

Marjorie Perloff on: "Hope Atherton's Wanderings"

Flocks roost before dark Coveys nestle and settle

Meditation of a world's vast Memory

Predominance pitched across history Collision or collusion with history

--Howe, Articulations

The two words are identical except for a single letter: according to the OED, collision means "1. The action of colliding or forcibly striking or dashing together; violent encounter of a moving body with another. 2a. The coming together of sounds with harsh effect. 3.fig. Encounter of opposed ideas, interests, etc. clashing, hostile encounter." Whereas collusion means "Secret agreement or understanding for purposes of trickery or fraud; underhand scheming or working with another; deceit, fraud, trickery."

What a difference a phoneme makes! One's collision with history may be accidental, an encounter of opposed ideas neither planned nor anticipated. One's collusion, on the other hand, is by definition premeditated. Attentiveness to such difference (/i/ versus /uw/) has always distinguished Susan Howe's "history poems" from those of her contemporaries. . . .

Perhaps the best place to show how this process works is in Howe's most recent book, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*. On the first and otherwise blank page of this long poem, we read:

from seaweed said nor repossess rest scape esaid

From seaweed said: the story to be told here, if not quite "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves"

(Hopkins), evidently consists of fragments shored from the ocean of our American subconscious. Yet one cannot "repossess [the] rest"; or, since what is said from seaweed cannot be repossessed, one must rest one's case. Or just rest. "Scape" may refer either to the seascape or to the landscape or, most plausibly, it may be an abridged version of escape: "there is, no escape, he said," or "let it be said from what the seaweed said" (cf. Eliot's "What the Thunder Said"), no escape, moreover, from the desire to repossess the rest.

Obviously there are many ways of interpreting the eight words in these two lines, which is not to say that they can mean anything we want them to mean. We know from this introduction that an attempt will be made to "repossess" something lost, something primordial. The sound structure of the passage, with its slant rhyme of sea/weed and repossess/rest, its consonance of weed/said/esaid, and its alliteration of s's (nine out of forty-one characters) and assonance of e's and o's, enacts a ritual of repossession we can hear and see. And so small are the individual morphemes--from, said, scape, esaid--that we process them one by one, with difficulty. This "saying" "from seaweed" will evidently not be easy.

Who speaks these opening lines? The voice is impersonal, part bardic, part comic--a voice akin to Beckett's in *Ping* or *Lessness*. But the abrupt opening is immediately juxtaposed to a document, a text taken from the "real" world, namely, an "EXTRACT from a LETTER (dated June 8th, 1781,) of Stephen Williams to President Styles":

[Perloff quotes the Williams letter]

I reproduce this document in its entirety so that we can see what Howe does with her *donnée*. For *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* is by no means a retelling of the Hope Atherton story or the invention of an up-to-date analogue that points to the "relevance" of the Indian Wars to our own time. Still, the story, as gleaned from the letter above and from a number of old chronicles of New England towns, is inscribed everywhere in Howe's poem. It draws, for example, upon the basic paradox that the Reverend Hope Atherton, ostensibly a Man of God, would accompany the Colonial militia on an Indian raid. And further, that having somehow gotten separated "from the company," this "little man with a black coat and without a hat," as one chronicle calls him, would surrender himself to the Indians, only to be rejected by them as suspect, indeed perhaps the "Englishman's God." Suspect as well to his own people, who, upon his return to Hatfield, refused to believe his story. Atherton, in the words of the chronicle, "never recovered from the exposure" and died within the year, an isolated figure, indeed something of a pariah.

Such "untraceable wandering" culminating in the "nimbus of extinction" is, so Howe believes, a ubiquitous fact of early New England history, and its burden continues to haunt our language.

. . . .

In a sermon of 28 May 1670, reproduced in one of Howe's sources for *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, the Reverend Hope Atherton recalls that when, in his forest wanderings, he came face to face with the Indians, "I spake such language as I thought they understood." But evidently "they" did not understand, and this failure-to-understand what the other is saying becomes Howe's point of departure in *Articulation*. Here is the opening poem of part 1, "Hope Atherton's Wanderings":

Prest try to set after grandmother revived by and laid down left ly little distant
each other and fro Saw digression hobbling driftwood forage two rotted beans &
etc. Redy to faint slaughter story so Gone and signal through deep water Mr.
Atherton's story Hope Atherton

We note right away that in this poem Hope Atherton is not a "character," with such and such traits and a definable history. The "Wanderings" of Howe's title (there are sixteen sections in part 1, ranging in length from two to fifteen lines) are presented, not as articulations of time--not, that is to say, as accounts of what happened--but in time, in the time it takes to articulate the "sound forms" themselves. Thus poem #1 is a deceptive square (eight lines of predominantly eight- and nine-syllable lines), which tries to contain, both visually and aurally, the linguistic displacements produced by a faulty memory.

The first word, Prest, may refer to Atherton's condition: he was pressed by the Indians to "try to set after" his own people, perhaps after he was revived by a grandmother and left to lie ("ly") in the forest. But the absence of the subject or object of "Prest" brings other meanings into play: "oppressed," impressed," "presto." We cannot be sure whom "he" (if there is a he here) was "revived by," or whose "grandmother" is involved. As for "left ly," the tiny suffix makes it possible to bring to bear a whole host of -ly words: "left mercilessly," "left unkindly," "left ruthlessly," "left carelessly." The reader is given all these options; he or she can construct any number of scenarios in which two people are lying a "little distant [from] each other" and moving to and "fro." It is only dimly, after all, that we can reconstruct the Colonial/Indian conflict, with the colonists' "hobbling driftwood" and "forag[ing] two rotted beans & etc."--"& etc." suggests that it is what comes after speech ceases that matters--as well as the militia's "Redy to faint slaughter story," a story, "Mr. Atherton's story," now "so gone" that it can only come to us as a "signal through deep water."

Not only does Howe frequently decompose, transpose, and refigure the word (as in ly); she consistently breaks down or, as John Cage would put it, "demilitarizes" the syntax of her verbal units. Reading the poem above, one is never sure what subject pronoun goes with what verb, what object follows a given preposition, which of two nouns a participle is modifying, what phrases a conjunction connects, and so on. An extraordinarily taut sound structure--e.g., "revived by and laid down left ly"--holds in check a syntax that all but breaks down into babble. Indeed, by poem #8 all the connectives that make up "normal" syntax have been abandoned:

rest chondriacal lunacy velc cello viable toil quench conch uncannunc drumm
amonoosuck ythian

Is "rest" a noun or a verb and how does it relate to "chondriacal" (hyperchondriacal?) "lunacy"? In line 2, "velc" may be an abridgment of "velocity," which doesn't help us make sense of the intricately sounded catalog "velc cello viable toil"; in line 3, "uncannunc" contains both "uncanny" and "annunciation" (the prophecy, perhaps of the "conch" shell which cannot "quench" our thirst); in line 4, the Anglo-Saxon ("drumm"), Indian ("amonoosuck"), and Greek ("ythian") come together in a "collusion" that makes us wonder if the "rest" isn't some sort of hyperchondriacal lunacy on Atherton's part. Or, some would say, a "lunacy" on the poet's part as well.

What justifies such extreme verbal and syntactic deconstruction, a decomposition that has become something of a Howe signature? Is the obscurity of Articulation merely pretentious? Confronted by lines like "velc cello viable toil," many readers have closed the book, concluding that the poet is talking only to herself. The charges leveled against "language poetry" in general--obscurity, abstraction, lack of emotion, the absence of lyric selfhood--all these can easily be leveled at Susan Howe. Yet even readers unsympathetic to her work, readers who claim a book like Articulation is too private, that it isn't really "about" anything, will, I submit, find themselves repeating lines like "velc cello viable toil," if for no other apparent value than their complex music, the way e, l, and c in the first word reappear as cel in the second, or the way the v, e, l in velc reappear in the very different sounding word viable, the latter also containing the l of cello and toil.

Is this then jabberwocky, nonsense verse? If Howe wants to talk about Hope Atherton's mission to the Indians or apply the "themes" implicit in the tale--Colonial greed, Puritan zeal, the fruits of imperialism, the loneliness of exile, the inability to communicate with the Other--to the contemporary situation, why doesn't she just get on with it? Even a prose piece like the Mary Rowlandson essay is, after all, by and large comprehensible.

It would be easy to counter that the breakdown of articulation, which is the poem's subject, is embodied in the actual breakdown of the language, that the fragmentation of the universe is somehow mirrored in the fragmentary nature of the text. But the fact is that in Howe's work, as in Charles Bernstein's or Lyn Hejinian's, demilitarization of syntax may well function in precisely the opposite way--namely, as a response to the all-too-ordered, indeed formulaic, syntax that characterizes the typical "workshop" poem.

Poem #5, for example, articulates a "sound form" that refers to Hope Atherton's journey home:

Two blew bird eggs plat Habitants before dark Little way went mistook awake abt again Clay
Gully espied bounds to leap over Selah cithera Opynnc be 5 rails high houselot Cow
Kinsmen I pray you hasten Furious Nipnet Ninep Ninap Little Pansett fence with ditch Clear
stumps grubbing ploughing Clearing the land

"Two blew bird eggs plat": "blew" is a pun on "blue" and "plat" means "flat" as well as the truncated "plate." The image of the "Two blew bird eggs plat" gives a fairy-tale aura to this segment of the journey, as does "Little way went mistook" with its Hansel and Gretel echo. Again, the "bounds to leap over" ["leop" is OE for "leap"] are more than "houselot" divisions, for the real crossing of the poem is over the borders into another language where the "babble-babel" is formed from words and sounds taken from Hebrew ("Selah"), Indian ("Nipnet Ninep Ninap"), and English ("Clay Gully"), with the mythological reference to Venus's isle "Cythera" thrown in.

The poems now become increasingly fragmented, gnomic, enigmatic, as if the breakdown depicted is not so much Hope's as that of language itself. Regression sets in, poem #9 going back to Anglo-Saxon origins:

scow aback din flicker skaeg ne barge quagg peat sieve catacomb stint chisel sect

and then in #13 to a kind of aphasia, words, now without any modification or relationship, being laid out on the page as follows:

chaotic architect repudiate line Q confine lie link realm circle a euclidean
curtail theme theme toll function coda severity whey crayon so distant grain
scalp gnat carol omen Cur cornice zed primitive shad sac stone fur bray
tub epoch too tall fum alter rude recess emblem sixty key

Epithets young in a box told as you fly

By this time, Hope's search has become the poet's search. It is the poet who must deal with the "chaotic," must "repudiate" the "line" that "confine[s]," the "euclidean" "circle" too neat in its resolution of "theme theme," and the "severity" of its "coda." But one can also read this poem as dealing with any form of making, of "architect[ure]," the placement of "cornice" and "stone" so as to "alter rude" appearances. And the Indian motif never quite disappears, here found in the reference to "scalp," "gnat," "primitive," and "rude."

In #13, words are spread out insistently on the white ground of the page; in #15, by contrast, words run together:

MoheganToForceImmanenceShotStepSeeShowerFiftyTree
UpConcatenationLessonLittleAKantianEmpiricalMaoris HumTemporal-
spatioLostAreLifeAbstractSoRemotePossess
ReddenBorderViewHaloPastApparitionOpenMostNotion is

The "collusion" that forces words into this particular "collision" is oddly painful: the text is, so to speak, wounded, as if to say that the nightmare war with the Savage Other has come back to haunt Hope/Howe with its "AKantian Empirical" "Force" or "Immanence" of "Mohegan" or "Maori" presence, its reference to "Shot," "Shower," "Fifty Tree," "ReddenBorderView." This particular lyric concludes with a refrain already articulated in #14, a couplet producing a verbal mirror image:

blue glare(essence)cow bed leg extinct draw scribe sideup even blue(A)ash-tree
fleece comfort (B)draw scribe upside

"Sideup"/"upside" is a breaking point; after this particular collision, the sequence suddenly shifts to the formal and coherent monologue (#17) of Hope Atherton himself:

Loving Friends and Kindred: - When I look back So short in charity and good works We are a small remnant Of signal escapes wonderful in themselves We march from our camp a little and come home Lost the beaten track and so River section dark all this time We must not worry how few we are and fall from each other More than language can express Hope for the artist in America & etc This is my birthday These are the old home trees

On a first reading, this lyric coda seems excessively sentimental as well as unwarranted. Having wandered with great difficulty through the forest of the preceding lyrics, one is, of course, relieved to come into this clearing, to hear the sermonlike address to "Loving Friends and Kindred." But the resolution here provided--"We must not worry / how few we are and fall from each other / More than language can express / Hope for the artist in America & etc"--is a shade too easy, given the intractability of the material that has been put before us. How and why, after all, does Hope become Howe? How and why is there "Hope for the artist in America"? And finally, what do we do once we reach the birthday when we settle down under "the old home trees"?

. . . [T]he voicing of desire in Articulation, as in Howe's other poems, avoids the personal "I" so pervasive in contemporary lyric. Ostensibly absent and calling no attention to the problems and desires of the "real" Susan Howe, the poet's self is nevertheless inscribed in the linguistic interstices of her poetic text. Howe has been called impersonal, but one could argue that the "muffled discourse from distance," the "collusion with history" in her poetry, is everywhere charged with her presence. She is not, after all, a chronicler, telling us some Indian story from the New England past, but a poet trying to come to terms with her New England past, her sense of herself vis-à-vis the Colonial settlers' actions, her re-creation of the Hope Atherton story in relation to Norse myth as well as to contemporary feminist theory.

Most contemporary feminist poetry takes as emblematic its author's own experience of power relations, her personal struggle with patriarchy, her sense of marginalization, her view of social justice. There are Howe's subjects as well, but in substituting "impersonal" narratives--a narrative made of collage fragments realigned and recharged--for the more usual lyric "I," Howe is suggesting that the personal is always already political, specifically, that the contemporary Irish-American New England woman who is Susan Howe cannot be understood apart from her history. But history also teaches the poet that, however marginalized women have been in American culture and however much men have been the purveyors of power, those who have suffered the loss of the Word are by no means only women. Indeed, what Howe calls the "Occult ferocity of origin" is an obstacle that only a persistent "edging and dodging" will displace if we are serious about "Taking the Forest."

From Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric. Copyright © 1990 by Marjorie Perloff.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Criticism Target:

Susan Howe [2]

Author:

Marjorie Perloff [3]

Poem:

Hope Atherton's Wanderings [4]

Tags:

sound [5]

articulation [6]

repossession [7]

deconstruction [8]

history [9]

loss [10]

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/marjorie-perloff-hope-athertons-wanderings>

Links

[1] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/susan-howe>

[3] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/marjorie-perloff>

[4] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/hope-athertons-wanderings>

[5] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/sound>

[6] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/articulation>

[7] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/repossession>

[8] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/deconstruction>

[9] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/history>

[10] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/loss>