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# Sounding the Text: Susan Howe and David Grubbs's *Thiefth*

**Abstract:** This essay investigates the musico-poetic collaboration between Susan Howe and David Grubbs. Focusing on *Thiefth* (2005), the first of a CD series that collects *Thorow* (1987; 1990) and *Melville's Marginalia* (1993), it examines the forms, effects, and implications of the two works' remediation from printed to sonic product. At stake are notions of textuality and voice, as well as issues of margins and marginalization that Howe starts challenging on page. The shift from the written to the aural dimension does in fact intensify the poems' anti-representative and anti-narrative drive, extending Howe's dismantling of the visual frames. As the poet's selective, anti-expressivist and anti-performative reading increases her textual scattering and fragmentation, foregrounding the sonic and material aspects of language, so does Grubbs's experimentation with music, sound, and voice manipulation through the use of audio reproduction technology. If the insertion of pre-recorded ambient sounds generates acoustic effects that match the polyvocality and simultaneity of Howe's visual poems, music amplifies their inherent dissonance and release from the constraints of signification. This intricate web of sonorities does not only defy the authority, stability, and closure of the written texts. It develops an aesthetics of sound that augments Howe's graphic experimentation and calls for a listening practice that might draw attention to the margins of history and society.

**Keywords:** Susan Howe, David Grubbs, *Thorow*, *Melville's Marginalia*, audio textuality, vocal performance of poems, voice, sound, musical adaptation, acoustic technology, sound aesthetics, listening

"The origins of poetry may well reside in sound and song. But the transmission history of poetry depends upon visual forms," writes Johanna Drucker (237). Yet, if the invention of the printing press, in the 15th century, did turn poetic production from oral to (predominantly) visual composition, 20th century poetic history has recorded a significant return to orality. From avant-garde experiments in sound poetry to the flourishing of poetry readings since the late 1950s, from performance poetry to poetry slam, the medium of poetry has been variously tested. But what is exactly this medium? Is a poem, asks Brian Reed, "something heard? Overheard? Performed? Read silently on the page? . . . a bodily rhythm that prompts toes to tap and heads to nod in time?" (270). To give all these questions a positive answer is to acknowledge the "persistently 'multimedia' character of the art of poetry," which can be channeled in different means of communication (272).

Nevertheless, if *the medium is the message*, in McLuhan's dictum, what happens when a text shifts from one mode to another? Is it still *the same* text? Approaching different embodiments of a text implies coping with different aspects of articulation, production, and reception that rely on different perceptions, cognitive processes, and

relations (between authors, readers and a larger cultural-environmental context). Furthermore, in the face of its change, is it still *a text*? If, as Charles Bernstein reminds us, the very notion of textuality is associated with "the woven texture of written language, and, indeed, with visual inscription" ("Making Audio Visible" 963), the audio text undermines the stability, fixity, and closure of such a text, calling for a new critical attention.[1]

The conversion of a text from written to oral form, from "a mere evoked aurality," which is caught in silent reading, to oral "vocalizing" (Stewart 2), which turns readers into listeners, has radical consequences, on and off the page, that this essay intends to explore. The investigation is directed towards the recent vocal and acoustic turn of Susan Howe's production in collaboration with experimental musician David Grubbs. Since their first encounter in 2003, they have re-edited some of her previously printed texts (*Thorow, Melville's Marginalia*, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, *Frolic Architecture*, *Tim Tit Tot*) in audio CDs (*Thiefth*, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, *Frolic Architecture*, *Woodslippercounterclatter*) and exhibited in live performances, where the texts are re-enacted again and again. Inaugurating the series of transpositions, *Thiefth* provides an ideal ground of analysis for the purpose and scope of this paper. Not only does it cope with the eccentricities of Howe's page, but also markedly revises the printed sources. Furthermore, addressing issues of margins and marginalization from the double level of content and form, it provides a paradigmatic case for discussion on the transformations of the poems as they shift from the visual to the acoustic field, from landscape to soundscape.

*Thiefth* is the only product in its category that collects two different texts, namely *Thorow*, released in 1987 and later collected in *Singularities* (1990), and *Melville's Marginalia*, from *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (1993). Disrespectful of former textual boundaries, the compilation rearranges the presentation of Howe's work, affecting both her individual products (here conveyed in a new mode) and her full production (establishing new direct internal connections, this reassembly offers a privileged perspective on its concerns and orientation).

Apparently distant from each other, *Thorow* and *Melville's Marginalia* share structural devices and thematic concerns that *Thiefth* helps emphasize. In their printed form, for instance, they both include prose passages and rely on collage and graphic experimentation. Signaling boundaries, they both move to their eradication, performing an aesthetic as well as a political act.

*Thorow* was inspired by Howe's writer-in-residency in the town of Lake George, at the foot of the Adirondack Mountains, New York, during the winter and spring of 1987. Annoyed by the degeneration of the natural landscape under the effects of modernization and mass tourism, the poet undertakes an investigation of the past, back to the arrival of earlier European colonists, to examine what went wrong;

1 Interest has shifted to the material properties of sound (beyond conventional metrical studies), performance and poetry reading, sound technology and reproduction (Cf. Khan and Whitehead, Morris, Bernstein 1998 and 2009, Middleton, Perloff and Dworkin).

to recover unspoiled "forms of wildness," as well as to question and revise their representations: "re-reading re-tracing once-upon" (*Singularities* 41). Combining historical and literary sources, she draws from the papers of William Johnson, the eighteenth-century Irish fur trader who named the lake after King George, and Henry David Thoreau. Whereas echoes of Johnson can be heard in the first section of the work, Thoreau's notions of nature inform the second, which concerns Howe's experience of the lake. The third and final section, on the other hand, offers one of the most radical samples of Howe's experimentation with fragmentation and line scattering.

The genesis of the work and the intentions of the poet are illustrated in a brief but theoretically dense introduction that, divided into two parts, describes the circumstances (an untitled preamble) and offers a critical and literary background ("Narrative in Non-Narrative"). Whether Howe's view of the present, which can only offer dull replicas of the past, alludes to Baudrillard ("In winter the Simulacrum is closed for the season," 41), her vision of American colonial history echoes Todorov's assessment in *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. As she writes in a central passage:

> In the seventeenth century European adventurer-traders burst through the forest to discover this particular long clear body of fresh water. Pathfinding believers in God and grammar spelled the lake into *place*. They have renamed it several times since. In paternal colonial systems a positivist efficiency appropriates primal indeterminacy. (41, original emphasis)

The myths of the "Virgin" and "Promised Land" are here debunked in the face of their tacit imperialist ideology. In tune with Todorov's analysis, Howe describes colonization as a pre-eminently linguistic matter, tracing a direct link between naming and possessing. Conflating colonialism and patriarchy ("*paternal* colonial systems"), she points to a history of abuse perpetrated by men and exasperated by traditional rhetorical discourse that connotes the land as feminine. Relying on the power of language and representation, both systems suppress difference, which they confine to the realm of inarticulateness, by silencing and/or marginalizing the "Other" (natives as well as women). Yet, in the use of the poet, language turns from a means of control and possession to a means of liberation. Her alternative spelling for "Thoreau,"[2] for instance, opens the proper name to the "instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity" (42) described by Deleuze and Guattari (37), questioning the very act of naming (Back 51).

Explicitly mentioned only at the end of the introductory passage, Thoreau is

2 Other "misspelled" or, truly, archaic words ("thorow" is the old form for "through") recur in the text as an apt way to "'unspell' America" (Back 51), i.e. to set it free from the power of naming.

merely evoked through the punning effect of the title-word and allusions to his work in the poem. Howe's desire for the wildness, in the face of a modern landscape that is marked by economic exploitation and profit, echoes his. Yet, dissociating from him (unlike her, "Thoreau never visited the Adirondacks" (42)), Howe will not follow his path into nature but rather offer a critique of "The literature of savagism / under a spell of savagism" (49).[3] However attracted by the idea of returning to an originally pure landscape, she cannot inscribe her work within a tradition of literary representation she is criticizing.[4] On the other hand, to reassess the wrongs of history and literature, she must undo cartographies of power ("European grid on the Forest," 45) that have reduced the "primal indeterminacy" into a differentiated and hierarchical organization of space: she must break the boundaries imposed upon both land and paper. Shattering instruments of orientation and measure ("I pick my compass to pieces," 55), her poetic subject moves toward no established direction ("Dark here in the driftings / in the spaces of drifting," 55), crossing the land without conquering, listening to the landscape instead of naming its forms ("I heard poems inhabited by voices," 42), seized instead of seizing ("The Adirondacks *occupied* me," 42; original emphasis).

From an aesthetic point of view, this stance is embodied in the explosion of the typographic grid occurring in the last section of the poem, where Howe's typical line scatterings, rotations, and inverse mirrorings get rid of the directional axes (left-to-right, up-to-bottom) that govern reading, deeply confounding whoever approaches the text (cf. Dworkin 32). Regardless of conventions that are explicitly mentioned ("The Frames should be exactly / fitted to the paper, the Margins / of which will not per[mit] of / a very deep Rabbit," 56-57), any frame is indeed unsettled in this new indeterminacy. Margins are blown up, or absorbed, turning the page into an open field where words can move in any possible direction, i.e. where meanings and relationships are always negotiable (Figure 1).

3 "Savagism" refers to the biased vision of the Indian that was popular at the time of Thoreau. Montgomery acknowledges Howe's debt to Robert F. Sayre's *Thoreau and the American Indians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), who described a younger Thoreau as being "under the spell of savagism" (755). White, in her turn, reads a direct reference to Cooper, identifying precise allusions to his work: from "Scout" and "Pathfinding" (indicating Natty Bumppo) to "Mount Vision" (connected to westward expansion in *The Pioneers*) and the massacre at Fort William Henry in 1757, a central event in *The Last of the Mohicans* (246-255).

4 Cf. Howe's deconstruction of the wildness: "There never was such a pure place […] Uninterrupted nature usually is a dream enjoyed by the spoilers and looters—my ancestors. It is a first dream of wildness most of us need in order to breathe; and yet to inhabit a wildness is to destroy it. An eternal contradiction" (Beckett 21).

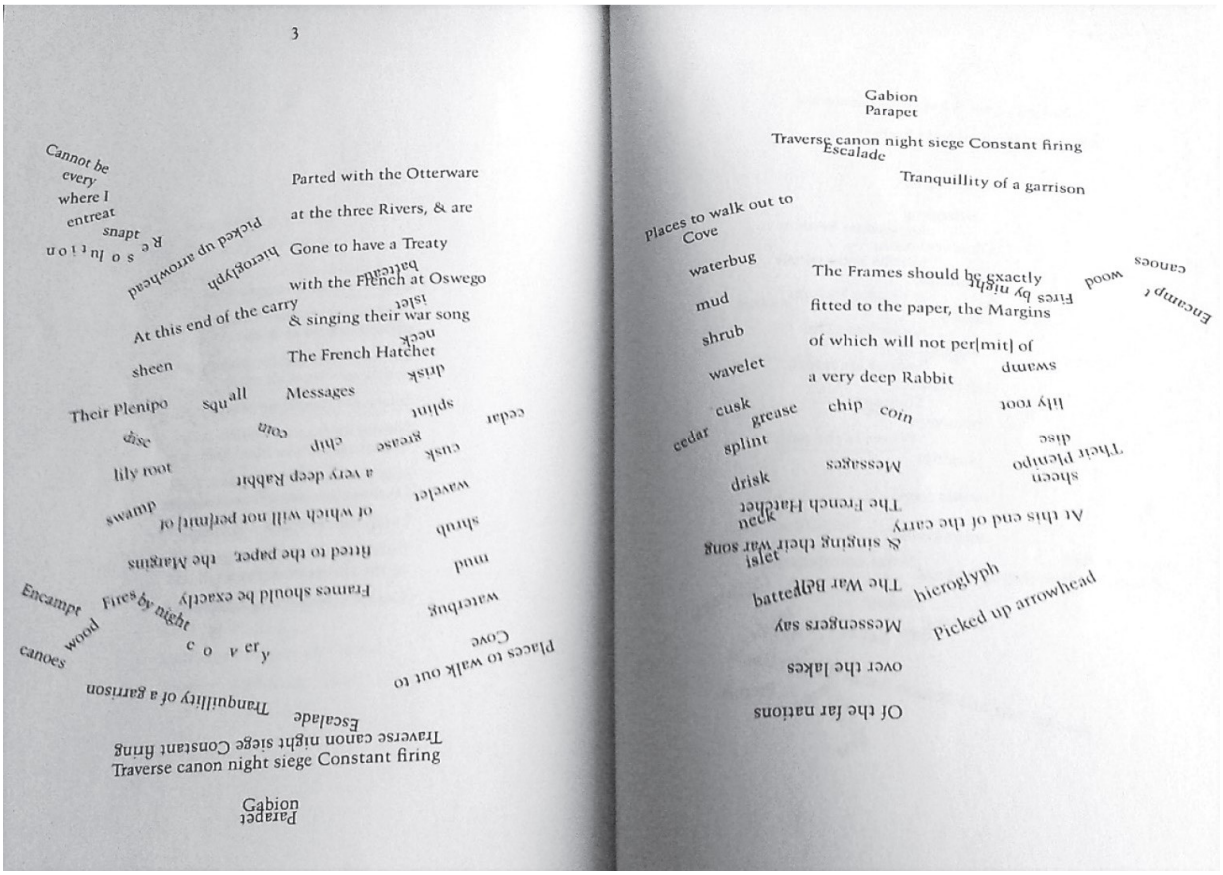


**Figure 1.** "Thorow" by Susan Howe, from *Singularities* (56-57), copyright © 1990 by Susan Howe. Reprinted by permission of Wesleyan University Press.

Under the effects of this disruptive poetics, the margin does shift from a peripheral to a central dimension in *Melville's Marginalia*. The work owes its title to Wilson Walker Cowen's homonymous edition (1987), which collects Melville's annotations in the margins of the books he possessed. Like the holes of history, this material, which is intrinsically ephemeral, precarious, and personal, attracts the poet's interest for its "persistent problem of eradication in the marginal body," with notes concerning women erased by Melville's wife and daughters (Howe, *The Nonconformist's Memorial* 90). As with the "voices" that fill the landscape in *Thorow*, Howe is driven by the *call* emanating from her source of inspiration, compelled by the revelations she receives in a sort of "mystic documentary telepathy" (Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars* 18). Hence her special focus, among Melville's readings, on the Irish poet James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849), after her unexpected, exceptional discovery: "I saw the pencilled trace of Herman Melville's passage through John Mitchel's introduction and knew by shock of poetry telepathy the real James Clarence Mangan is the progenitor of fictional Bartleby" (*The Nonconformist's Memorial* 106).

Like *Thorow*, *Melville's Marginalia* comprises prose passages that, providing contextual information,[5] help contain an eccentric poetic body in both structure

5 The prose sections include a preface, an additional statement on the genesis, purpose, and

(a collage juxtaposition of fragments) and layout (presence of capitalization, underlining, words and sentences turned upside down and/or arranged into diagonal lines, overlapping and line crossing, partially erased words, horizontal and vertical marks). At stake, here as well as in Cowen, is the disruption of textual hierarchies that printing, with its homogenizing, stabilizing and regulating force, does instead maintain. Reversing the relationship between center and margin, text and note, Howe's chaotic configurations oppose the tyranny and constraints of publishing processes, which restrict the freedom of writing by revision and censorship. Furthermore, sanctioned by the controlling power that presides over its release, and fixed by the rigidity of typographical characters, the printed text comes to offer a definitive, authoritative version that rejects alternative forms and meanings. "Printing ruins it" (147), declares Howe alluding to the reduction achieved by the medium. Print "settles" (150), establishing both order and dominion, colonizing the wilderness of manuscript material. Concerned with *confine*ment, it performs the task of a "sentinel" (150) in the prison-house of the book ("call whatever gaol a goal," 150).

Given these premises, what implications does the audio version of these texts entail? What is at stake in this new frontier of textuality, where transmission and reception privilege the auditory dimension despite Howe's great investment in the visual? The texts under consideration undergo complex transformations for Howe's vocal execution is amplified by Grubbs's contribution; the result is an interesting convergence of voice, sound, and music,[6] with a little help from audio technology, electric and digital. Like printed collections, the audio CD is divided into sections (the soundtracks) that reflect the earlier embodiment of the texts in book format. Reproducing *Thorow*, the first four tracks enact the tripartite structure of the printed source, corresponding to its introduction (track 1), part one (track 2), part two (track 3), and part three (track 4). Devoted to *Melville's Marginalia*, the fifth track flows without interruptions. Substantial difference, however, distinguishes the audio versions on a purely textual level, for the prose sections of the earlier formats are either massively disintegrated (*Thorow*) or utterly excised (*Melville's Marginalia*).

*Thorow*'s introduction, in fact, consists here in characteristic buzzing sounds that overlap and/or alternate with the notes of a baritone saxophone and of a fluteophone. Against this unfamiliar and disorienting sonorous background, the verbal text falls short, collapsing into a few isolated word fragments and phonemes involving

scope of the work, excerpts from Mangan's primary and secondary sources.

6 Implying anything that is or can be heard, "sound" is the broader category from which "voice" and "music" emerge, after a differentiation process that is historically, culturally, and socially determined. As "voice," through metaphorical associations that abstract it from the sonic, material properties of sound, came to be identified with individual identity, agency, authorship, authority, and power (Weidman 232), "music" developed as "rationalized and standardized sound" (Sakakeeny 117).

obstruction of the airstream, whether complete (stops /t/ and /k/) or partial (fricative /s/), which can neither cohere into discourse nor relate to the acoustic environment.[7] In the audio version of *Melville's Marginalia*, on the other hand, as the poetic body is itself abridged, the prose is definitively lost. The effects of these operations are highly destabilizing. Once the orienting frames of the books collapse, the contents drift, released as they are from any narrative that prefigures direction and purpose. Nor does the oral enactment provide listeners with an easy path to follow, for the peculiar intersection of different sonorities, from Howe's voice to Grubbs's experimentation with different kinds of sounds and music, increases uncertainty.

Indeed, "voice" is a problematic term in this context, for it remains tied to the notions of spontaneity, naturalness, self-expression, self-presence, and authorship that have been questioned in the work of language poets (cf. Bernstein, "Stay Straws and Straw Men," and Silliman et al.) and in the larger frame of post-structural criticism (Barthes, Foucault, Derrida). Marking identity and agency, its metaphoric associations have obscured the primary and literal sense of voice, i.e. sound produced by the vocal organs, and downgraded its sonic and material aspects to a secondary status and a disruptive function. As the privilege of signifying, authorial voice over bodily, material vocality is reflected in related binaries (referential meaning/other processes of signification, content/form, human/non-human, language/music, male/female), "voice" must be necessarily denaturalized in order to subvert hierarchies and inherent ideologies (cf. Weidman 233-234).

The joint production of Susan Howe and David Grubbs runs counter to the dominant concept of voice in different ways. For her part, the poet offers an anti-expressive, anti-performative reading that replaces *orality*, just a "reading style" emphasizing breath, voice, and speech, with *aurality*, which is instead concerned with what the ear hears, with the sound of the writing. Whereas the former privileges speech over writing, (signifying) voice over sound, listening (psychological act) over hearing (physiological act), the latter is entangled with the articulations of the body, including mouth, tongue, and vocal chords; it voices the poem rather than the poet; it is *a/orality*, i.e. the very negation of orality (Bernstein, *Close Listening* 13). Just as her visual experiments foreground the material aspect of writing, so does her reading emphasize the material aspect of sound, deconstructing to a higher degree any notion of voice that is related to individual identity. Technological mediation, finally, favors her objective. Dispensing with the sight and presence of the speaking subject, audio recording alienates voice from its "natural" source; depriving it of its originating body, it prevents direct connection with the writer, which threatens authorship, authority, and agency. This effect is then increased by Howe's own

7 As Wilkinson observes, most of these utterances relate to the final section of the poem (more coherent phrases like "you are of me," "I of you;" overlapping words like "blu/wov," "floted/folled;" repetition of "th;" stutters and cracks). Howe's introduction, on the other hand, literally explodes ("light letters exploded," 42) in sections 1 and 2, where surviving fragments fall over the poems.

emulation of sound reproduction technology, which is thoroughly in tune with her role of the poet-as-*medium*, who, listening to the voices of the past, speaks the words of others.

David Grubbs's testimony, as the poet's first and most attentive listener, is here revealing. "In performing her text," he says on *Thorow*, "she cuts words in a way that to me sounds *like audio tape* and *razor blade*. The very word 'thiefth' . . . proposes an analogy between our respective methods in its quality of having been spliced together from two sources" (Grubbs, emphasis mine). Grubbs's comparison of Howe's reading voice with both a modern device of audio reproduction and a sharp tool for cutting points to a technologized and depersonalized voice that is far from the spontaneity and fluidity of speech. The broken articulation he describes rather suggests a stuttering voice that, incapable of achieving unity and harmony, dramatizes rupture and dissonance. Emancipated from the yoke of reference and the solidification of meaning, utterances draw attention to themselves as sounds; released from lexical and syntactical boundaries, words and sentences strive for "primal indeterminacy" and liberation from signification.

Grubbs's assessment of Howe's oral delivery is based on the special vocalization of "thiefth," which, despite appearing only at the end of *Thorow*, is symptomatically given due prominence as the title for the CD collection. Unnaturally stumbling at the junction of the two word-units ("thief-th"), the poet foregrounds her contrived process of combination out of unrelated source fragments. Unbroken on the page, the term is cut off from any syntactical structure; it is the last of a few scattered, similarly constructed word-units that, detached from each other by larger portions of the blank page, are eventually torn from the void-silence that suppresses them (Figure 2).

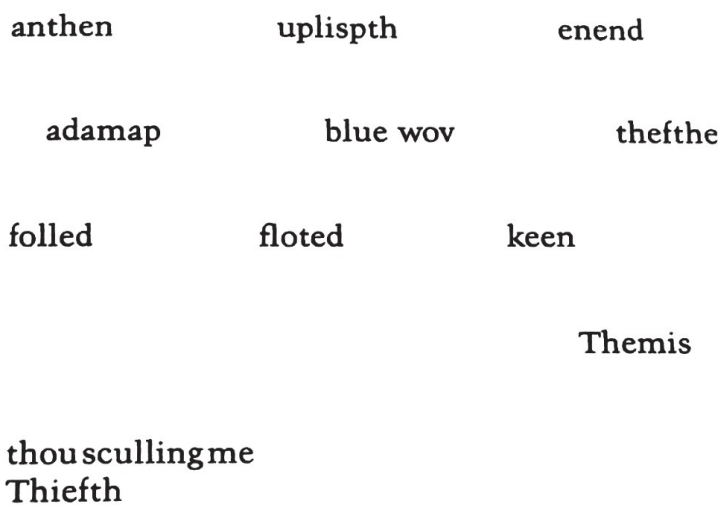


**Figure 2.** "Thorow" by Susan Howe, from *Singularities* (59), copyright © 1990 by Susan Howe. Reprinted by permission of Wesleyan University Press.

Yet, "thiefth" is certainly not an isolated case. *Melville's Marginalia* embodies a kind of dysfunctional speech, a stutter, as explicitly signaled from the beginning ("Crumple / and stammer out difficult," *The Nonconformist's Memorial* 94). Inherent in Howe's typical collage of fragmented sentences, which obstructs the flowing linearity of any discourse, this speech impediment is remarkably conveyed by Howe's hesitancy at individual phonemes and consequent hampering of elocution. Even if, unlike "thiefth," the stutter is visibly suggested on the page by the slipping of letters out of their lexical chains (e.g. "Traces *u* pon the comin *g* […] The bracket isn *t* closed", 121; "ame *n* of hal *f l* ight / alter wi *t h*willow /? water stain to right," 122—emphasis mine), it is in oral deliverance that this quality can be fully appreciated.[8] Howe's method reaches its apex in the poem on page 123 (Figure 3), where trouble in articulation is further suggested by the overlapping of typographical characters. Exemplifying revisions, this visual expedient introduces uncertainty, indecision, and change, threatening the supposedly fixed and closed nature of the printed text:

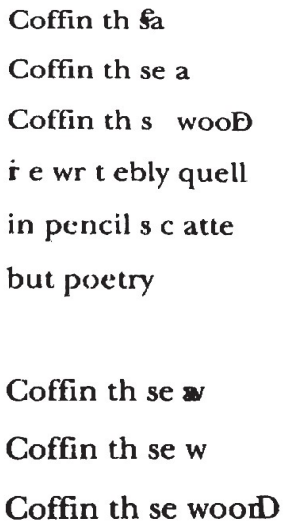


**Figure 3.** "Melville's Marginalia" by Susan Howe, from *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, copyright © 1993 by Susan Howe. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

8 Only in the stutter can Howe recover the voices—preeminently female (or feminized, like Billy Budd's)—at the margin of discourse: "It's the stutter in American literature that interests me. I hear the stutter as a sound of uncertainty. What is silenced or not quite silenced. . . . we are in the stutter. We were expelled from the Garden of the Mythology of the American Frontier. The drama's done. We are the wilderness. We have come on to the stage stuttering" (Foster 181).

Whereas, in silent reading, the eye can eventually reconstitute unity, helping readers acquire some kind of "fluency," Howe's vocalization truly embodies the hesitancy of speech that the written text can only evoke.[9] Stammering, as she interrupts her voice or repeats words and sentences in an effort for the right term, she has her listeners experience the sound quality of each phoneme to an extent she cannot achieve among an audience made up of mere readers.

If Howe's speech sounds unnatural, Grubbs's technological interventions add a higher degree of artificiality. Privileging the voiced text, Grubbs starts working from Howe's reading of her poems, which he tapes and listens to repeatedly (Grubbs). Audio recording, however, is instrumental to his work in a more invasive way. Relying on digital technology, he can in fact manipulate Howe's voice and enhance its capacities in ways otherwise impossible. With the help of a computer, he can split her sentences, pick fragments and play them over Howe's present reading, doubling, or even tripling, her voice to achieve peculiar effects.

Undoubtedly, this operation is highly effective to reproduce not just the polyvocality of Howe's textual dimensions but also the effect of simultaneous occurrence that, in the printed version, is suggested on the graphic level. In *Thorow*, this is the special case of the third and last section. As the random scattering and overlapping of fragments disrupt the linear progression of both writing and reading, so does Grubbs's manipulation of Howe's recorded voice, as he cuts sentences and overlaps fragments, triggering an audio experience based on simultaneous perception and chaos. In tune with the unsettling of the landscape/page implied by both graphics and war related terms ("Encampt," "Gabion/Parapet," "Traverse canon night siege Constant firing," "garrison," "escalade," "arrowhead"), any consistent voice that might ensure "historical truth" is disturbed by the assault of acoustic interference and intersecting articulations. Conflict reverberates in the clash between fast and slow, loud and gentle utterances as well as in the persistence of harsh sounds (/t/ and /s/) that convey cracking, breaking, and slicing (Wilkinson). The same strategies return in *Melville's Marginalia*, in both book and sound track. Yet, if on these occasions Grubbs's method matches Howe's experimentation on the page and helps the poet overcome the limits of the human voice, elsewhere it signals a more independent use by the musician, who responds to, or interprets, Howe's text.

In *Thorow*, for instance, Grubbs extends the use of this stratagem to the first and second sections of the work as well, which, in printed form, display a more regular and relatively conventional configuration. In a few poems, he plays pre-recorded sentence fragments extracted from the introduction over Howe's vocal performance,

9 Howe is here emphasizing the material conditions of poetry with an allusion to the physical properties of the book: from the cover ("coffin") and binding ("sew") to the origin of the paper pages ("wood") where words are printed. As Dworkin observes, "coffin," "resonating between 'tomb' and 'tome,'" was also a technical term in press printing and paper manufacture (43).

which results in transitory but effective attacks on the sequential development of both writing (the text on the page) and reading (Howe's). Unlike readers, listeners are led astray once again: deprived of a guide, once the introduction is blown into pieces, they get lost in a muddle of words as they enter a polyphonic landscape that exactly defies "Apprehension as representation" (54), the writer's central object of criticism. Even if saved from disintegration, these fragments compromise comprehension; unless they are listened to several times, they are difficult to detect. Furthermore, even if reconstituted, they would still be missing their original context. Why, therefore, and to what effects, does Grubbs increase the opacity of the verbal text?

The musician relies on these interventions to stress and further develop the poet's denunciation. In the first section, for instance, words like "snow" and "once-upon," which are torn from the end of the first introductory passage,[10] are played over contradictory and iterative lines: "Must see and not see / Must not see nothing / Burrow and so burrow /Measuring mastering" (45; track 2, 0:54-1:03). The ensuing reverberation amplifies the multiplication of perspectives accomplished by the text, whose ambivalence warns against the duplicity of European colonists, who came as both explorers and conquerors ("Measuring, mastering"), who loved and yet exploited the land. Voice proliferation is then symptomatic of alternative stories, which can be recovered only by a revisionist approach to historical discourse, "re-reading re-tracing once-upon."[11] Elsewhere, this vocal irruption reflects and intensifies the violence of history deprecated by the poet, turning war—the "Armageddon at Fort William Henry" (51)—into the object of an auditory experience (after the perception of conflicting voices),[12] or helps undo the mapping and enclosing of the land, with its intrinsic transgression of spatial and temporal boundaries.[13]

In *Melville's Marginalia*, on the other hand, Grubbs devises one more "trick" for the listeners, splitting and turning the same poem against itself. Regarding the text on page 125, for instance, he works with the two halves of a poem (made up of 12 lines, it is divided into two sub-units of 6 lines each), having one overlap the other.[14]

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10 "Let myself drift in the rise and fall of light and snow, re-reading re-tracing once-upon" (41).

11 For the same reason and effect, this operation is repeated concerning the following, contradictory lines: "New life after the Fall / So many true things // which are not truth itself / We are too finite" (49; track 3, 0:11-0:17).

12 In compliance with the contents, Grubbs launches his attack by overlapping the most explosive sentence ("Work penetrated by the edge of author, traverses multiplicities, light letters exploding apprehension suppose when individual hearing," 42) over the lines "I stretch out my arms / to the author // Oh the bare ground // My thick coat and my tent / and the black of clouds" (51; track 3, 2:00-2:08).

13 The fixed borders designated on the page ("Most mysterious river // On the *confined brink* // Poor storm / all hallows // and *palings around cabin*," 53, emphasis mine) are shuttered by the incursion of words that emphasize instability ("Every name driven will be as another rivet in the machine of a universe flux," 42; track 3:18-3:28).

14 Here is, for convenience, the full text: "One forever occupied / stood on the path / with

The voiced text, consequently, evolves in a different way once released from the page. Starting from the middle of the second half ("Roisin Dubh means Ireland"), it goes on with the first line of the first half ("One forever occupied"). From now on, the two sections are delivered simultaneously: as the first flows regularly, the second, commenced in mid-way, runs back to its beginning, climbing upward. In the process, we hear two Susans, two voices with different pace and tone (quicker and pressing, concerning the first part; slow and meditative, concerning the second) that almost compete with each other, diverging rather than converging. In fact, even if they overlap, they never fully merge. Since the superimposition starts from the second sentence, the initial lag ensures that the "two voices" begin and finish at different times, providing only two clearly distinct but unrelated utterances, the first ("Roisin Dubh means Ireland") and the last ("a spectral creature on a ladder"), neither of which conforms to the line sequence of the printed poem. In between, the vocal clash undermines the stability of an already precarious text, whose transmission and experience are here totally transformed.

In like manner, the hesitancy of Howe's text, voiced as well as printed, is matched by Grubbs's acoustic interferences, or noises,[15] which cause disturbance and an increased sense of precariousness. The artist introduces synthetized and digital sounds as a background to Howe's reading voice or in between her stretches of speech, filling the silence of the white page. Disjointed from their original contexts, these simulated or recorded sounds imply an operation of de- and re-contextualization that parallels collage in the visual arts. Challenging listeners' comprehension, such a process invites them to develop meaning from the juxtaposition of unrelated backgrounds. Signaling discontinuity and rupture, it threatens to disintegrate listening and communication; on the other hand, this breaking of constraints can also release new possibilities of sound formation, expression, and signification.

In *Thorow*, vocal and musical executions are interspersed with or backgrounded by persistent buzzing and crackling noises that disturb enunciation, increasing indeterminacy. Abstracted from their sources, they prevent the recognition of a precise or familiar environmental context, generating some kind of anxiety. Likewise, in *Melville's Marginalia*, Grubbs pre-recorded and employed the distracting sounds he could hear at home while working on the text: dripping water, empty apartment creaks, melting snow, airplanes (Grubbs). Set in the new context, they provide further

whispered information / that that person / was Clarence Mangan / a spectral creature on a ladder / *all his souls was in the book / in his arms / Roisin Duhb means Ireland / On earth I guess / I am bound by a definition / of criticism*" (emphasis mine, to signal the split).

15 Like "voice" and "music," "noise" is also part of sound, denoting its material aspect and general property ("noisiness"). As a relational concept implying difference, it bears negative connotations once defined against music (music is "beautiful" and "desirable;" noise is "unintentional" and "unwanted"), in technologically mediated communication (noise as interference compromising the reception of the message), and in social contexts (where it names the inarticulate voices of marginal subjects). Cf. Novak 126-131 and, on the subversive potential of noise, Attali.

distractions, pairing the disruption of Howe's stuttering voice. Furthermore, the sounds of creaks and melting snow provide powerful acoustic metaphors for the crumbling of Howe's text and its changing state from the printed to the sonic dimension.

If digital and synthetized sounds, which point at a high degree of manipulation, produce acoustic effects that are equivalent to Howe's visual texts, supporting her voice when not capable of pairing the visual strategies employed on the page, instrumental music provides more than a mere accompaniment, more than just background. Itself a "reading," in the sense of "interpretation," it helps and supports Howe's audience of listeners. Experimenting with the sound of different instruments, Grubbs pursues effects that are inspired by Howe's performance. In *Thorow*, baritone saxophone variations, which are further lowered in pitch, are contrasted with the higher notes of the fluteophone, which parallel Howe's vocal flight out of lexical and syntactical boundaries.[16] In *Melville's Marginalia*, Grubbs joins Howe's cacophonous performance with music he composed and recorded for the piano and a brief excerpt from the recording of a Baroque violin concerto (Grubbs), juxtaposing dissonant notes for an altogether dissonant work.

Yet, in spite of the distinctions traced here, the boundaries between voice, sound (or noise), and music are continuously blurred, with a consequent convergence of each category into the others. Pre-recorded and manipulated to achieve specific effects, Howe's voice is turned into one more sound that cuts across Howe's performance. Nor is the poet's "live" execution exempt from the same process. Not only is it mediated by sound recording, but Grubbs's artifices never let the medium "vanish," never make it "transparent."[17] Music, too, undergoes a similar process of manipulation and objectification. Played by Mats Gustafsson, the notes from baritone saxophone and flutephone, in *Thorow*, have been pre-recorded and then conveniently "played" by Grubbs as Howe reads her text. In *Melville's Marginalia*, on the other hand, Grubbs integrates pre-recorded melodies and ambient sounds, which interfere with the verbal text in a complex, multilayered, acoustic dimension.

Enhanced by the musical arrangement, sound, and vocal manipulations of David Grubbs, Howe's voiced texts offer one more embodiment in the life of a poem

16 The music for *Thorow* took inspiration from Charles Ives's "Concord" Sonata, divided into four movements, the last of which is called "Thoreau." Here is a part for flute intended to represent Thoreau as playing his flute at Walden Pond. Grubbs asked Swedish musician Mats Gustafsson to record variations on this theme on the fluteophone, an instrument Gustafsson had created by squeezing a saxophone mouthpiece into the body of a flute (Grubbs).

17 Turning the means of sound reproduction into a "vanishing mediator" is to generate the illusion of direct, unmediated communication and prevent that "loss of fidelity," or "*loss of being*," that distinguishes a "copy" from its "original" (Sterne 218, original emphasis). Playing back Howe's pre-recorded voice over Howe's voice, *Thiefth* invalidates this dichotomy and the supposed value of "authenticity," itself a construction. Indeed, it manifests a new originality as "the possibility of reproduction transforms the practice of production" (Sterne 220).

that controverts the authority, stability, and closure of any "original," written text.[18] Her kind of selective reading, where portions of the printed works are skipped or exploded into a few, almost indiscernible fragments to be played over her voice, points to the dynamic potential of any text that printing, on the other hand, would inhibit. Whether the textual history of Howe's written products shows the poet engaged with a re-editing process that significantly transforms her previously published works, her oral instantiations affect more deeply the nature and reception of the texts. Her kind of anti-performative reading, intensified by compositions that precisely resist performance, shifts attention from language-as-word to language-as-sound, which, in turn, requires a parallel shift from *semantic* to *reduced* listening.

Whereas *semantic listening* looks at language to interpret a message, neglecting the acoustic properties of phonemes, *reduced listening* concentrates on sound itself, as an object rather than a mere vehicle. Acousmatic listening in particular, i.e. when someone hears a sound out of context, without seeing its cause, reinforces this mode since it directs the auditors' undivided attention to sonic textures. At the same time, it might also elicit *causal listening*, the most common of the three, with disoriented auditors in need of information about the cause or origin of what they are hearing (cf. Chion 48-52). Yet, even in this modality, listeners remain subject to vagueness. Not only does a sound usually have plural sources, especially if mediated; a recognizable source might still "go unidentified and unnamed indefinitely," as with a familiar radio announcer whose name and physical traits are not known by the audience (Chion 49). Entangled in an intricate web of sonorities, Howe's listeners are similarly asked to become familiar with sounds and voices that, removed from naming, evade repression in the political, social, and aesthetic domains.

Accordingly, the poet's turn from mere evoked aurality to oral vocalizing denotes a shift from an aesthetics of vision to an aesthetics of sound that does not contradict her visual experimentation but rather extends it. Howe's anti-representative, language-centered poetry, in fact, repudiates sight, which is exclusively bound to the eye and limited to a singled perspective, for the multidimensional potential of vision, which is instead open to multiple views and calls for integrated perception and cognitive processes: "Vision is eyes hearing, hands smelling," writes Bernstein ("Words and Pictures" 142). In this regard, sound offers a unique escape from optical hierarchies and restrictions. As sound artist and scholar Salomé Voegelin suggests, sonic perception "is free of the visual stronghold on knowledge and experience. Sound does not describe but produces the object/phenomenon under consideration. . . . It does not deny visual reality but practices its own fleeting actuality, augmenting

18 In this regard, Bernstein questions the unbalanced relationship between the written text, intended as an "immutable original," and the supposedly derivative nature of its performance, understood as interpretative recitation. Nor is there any "primary" written document as such, for even written texts exist in a variety of parallel versions (from manuscript papers to different printings), or "textual performances," "none of which can claim sole authority" (*Close Listening* 8).

the seen through the heard" (10). If, in the visual field, the subject contemplates and controls the object from the outside, in the auditory field, characterized by dynamism and surroundability (Ihde 73-83), there is no separation between the heard and the hearing. Sound can therefore question the notions of subject and object, and relationships between the two that reflect distance, hierarchy, and power. The aesthetic subject *in* sound is rather "defined by interaction with the auditory world" and "entwined with the heard" (Voegelin 5). Furthermore, being dynamic and evanescent, sound makes the very object of perception "unstable," "fluid" and "ephemeral," "unsettling what *is* through a world of sonic phenomena," "unsettling the idea of visual stability" (Voegelin 12, original emphasis).

Writing to unsettle visual frames, which reflect social and political dynamics of power and exclusion, Susan Howe's collaboration with David Grubbs successfully integrates visual and acoustic fields, increasing the capacity of both. Releasing sounds that, in the linguistic economy of the "paternal colonial systems" denounced in *Thorow*, are "incoherent, inaccessible, muddled and inaudible" (Howe, *Singularities* 21)—i.e. the "noise" of marginal voices—she calls for listening as an aesthetic practice that might challenge the way we see and act in the world (Voegelin 12), drawing attention to the overlooked and the unheard.

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