

“Word is My Way in Sylvan Imagery”
On Susan Howe’s Ecological Thought

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2023

*If I exceed permission, excuse the bleak simplicity that
knew no tutor but the North.*

Dickinson

SUSAN HOWE is a poet infrequently read through an ecocritical lens despite recurrent images of nature, specifically of winter, throughout her work. Her landscapes are generally treated as settings that ground her highly abstract poems in sociohistorical contexts, rather than as ecological thoughts in and of themselves.¹ While no one could accuse Howe of writing uncritical nature poetry, many of her poems explicitly thematize ecology through individual encounters with nature, and she does not hesitate to draw on conventional American nature poets such as Thoreau and Emerson.² Formal experimentation in her poems camouflages a familiar-seeming eco-poetic that privileges the human. Plants, minerals, and animals appear everywhere in Howe's poems but rarely have their own agency, and are often juxtaposed with human concerns: "Oh the

1. "The ecological crisis we face is so obvious that it becomes easy—for some, strangely or frighteningly easy—to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected. This is *the ecological thought*." Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 11.

2. This somewhat pejorative understanding of "nature poetry" is drawn from Morton and Heise, as well as Bloomfield, "Palimtextual Tracts: Susan Howe's Rearticulation of Place," 668. It is not a popular or contemporary eco-poetic, and runs the risk of being associated with the work of "white male environmentalist writers [who emphasize] the (usually male) individual's encounter with and physical immersion in the landscape, typically envisioned as wild rather than rural or urban" in Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, 29.

bare ground / My thick coat and my tent / and the black of clouds” (*Singularities*, 51). This view is not so different from Thoreau’s of Walden Pond, “looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature” (Thoreau 212).

Yet Howe never treats the natural world as soil for personal epiphany. As Will Montgomery writes, “Howe’s problematic pursuit of origins is a reawakening of Thoreau’s version of the American wilderness, but one that is subdued with pessimism and ambivalence” (Montgomery 103). For Howe, ecology is the determining factor of history, intimately tied to violence, death, and danger, a cold pastoral if there ever was one.³ Her ecological writing never feigns at objectivity or idealization, but moves from specific natural facts—most of which spell hazard to the human—to an astonishing interconnect- edness on the level of myth and metaphysics.

A central contradiction in Howe’s work, and of ecological writing on the whole, is that “to inhabit a wilderness is to destroy it” (“The Difficulties Interview,” 21). To write of nature is to orga- nize it in language, and thus to dominate it. For Howe, the human and the ecological cannot be divorced. The human eye is required to see; unmediated encounters with nature are a fallacy. This knot- ted relationship between people, place, and history is emphasized by Howe’s choice of landscapes: twentieth-century Europe and colonial New England, both defined by diabolical violence. She describes her writing as “pulling representation from the irrational

3. “But I always seem to somehow get myself embroiled in ideas of history in my work. And then I am surprised at often a sense of violence intrudes itself, and I am always worried about what “time” it is or is not.” Falon and Howe, “Speaking with Susan Howe,” 31.

dimension,” (*The Birth-mark*, 83); this dimension is most available during winter, when nature’s effects on humans are at their most dramatic and deadly, both the individual and institutions are tested, and even history’s “winners” lose faith. With the exception of a few early works, each of Howe’s texts progresses from consideration of specific places, events, and people to a larger and more open poetry of hazard. Many of her sequences begin with personal or historical background given in almost conventional prose, interspersed with stanzas that lack even as much direction as punctuation and capitalization might offer. Expansion from the historical individual to historical consciousness in Howe’s work is a cycle of destabilization, repetition, and departure.

These prose histories, whether familial, literary, or mythological, borrow text from “darksided”⁴ writers like Charles Sanders Peirce, the forgotten genius of American Pragmatism; William Byrd, who wrote two parallel surveys of the North Carolina-Virginia boundary line in 1728; or the harsh confessional journals of Puritan preacher Thomas Shepherd. “In [the library’s] sleeping wilderness I felt the telepathic solicitation of innumerable phantoms...” (Howe, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, 16). The effect is citational and scholarly, creating meaning through referentiality. In the poems that follow these introductions, the “real” people Howe moves through as doorways are reconjured through stammer, murmur, and typographic experimentation. Because she is a thorough reader of these histories, it is never

4. “I write to break out into perfect primeval Consent. I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate.” From “There Are Not Leaves Enough to Crown / To Cover to Crown to Cover,” in Howe, *The Europe of Trusts*, 14.

enough to caress a subject once: her poems exist as sequences or book-length projects rather than discrete objects, and certain names (like Peirce, Melville, Olson, and Dickinson) appear in numerous publications. The effect of this explication and repetition—making the poems followable—lends credence to her rather dubious statement that her poetry is accessible to anyone who wishes to access it.⁵

Howe's long poem "Pythagorean Silence" follows this formula to the letter. Originally published as a supplement to the poetry journal *Montemora* in 1982, "Pythagorean Silence" was collected in *The Europe of Trusts* in 1990 alongside Howe's other "European" works. In the "introduction" of *The Europe of Trusts*, titled after the Wallace Stevens line "There Are Not Leaves Enough to Crown / To Cover to Crown to Cover," Howe writes that in 1941, when she was four years old, her "law-professor father, a man of pure principles, quickly included violence in his principles, put on a soldier suit and disappeared with the others into the thick of the threat to the east called West" (*The Europe of Trusts*, 10), from which he would not return for four years.⁶ She then stages a pivotal scene the reader will encounter again in "Pythagorean Silence" of a mother and father on a day of

5. "Janet Ruth Falon: Does it bother you when people say your work is inaccessible? Howe: Well, I hear it so often sometimes it gets to me. But I think it's accessible to whoever really wants access to it." In Falon and Howe, "Speaking with Susan Howe," 41. One reason Howe is often excluded from the various schools of her contemporaries, in particular the Language poets, is this accessibility: in prose she provides a great deal of access to her personal history and her consideration of this history in relation to her writing, achieving a warmth or sentimentality not found in the poems of contemporaries like Scalapino or Armantrout.

6. Falon and Howe, 30.

war.⁷ While “There Are Not Leaves” stays prosaic, almost rhetorical, and then quickly concludes, in “Pythagorean Silence,” what begins as a child’s imagined wartime Europe grows immeasurably larger on the next page:

1

age of earth and us all chattering⁸

—abandoning comforting capital letters and conventional sentence structure for lines that hang strange and stark. “Chattering” and “shivering” are then picked up as “broken modes of utterance” (Montgomery 623). Lyric expression is barely audible above the cold wind of the landscape, which, in his writing about Howe, Montgomery links to the coldness of the grave.

As her poems open beyond their source texts, they move away from individual voice(s), the historical event recedes, and language loses its sense-making ability, stripped down to sounds and morphemes. This departure occurs sometimes within a single poem, and sometimes builds over the course of many pages.

Transcendent could be whis
buried

Or as snow fallen

7. “Shadows are seated at a kitchen table / Clock // and shadow of a Clock // A black cloud hands over the landscape / War // some war —” in Howe, *The Europe of Trusts*, 32.

8. Howe, 36.

Could be cold snow
falling⁹

At apotheosis, Howe's eco-poetic is capacious enough to hold not just the "odd Universe," but the "[a]bstractions of the world's abstraction" ("Pythagorean Silence," *The Europe of Trusts*, 28) that make the universe knowable. Arguably this is the function of poetry: to enfold the envelope which contains everything. As Timothy Morton notes in *Dark Ecology*, this envelope "is not Mars. It is planet Earth" (Morton 10). The first fact of planet Earth is place, or space with conditions, the "twist you can't iron out of the fabric of things" (Morton 11). For Howe, the first twist is her birthplace of New England and the second, the dark, enclosed fields of Europe, often England (the woe-ful homeland of English-language literature) or Ireland (from which her mother immigrated). Father and motherland.

The dominant season of Howe's places, both European and American, is winter. In her poems, human interpolation exists—the manmade features of the landscape as real as the trees—but is "snowed in," or assimilated into nature, sometimes for long periods. "Lyric is transparent," Howe writes, "as hard to see as black or glare ice" (*The Quarry*, 39). Memories of her own poems are memories of winter:

I wrote this poem on a winter day in 1998 when my mother was still alive, and I hadn't met Peter. [...] I remember the way the lines came to me suddenly, after reading the journal,

9. Howe, 30.

and how quiet it seemed inside the room with soft snow falling outside.¹⁰

In her early poems, flora and fauna rush by, uninterrupted by grammar, in ecological images that don't necessarily add up to ecological thought.¹¹ Not until Howe focuses on the study of winter, about four years into publishing, does she come into her own as an ecological writer.¹² Survival through this season demands much and, for Howe's historical subjects, often causes madness in the form of hardscrabble Puritan faith, and the painful compromising of that faith, which begets the savage colonial American spirit:

Bleak necessity caused millenarian affirmations of destiny to thrive on misery. At Boston in New England, the distinguishing mark of a saint was that he or she could transcend adversity. Extremity was every Puritan's opportunity.¹³

The colonial period in what would become America was one of violent extremity, both in terms of the Native American genocide and

10. Howe, *The Quarry: Essays*, 38–39.

11. “silkworm peacock salamander / bee swan lion ostrich dove / fish basilisk camel eagle / taxo beaver weasel swallow” in Howe, *Hinge Picture*.

12. This assessment is in keeping with those of other critics, who note that Howe's approaches to landscape and nature have not remained “constant or even consistent” throughout her career. See Bloomfield, “Palimpsestual Tracts: Susan Howe's Rearticulation of Place,” 693.

13. Howe, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*, 90.

within the colonies themselves, for female colonists especially.¹⁴ For Howe, ecological thought demands consideration of these crimes. Through ideas and images of winter, she asks how the landscape brought the colonists to antinomianism—the rejection of law and affirmation of the supremacy of faith—and what effect this might have had on the country that would soon be established.¹⁵

Secret History of the Dividing Line, published 1978, is the first of Howe's books to study winter at length. In this book, the frozen lake is deployed initially as a visual technique. On this subject, Rachel Tzvia Back writes:

As much as directing the reader's attention to whatever currents and creatures may move beneath the ice, Howe's frozen lake image/picture expresses an interest in the surface itself—the startling solidity of waters and words, the material mystery that often resists penetration. The frozen lake image/picture also foregrounds the motif of reflections prominent in Howe's American works.¹⁶

14. "During its turbulent infancy, discourse in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, religious or otherwise, stirred by millenarian activism, fraught with puzzlement and rapture, fury and passivity, was charged with particular risks for women, who were hedged in by a network of old-world property values." Howe, 3.

15. Antinomianism in general, as well as the Antinomian Controversy that took hold of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s, are highly significant for Howe, and may be linked to her rejection of authority in poetry vis-à-vis any school or institution. See Howe, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*; Montgomery, "Lyric for Crossing Over," 41.

16. Back, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe*, 34.

“The ability to ‘walk on water’ is of special interest to New Englanders” (Zielinski 245). “‘What’s in a lake?’ / ‘Glass and sky.’” (*Secret History*, 14). Howe sees the glassy surface of the lake not just as a mirror, but also as a lens, images of which repeat throughout her work, significantly in one of her only short, freestanding, titled poems, at the end of her first book, *Hinge Picture*:

GLASS SHOT

a motion picture or television
shot in which part of the scene
is made through a glass plate
having other parts of the scene
painted on its surface¹⁷

For Howe, the frozen lake is a powerful symbol of perception, where the natural and the human ambiguously meet. Looking across, under, and through is fraught, and much has been said about the “interleaves” in Howe’s writing, the transparent surfaces and boundaries. Observing the frozen lake, there is “no time, no space, no motion” (*Secret History*, 28). Throughout *Secret History*, tense shifts fluidly and events lose their form and specificity: “the journey first / before all change in future” (*Secret History*, 8). In the annual freezing of a lake, Howe sees a larger freezing and thawing, going back beyond language’s “first dumb form” (*Secret History*, 8). She understands geological time not as beyond or behind the human, but as

17. Howe, *Hinge Picture*.

determinative of and determined by human experience, prefiguring Morton's influential framing of the Anthropocene.¹⁸

The oldest human footprints on the North American continent, in White Sands, New Mexico, tell us that people arrived between 21,000 and 23,000 years ago, at the end of the most recent ice age.¹⁹ At this time, like much of North America, what we now call New England lay under three miles of ice (Zielinski 11). Glacial activity was key to the development of the New England landscape, forming its lakes, ponds, mountains, and other characteristic features like drumlins, clusters of hills used strategically in battles (the most famous drumlins being Breeds and Bunker Hills). These features were of great interest to the European colonists as they sought to subdue the landscape, and are thus of great interest to Howe, who frequently depicts landscapes at moments of military conflict, as in the sequence "Articulation of Sound Forms in Time."²⁰

18. "The Anthropocene names two levels we usually think are distinct: geology and humanity. [...] The Anthropocene binds together human history and geological time in a strange loop, weirdly weird. Consider how personal this can get." In Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, 7–8.

19. Pigatti, "Independent Age Estimates Resolve the Controversy of Ancient Human Footprints at White Sands."

20. In his 1976 *New England Weather Book*, David Ludlum describes written records of Revolutionary War battles as meteorological historians' primary source of knowledge for the weather of that time. "Information on wind directions, precipitation types, and changes in temperature could be used to show where high and low pressure systems and associated fronts were situated at particular times during the battle," in Zielinski and Keim, *New England Weather, New England Climate*, 242.

In this sequence, the year is 1676 and the doomed Reverend Hope Atherton wanders the woods that surround the northernmost colonial settlement in the Connecticut River Valley, fleeing after an attack on a Wissantinnewag-Peskeompskut fishing encampment, which Howe notes in the prose introduction was one of many attacks on local tribes that spring. Captain William Turner's militia, in which Atherton served as chaplain, massacred around three hundred Native Americans, mostly women and children, just before nightfall on May 17. The sound of what are now called Turner's Falls masked the arrival of Peskeompskut warriors, and around fifty colonists were killed. In the scuffle, Atherton was separated from his unit and lost in the woods for several days. Howe writes that nobody believed Atherton's recounting of his experience, which he delivered as a passionate sermon on May 28, 1676.²¹ Exposure from this event would kill Atherton the following June.

In "Articulation of Sound Forms in Time," natural phenomena outside the range of human history become part of human history through Atherton's eyes, opened by hunger and desperation: "Bats glance through a wood / bond between mad and made" (*Singularities*, 33). Howe writes of the defamiliarized beauty of the Connecticut River as to Atherton it becomes increasingly alien and menacing:

The Now that is Night
Time comprehended in thought

Sullen chill uncertain
Solitude and chill uncertain

21. Orcutt, "Hope Atherton"; Howe, *Singularities*, 4.

Glacier cloud drifting

nimbus of extinction
mimic tracery mimic swaddling

week of dull day under hell-sky²²

In the introduction to “Articulation,” Howe describes Atherton as the “putative author, premodern condition, presently present” (*Singularities*, 4), illustrating the madness of even the godliest and “gentle-spirited” colonists and their legacy. Against the landscape, they don’t have a prayer. Howe treats colonial American literature (and perhaps all subsequent American literature) as a record of the immense pressure of the landscape on the English colonists’ Puritan faith, their “short-circuited conviction” in a God who “set an order [but] is not tied to that order” (*The Birth-mark*, 91, 50). New England’s “occult ferocity of origin” extends from the geological through indigenous history to bloody early America, a story of “paternal colonial efficiency [appropriating] primal indeterminacy” (*Singularities*, 40). Through landscape, Howe engages with the long and complex history of this appropriation.

Howe considers early American colonists to be refugees from agrarian uprisings as much as from religious conflict: “Schismatic children of Adam thought they were leaving the ‘wilderness of the world’ to find a haven free of institutional structures they had united against” (*The Birth-mark*, 48). One crack in the “haven” sought by the colonists was that the land they arrived at was already owned.

22. Howe, *Singularities*, 28.

Indigenous inhabitants of North America had complex property rights arrangements that varied depending on the agriculture and wildlife of each region, generally consisting of individual family-owned plots and an “outer commons” of shared but regulated hunting and fishing territory.²³ This system was not so different from what the colonists would establish for themselves in the “uncounted occupied space” (*The Birth-mark*, 49).²⁴ They hailed from a variety of European agricultural arrangements, from fully enclosed to open-field to collective, and many had firsthand experience of the harm done to the working class by land privatization and the resulting violence. By some accounts, in the early phases of North American colonization, it briefly seemed possible for European settlers to integrate “into an existing indigenous commons as part of an extensive network of places and resources governed by recognized rules of access” (Greer). Of course, in the end, there would be no recognition and no integration. Only until the Revolutionary War were collectivist remnants, such as village herds and common pastures, common in colonial New England towns.

The “European grid on the Forest,” (*Singularities*, 45) which fascinates Howe throughout both her European and American works,

23. Greer, “Commons and Enclosure in the Colonization of North America.”

24. “If we can generalize about enclosures and the inner commons in the early stages of the European occupation of North America, it would be fair to say that settlers laid claim to land sometimes as individual families cultivating self-contained farms, sometimes as a community sharing a given space and its resources. Typically, there was a combination of private property’ and collective management.” Greer.

is enclosure, the fencing-in of common land from the twelfth to seventeenth centuries that defined the landscape of England, and by colonial extension many parts of the world. Howe captures the nonlinear history of the New England landscape through constant effacement of enclosure's signs and signals:

Fence blown down in a winter storm

darkened by outstripped possession
Field stretching out of the world²⁵

She mimics this effacement in form by repeating stanzaic arrangements and then breaking them. One of many examples is the couplet in "Articulation of Sound Forms in Time," which first appears in the John Cotton quote in the sequence's introduction, then serves as the most-repeated though oft-shattered stanzaic form until the sequence's conclusion. Other negated images of enclosure in Howe's poems include overgrown fences, snowed hedgerows, a "green tree girdled against splitting," (*Singularities*, 31) a curious line in which a human cut (girdling) intended to prevent a natural fissure (splitting) renders the tree half dead, half alive. These images are typical of colonial and ecological violence—the parceling and commodification of the landscape that would come to define what we now know as America—but eradicated and re-erected, they also serve as haunting symbols of the lack of inevitability of these developments. "An author cannot let some definitive version of New England's destiny pull her" (*The Birth-mark*, 125); "if only this or that would

25. Howe, *Singularities*, 44.

happen” (*Secret History*, 14). Other paths history might have taken are always visible in Howe’s poems.

When Europeans arrived in the Americas, their understanding of the new world’s harsh and variable weather was as poor as the indigenous people’s was keen (Ludlum 108). The English colonists and their descendants experienced the weather of New England as a great mystery and a great nuisance, to the extent that the first poem published in America may be “New England’s Annoyances,” a folk song issued as a chapbook between 1630-1643.²⁶ For decades North American colonists remained curiously resistant to experimental or proto-scientific explanations of natural phenomena, more so than their contemporaries overseas. By the sixteenth century in England, almanacs provided calendrical and meteorological information alongside a wealth of other guidance, aphorisms, and humorous verse, outselling every English-language book except the Bible. In New England, weather information did not appear in almanacs until at least 1681, almost fifty years after they were first published in North America. “The English Puritans were opposed to making prognostications of the almanac variety,” (Ludlum 108) preferring the guidance of the Bible and the pseudoscientific astronomical writing of the Greeks (both of which also recur in Howe’s poems²⁷). In the words of Massachusetts almanac writer Nathaniel Ames, “The Book

26. There is some debate about the year of publication, as no copies survive. Anonymous, “New England’s Annoyances,” 1; University of Pittsburgh Center for American Music, “New England’s Annoyances.”

27. For Howe and the Ancient Greeks, see Montgomery on Howe’s treatment of Ovid, Pythagoras, and the pre-Socratics. Montgomery, *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority*, 57.

of Fate is hid from all created beings—in general we know nothing of the Connection of Things” (Ludlum 120). Absent an institutionalized and coherent understanding of Things, in the colonial period, “a mother tongue (English) had to find ways to accommodate new representations of reality” (*The Birth-mark*, 48).

Howe notes that of these representations was a new genre: “the only literary-mythological form indigenous to North America, the captivity narrative” (*The Birth-mark*, 89). She describes the story of Mary Rowlandson, one of the first books published by a woman in America, as “a forced march [...] deep and deeper into Limitlessness, where all illusion of volition, all individual identity, may be transformed—assimilated” (*The Birth-mark*, 96). Here the female Puritan colonist—a repressed and imperiled subject—is assimilated not into Nature, which Howe notes is never described as lovely or beautiful, nor into the grace of a “thundering,” administrative God, but into the wilderness. This assimilation, which has no moral character in and of itself, is key to Howe’s understanding of poetry.

Ideas of “wildness” and “wilderness” in Howe have borne up to several critical treatments, many of which follow Peter Nicholls in considering “Howe’s wilderness a text composed of gaps and traces” (Nicholls 589). In particular, much attention has been paid to the relationship between Howe’s notion of the wilderness and her topographically complex poems, which might suggest an unenclosed territory (or, per Bloomfield, a palimpsestic or “archival” landscape). Readings of Howe’s wilderness as text emphasize her frequent descriptions of the library as an outdoor space, suggesting a fundamental allegorical relationship between ecology and literary history. In keeping with Howe’s notions of the natural world, the library

is no sanctuary, glade, or clearing; it is enclosed, exclusionary, and constituted of “records compiled by winners” (*The Birth-mark*, 4). A reading of Howe’s wilderness that builds on the above might offer a notion that is spiritual and metaphysical in addition to intertextual.

Writing on “Pythagorean Silence,” Will Montgomery describes Howe’s version of Ovid’s metamorphosis as “a passing-into-stasis that retains ‘spirit’ within a ‘physical Universe’” (Montgomery 618). This useful formulation of Howe’s ecopoetics might also be described as a freezing. Howe’s signature ecological thought is of the “spirit” pinned in ice:

February seems
stable

clarity of frozen

Chance

veiled as ever

February ends

will go north through woods to the wood hoo
to call

what name?

Abstractions of the world’s abstraction
warm my icy feet²⁸

In these lines, Howe has moved beyond any particular landscape and mentions no historical or textural referent. What’s left is the lyric narrator—the shivering but ever-present perceiver—and

28. Howe, *The Europe of Trusts*, 28.

seasonality: the spirit and the physical universe. “February” could be construed as an enclosure of sorts, a human imposition on the landscape like a barn for horses, but it ends as quickly as it begins, without unveiling (thawing) anything. The question “what name?” reflects Howe’s characteristic movement from the specific to the mythological: in “Pythagorean Silence,” for example, Pythagoras, Pearl Harbor, Buffalo, Herod, Rama, Rhadamanthys, Rachel, Germany, Plato, Socrates, Mark, Arthur, Excalibur, Igraine, Eros, Eden, Lucifer, Penelope, Thales, Ocellus of Luciana, Newton, Achilles, Troy, and Flora all appear (Montgomery might add Hamlet, Daphne, and Ophelia). Like these names, the landscape at hand has slid into a state of permanent abstraction, “moving in solitary symbols through shadowy / surmises” (“Pythagorean Silence,” 74). The poem’s speaker is assimilated into this cold, dark space. It is an easy leap from here to the “heavens.” For the Puritans, understanding the wilderness as nameable (i.e., commodifiable, conquerable) but incomprehensible (i.e., abstract, amoral, unpredictable) overpowered scripture, causing antinomian revolution. This same contradiction is the root of Western science, physics especially—of which World War II is the brutal apex—as well as poetry, which paradoxically creates mystery by naming the unknown.

Though “ecological situations” appear throughout her work, Howe’s writing does not take on climate change in any programmatic way. She favors sustained moments of stillness over shifts, even in her writing about film.²⁹ Her poems shy away from the volatile

29. “*La Jetée* is made up almost entirely of stills. [...] Marker’s use of photographs and freeze frames in this film that calls itself a fiction is a compelling documentation of the interaction and multiple connections perceived

present and occur in past or conditional tenses, if there are verbs at all. In the twenty-first century, the long instant—a season observed to its depths, an immersion in literary history—increasingly seems a luxury. For Howe, who “has never declared a commitment to environmental issues as explicitly as those such as Jorie Graham, John Kinsella, and Juliana Spahr, for example” (Bloomfield 669), there is no other moment. The reader can meet this with patience or frustration. For the most part, Howe does not advocate against, or even acknowledge, ecological devastation beyond the occasional aside.

It can be difficult to consider poetry that does not acknowledge ecological devastation urgent. From 1895 to 2001, despite dozens of significant cold-weather events, New England experienced a “general warming in temperature for every state except Maine” (Zielinski 249). The twenty-first century has seen the continued global rise of these temperatures, and in New England specifically, the fastest decline in snow cover in North America.³⁰

The Source of Snow
the nearness of Poetry³¹

In the twenty-first century, even where winter persists, nature bears ubiquitous signs of having been dominated, especially in Europe and New England. Other poets are more sensitive than Howe

separately and at once between lyric poetry and murderous history. That’s the secret meaning. I knew it by telepathy in 1948...” in Howe, *The Quarry: Essays*, 111.

30. Young, “Global and Regional Snow Cover Decline: 2000-2002.”

31. Howe, *Singularities*, 50.

to these changes. To select an example almost at random, Juliana Spahr's poetry relies heavily on current events, from the geopolitical to the environmental: "When we turned sleeping uneasily poachers caught sturgeon in the reed-fringed Caspian, which shelters boar and wolves" (Spahr 12). The mythopoetic valence of history is lost here, or consciously eschewed, narrowed to a specific and generally Googleable event. Without that valence, ecological thought narrows to a sequence of tragic occurrences, an eschatology of sorts, in which nature is a victim of human intervention. Without speaking to whether that idea is true *now*, this was not the prevailing understanding even as recently as a few hundred years ago. Nature imagined as a more-than-fair combatant is what made the American landscape what it is: sectioned into 160-acre squares, cross-cut by highways, fracked and drilled, barren home to industries which no longer exist or which are dominated by corporations. Howe's ecopoetry is vast enough to encompass this hard-won, unstable arrogance, and in doing so, to suggest that the story has not quite concluded. The reader must keep in mind that Howe may, in fact, be wrong.

As Morton notes, "the ecological crisis makes us aware of how interdependent everything is. This has resulted in a creepy sensation that there is literally no world anymore" (*The Ecological Thought*, 30). Susan Howe is one of the last poets for whom "a true world" ("Pythagorean Silence," 54) still exists. Her poetry, written in the moments leading up to the rupture³² that Morton calls "holism,"

32. "I am a poet writing near the close of the twentieth century. Little by little sound grew to be meaning, I cross an invisible line spoken in the first word 'Then.'" Howe, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*, 47.

retains the ability to make meaning from the “twist.” In our time, poets and the well-intentioned may lose or forgo this ability, but deforesters look at the woods and see wood, paper, and profit. There is meaning left, but whose? Howe’s poetry serves to remind us that knowledge drawn from the landscape is a form of rationalism³³:

If winter landscape meets the being of the subject of the soul now and before, and conveys what is yours to join the finished pastoral invention of others that is rationalism’s secret.³⁴

Perhaps “what is yours” need not be only violence against landscape.

33. i.e., knowledge drawn from innate reason. See Markie and Folescu, “Rationalism vs. Empiricism.”

34. Howe, *The Quarry: Essays*, 45.

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