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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Susan Howe and the Difficulty of Printing Art in Printing Form

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Article History: Submitted-18/01/2018, Revised-26/02/2018, Accepted-27/02/2018, Published-28/02/2018.

Abstract:

Literary writers frequently confront with the difficulty of expressing themselves in printing form. Nowadays this is much more evident since writing is more experimental and writers demand from the printing book space and other characteristics it does not always possess. Susan Howe's work is a perfect example of this. Her work contains very good examples of how contemporary writers face the difficulties printing form imposes on them.

Our analysis will be centered on three aspects of her work. In the first place, we are going to speak about those aspects connected with the formal presentation of the book. A second question we will take into consideration is related to the final form of the book and who determines it: is the author, the editor or both together? The third question we are going to analyze is the importance small presses have for this type of writing and how they make possible experimental work be published with certain characteristics larger publishing houses cannot afford.

Keywords: Susan Howe, contemporary poetry, experimentation, book constraints.

Susan Howe is born on 10th June 1937 in Boston, Massachusetts. Raised by the American Law Professor Mark De Wolfe Howe and the Irish Playwright and Director Mary Manning she grows quite close to her mother while her father becomes an absent figure. Her mother becomes one of her most important influences in her life and artistic career. She acquires her mother's interest for books and theatre being quite a common activity at home reading popular Irish novelists or poets or being told stories about Ireland, its myths, its history. Meanwhile, her father is physically and emotionally absented from her life. Most of her childhood he remains in Europe fighting in World War II and when he returns home he keeps distance with her becoming one of the first examples she finds in her life of patriarchy.

After graduating in the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts Howe initiates her career as painter in the sixties. Few things are known for sure from this period because she never exhibits in public. According to her own comments she enjoyed combining words with drawings in her paintings till, with time, she discovered words occupied more space than pictures and decided to change the canvas for the printing paper.

Her pictorial side would be of great relevance in her approach to the book because she conceives the page like a kind of canvas, an open space where words will move freely in all directions provoking strange and new combinations visually very attractive. She also conceives as common the inclusion in her books of elements not frequently found in literary

works such as tissue interleaf papers, photographs or bookmarks since she perceives the book like an instrument to express her creativity.

Our discussion is going to go around the way Howe uses the print book to materialize her art and the difficulties she finds as a contemporary writer who makes use of new writing innovative techniques. Howe demands characteristics from the printing book it did not usually present in the past, so she adapts it introducing new elements not frequently found in the literary field as we will see through our analysis. We are going to center our attention in three concrete aspects: the book, editorial questions and small presses or big editorials.

The book

Traditionally a book must fulfill certain conditions to achieve that category, mainly related to its extension, presentation, internal order, etc. We can say every literary genre imposes its own conditions on the book in order to contain the literary work. Contemporary writers, eager to express themselves freely sometimes feel limited by these constraints although much more frequently they make use of these resources to introduce new visions of the literary work. Take the example of Howe and the use she makes of the title page in one of her books, *A Bibliography of the King's Book; or Eikon Basilike*. Inspiring herself in an existent book by Edward Almack, she takes the title page of that book for her own.

A Bibliography of
The King's Book
or Eikon Basilike

BY ~~EDWARD ALMACK~~
(MEMBER OF THE BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY)

susan howe

LONDON
BLADES, EAST & BLADES
13, ABCHURCH LANE, E.C.
1896

paradigm press
providence

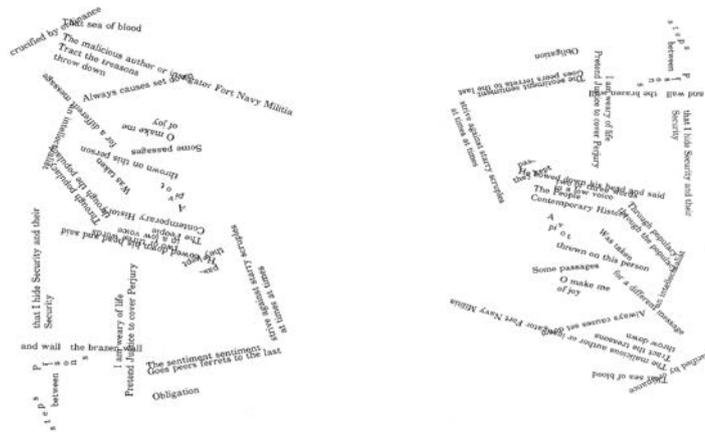
She crosses out the name of the author and the edition details while she places hers, an act which expresses much about her conception of the literary work. Usually she takes fragments, pieces of other works to introduce in her books but in this occasion, she has gone a step farther. She wants the reader to recognize her source of inspiration. While in other

writers this action could be perceived as an act of rebellion, as the erasure of the author from his/her work, in Howe is a very particular use of intertextuality. She crosses out the name of Almack but she does not eliminate it because she wants the reader to recognize what she is doing, to make clear where she has taken the material for her work.

Other two aspects we are going to take into consideration are pagination and binding, both strongly determined by culture. In West culture, reading direction goes from left to right so both binding and pagination adapt to that circumstance and their presence also impose an order, a sequence in the book the writer is obliged to follow when arranging his/her material (Walker and Chaplin 1997: 117; Evans and Thomas 2013:9). Contemporary writers like Howe are quite conscious of this fact treating every page as unique and independent, perceiving it as an open space where to express without considering the rest of the book. The book forms a whole unit made of small ones. Every poem works on its own, but all together constitutes the book. In certain books like *Bedhangings*, *Bedhangings II* or *A Bibliography* Howe avoids the use of pagination which creates in the reader the impression s/he can choose the order of his/her reading.¹ S/he can start at any part of the book and its comprehension is not altered because of that.

Howe also introduces some novelties with respect to the direction of the text on the page. Instead of using the traditional left margin and aligning all lines to that same margin she presents several poems with a multitude of directions for the reader to choose. One of the most attractive examples is that of two similar poems she places one in front of another but in an inverted position, as if the one was the reflection on a mirror of the other. Howe could have inspired herself in the denominated “mirrored” or “palindrome poetry” (Gause 2010: 41-42; Lyon 2003: 461; Myers 2003: 261). These types of poems can be read equally from the beginning to the end or in an inverted way and they are similar in both sides. However, they use to be a unique poem while in the case of Howe we are going to find two poems. Howe always plays with the idea of the mirror, of two inverted and opposing images. But which one is the reflection, and which one is the real one? That is something Howe does not answer but leaves the reader to decide.

¹ Later, when we discuss the main differences between publishing in small and big editorials we will see how the writer does not always have the possibility of using resources like this. To get a greater number of volumes there are certain sacrifices to do as Howe's work reflects quite well.



These types of patterns present two main difficulties. The first one is that of reading. The traditional approach of reading poetry does not apply to this kind of poems. Here the text moves in several directions, so there is not only one way of reading. In fact, the reader is obliged to move the position of the book to be able to read the whole poem, and not all readers would do it in the same way, so there is a multiplicity of readings.

Using two poems, Howe also attracts our attention on the fact one single story can have more than one approach. This text refers to Charles I's execution. The inversion she makes of one of the poems imply this story has a second path. History has offered a supposedly objective interpretation of that event, but Howe suggests there is something else, a hidden story behind history. That is also provided by the clashing of voices we find within both poems. Lines that move in all directions like the voices of those contemplating Charles I's execution are the way in which Howe pictures the violence of that scene. Some speak in favor of the king; other people criticize him while many people shout for him to be executed, and all those voices collapse and cut one upon the other, which is represented in written form by those lines that cut and intersect.

The second great difficulty these poems present is their writing. Howe provides us with excellent examples of the problems contemporary writers used to have to print their work. Nowadays technology includes a multitude of ways of printing poems like these. But Howe's book was published in 1989. For her, a writer, it was quite complicated to reproduce this type of pattern on the paper. She mainly had a typewriting machine and needed to move the page to get that effect. Printing them would be an easier task because printing press had other possibilities to reproduce this type of graphic material, but the writer is the one who confronted greater difficulties when materializing her art in printing form.

In her attempt to get more significant freedom within her books Howe also omits individual elements that could be considered characteristic of poetic works such as titles or numbers that necessarily establish order in the poem. In her first books, she used numbers to separate her texts because of the size they had. They occupied more than one page, so Howe uses the

numbers as a way of establishing the frontier between one and another, but in her following books, she omits any element that obliges the reader to follow a specific order. As the most she will establish different sections within a single book where she includes poems or essays dealing with one thematic line. No other restriction is imposed on the reader who is even free to choose which way to start since every section works as independent from the rest.

As you can observe, the books impose certain physical restrictions on the contemporary writer s/he can avoid. However, to get some creative freedom s/he makes changes in the presentation of the books that obey the new vision they want to transmit to her reader. Among the most common changes, we found the absence of pagination or the projection of the poem all over the page. But there are much more attractive elements as those we will see in a moment where the writer does not only alter the usual presentation of the book but includes items that are not usually part of the poetic book.

Howe introduces into her books materials that do not frequently constitute part of the poetic book such as bookmarks, drawings, photographs, inter-leaf tissue papers. These elements could be found in old books or, much more frequently, are additions the reader introduces into the books s/he is reading. But Howe wants them to be a part of her books, like the poems or the rest of the texts she includes. She is making evident the “materiality of the book.” The book is not only an instrument to transmit art, but it becomes the object of art. The whole book is left to be read and also to be contemplated, in the same way, we would do with a picture or a sculpture. She takes care of every detail of the book to get it fit her purposes. One of the best examples she provides us is in her book *Kidnapped*. Taken its title from work by Robert Louis Stevenson, Howe creates a book that constitutes a homage to her mother and all those members of her Irish family that one day left their country looking for a better future going their homeland to remain the rest of her life in a place that is not theirs.

Kidnapped contains three elements that attract reader's attention upon it:

a) A bookmark with a line handwritten by the author which says, “The Collar-bone of a Hare”. It reminds her of several bookmarks her mother kept within one of her books that she inherited.

Actors have inscribed her copy of *Later Poems* - “28 October 1924” - To Mary with love from us all. Sara Allgood, Dorothy Day McCauliffe, Joyce Chancellor, Gertrude McEnery, Maeve MacMorrogh, Shelah Richards.” Inside, five narrow strips of what looks like wrapping paper, once meant to serve as marked, are still intact.

Each one has a fade title in pencil at the top so all these years later I can just make out in her handwriting- “September 1913,” “The Collar-bone of a Hare,” “Heaven,” and “The Folly of Being Comforted.” (*Kidnapped*)

As the book is written like a homage to her mother she wants to make the reader participant of her memories, so she has reproduced a piece of paper equal to one of those her mother had. And to make it understandable she makes this commentary within the prose section of this same book.

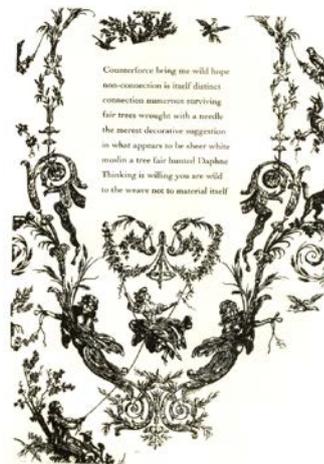
b) Two pieces of tissue-interleaf paper accompanying a facsimile of Stevenson's book title page, *The Master of Ballantrae: A Winter's Tale*, the same book she received in inheritance from her Irish uncle. Howe imitates the original book introducing the tissue papers in the same place that would appear in the original book. Her book is about her family, their anecdotes, stories, and life so she uses her uncle's book as an introduction to what she is going through her whole book. Her uncles' book incarnates all his owner experiences because it accompanies his uncle all his life, so it is a truthful witness of many important moments in his life. Instead of placing a family photograph Howe plays with books. In addition to that she introduces the tissue papers not just as a way of being faithful to the original book but also as a way of attracting the reader's attention upon a specific circumstance. With the passing of time life becomes as opaque as that book. Events are not perceived in the same way when time passes since witnesses disappear and only remain slight remembrances of what they were, and the same would be applicable to history. She is interested in using her books to provide a new approach to history where people and events that were forgotten with the passing of time acquire the relevance they deserve. In this particular book she does it with her own family. She wants to recreate some of the most relevant events her family lived in their trajectory from Ireland to America and how they have influenced on her own life.

c) Several *color photographs* at the beginning of each section of this book. The presence of images in Howe's works is not something new taking into account her pictorial origin. But it is not a resource she uses much frequently in her works. She transforms *Kidnapped* into a family album. Instead of choosing family photographs for the main pages she introduces photos with the reproductions of her family books. For her those books represent her family because they have been witnesses of their lives and, at the same time, those books contain a part of every person who own them. Those books were chosen because of their content. They contain the stories they read, belong to the authors they enjoyed and in many occasions, they even contain annotations in the margin with thoughts or ideas that have been kept through the passing of time. Including the photos of those books is like reproducing the most intimate side of her family so she uses to open each section. The fact they are in color also attracts her reader's attention because the rest of the book only contain black and white photographs. In this book she also continues with a practice she inaugurates with *Peirce-Arrow* where she used photographs of the manuscripts and writings by Charles Sanders Peirce. In *Kidnapped*, Howe transforms it into a much more personal question because the photographs belong to her family circle. All form part of her family history and cover different moments of her mother's life, and even hers. For example, she introduces a photograph of the fragment of newspaper corresponding to the day she arrives America with her mother from Ireland when she is still a child, and next to it the transcription of the text for the reader to get the whole information. While the photographs that inaugurate every section are in color, the rest of the book are black and white for a very practical purpose. It would not be appropriate to reproduce color photographs in the middle of the text because photographs would take the prominence and her reflections would be relegated to a secondary place. Besides, black and white color brings into the reader's mind reminiscences of the past. She wants to speak about her history, her past and that of her family and this is a good way of achieving it. But photos are not just an accessory, something she puts to cover a space. She does not like ornaments

into her books. Every element she introduces is carefully selected and has its purpose. Photographs are strategically located within the prose sections of her book becoming part of them as they illustrate part of the information she introduces. To a certain extent we get the impression Howe wants them to give testimony of her own words. She does not only speak about her family history but uses old photographs referred to those same events to provide a visual testimony.

Another book which attracts our attention for the unusual elements it contains is *Bed Hanging*. In a return to her origins Howe presents this book of poems illustrated by the drawings of the North-American artist Susan Howe.

There are several aspects worth to be mentioned with respect to these drawings. In the first place, the election Howe has made of the black and white color. This is an important aspect which affect the perception of her poems. None of the drawings in this book contains any color. It avoids that exists a big contrast between poems and drawings. The reader feels attracted by the presence of the drawings because it is an uncommon element in a book of poetry, but s/he can conceive them as part of the poem, especially when the poem appears integrated within the drawing, as in the following example.



(Bed Hangings)²

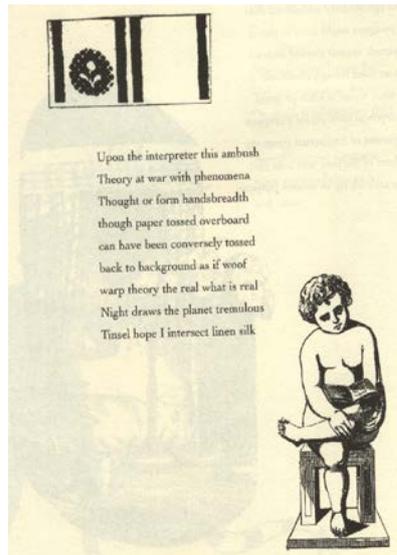
An illustration takes almost the whole space on the page while the poem locates on the upper side, also surrounded by part of the drawing. However, we observe the poem stands out because it is placed on a completely white space. It attracts reader's attention because of its uniformity and the presence of the drawing does not interrupt its reading. Howe offers the reader a new projection of looking at poetry which connects with her idea of breaking barriers between genres, something we will speak about in a moment. This type of presentation is much more common of other type of publications (newspapers, ads,

² As in other books by Howe *Bed Hangings* does not have pagination.

magazines, etc.) rather than poetry, but that is precisely its novelty.

The poem passes from being an object exclusively to be read to transform into an object to be contemplated, the same it was a picture or another type of work of art.

Another important characteristic is the perspective poems adopt with respect to drawings since no matter the position the drawings adopt, poems never lose their prominence. Drawings have been conceived for the poems and not the other way round as it can be perceived from the effects applied to every drawing and their position with respect to the poems they go with. It is what was observed in the previous example and in this one.



(Bed Hangings)

There are two illustrations located at both sides of the poem while it is placed on the central part of the page, attracting reader's attention upon it because it is the different element within the page. In addition to that, it occupies a total white space so it is much more visible on a first approach.

All these elements acquire importance within Howe's work because they show how she perceives literary genres. Howe evidences nowadays there is not such a clear and limited frontier between literary genres as it happened in the past. The introduction of photographs, drawings or external elements into her books and the combination of prose and poetry within the same book denote the contemporary writer demands greater freedom to create. This is indicating the revolution perceived in other arts like painting or music has also affected literature and in a particular way, the book. The traditional idea a book containing poetry could not contain prose is no longer available and this is not at all something negative. Just the opposite, literature is evolving, and the artist needs to adapt the existing means to his/her art in order to express his/her creativity.

Editorial questions

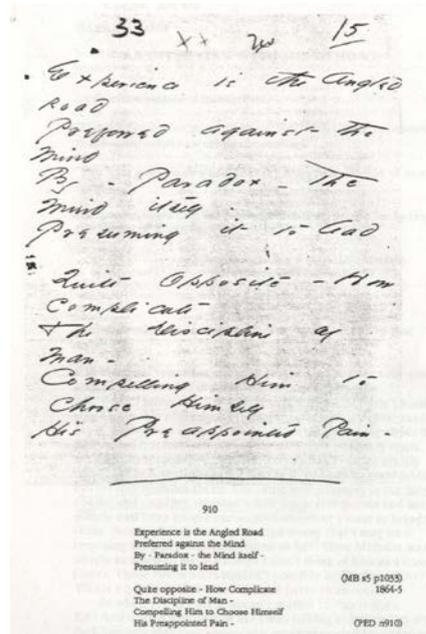
Howe considers crucial the role of the editor in determining the final aspect a book is going to have. She believes the editor has in their hands the possibility of changing the literary work altering the author's intentions when creating it. And the examples she provides are taken from two well-known American figures with great difficulties to see their works published during their life-time: Emily Dickinson and Charles Sanders Peirce. Both receive a lot of attention on the part of Howe (in fact she dedicates two of her books to them, one a book of essays and the other of poetry) because they embody two writers much more worried about their works than getting them published. In fact, Peirce's works were never published in book form and all his material is kept in the original handwritten manuscripts he produced. Dickinson has the possibility of getting her work published though, according to Howe, not in an appropriate condition because much of it was altered or distorted before printing.

Some of Emily Dickinson's surviving manuscripts and letters have been cut apart with scissors. Sometimes pages have been torn to shreds, leaving a single word or double strand of words on the brink of the central blank. (...) Thomas H. Johnson, pieced torn unities together. Sometimes he lengthened and recombined strands of "unrelated thoughts" or "fragment scraps" and placed them in a category called "Prose Fragments", as if these threaded filaments of letters were too disorderly to qualify as poetry. (*Birth-Mark*, 28)

Howe chooses these writers because of the similarities she keeps with them. They use certain elements in their works that are not considered usual in the genres they practice as Howe does herself. Dickinson, for example, enjoys introducing dashes or other typographical marks within her poems nobody knows the use they have, or when writing her letters cuts sentences in a way critics still wonder if she is using prose or poetry. Peirce employs atypical materials within his manuscripts on logic which make people wonder if he is going against what he is supposedly practicing as philosopher: "Silhouettes of men with long noses, pyramids of numbers, phrases repeated: for a pragmatist, Peirce's manuscripts show a mind as irrational as it was rational." (*Prevallet*) Howe finds herself identified in these writers' work because her own work presents characteristics that are not common of a literary work according to the established canon. Being different implies to have more editorial difficulties because editors try to adjust the book to what they know as valid so there are occasions they make their own and personal interpretations. In fact, editing implies erasures, changes, adaptations of the handwritten manuscript to get to the printing text. What worries Howe in this process is that "the imposition of editorial control (...) limits authorial intention and meaning." (Emerson). The editor establishes the criteria s/he considers more appropriate for every book according to its characteristics. But s/he also confronts with the difficulty of deciding if a specific mark or element in a manuscript responds to a purpose or it is just something accidental, as, for example, a spot of ink or something similar the author was not able to erase.

In her book, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*, Howe discusses upon this same topic and presents some examples like the following one. She

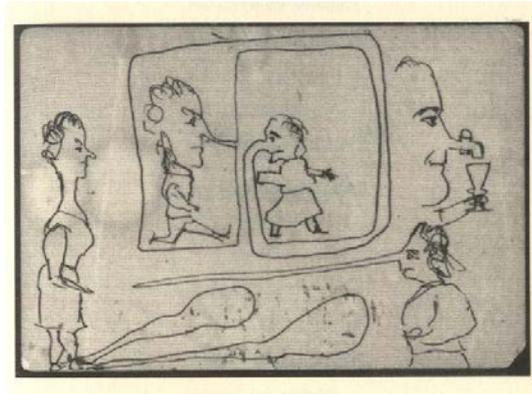
introduces a photograph of one of Dickinson's poems and below the transcription provided by one editor of Dickinson's books. She manifests with this her fear the literary work not be altered by editors because the reader would not be able to perceive the text as it was originally conceived by its author.



(*Birth-Mark*,151)

This is an example of the way Howe presents this. She presents a facsimile, an exact copy of the manuscript where we can appreciate not only the marks Dickinson introduces but also the way she cuts the lines. Howe has constantly criticized many editors have tried to standardize the way Dickinson ends lines proving the end they consider appropriate. In this way there is no possibility of altering the original format of the poem. It is the most faithful presentation to the original that can be done. But evidently, this is just an attempt on the part of Howe of attracting attention upon the particularities Dickinson's poetry presents. From a practical point of view this type of edition would be impossible to produce because many readers would be unable to understand Dickinson's hand-written. However, once more Howe is making emphasis on the visual form of poetry, something she feels particularly attracted by. She does not mind the hand-written be understandable, she is much more worried about its visual presentation and the way lines distribute on the page.

Howe also offers similar examples from Peirce in her book *Pierce-Arrow*. There are some which are particularly attractive because they emphasize the most artistic facet of this North-American philosopher like the following one.



(Peirce-Arrow)

It is a caricature produced by Peirce and with-it Howe shows her readers Peirce is not a common philosopher only worried about in his theories but he possess a side of his mind open to artistic creativity, which makes possible he introduces humorist interpretations of his reality among his manuscripts. Both, Peirce and Dickinson, keeps features in common which attract attention on them, particularly the fact both are individuals who have lived on the frontiers with respect to their own epoch. Because of their ideas and the way, they conceive art and philosophy both would be marginal people, almost silenced and that is the point that awakes Howe's interest. Apart from feeling attracted by that circumstance she also wants to make her contribution to allow the writings of these two authors be valued in the correct measure. That is the reason why she dedicates them part of her poems and essays including their works in this particular way.

But how does editorial question affect to Howe? What kind of impact this question has within her books? When approaching Howe's work, we realize contemporary authors have an advantage writer like Dickinson or Peirce did not have. The technological advances provide writers like Howe who employ so many experimental elements can introduce them within their books without any problem. We could say there is a dialogue between author and editor that allows book approaches much more to the concept its author has in mind. Achieving public recognition also contributes to make this task easier for the writer. Howe, as many other artist, starting her career publishing in magazines and small presses. With time, she has achieved the recognition of the public and the critic and has been able to publish in well-known editorials. If we compare her work as it was published initially with that she presents later on we can say Howe has not had the problem Dickinson or Peirce faced. There are slight variations we will comment in the next section of this essay but in general we can say her work has remained almost intact. She has had to accomplish slight variations mainly determined by the costs of publishing a larger number of copies, but the form and the quality of her work has been preserved by her through a dialogue with the editor.

Small presses and editorials

As a contemporary experimental writer Howe started her literary career publishing in

magazines and small presses. The characteristics of her work did not attract immediately the attention of critic, so she starts with limited editions of no more than three hundred copies. With time she has been more and more accepted by critic and she publishes in editorials well known in the United States such as *New Directions*, *Sun and Moon Press* or *Wesleyan University Press*. This fact has supposed she gets greater diffusion but in exchange she has had to accept certain sacrifices that mainly affect to the aspect of her books and the internal distribution poems have within them, but with slight, insignificant variations in the form of the poems.

Publishing in small presses has made possible for Howe to take care of almost every detail, from the front cover till the distribution she is going to provide to every poem, the space that is left from the margins, etc. As the number of books is limited the material employed and the care of the details is best. Two good examples of this are in her books *Kidnapped* and *Bedhangings II*. Published with an edition of no more than three hundred copies Howe introduces in these books details that are no part of bigger editions. For example, both books are hardback editions while her other publications are paperbacks because it is cheaper for editorials. The tissue papers, the bookmarks and the color photographs she introduces in *Kidnaapped* does not appear when it is reprinted as part of a larger book entitled *The Midnight*. There the photographs appear as black and white and the other elements have been eliminated. These details would make the edition more expensive, so they are suppressed.

In limited editions Howe also avoids the use of elements such as pagination that she has to employ in biggest ones. She is equally experimental in both cases, but small presses allow her to add things that are not usually common in literary books.

There are other occasions where changes are even more evident because they affect to the presentation of the poems on the page. This does not happen frequently but just in a few occasions where she has had the possibility of reprinting several of her books in one single one. There are slight variations motivated by the lack of space because Howe enjoys placing every poem in one single page but in this circumstance, she is obliged to put more than one poem on the same page. A good example is found in her book *Nonconformist's Memorial* where, among other poems, she has reprinted her book *A Bibliography*. Many of the poems that initially occupy one single page now have to share space, so they are distributed in pairs.

This fact could affect slightly the reader's perception of these poems because, when they appear separated the reader perceives them as unique, isolated units. Now they are placed together on the same page the reader could try to analyze them as a unit though it is quite unlikely that interpretation works. Most of Howe's poems works as independent units. Her books keep a thematic common line, but every poem works on its own and the reader, once s/he gets the meaning of each of them can perceive the book as a single structure. This implies the position given to the poems within the book does not have to affect much the interpretation given to them.

One of the most important variations we observe with respect to reprinted books is in Howe's *Defenestration of Prague* when reprinted as part of *The Europe of Trusts*. *Defenestration*

contains some of the first illustrations Howe introduces in her books. When reprinted, these illustrations disappear. In addition to that, some of her longer poems, like the one that starts “running rings/ of light” or that other one “fearsad bell high stone wall” that initially occupied one single page now occupy two pages. That supposes an alteration of the perception the reader gets, particularly of the second one.

fearsad bell high stone wall
evensong
the blue of sweet salvation
such roads between the uplands
over the lowered cols
eden éadan brow of a hill
as many lives
as there are loaves
and fishes
and O
her voice
a settled place
table spread flesh and milk
in mystery
in the room
in the sunlight
about the dead
who come from west-the-sea
raiment
shirt-clad and light-clad

She must be traced through many dark paths
as a boy

This is the poem as it was published originally in *Defenestration of Prague*.

accessing to bigger editions. That has had a negative consequence for her: it has limited the number and the quality of the elements she includes in her books though she has continued with her purpose of controlling as much as possible of the book final form. She has worried a lot through her career about the fact editor can exercise too much control the initial intentions of the writing get lost, so she tries to get an agreement with editor not to lose quality in her books. She has been quite successful to that respect because the different editions of her books maintain almost intact with respect to the first one and the few changes we appreciate are mostly determined by a question of space. There are occasions too much material must occupy a limited number of pages, so the only possibility is placing together more than one poem on the same page. Therefore, Howe provides a clear vision of how the contemporary writer adapts their work and their creative capacity to the physical limitations of the book making that in our era book still be a necessary and valid instrument in the transmission of art and culture.

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