



THE AMERICAN TRACT

Susan Howe. *Souls of the Labadie Tract*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp. 2007.

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Some of the greatest poetry in the English language has been written in the United States in the past fifty years. A salient feature of this extremely various poetry is a density of presence that cannot be satisfied with any existing assumption about individual or collective consciousness, or the way in which consciousness receives the world or the world is composed. Such a phenomenology is highly sceptical, but regards the poem, as painters contemporary with the New York School regarded the canvas, as an exemplary site for securing the plenitude of presence, even if its securing will always demand further acts of revision, further critique, further wagers. Such art is constitutive presence, a thick here and now alert to conditions on its borders. This achievement makes it all the sadder that new American poetry can exhibit a relatively uncritical relationship with a past it retrieves continuously, so as to refresh a mystic connection with a land belonging to others (that is, native Americans) until the recent past. It is sad that an admittedly ever-deferred transfiguring can be held to overcome and by implication to justify such appropriations, redeeming history and catching up the indigenous and colonising, the oppressor and oppressed in a utopian or heavenly community. This American project can be articulated openly as the basis for ambitious poetry, even now, for example in the work of Susan Howe.

Susan Howe is a poet whose writing is revered for its spareness, its scholarship, its implicit feminist politics, and its exploration of what it is to be American. It draws for its prime example on Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*, an epic of migration and American colonisation making much use of documentary materials, a debt which Susan Howe generously affirms. Her book-length projects of reading and recovery, starting with *My Emily Dickinson*, substitute for Olson's vitalism an attachment to the tradition of American transcendentalism. She writes in the 'Personal Narrative' introducing her recent book *Souls of the Labadie Tract*:

If I were to read aloud a passage from a poem of your choice, to an audience of judges in sympathy with surrounding library nature, and they were to experience its lexical inscape as an offshoot of Anglo-American modernism in typographical format, it might be possible to release our great great grandparents, beginning at the greatest distance from a common mouth, eternally belated,



some coming home through dark ages, others nearer to early modern, multitudes of them meeting first to constitute certain main branches of etymologies, so all along there are new sources, some running directly contrary to others, and yet all meet at last, clothed in robes of glory, offering maps of languages, some with shining tones.

Nothing like this could have been written by a European. The carefully contrived term ‘library nature’ is designed to evoke Thoreau, and advertises the library, an English-language library, as a wild place, a place of thickets where the attentive citizen can hear the calls of destiny. Using theological language, Howe envisages a text where “all meet at last.” True she acknowledges the millennial “common mouth” will be “eternally belated,” but she stacks the odds in favour of a “common mouth” coming to pass, by positing “an audience of judges” as the present occasion for then slipping into a use of “our” which can anticipate the “all” of “all meet at last.”

This ‘Personal Narrative’ was originally a talk to the MLA Conference, the professional body for American teachers of literature; how did they react to being cast as saints, elected to lead an English-speaking procession to the Promised Land, or at least, the Promised Text?

Imminent transcendence and aching postponement, erasure and re-framing characterise Susan Howe’s poetry, and have been accommodated by her readers to theories of the lyric horizon, and to the belatedness and postponement of meaning in lyric poetry. Her poems have been lent to discussion of authorship and origination, with the status of found texts as poems animated by their position within a sequence and on the page. These matters are of course central to contemporary poetic theory. But the neat little poems of the titular sequence ‘Souls of the Labadie Tract’, six to eight lines each, two to five syllables, remind us that ‘Tract’ begins as a literary term, becomes a scriptural term, then becomes confused with ‘trace’ and ‘track’, the words being used interchangeably, before meaning an extent of territory; all these meanings are at play in Howe’s title and poetic sequence. So this one word traces a movement from the library to the “shining tones” of the scriptural tract, to the almost vanished traces of the Labadist Christian sect, to the territory they occupied—a name and space on the map released by this poetry from an antiquarian interest, and transformed into pure potential.

Although the Labadist sect was more exclusive than the MLA, its tract leads to the same destination, as the last three poems in Howe’s sequence disclose:



Longing and envying rest
after a little—garden under
trees but better still likely

to be still more anxious to
get to just daylight all I've
always pushed backward

That's the "Labadie Poplar"
Labadists—New Bohemia
little is otherwise known
Our secret and resolute woe
Carolled to our last adieu
Our message was electric

Will you forget when I forget
that we are come to that

"America in a skin coat
the color of the juice of
mulberries" her fantastic

cap full of eyes will lead
our way as mind or ears
Goodnight goodnight

As published these poems are surrounded by an enormous quantity of white space holding at bay the library from which their words are extracted so as to enter the space of revived meaning. And 'space is God', Howe asserts in the book's concluding text, 'Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards'—a very nineteenth century sentiment. Extracting words releases them from the textual ground where they have been buried, so they become those ghostly but sainted ancestors whose muttered intimations "get to just daylight." The ancestral words of the Labadists are aligned with the ancestral words of Emerson and Thoreau, the ancestral forms of Emily Dickinson, summoned at once by the appearance of these tiny poems on the page with their dashes, the diction of Walt Whitman in the odd use of the word "electric," and the textual authority of Anglo-American mod-



ernism, especially Louis Zukofsky and at the end T.S. Eliot. With all that historical text at work, the ‘Souls of the Labadie Tract’ themselves occupy the surrounding white space as myth, as invention. The souls are ghostly footfalls. Howe has solicited their myth early in the sequence: “Authorize me and I act | what I am I must remain | only suffer me to tell it.” This formula, poised against the white of pure potential, conforms exactly to the formula for American ethnic, gender, or victimised identity. It is also the formula for God’s work, whereby the community or the conference is transfigured into the band of saints, and anyone is already a part, so long as God will “only suffer me to tell it,” to tell “all I’ve | always pushed backward.”

The “fantastic | | cap” in the last poem of ‘Souls of the Labadie Tract’ combines “Greenest green your holy cope” from an earlier poem, with a forest, a library and a priest’s dress, “a skin coate of grasse greene,” from a later poem, and belongs to a weft of short ‘a’ sounds running through the sequence—the mulberries cited in the last poem converted into the silk threads of text or textile. This all leads to America’s “cap full of eyes,” like a cap full of a magic draft or drug, and like millions of Americans under their baseball caps, their logos asserting their identity, their “I.” The goodnight into which these poems fade is the white page, the transcendent text.

This particular poetic practice, then, is nothing like so theoretical as it’s often held to be. Although it parades its linguistic construction, the language doesn’t do much heavy lifting; it falls into line with American literary, social, religious and political life—at its most high-minded, at its most admirable. But isn’t there something strangely immaterial about all this, despite its obsession with materials? There’s a strong feeling for a formative past, but a past consisting of ghosts wandering about a wilderness. Howe’s poems do include the traces of native Americans, but lightly registered in the language of settlers. The text present to the reader is a wispy text, needing to call on a radiant future to invest wispiness with powerful significance, visibly and audibly. One tactic these poems use is mirroring, where poems opposite each other on the page are visually similar and often chime, rhyme and echo, as though they would defeat time and achieve a synchronic compact between the poem and the often archaic language whose reorganisation produces the poem; this happens particularly at the mid-point of the sequence. Mirroring is complemented by a diachronic and extensive distribution through the sequence, whereby brief phrases recur with variation as though revenants, or like genetic code. Interest gathers round such relationships because there is little local satisfaction to be gained and no line of thought to be pursued from verse line to line when versification feels so arbitrary—blocks of verse are assembled regardless of metrics. The prosody

does not lead the voice; rather, the voice has to invest the verse with sonic significance through a determined strategy, a mutter, a whisper, or an exaggerated slow savouring. Line-breaks have no sonic or semantic rationale except by accident—so the words “break” and “forget” might have been important choices at line-ends, but not so much where other end-words are insignificant, and where no particular accent falls on them other than what a reader must impart. Coding resistance to the voice in verse might bring advantages, for instance through disengaging language from individual expression, but here the sparse tract declares its recovery from the past and orientation to the future with a stilted deliberation. When each word goes exactly here but here is of no special account, the reader is left to impart life.

These tactics mean that the present of the poem is insubstantial, and has power only insofar as it echoes what has been written previously. The poems assert their dependence on prior text, not only the hitherto occluded text which has been ferreted out in the research library, but prior poetic texts. Among the poetic lineage *Souls of the Labadie Tract* summons, are the textual ghosts of the Elizabethan English songwriter and prosodic theorist Thomas Campion and of Emily Dickinson. One reason I call these textual ghosts is that they are inaudible. Given that Campion has often, and not least by Ezra Pound, been admired as a master of poetic sound, of clear yet intricate song; and given that Emily Dickinson’s poems are notable for a heavily-stressed metric derived from the hymnal, the presence of these poets seems perversely disembodied. In Dickinson’s case the haunting is betrayed by dashes and the visual appearance of Susan Howe’s stanzas, and in Campion’s by his name and by tiny fragments of Elizabethan English. In neither case are the poet’s cadences discernible. This must surely represent a choice by Howe, and one consistent with her describing the earth, in a borrowed phrase, as “a mantle painted full of trees.” Howe explains such a choice in ‘Personal Narrative’: “I wanted jerky and tedious details to oratorically bloom and bear fruit as if they had been set at liberty or ransomed by angels.” But in ‘Souls of the Labadie Tract’ she takes the further step of pulverising prior poetic discourse into “jerky and tedious details” as though to mark their gathering into a physical presence as illegitimate, in the same spirit as those sectarians for whom any indulgence of the senses is a satanic diversion, when all should be preparing to join the shining choir.

Hence the paradox that a discriminating, tightly focused attention to the material text, which in much of Howe’s writing entails reproducing variously aged, distorted, torn and fragmented printed remnants, tends towards a poetry which is remarkably etiolated. Here is the incessant deferral of closure co-existing with a millennial conviction, and in these poems, as



Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “each existence appears in more ensembles, masses, tissues or complexes than one perceives at first, and each one is also infinitely more detached from such, and detached from itself” (“Cosmo Base-lius,” *Being Singular Plural*, 186). But at the horizon these existences and ensembles must be reconciled in the “just daylight,” ever-deferred.

Such a reconciliation is performed indifferently, flattening its materials and desiccating them like pressed leaves. The centrally positioned text of *Souls of the Labadie Tract* is titled ‘118 Westerly Terrace,’ Wallace Stevens’ home address. That Wallace Stevens had an address might be something of a shock to tender sensibilities; but more problematic is the suppression of Stevens’ epistemological restlessness in favour of *settlement*. At all times the address is fixed:

because beauty is what *is*

What is said what this

it—it in itself insistent is

The auditory and visual play of the final line here is welcome, but its artifice designs to settle matters, affixing them more tightly in a consonance of assertion and poetic contrivance that restricts movement. Indeed, in this extensive although sparsely-scored sequence, there is scarcely a phrase which is not an assertion. These are not the fragments opening to interpretation so much beloved of contemporary poetic theorists; they are presented as gospel evidence. Neither is this the sequence that sets in play a dozen obliquities or launches a dialectical spiral; it is a part-work sermon. For all the calm and radiance characteristic of the born-again, there is discernible a passive aggression here in so extreme a traducing of Wallace Stevens, Howe’s each step placed so carefully in her own footprints, almost falling over in the effort to go nowhere.

Throughout this book the anachronism of Howe’s poetry is troubling. During the last half-century, the texture of life has changed profoundly. It has become a cliché to talk of the change from a modern to a postmodern world, and leaving aside the intricate debates on postmodernism within the arts, this change has been characterised as the end of grand narratives and the development of a new form of experience where time and space are radically conflated. The term ‘postmodernism’ has tended to merge with the technology of digitalised information and its exchange.

It seemed for many who thought about this change that infinite access had become possible; so a peasant in the Sudan equipped with a satellite





dish and a cheap computer could communicate easily with a New York banker and on conditions of theoretical equality. There was some wild joyfulness in the postmodern turn, a kind of hedonism, and a real democratic impulse, a belief that an information commons had arrived, which would rattle political and economic hierarchies. What you can do with information tends however to show not that information is power but that power can use information to create greater value and to sequester it. Susan Howe's poetry is extremely intelligent within the limits of its conception of limitlessness—but it falls short of the poetry needed now, and its strengths have become its liabilities. Alas, robes of glory do not await any of us, and we can but imagine the best clothes for our continued life together, out of the immeasurable complexity that presses in. The exhibition of a wedding dress fragment will not do—"fragile serenity" will butter no parsnips. Something more motley would be becoming, something more critical, something far from reverential.