedents of the woods of Howe's "sylvan/imagery" (DP 89) in *Defenestration of Prague* might be adduced, Howe mainly draws on *The Faerie Queene*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and, again, the "wild wood" of Milton's *Comus: A Masque*.⁴¹

As a girl Howe took part in stagings organized by her mother of *Comus* and of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, both of which, she has said, left a powerful linguistic imprint.⁴² (In *Comus* she was a wood-nymph, or hamadryad, aged four – hamadryads, incidentally, are supposed to live and die with the trees they inhabit). In *Defenestration of Prague* – as with Daphne's flight into the woods in *Pythagorean Silence* – the obscurities of the forest prepare a consideration of the functions of lyric:

...
 Benevolent woods and glades
 hamadryads
 plots and old-plays
 A fictive realm
 Words and meaning meet in
 feigning
 without a text and running from
 true-seeming
 Florimell flees away into the forest

⁴¹ Howe may also have *The Waste Land's* "sylvan scene" (II, 98) in mind (the phrase derives, in turn, from *Paradise Lost*). Indeed, there are several parallels between *The Waste Land* and Howe's writing in *Defenestration of Prague* and *Pythagorean Silence*. Eliot's poem also contains reference to Tristan and Isolde (I, 31) (see DP 99–100), Ophelia's farewell (II, 170–71) and overhanging boughs (III, 172–73), and to Psalm 137 (III, 182) (cf. PS 44).

⁴² See Susan Howe and Cole Swenson, "A Dialogue: Susan Howe and Cole Swenson," *Conjunctions*, 35 (2000), 374–87, 376.

Hide her there
 an illusion (fiction)
 Beauty of the world
 becoming part of the forest

...

(DP 107)

The forest is a place where a drama of representation is staged. The work of mimesis – here at once “feigning” but evading “true-seeming” – is made complicated with the ceaseless flight of Florimell into the forest. The forest becomes a space for the continual creation and unmaking of fictions. Yet verisimilitude – “true-seeming” – is not the goal. The fictive Florimell, hidden in the forest, is as much a fake as her false double. The original object of representation is simply not accessible. Mimesis, in this sequence, is a process of staging – or coming into being – that is never fully achieved. Instead, like the radically curtailed portions of language in Howe’s poetry, it is a venture that is aware of its own artifice and can only communicate through the gradual, processual accumulation of small utterances. When Florimell becomes “part of the forest” it is as if she is almost lost to representation. She is accessible only to a form of expression that could rival the insubstantial shadowplay of the forest – for which we might understand Howe’s own writing.

Defenestration of Prague engages in another important way with this play of fictive worlds. In this case a complex of ideas concerning words and pictorial representation is approached, albeit in a very oblique manner, through the Jacobean masque. In a 1983 letter Howe wrote, somewhat elliptically, to Charles Bernstein on this theme: “*Defenestration of Prague* is very much involved with Masque tradition – and perspective of such – Inigo Jones vs Ben Jonson – artificer/architext vs writer. The eyepoint centred on Royalty etc. The political implications.”⁴³ *Defenestration of Prague* is ambivalent about the courtly masque: enthralled by its capacity to stage the fabulous (which becomes an analogy for a hallucinatory understanding of the act of reading) but troubled by the spectacle’s endorsement of the ideology of Divine Right. The many voices of Howe’s poem are a means of substituting a multiperspectival model of viewpoint for the single monarchical sight-line encouraged, as we will see, by the masque.

The front and back covers of the original edition of *Defenestration of Prague* are devoted to a sketch by Inigo Jones entitled “Cloud Containing Divine

⁴³ Letter of 17 March 1983 (MSS 0519).

Poesy," part of his design for *Temple of Love: The Queene's Shrovetide Masque*, which was performed on 10 February 1635.⁴⁴ In the masque the visual spectacle, the words and the music were of roughly equal importance.⁴⁵ As with Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, the "characters" of masques were typically allegorical personifications – "Virtue," "Pleasure" and so on. Moreover, in the Jonsonian form, the masques incorporated grotesque or comic "anti-masques," designed to contrast the behaviour of the lower orders with that of the aristocrats whose virtues were hymned in the texts. The masques, then, were victory celebrations in which nobility and order invariably triumphed over baseness and wildness.⁴⁶

Inigo Jones discovered perspective sets in Italy and he used the innovation for the extraordinarily lavish spectacles he staged for James's court.⁴⁷ These made use of complicated "machinery," scenery and lighting effects.⁴⁸ However, to the Renaissance eye, the idea of conveying spatial depth through flat pieces of board and converging lines was new. The effect of perspective, moreover, would be most apparent to those in the best seats, and most of all to the king, who would be placed in the seat which offered the best view of the new sets. Howe's reference to "eyepoint" in her letter to Bernstein suggests that she follows Renaissance scholar Stephen Orgel's argument that representation in the art of the masque is designed to reflect back to those in power a world in which their dominance is entire and, indeed, part of the order of things. Orgel writes,

They [i.e. the sets] were employed only at court or when royalty was present; they were not used in the public or private playhouses. ... Jones's stage subtly changed the character of both plays and masques by transforming *audiences* into *spectators*, fixing the viewer and directing the theatrical experience toward the single point in the hall from which the perspective achieved its fullest effect, the royal throne. ... Through the use of perspective, the monarch, always the ethical centre of

⁴⁴ *Defenestration of Prague* (New York: Kulchur Foundation, 1983). This particular masque was, of course, a post-Jacobean one.

⁴⁵ See Howe's letter to Taggart of 13 Nov. 1981, in which she writes of "a sort of holy trinity of music/word/object" (MSS 0011).

⁴⁶ See Robert M Adams, "The Staging of Jonson's Plays and Masques," in his edition of *Ben Jonson's Plays and Masques* (New York: Norton, 1979), 311–17, 315. Masks, too, are important to the poem, which, in its final section, alludes to the mumming play: "Fairs held on hilltops/(mummer and strawboy)" (145). The mumming play was a popular form in which the participants wore masks and which carried an anti-English political charge in Ireland.

⁴⁷ The cover of Howe's *The Secret History of the Dividing Line* (Somerville, MA: Telephone Books, 1978) contains an illustration from an eighteenth-century book on perspective.

⁴⁸ The one-off ritual was followed by the destruction of the entire apparatus, lending each event the character of potlatch.

court productions, became in a physical and emblematic way the centre as well. Jones's theatre transformed its audience into a living and visible emblem of the aristocratic hierarchy: the closer one sat to the King, the "better" one's place was, and only the King's seat was perfect. It is no accident that perspective stages flourished at court and only at court, and that their appearance there coincided with the reappearance in England of the Divine Right of Kings as a serious political philosophy.⁴⁹

If *The Faerie Queene* is a highly aestheticized celebration of order, virtue and Elizabethan Protestantism, the Jonsonian masque seeks to effect an analogous eulogy to the prevailing social hierarchy with its material staging of the miraculous. Howe's poem sets out, on the one hand, to unpick the organization of space that constructs the official viewpoint and, on the other, to exploit the mystificatory manoeuvres that endow the king with divine authority. At the level of the artwork Howe posits a convergence between the iconoclastic "wild interiority" of language and the sense of wonder that pervades the Jonson–Jones aesthetic. As with her later work *Eikon Basilike* it is not possible to read her poem as straightforward iconoclasm – it is too much in sympathy with the masque's investment in awe. The poem rather seeks to investigate the hallucinatory aspect of literary experience and to decouple this from its authoritarian trappings in the texts she is exploring.

Defenestration of Prague, then, with its affirmation of lightness and revelry, is in partial accord with the mood of the masque. However, Howe's poem does not echo the plotting or style of Jonson's masques. Rather, it mimics the atmosphere of stylized and confected performance and often returns to a vocabulary of ephemerality. In Jonson's masque *Oberon*, for example, there is a fairy palace with transparent walls. The combination of insubstantiality, extraordinary staging and the mirroring of earthly authority is revealed in the following stage direction:

*There the whole palace opened, and the nation of Fays were discovered, some with instruments, some bearing lights, others singing; and within, afar off in perspective, the knights masquers sitting in their several seiges. ...*⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Stephen Orgel, "The Poetics of the Spectacle," in Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong, eds., *Inigo Jones: The Theatre of the Stuart Court*, Vol. 1 (Berkeley and London: Sotheby Parke Bernet/University of California Press, 1973) 1–14; 7; Orgel's emphasis.

⁵⁰ Ben Jonson, *Oberon* (1611), in *Ben Jonson's Plays and Masques*, ed. Robert M. Adams (New York: Norton, 1979), 350.

This spectacle is followed by a song:

Melt earth to sea, sea flow to air,
 And air fly into fire,
 Whilst we in tunes to Arthur's chair
 Bear Oberon's desire;
 Than which there can be nothing higher,
 Save JAMES, to whom it flies:
 But he the wonder is of tongues, of ears, of eyes.⁵¹

Jonson, then, in cahoots with Jones (who staged this masque), is presenting the audience with a spectacle of "wonder" that reflects back to the court its own glamour. However, this is presented in the language of the immaterial and the melting of elements into one another. In Howe's poem there is a tendency to take up this emphasis on insubstantiality and to use it as a weapon against the singleness of kingly perspective. Howe assents to the ephemerality of the spectacle but puts this in the service of a kind of imaginative disobedience.

This engagement with the airiness of masque – and the perilous pleasures of its narcissism – can be seen at many points in *Defenestration of Prague*. Howe writes, for example, lines such as "figural shadowing of invisible" (DP 103), "Fantasticality/nimble phantasma capering on a page//with antic gesture" (DP 110), "Worlds pass mirror-worlds in shelter" (DP 118) and "Revolution repetition Doubling//Self around self/mimicking and lengthening//Layer after layer/Mirror characters pursue each other" (DP 127).

The hallucinatory masque space Howe sketches in *Defenestration of Prague* is an environment in which the traffic between ideal and real is sufficient to blur the distinction between the two. The attention given to the question of presence finds an analogue in the vestigial nature of the actors. This nexus of ideas around insubstantiality and unstable identity in the poem is most evident in the lines "evanishing of the actors into//one another" (DP 108) and "Players melt into one another" (DP 136). The lines echo the aftermath of the masque scene in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (IV, i, 148–50):

Our revels are now ended. These our actors,
 As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
 Are melted into air, into thin air.⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid., 350–51.

⁵² In these lines, as both the Orgel (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) and the Kermode (Methuen: London, 1954) editions of *The Tempest* note, Shakespeare is extending a figure that derives from Latin poetry and from Job 20:6–8. Orgel (180–81) observes that Prospero's phrase "insubstantial pageant" is comparable to Jonson's statements on the ephemerality of the masque and, furthermore, that his reference to "towers" and "gorgeous palaces" recall the fabulous settings of the courtly masques themselves.

This quality of being on the point of dissolution is pervasive in *Defenestration of Prague*. The fairy-like actors and “sylvan” setting of the poem are a means of invoking a version of Renaissance pastoral: the forest as a magical space in which the rules of court and city are suspended.⁵³ Standing as a figure for contemporary poetry, this environment makes of the page a site of refuge from more transparent language use, a place in which meanings appear and disappear in much the same manner as the “evanishing actors” of the masque. At numerous points the poem deploys language that resists any interpretation other than a staging of this ephemerality. Howe appropriates the masque’s capacity for staging the fantastic but allows the highly associative dream-logic she instantiates to dismantle the sovereignty of perspective that would be the prerogative of the king – or his proxies, author and reader.

While Inigo Jones’s importation of perspective is in part seen as a device through which depth of field was put in the service of a self-confirming quasi-religious ritual of sovereignty, Howe’s shifts in the poem reaffirm the subsequent democratization of perspective in theatrical representation. When Howe writes, for example, such opaque lines as “Fable over the mountain//abash negation/gnashing pattern of alliteration” (*DP* 122), she renounces, with forceful lyrical diction, any singleness of viewpoint – neither writer nor reader can lay any definitive interpretative claim to such sequences.

In the “benevolent” pastoral setting of *Defenestration of Prague*, poetic language is given an evanescent, sportive quality that is quite different from the more threatening American forests of *Thoreau* or *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*. Yet all of this 1980s writing shows a complicated awareness of the formal and ethical problems facing a woman poet writing in the American context. Howe is a New England poet, with all the baggage that that entails, and she often returns to the themes of social authority and colonization.

The masque was a kind of staging or realization of fantasy, its fabulous metamorphoses conjoining real and ideal. Howe’s evocation of a hallucinatory forest is an attempt to stage the fabulous through the formal means available to the late twentieth-century poet. While the multiple viewpoints of Howe’s poetics suggest a critique of the way that the masque served to authenticate divinely ordained kingship through the exercise of monarchical perspective, the desire to produce a state of irrational transport is susceptible to the lure of that very mystification of authority. What is valuable about Howe’s poetry

⁵³ Cf. *As you Like It*: “Are not these woods/More free from peril than the envious court?” (II, i, 3–4).

is the ability to sustain just such a complicated relation to authority. The gendered identifications of *Pythagorean Silence* are similarly hard to pin down, as Howe seeks to rethink the figures of Daphne and Ophelia. From their metamorphoses Howe seeks to express a predicament that embraces both a marginalized feminine speech and a marginalized poetic speech. Howe's act of resistance, however, risks folding in on itself and becoming a valorization of a silenced-ness that remains, in the end, silenced.

Her answer to these dilemmas could find no other expression than through the disjunctions of her poetry: it is a struggle between muteness, on the one hand, and authority, on the other, which is generative in the extreme. Her use of motifs from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is similarly double-edged: it binds her to the literary mainstream in a way that is different from her peers among the language generation. It is true, certainly, that she reinflects such works in her own poems. But her *détournement* of these texts does not amount to a wish to reject some sort of overbearing and hegemonic canon; it is a far more ambivalent engagement that insists on close re-reading of Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton and the Bible – texts which are no longer forcefully inscribed in cultural memory. Howe poems splinter these works as her “words” and “weeds” “shiver,” and she seeks to find a means of approaching the “enigma of Power.”