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abstract fragments," is too ingrained to be offset by an exacerbation of their discrete enclosure of space.[81] The layout of pages even in *Fin de Copenhague* ultimately enacts the very structures Debord critiques.

This may seem a rather petty and harsh assessment of Jorn and Debord's work, arrived at only after interrogating the most trivial and incidental aspect of a book which otherwise, as I have just been arguing at some length, displays an exemplary Situationist practice. But the significance of such details, and the unflinching attention they require, is precisely the lesson a radical formalism might learn from that Situationist practice. The dream of politics requires both a sleepless watch, an insomniac vigilance Argus-eyed and lidless, and also—as the title of Michèle Bernstein's manifesto announced in the premier issue of the IS—"Pas d'indulgence inutile [No useless leniency]." We awake into the dawn of the dream of politics with precision, and "oui, l'heure nouvelle est au moins très-sévère [yes, the new hour is, at the very least, quite severe]."[82]

Rien ne se passe d'essentiel où le bruit ne soit présent.

—Jacques Attali

There is no such thing as silence.

—John Cage

2. The Politics of Noise

Unmasking the "Face of the Voice of Speech"

"How often do critics consider poetry as a physical act? Do critics look at the print on the page, at the shapes of the words, at the surface—the space of the paper itself?" Having posed these questions, Susan Howe accusingly answers: "Very rarely."[1] In the last chapter, we saw the consequences of overlooking precisely such details; having tested the relation of certain physical poetic acts against the specific political claims of the Situationists, this chapter will turn to a more general examination of the political dynamics of the text at those moments when it threatens (or promises) to become illegible. As in the previous chapter, I will continue to explore the degree to which textual and bibliographic details can motivate the work within which they not only signify and provide material support, but also continually offer points of resistance, contradiction, and the necessity—for both readers and writers—of making irrevocable ethical decisions. By way of example, I will focus on the writings of Howe herself, who began her artistic career as a visual artist and has in fact been one of the rare exceptions to the critical blindness towards the most visual acts of poetry. In her important scholarly work on American literature, and especially on the manuscripts of Emily Dickinson, she evinces a close attention to visual prosody: the look of texts on the page and their necessary imbeddedness in the materiality of that page through details like size, cut, color, and watermark.[2] "Messages," as Howe wittily asserts, "must be seen to be heard to say."[3] One might, of course, question the extent to which Howe reads her

own poetic concerns into earlier writings, but whatever the answer, her treatment of others' works stands as a good model of how her own poems, and their visual prosodics, might be considered.

The unconventional look of Howe's pages is the most immediately noticeable aspect of her poetry; the inconsistent leading and spacing of the earlier poems has given way to cut and scored-through type, overprinting, lines set at conflicting and intersecting angles, and even type set backwards and upside down. Surprisingly, this is one aspect of her work which critics have consistently noted but failed to seriously address.[4] In part, this may well be due to the difficulty of talking about visual prosody; we lack a sophisticated critical tradition and ready vocabulary. In fact, when such matters are considered at all, any radical deviation from a printing norm is generally taken to be a more important classificatory element for poetry than the underlying theoretical conceptions of representation, performance, or the relationships between text, space, sound, and so on. Critical accounts all too often class together essentially different writings under a single rubric like "visual poetry," which is somehow meant to encompass everything from ancient Greek *technopaginae* to the work of the Brazilian Noigandres group in the middle of the twentieth century to Flash animated digital poetry. So, by way of approaching what Howe's visual techniques accomplish, I want to start by very briefly situating her work in terms of what it specifically does *not* do in comparison with other experiments in typography and spatial composition.

Just as Howe's scholarly project in American literary history has involved "unsettling" the "European grid on the Forest," her poetic project has involved unsettling the grid of the page.[5] While Howe's earlier field compositions and word grids challenge their audience's reliance on conventions of reading (left-to-right, top-to-bottom), her subsequent turn to rotations and inverse mirrorings, in works such as *The Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* and *Eikon Basilike,* confound a reader's expectations by eliminating the very directional axes on which those conventions are based. Moreover, when such radical disruption gives way to palimpsests which render some words entirely illegible, it becomes clear that Howe's graphic maneuvers are not, like the texts of poets as diverse as Louis Zukofsky and Denise Levertov, at the service of finely modulating a vocal realization of the poem—and this is true despite Howe's virtuoso readings of her own poems. Those pages which are left "to be read by guesswork through obliteration" do not constitute a guide to greater syntactic clarity or a score for performance, and this in itself is an important distinction between Howe's

work and the majority of even visually experimental writers.[6] Additionally, the viewer of such pages is immediately aware that in contrast with the Italian or Russian futurists—or even contemporary commercial advertising and design—Howe does not exploit the "expressive" potential of varied inks and types, or even, like Mallarmé, different fonts.[7]

One section from Howe's long poem "Melville's Marginalia," however, does make a more direct allusion to what is perhaps the most famous example from the history of typographic innovations: Apollinaire's "Il pleut" ("It's Raining"). This visual rhyme should serve to emphasize the distance which separates Howe's work from that of other twentieth-century experimentalists. "Melville's Marginalia," in part, is a consideration of the life of the Irish writer James "Clarence" Mangan. Explicitly noting the "feminine softness of his voice," Howe translates the rain of ghostly feminine voices from Apollinaire's page into the "verbal phantoms" raining down on her own.[8] Mangan, a figure who "has been all but forgotten" in the current academic memory, is one of the "Writers in these publications" which Howe plunders for her material and "Whose name appears and disappears forever"—quite literally—into the near illegibility beneath the "Churchyard and grave": "voix . . . mortes même dans le souvenir" indeed.[9] As Howe argues, however, this "relative unacquaintance" was not always the case, and "Melville's Marginalia" is saturated with over half a dozen bemused and reverential anecdotes describing various encounters with Mangan. These snippets, like the "gouttelettes" of Apollinaire's second line, could each be entitled "merveilleuses rencontres de ma vie."[10] Two such droplets, in fact, frame the "verbal phantoms" section and foreground the significance of its allusive layout; the previous page contains a citation which describes the "spectral-looking" Mangan as a phantom figure "who never appeared abroad in sunshine or storm without a large malformed umbrella," and the text which follows the section concludes: "Sometimes, even in the most settled weather, he might be seen parading the streets with a very voluminous umbrella under each arm."[11] With the repetition of this odd detail, readers—like Mangan—are indeed prepared for the rain.

Rather than pursue the thematic correlations between these two poems, I want to emphasize the fact that Howe's poem, by calling attention to the rain in this way, both evokes "Il pleut" and also emphasizes the dissimilarity between the texts. The raining words in Howe's poem, to quote from its second vertical distich, move in their "liquid clearness" from the "sky" to the "horizon" in "pure lines"; the *line,* that is, forms Howe's basic unit of both prosodic and spatial composition, and deviations from

the conventional horizontal axis in her texts arise primarily from the manipulation of lines rather than of individual words or letters. Moreover, her lines are also "pure"; Howe's visual constructions are dominated by a geometrically strict linearity. In contrast, the words and lines in *Les Calligrammes* curve and circle in uneven waverings; diagonals are generally formed by angling individual letters rather than the rotation of a conventionally typeset line, and the printing of some of the calligrammes ultimately gives way to the "whirlwind handwritten" text of an even more aggressively alinear hand-lettering.[12] Apollinaire's appeal to the calligraphic (beyond, even, the calligrammatic) has been similarly exploited by writers from Aleksei Kruchonykh to Robert Grenier, and it is conspicuously absent from Howe's oeuvre.[13] One should also note that the illustrative aspect of this section of "Melville's Marginalia" is entirely atypical; Howe's writing is generally not—like that of Apollinaire or George Herbert—shaped, pictorial, or even schematic. Accordingly, the relationship of image and text in Howe's disrupted pages is, as I hope to show, more rich and sophisticated than in the vast majority of so-called "concrete" poetry descending from Apollinaire.[14]

While some of the more visually innovative pages from William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* or Charles Olson's *Maximus* poems may be an inspiration closer to home, one precedent for the look of Howe's essentially linear constructions can be found not in some modernist or postmodernist avant-garde, but rather in Samuel Richardson's mid-eighteenth-century novel *Clarissa Harlowe.* (See figure 1.) *Clarissa* is not one of the source texts for "Melville's Marginalia," but a comparison of a page from each reveals similarities which are both striking and significant (as well as uncanny; note the central exclamation in the fourth stanza of Clarissa's poem: "O my Miss Howe!").[15] (See figure 2.) Both pages share an identical overall layout: five horizontal sections above a smaller indented grouping, flanked on the right by a vertical fragment and on either side at the bottom by fragments angled to form a "V." With descriptions that evoke the visual surface of some of Susan Howe's work, Clarissa's writing in this section of the novel appears in a series of papers and "scarce broken letters" found "torn among fragments"; after she "tears, and throws . . . these rambling papers . . . in fragments," they are transcribed, reconstructed, and described as "Scratch'd thro'" and "Torn in two pieces," and they then culminate in the graphically represented dislocations of "Paper X."[16] Clarissa's letter is written immediately after she has been raped, and the text's shift from prose to disrupted verse is obviously meant to be emblematic. The spatial

PAPER X.

LEAD me, where my own thoughts themselves may lose me;
Where I may doze out what I've left of Life,
Forget myself, and that day's guilt!—
Cruel Remembrance!—how shall I appease thee?

—Oh! you have done an act
That blots the face and blush of modesty;
Takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent Love,
And makes a blister there!—

Then down I laid my head,
Down on cold earth, and for a while was dead;
And my freed Soul to a strange Somewhere fled!
Ah! sottish Soul! said I,
When back to its cage again I saw it fly;
Fool! to resume her broken chain,
And row the galley here again!
Fool! to that Body to return,
Where it condemn'd and destin'd is to *mourn!*

O my Miss Howe! if thou hast friendship, help me,
And speak the words of peace to my divided Soul,
That wars within me,
And raises ev'ry sense to my confusion.
I'm tott'ring on the brink
Of peace; and thou art all the hold I've left!
Assist me—in the pangs of my affliction!

When Honour's lost, 'tis a relief to die:
Death's but a sure retreat from infamy.

Then farewel, Youth,
And all the joys that dwell
With Youth and Life!
And Life itself, farewell

For Life can never be sincerely blest.
Heav'n punishes the *Bad*, and proves the *Best.*

Death only can be dreadful to the Bad
To Innocence 'tis like a bugbear dress'd
To frighten children. Pull but off the mask
And he'll appear a friend.

I could a Tale unfold—
Would harrow up thy soul—

By swift misfortunes
How am I pursu'd!
Which on each other
Are, like waves, renew'd!

Figure 1. Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa* (1747)

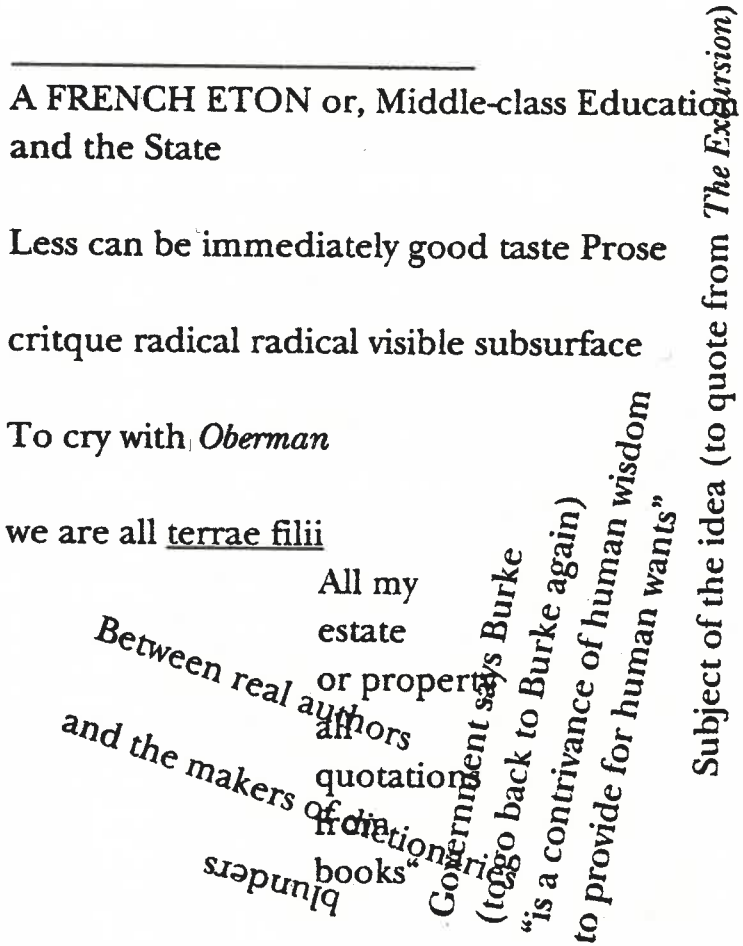

Figure 2. Susan Howe, "Melville's Marginalia" (1993)

portrayal of this distracting, visually confused and over-articulated layout mirrors the accompanying verbal descriptions of Clarissa's distracted, confused, and inarticulate thoughts; with conflicting axes breaking in on one another, the physically violent disruption of "Clarissa" conflates both the body of the text and the body of the character into a "word flesh crumbled page."[17] As the novel's subtitle promised, this is a work "Particularly *shewing* the Distresses that attend . . . Misconduct" [emphasis added]. The visual aspect of Richardson's page, that is, enacts a thematic aspect of the narrative but without any claims to a pictorial representation.

Howe structures her own writing within a thematics of mythical and historical violence: Pearl Harbor, the colonizations of America and Ireland,

pursuits and exterminations, captivities and expulsions, regicide, revenge. In her works, these specters fuse with the violent silencings that haunt the history of literature itself, to become "Battles . . . fought ferociously / on paper."[18] Howe's poems, moreover, refer explicitly to their own place in the textual records of such violent histories. Constructed—like most academic essays, and including this chapter itself—only at the expense of other writers' "Texts / torn from their contexts," and filled with "words / torn to pieces by memory," her poems physically appropriate and dissect the language of others, often with a deft *détournement:* "I can compose my thought," a line from "Melville's Marginalia" reads, and then continues: "I will dismember marginalia."[19] Figuring poetry and sentences as, respectively, "a play of force and play / of forces," these poems ultimately begin to absorb all textual practices into the terms of violent action, so that even the seemingly innocuous transliterative or transcriptive act of recording the numeral 1 as the letter "i" encodes, in Howe's formulation, an "eye for an eye."[20] Her poems thus link together, to quote two lines themselves linked in the poem "Scattering as Behavior toward Risk," the "violent order of a world" with an "Iconoclastic folio subgenre."[21] The poems, that is, mate their themes to the visual violence of the image-*breaking*—the icono*clasm*—of Howe's disrupted folio pages. On the fragmented and indeterminate surfaces of those pages

> War
>
> approaches its abstract form Play
> of possibilities
>
> probabilities
>
> [. . .]
>
> Confusion
>
> of lines bisecting shred
> after shred.[22]

"I had unleashed a picture of violence," Howe explains in reference to the most graphically extreme pages of her poem *Eikon Basilike,* and as her fragmented pages participate in the very processes of violence which they critique, they graphically enact the destructive and deconstructive elements of her project with a visual foregrounding that forces the reader to confront these themes as well.[23] Moreover, Howe's radically disrupted page

situates its readers in a position from which they might more empathetically respond to the issues of power addressed by their thematic treatment of personal and cultural violence. Faced with the aggressively restive, almost alien language of her pages, readers are likely to find themselves grappling with a discourse from which they are excluded and about which they must struggle to say anything at all; they may come one step closer, that is, to the position of Howe's personæ: Anne Hutchinson, Hester Johnson, Ophelia. In the process, those readers must directly and personally come to some kind of terms not just with their response to power, but also with what Howe has called our culture's strong "contempt for powerlessness."[24] In both cases, the two denotations of "apprehension"—"visual perception" and "anxious unease"—come together on the page of Howe's poetry.

To view Howe's poems, like Clarissa's letter, as the visual record of their narrated violence is an analogic reading, and this is one way to interpret the typographic space of her poetry in general. The visual surface of her pages illustrates at a literal, physical, and spatial level the much more complicated lessons of the texts' thematic, semantic, and conceptual planes. Howe's mirror pages and repetitions of inverted and reversed text blocks, for example, echo both her own ironic citational techniques as well as what her *détournements* teach her readers about the historical abuses and dangers of language: that the same words can always be turned around, or made to say the opposite, that the voices of others—like the type on the page—can be all too easily manipulated and twisted. Similarly, Howe illustrates the link between "Lenses and language."[25] As her own "reading through" source texts reminds us, language is always reflected and refracted through other points of view. Howe's poetry questions received perspectives and centers of power as it attempts to occupy, or at least to approximate, traditionally neglected positions, a point driven home when readers must physically rotate the page or crane their necks to make out exactly what is being said in a visually decentered field. According to her statement for the New Poetics Colloquium, part of Howe's project has been to recover "voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate," and the occasionally illegible surfaces of her texts physically embody her thematic point that voices can—even if incompletely—be lifted from the brink of erasure, obscuration, and obliteration.[26] By showing "the face of the voice of [their] speech" through her disruptive visual prosody, Howe attempts to reveal "the machinery of injustice" to readers who must visually consume the edgy lyrics of a radical, visionary sensibility whose "whole being is [itself consumed] by Vision."[27]

"Incoherent inaccessible muddled inaudible": one poem catalogues

those voices that Howe attempts to recover while simultaneously hinting at the unconventional linguistic form their recovery takes: "Irascible unknowable disorderly."[28] This association between politically marginalized figures and the "noise" of her difficult poetic parallels Howe's thematic connection of noise and political violence. The first poem in Howe's collection *The Europe of Trusts,* for example, opens with the autobiographical statement: "For me there was no silence before armies," and later in the volume she specifically registers guerrilla resistance and political struggle as "noise and noise pursuing power."[29] Such intersections of marginalization, violence, and noise are precisely the nexus explored by Jacques Attali in *Bruits* (*Noise*), his "essai sur l'économie politique de la musique [essay on the political economy of music]." Attali's book is typical of a certain genre of French essay writing, but despite its cursory treatment of widely scattered and selective evidence, and a tendency toward glib oversimplifications, its historical investigation of sonic culture succeeds in positing an innovative cultural model that allows one to read music as an anticipation of social change. Sound arranged into music, Attali argues, "simule l'ordre social, et ses dissonances expriment les marginalités [simulates the social order, and its dissonances express marginalities]."[30] He then traces the threatening noises at the edge of the dominant social order to mythical scenes which strongly evoke the milieu of Howe's earlier poetry: the edges of the forest beyond the hamlet in some dark fairy tale, the itinerant piper of some medieval legend, the banshee, *la mandragola, die Lorelei, rusalka.*

Listening to the noises at the margins, in many ways, sets the parameters of Howe's project, and the violence which she hears there continues the logic of Attali's own investigation. In contrast to music, which he glosses as a channeling of noise, "*le bruit est violence:* il dérange. Faire du bruit, c'est rompre une transmission, débrancher, tuer. Il est simulacre de meurtre [*noise is violence:* it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder]."[31] This association, in Attali's analysis, extends beyond the tropes and metaphors of information theory: "le bruit a toujours été ressenti comme destruction, désordre, salissure, pollution, agression contre le code qui structure les messages [noise had always been experienced as destruction, disorder, dirt, pollution, an aggression against the code-structuring messages]."[32] This potential to disrupt the message, to unsettle the code of the status quo, is what makes noise more than simply the record of violence. Noise is also, as Attali argues, the potential for new social and political orders. Accordingly, Howe's poems can be read as "waging political babble" with their

programmatic recovery of the noises of historically stifled voices through a "critique radical radical visible subsurface."[33] In Howe's case, the political "battle" becomes inextricably intertwined with the "babble" of noise. That connection, and the importance of the battle, is precisely why the experimentalism of poetics like Howe's—and her "bluntly uncompromising and problematic" visual prosody in particular—cannot simply be dismissed on account of its difficulty in favor of the less arduous and less discomforting strategies of more conventional verse.[34] So, before returning to the politics of the critique mounted by her poetry, this essay will continue to look closely at the "babbles" which rise to its radical, visible surfaces.

Listening to the "Visible Surface of Discourse"

Vigilance! Les récupérateurs sont parmi nous!
—graffito, Paris 1968

One day, in the mid-1950s, in a Harvard University laboratory, John Cage walked into the supposed silence of an anechoic chamber, only to hear the persistence of sounds from his own nervous and circulatory systems; he would write: "Silence . . . is nonexistent. There always are sounds . . . . Something is always happening that makes a noise."[35] Illustrating this assertion with the famous composition *4'33"*, Cage translated the white canvases of Robert Rauschenberg from a visual to an auditory medium. In both cases, the works foreground the material circumstances of their art: what must always already be present before any "message" can be relayed. When asked what a canvas would look like if she had to paint her writing, Susan Howe responded: "Blank. It would be blank. It would be a white canvas. White."[36] As her answer might hint, Howe's visual prosody does in fact retranslate Cage's version of Rauschenberg's "audible silence"—although without the radical minimalism of either—into the terms of textual language.[37] That final translation answers an emphatic "yes" to Cage's query: "If sounds are noises but not words are they meaningful?"[38]

The even, straight, oddly clinical lines of even the disrupted page from *Clarissa* grate with the epistolary pretense of that novel and throw into contrast the differences between the "tangled scrawl" of a handwritten letter and the typeset book page.[39] The linear uniformity of the type in Richardson's book marks both the medium and the mediation of print; "print settles it," Howe notes in "Melville's Marginalia," and she further signals this gap between the manuscript and even the most scholarly transcriptions both implicitly, with quotations from the editorial apparatuses of facsimile editions, and explicitly, with phrases such as "printing ruins it."[40] In contrast, say, to Emily Dickinson's orthographically expressive fascicles, the calligraphy of which Howe reads so attentively, Susan Howe's own manipulations draw attention to the *printer's* art: struck and cut type, the leading and the set of lines. Indeed, the predominantly linear and blocked type in Howe's work can, like Richardson's, be read in its composition as a reference to the compositor, and such references are reinforced by the refusal of some pages to operate on the conventional assumption that the visual text is a score for the voice. To appropriate Peter Quartermain's assessment of one of Howe's poems, the disrupted page "emphatically and unabashedly draws attention to itself as text, as written rather than spoken language."[41]

Such visual references to the typographic are again consonant with an explicit thematic subject which Howe has engaged throughout her literary career: the material production of texts. One of the first pages in *Eikon Basilike* opens with the lines "No further trace / of the printer"; the entire poem, however, like so much of Howe's recent writing, is constructed primarily of precisely such traces.[42] These poems foreground not only "the printers faults," itself a faulty line due to lack of an apostrophe, but also the so-called "accidentals" of written language: conventions of capitalization, abbreviation, spelling, and alphabet.[43] With all of these elements, Howe calls attention to the very conventions which, when slightly torqued or antiquated, themselves call attention to the illusion of the transparency of the printed page, and she thus emphasizes her own works' status as printed artifacts. Even without such visual markers, many of the fragments in her poems constitute the remnants or evocations of inscriptions, dedications, colophons, and printers' advertisements—what might appear, in short, to be the "driest facts / of bibliography": signatures and the stamps of borrowers, pagination, watermarks, the frontispiece and flyleaf, the cropping and binding, all manner of codicological measurements and descriptions: condition, copy, edition, provenance.[44] "I have taken the library," one text announces; "I am at home in the library," another counters, perhaps referring to Howe, perhaps to James Mangan, and certainly to itself.[45] Indeed, even on those pages of "Melville's Marginalia" that do not have the confused look of palimpsest, the visual layout of centered columns of equally lengthed lines moving paratactically in fragmented units creates the appearance of larger, originally coherent texts read through a narrow window. These pages give the reader the impression of browsing through library catalogues, skimming over title pages, flipping and scanning as the eye and

the mind catch isolated words and phrases. In short, this visual layout situates the reader in a position which simulates that of the poem's subject: the roving librarian Mangan who, instead of classifying, browses and dreams irregularly.[46]

In addition to foregrounding the material pages of other books, Howe's poems frequently draw attention to their own pages as well, in part by conflating the space of the page with an evocation of the distinctly Northeastern rural setting which recurs throughout her work. This sylvan mise-en-scène is linked in part, of course, to her concern with "wilderness" and a certain historical and colonial "American" landscape, with what is culturally marginalized and at the margins of culture. Moreover, this setting also consistently and insistently identifies the material origins of her own pages in the wood pulp which has been the common ingredient in the manufacture of paper since the end of the nineteenth century. Within this "land of pages" where "Leaves are white," Howe collapses "passage" with *paysage* as she constructs a general logic that associates "the tracks of the rabbit" with "scribbling," "forest trails" with "lines," and forest "streams" with "ink."[47] Even more insistently, the second section of *The Nonconformist's Memorial* opens by suddenly drawing the reader's attention to the visual image of the wavering drift of print at the right-hand margin of the text; the first three lines read: "Arreption to imagery // of drift meadow edge / of the woods here."[48] The final locative self-reflexively references the line break itself and the conflation of "words" and "woods," "meadow" and "margin" at an "edge" where the "white" "December / Snow" of the following stanza blurs with the "pale bright margins" found later in "Melville's Marginalia"—a poem which itself then records Howe's attempt to follow the (printed) foot*prints* of Melville through the traces of his own marginal pursuits as "Tracking a favorite writer / in the snow . . . / of others."[49] Moreover, the poem suggests that such trackings mark their place by "The leaf s turned down": the leaves, that is, of both the pages and the trees from which those pages come.[50] Howe's poems constantly remind their readers that like "leaf," the words "folio," "biblio-," "book," "codex," and "paper" all reference—etymologically—writing's material origins in fibrous plants.[51] The specifically ecological import of such references is nicely sized up by the anxious repetition in the title of the opening poem of Howe's collection *The Europe of Trusts:* "There Are Not Leaves Enough To Crown To Cover To Crown To Cover."[52] With an echolalia that itself evokes the concatenous verse form of a "crowne" (in which the last line of a stanza is repeated in the opening of the next), the threat of exhausted resources hovers

behind a string of terms that all refer to both foliage and bibliography; a "crown" denotes the upper canopy of tree leaves as well as an oversized (15 × 20-inch) sheet of paper.

Indeed, in addition to stationery references such as "White foolscap" and "ass skin," Howe's oeuvre also includes many more explicit references to the specific paper on which the poems themselves are printed.[53] Like the phrase "bark of parchment," for instance, the "sylvan / imagery" of the poem "Pythagorean Silence" makes what Jerome McGann has insightfully read as a reference to "the material origins" of the page in forests which no longer exist.[54] The poem opens:

> We that were wood
> when that a wide wood was
>
> In a physical Universe playing with
>
> words[55]

This trope of the "word forest" recurs throughout Howe's more recent work as well, with lines that emphasize "the wood siege / nesting in this poem"—a poem where in fact "Language" becomes not a "food" but "a wood for thought."[56] An entire section of the book-length "Articulation of Sound Forms in Time" is entitled, significantly, "Taking the Forest," and its implicit transformation of the "wood" into the "word"—a graphemic and phonemic proximity which reminds readers that in the "physical Universe" printed words are never far from the transformed wood of their page—is concretely illustrated by one of the pages from "Melville's Marginalia." (See figure 3.) With the "rewrite" literally inscribed into the jumbled letters which open the fourth line of this page, the poem invites the viewer to "see" the "coffin" and "sew"—the cover and binding—as well as the "wood" on which the "word" physically, typographically, comes to rest after its lyrical permutations through anaphora which itself may also remind the reader that the emphasized "coffin," resonating between "tomb" and "tome," was a technical term in both paper manufacturing and press printing.[57]

Writing out of a diverse experimental tradition in American poetry which is unified in part by its attention to the "materiality of the signifier" (a phrase which already sounds rather tired), Howe reinvigorates a consideration of the material conditions of poetry. Howe's visual prosody cooperates with her poems' thematics to reference the status of her works as artifacts in printed books, and she joins other cross-genre artists such as

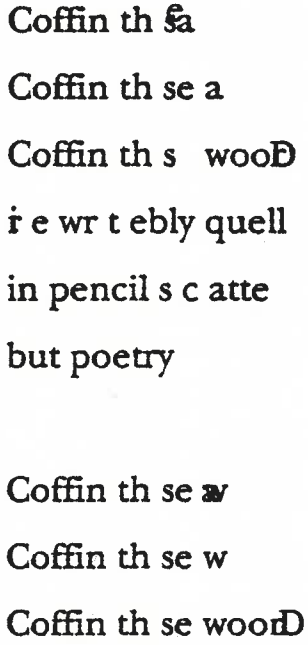

Figure 3. Susan Howe, "Melville's Marginalia" (1993)

Johanna Drucker and Tom Phillips who have focused on what was still, surprisingly, the primary material medium of poetic texts in the late twentieth century: "The figment of a book."[58] In the terms of information theory, that is, Howe foregrounds both the data and the channel of their transmission. Moreover, by referencing the page and the book through particularly restive and disruptive means, Howe also signals the noise in that channel. One can see this nexus clearly come together in a double pun suggested in "Melville's Marginalia"; the section of the book which contains this poem opens with an epigraph from Melville's Bartleby: "I like to be stationary." The homophonic play on the scrivener's materials and his immobility is then troped in "Melville's Marginalia" itself with a quote from James Mangan, whom Howe takes to be the "progenitor of the fictional Bartleby":

> there is a prospect of ultimate repose for most things; even the March of Intellect must one day halt; already we see that pens, ink, and papers are—stationary.[59]

As Howe understands, stationery—the pen, the ink, the paper—is not, as Mangan suggests, always "immobile," but it is always "static": that is, the "noise" in the channel of poetry.

Howe also hints at the ubiquity of that static with one of the pages from *Eikon Basilike*.[60] As if mapping trajectory lines of motion, the chronophotographic convention developed in painting by the futurists (recall Balla's *Leash in Motion* or Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*), the sequential but irregularly patterned lines of text which fan from the lower left-hand corner of the page can be read as representing or reenacting the fall of a tree, replete with the reverberation of its impact: the jarring "aftershock / Aftershock." The image on this page, indeed, contains its own caption: "So falls," one of the lines reads, "that stately l Cedar." Beyond the rare mimetic iconicity of this page (repeated at the level of the line with the "stately," upright, unfelled caesural mark which separates "stately" and "Cedar"), the visual layout of the page encodes a sort of rebus into the background of the text: "if a tree falls in the forest . . . ?" The proverb recasts as an interrogative the statement by Attali which I took as this chapter's epigraph: can we ever escape noise, and if so, does anything significant occur in its absence? This page's off-kilter set of lines, overprinted type, and mentions of "rabble" and "peculiar spelling" suggest the answers: when trees fall to produce books, one medium of lexical signification, they do indeed, necessarily, make noise.

When Howe makes manifest the "visible surface of Discourse" by explicitly linking the *faktura* (*фактура*), or materiality, of her texts with their medial noise, she highlights what the Russian futurists called *zvukopis* (*звуколись*), the "noise emitted by the surface of the work of art."[61]

One emblematically noisy surface can be found on a page from "Scattering as Behavior toward Risk," an examination of which will also illustrate once again the way that Howe's poems present a concept through both a denotative and an analogously visual arrangement of their words. (See figure 4.) This page is filled with terms that refer to the sphere of communication ("discourse," "Meaning," "Narrative," "the sayd," "Watch-words," and so on), and the repetition and emphasis of "common" ("in common," "communism," and twice with "common-wealth") gesture toward "communication" through the Latin *comunis* from which they all directly descend.[62] Additionally, in the context of "Saxon harmony sparrow that lamentation," which suggests Bede's famous account of the conversion of King Edward, "aboord" might well evoke the Anglo-Saxon *abeodan,* "to deliver a message." As in any system, however, noise proliferates hand in hand with an increase in the terms of communication. With the accretion of words like "muttering," "lamentation" (with its own etymological roots in barking and nonsense), "brawling" (which in its proximity to "lamenta-

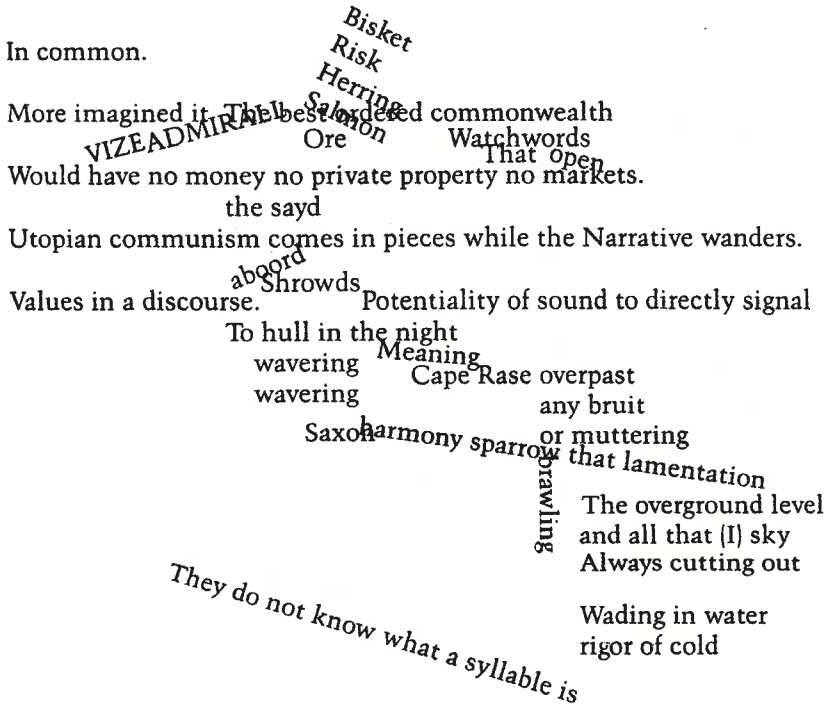

Figure 4. Susan Howe, "Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk" (1990)

tion" evokes "bawling"), and "bruit" (which in French, of course, is simply "noise"), the poem builds up a vocabulary of incoherent utterances which suggest that this page is far from a realm of "perfect" or "Utopian" communication. Moreover, the phrase "the potentiality of sound to directly signal" not only brings into question the possibility of perfect communication, but also evokes the phrase "signal-to-noise ratio," the very measure of the impedance in a channel carrying data.

That impedance, which Howe might call the "impediment of words," is precisely what Michel Serres—playing on the French term for "static interference"—has identified as the "parasite, the Demon, the prosopopoeia of noise."[63] Serres's parasite is that term which is always (already) present in any medial technology and which, paradoxically, is actually necessary for any communication or exchange of data to take place at all. In this sense, one might again translate Attali's polemical assertion, this time into the terms of information theory: nothing significant (or *signifying*) occurs in

the absence of noise. Attali provides the following definition of such medial "noise":

> Un bruit est une sonorité qui gêne l'écoute d'un message en cours d'émission. Une sonorité étant un ensemble de sons purs simultanés, de fréquences déterminées et d'intensités différentes. Le bruit n'existe donc pas en lui-même, mais par rapport au système où il s'inscrit: émetteur, transmetteur, récepteur. Plus généralement, la théorie de l'information a repris ce concept de bruit (ou plutôt la métonymie): on y appelle bruit pour un récepteur un signal qui gêne la réception d'un message, même s'il peut avoir lui-même un sens pour ce même récepteur.
>
> *Noise is a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission. A resonance is a set of simultaneous, pure sounds of determined frequency and differing intensity. Noise, then, does not exist in itself, but only in relation to the system within which it is inscribed: emitter, transmitter, receiver. Information theory uses the concept of noise (or rather, metonymy) in a more general way: noise is the term for a signal that interferes with the reception of a message by a receiver, even if the interfering signal itself has a meaning for that receiver.*[64]

In relation to the conventionally set page (like the one you are reading now, for instance), the page from "Scattering," like many of Howe's poems, is inscribed with examples of Attali's "bruit" and Serres's "parasite": misaligned and skewed type, archaic word forms and apparent misspellings, stutterings and omissions, reduced leadings, palimpsests, and a whole host of irregularities which move the text beyond opacity to a near illegibility in which readers—as the last line complains—sometimes even "do not know what a [particular] syllable is." Such medial noise is one of those "Values in a discourse" which "shrowd" "Meaning" in a message that is always "wavering // wavering" between coherence and nonsense.

Howe realizes that "Letters sent out in crystalline purity" are always received "Muddled and ravelled" to some degree, because, inevitably, "messengers falter."[65] With the recognition that there can never be static-free channels, Howe's aggressively "noisy" work resists the temptation to elegiacally view the dynamics of medial systems as mechanisms for loss. Rather, it celebrates their falterings and disruptions as an "ecstasy of communication." With an ear attuned to the pleasures of noise, Howe writes from out of the static: ex-static, indeed. The visually prosodic extremes of Howe's

poems amplify the noise accumulated in her source texts, and they serve to remind readers that not only her own poems, but all the works contained in the libraries she mines for her material, all those books to which her readers will return, are infested with parasites, however much they indulge in the illusion of the transparency of the page. If conventional texts can be seen as attempting, always futilely, to suppress the parasite, to exorcise the Demon, then—accordingly—one can read a wide range of contemporary texts, like "Scattering" or "Melville's Marginalia," as instead *emphasizing* their medial noise.

By explicitly making the noise in the channel and the noise of the channel itself into data—that is, making them a part of the message ("Sound," as Cage might have characterized it, "come into its own")—Howe briefly short-circuits the parasitic economy and reminds readers that the facile distinction between "message" and "noise" must ultimately deconstruct itself.[66] Serres's Demon haunts a space at the margin of all technologies of the word, a space which he names the "torus": that point at which data deteriorate to noise, and from which noise itself always suggests some signification. As Howe pushes syntax and sound to the margins of intelligibility and coherence she explores the jagged edge of that torus with a language that is highly evocative, if at times no longer conventionally "meaningful," and her visual prosody does the same. Indeed, even when eliminating lexical meanings altogether—as in an unintelligible palimpsest—the visual surface of the black ink on the white page still operates in a space of difference. The material text cannot ever completely escape from the republic of signification; it simply crosses the border from the canton of "literary" to that of "visual" art.

Just as Howe's poetry works in this way to unsettle any facile relationship between "message" and "noise," so Attali's work cautions that noise is not in and of itself necessarily radical or subversive. Noise can indeed undermine power structures, but it can also "absorber la violence et à réorienter les énergies violentes [absorb violence, and . . . redirect violent energies]," or be played into the hands of the very orders which it threatens: "monopoliser le droit à la violence, provoquer l'angoisse pour sécuriser ensuite, le désordre pour proposer l'ordre, créer le problème que l'on peut résoudre [monopolize the right to violence; provoke anxiety and then provide a feeling of security; provoke disorder and then propose order; create a problem in order to solve it]."[67] This is precisely the danger, as I have already suggested in the first half of this chapter, when experimental writing like Howe's stands as a foil to conservative new formalisms. But there

is another, perhaps more serious, risk as well. "Un réseau peut être détruit par des bruits qui l'agressent et le transforment," Attali argues, only "si les codes en place ne peuvent normaliser et réprimer ces bruits [A network can be destroyed by noises that attack and transform it, if the codes in place are unable to normalize and repress them]."[68] Even critical and scholarly work that pays close attention to the disruptive possibilities of visual prosody runs the risk of neutralizing the very disruptive potential it identifies. Such work must try to avoid co-opting those disruptions for its own rhetorical ends, and might instead attempt to communicate noise in the way one might communicate a disease. There is a strong temptation to recuperate the resisting and unsettling potential of "noise" as a "message" which can be absorbed into the very code it challenges, so that it can then be safely consumed by traditional hermeneutic strategies as simply another part of the message's "meaning." This chapter—indeed this entire book—is itself a prime example of the way in which noises get accepted into the system, get inside us, become, in short, *les parasites:* infecting, spreading, and disabling, but also structuring, adapting, mutating, mimicking, colonizing. The very look of texts like Susan Howe's "transmit," in Jerome McGann's terms,

> the simple signal of an emergency or a possible emergency. Stop. Look. Listen. They are Thoreauvian calls to awakening. This may be a special and relatively localized awakening—to the resources of language, to new possibilities for poetry—or it may involve more serious ethical and social questions.[69]

This chapter has been the signal of an emergency as well. Beyond a simple crisis of faith, it has sacrificed its principles—enacting the conservative rather than the liberating potential of *les parasites,* exhibiting "power" rather than "force" in Deleuze and Guattari's terms—and its redemption lies in the degree to which that enactment has in fact led to a local awakening: to your recognition of its failure. But not, perhaps, its failure alone. Because you are implicated and complicitous as well; this has been a litmus test, registering the point at which you identified its self-contradictory claims and the disjunction between *what* was being said and *how* it was being said in a text for which the subject of each was in fact the other. Stop. Look. Aggression, progression, recombination, return. Listen carefully.