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Uncovering History through Archival Poetry: Susan Howe's *The Midnight*

If at the heart of language lies what language can't express, can it be false to say that the
golden mountain which exists exists?

— Susan Howe *The Midnight*

Susan Howe's *The Midnight* seeks to express the many “inexpressible” truths that exist within language and literature. She demonstrates the unique power of poetry to explore materiality as a means of uncovering obscured or alternative histories. Through her oeuvre, Howe turns to marginal archival resources to illuminate unexplored narratives on the “dark side of history” or to destabilize established histories (Arnold 113, Barbour 134-135). Howe uses these methods to question the objectivity of history and demonstrate its materiality as she “works through and against history” (Arnold 113). She continues this practice in her 2003 book, *The Midnight*, which acts as an elegy for her mother, Mary Manning, while drawing in histories of bookmaking, of poetry, of America and Ireland, and of her extended family to “agitate” for a “reconciliation with her mother” (Martin 769). Manning was an Irish actress who emigrated to Boston and married a Harvard professor; this transition produced a sense of dual identities in both Mary Manning and her daughter, Susan Howe, that is at the heart of *The Midnight*'s archival poetry. Howe's archival poetry provides her with an avenue to explore the aspects of her dual identity that may conflict with or conceal one another and allow her to reconnect with the

untold stories of her late mother. Howe thus uses materiality to explore the myriad of identities and histories created by these events that exist within herself, her mother, and her family by foregrounding the materiality of the book, the poem, and the word. Howe juxtaposes inherited items from her family members with the histories, books, and poems that have influenced her to uncover narratives that have been lost in translation or transitions.

These inherited artifacts, books, and words, hold the multiplicity of histories that their owners did, as artifacts living are extensions of their owners. Further, to Howe, each individual word holds its own history, “all words run along the margins of their secrets;” her use of the word “margins” signals her attention to marginal notes and marginalized histories, illustrating that words themselves hold marginal meanings and histories for poets to explore. Through evoking the materiality of words, poems, and books Howe can enter into the history, the “secrets,” of a word and find her family (Howe 48). Materiality refers to the sense and attention to the physical materials that comprise a book, poem, and word; the processes used to produce the book, the paper, and the poems, and the histories of those processes and their products. Howe uses words as material components that can be stripped and broken down, exploded, and distorted to build poems and books.

Her sense and understanding of the materiality of words are informed by her encounter with the theory of dialetheism which allows her to explore the multiple histories hidden within singularities. Howe explains how dialetheism helped her understand the existence of “two(-way) truths,” that one word may have multiple meanings, and realities that are inexpressible but still true (Howe 69-70). Ultimately, “there are true contradictions” that can exist (Priest, et al.) This understanding of the multiplicity of truths allows Howe to explore the layers of hidden stories that make up a poem, a book, or a person. In *The Midnight*, Howe engages these theories when

examining poems and artifacts of her familial history to uncover the buried or conflicting truths that exist but are inexpressible. Howe employs this theory to demonstrate the materiality of history, books, poems, and words and the multiplicities that exist within them. Howe's inherited books and their marginal notes are woven into her texts to create spaces in which the inexpressible can be explored (Barbour 151). Anne Keniston views Howe's archival poetics as a means of "belatedly [gaining] access to previously lost 'spectral sel[ves]'... by examining the artifacts [family members] left behind" (Keniston 167). This essay demonstrates how through exploring the materiality of these artifacts and their interactions, Howe can view the multiplicity of truths hidden within each one. Howe thus reveals in *The Midnight* how poets can evoke the materiality of every component of a book to create spaces to explore forgotten or obscured histories.

The Midnight uses materiality to explore the multiplicity of truths and histories that exist in a singularity. History, to Howe, is integral to her identity, thus exploring and exploding the materiality of historical artifacts is liberating and revealing. Through her poetic archival exploration, she can reconnect with and learn about her mother, and her family in general. Howe uses archival artifacts in conversation with her poetry and prose to uncover stories that have been hidden, obscured, or lost. This essay examines how she looks for the space between the surface to draw out the voices of the dead, and then breaks down poems and re-presents them anew using the multiple stories hidden within a single poem. But Howe also employs slippages in her poems, to demonstrate to readers the materiality and subjectivity of words, and their ability to convey multiple meanings at once. Each word is filled with so much history that Howe seems to find endless malleability in words and their constructions, and thus each word, sentence, and paragraph holds a myriad of histories to be explored.

Howe evokes the materiality of the book to create and explore “transitional spaces” that allow her to access obscured histories. For example, *The Midnight* begins with a black and white photo of an interleaf covering the title page of her inherited copy of her uncle’s *The Master of Ballantrae: A Winter’s Tale* by Robert Louis Stevenson (Howe i-ii).

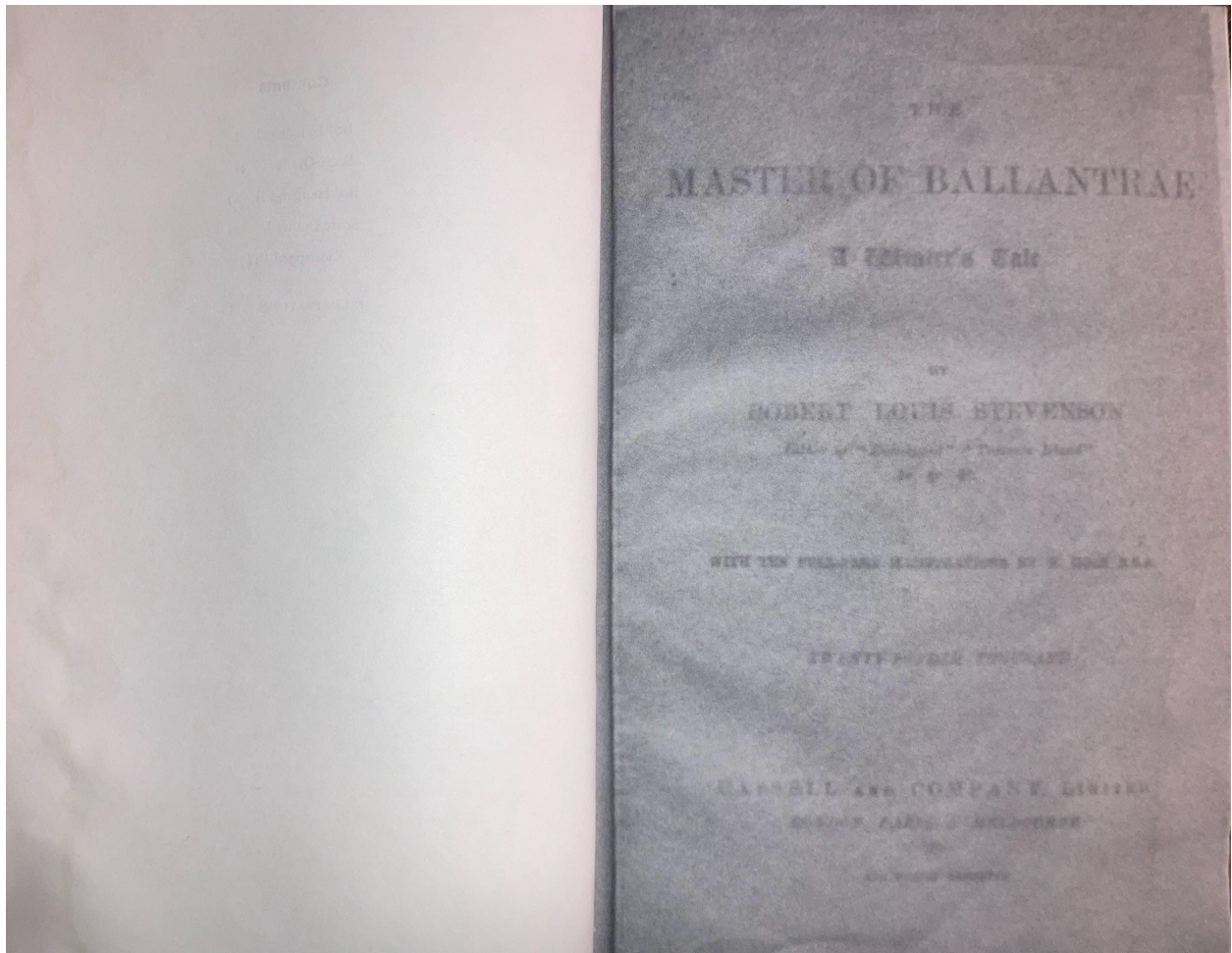


Figure 1. Opening page of *The Midnight*: image of interleaf over title page of *Master of Ballantrae* (i-ii)

Before the book has even begun, Howe has presented readers with an artifact of book-making history, the interleaf, that has become obsolete and forgotten, and that now seems so real and physical. However, the fact that it is a mere picture of a forgotten artifact of history foreshadows the functions of Howe’s book: the (re)presentations of history that seem to tangibly exist without

actually being present. The interleaf obscures the words of the title page underneath, while the historical context provided in the preface that follows helps clarify the image. Howe explains that this space between the image and text creates a “transitional space” which is “a zone of connection,” and it is within these spaces that Howe revives the past, as one can “capture for our world some soft object, a fuzzy conditional, a cot cover, an ode, a couplet, a line, a lucky stone” (Howe iv, 70). The exploration of artifacts explored through juxtaposition and obscurity presents a connection to the past that is almost real, as she describes the interleaf: “wonderfully life-like, approaching transparency... tangible intangible” (Barbour 139, Howe iv). Throughout her prose and poetry in *The Midnight* Howe will continue to obscure and overlay literary histories with familial artifacts to evoke a sense of materiality to create these “transitional spaces” in which she can play and resurrect the past.

Howe evokes the materiality of the poem when de/re-constructing poems from her childhood using her mother’s artifacts to create “transitional spaces” for her to reconnect with her mother. Howe incorporates her books inherited from family members because they provide a specific intimate view of a person’s inner thoughts, allowing them to come through as “incorporeal” ghosts (Eastman 151, Howe 137). These objects survive even after the person has died and constitute one of the few places in which their presence can still be felt (Keniston 167). She uses marginal notes and bookmarks to help her uncover the intimate and hidden stories within the artifacts and poems she dissects. Howe draws specifically on Yeats consistently throughout the book as her “mother brought [her] up on Yeats as if he were Mother Goose” (Howe 74). She uses her mother’s annotated bookmarks (or “tip-ins” as she calls them) to create “transitional spaces” that allow her to reimagine and reconnect with her mother through Yeats’; these reconstructed poems are places in which Howe reinvents histories by inscribing multiple

meanings upon poems of her past. Howe's de- and then re-construction of Yeats' "The Heart of a Woman" is a powerful demonstration of this poetic technique. She writes:

Now “The Folly of Being Comforted” tip-in has fallen so it covers “The Heart of Woman” in such a way I can only see

O	N
T	rest;
He	
An	
O	
T	m;
	s,
	h. (H

Howe begins by explaining how her mother's "tip-in" is what first obscured the poem and presented it to her anew. On the previous page, under a photograph of her mother's tip-ins covering the table of contents page of Manning's copy of Yeats' *Later Works*, Howe writes that her mother "loved to embroider facts" (Howe 76). I believe that Howe's use of archival materials interwoven, or obscuring poetry is her way of "embroidering facts" like her mother. However, rather than embellishing stories, Howe uses history to break down and rebuild the poetry that formed her. The new poem created by Howe presents "An OThe[r]," if read down according to Marjorie Perloff, concluding with a call for silence, "s, h." Howe's stripping down of Yeats' poem is reminiscent of the concrete poems of Ian Hamilton Finlay, who was a great influence on Howe's poetic development (Perloff 220).

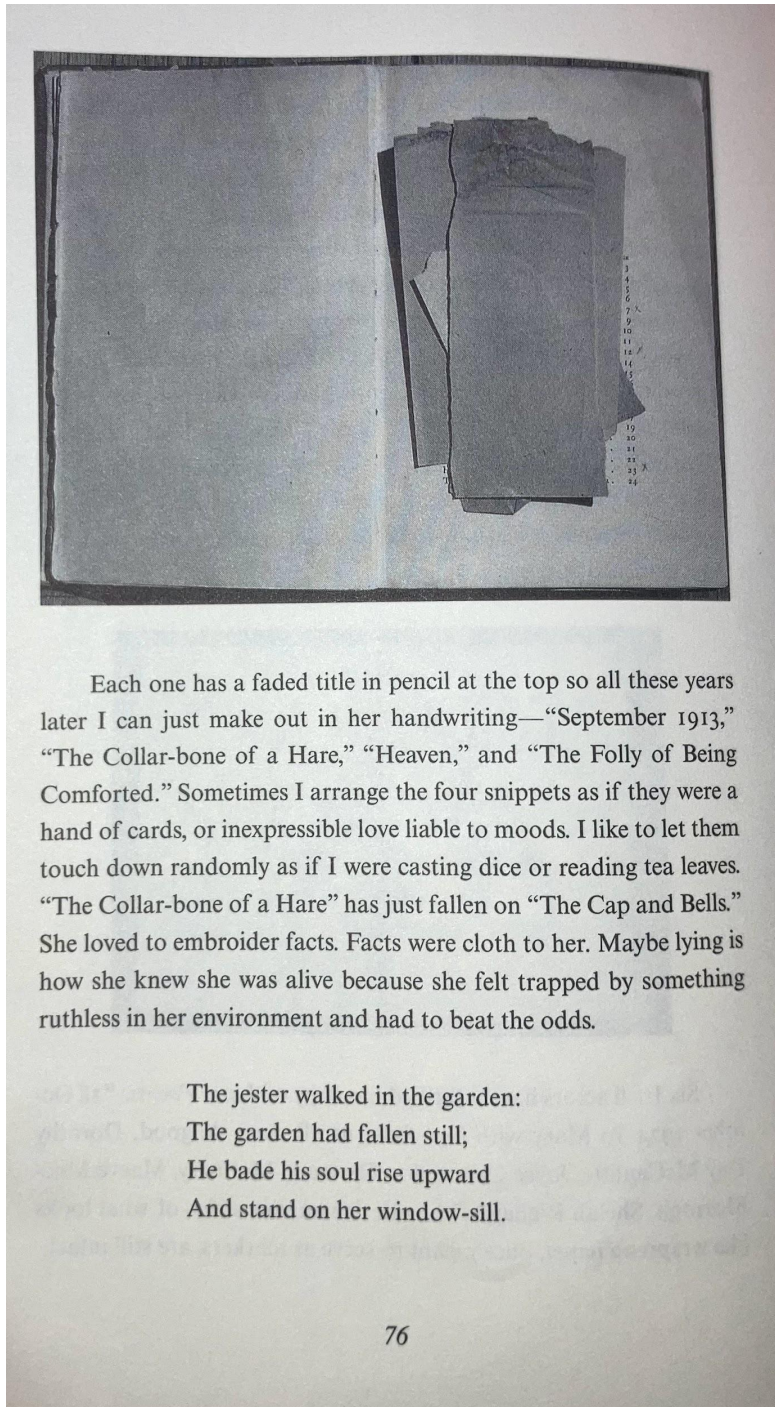


Figure 2. Her mother's tip-ins over Yeats and love of embroidering facts, *The Midnight* by Susan Howe (76)

While her mother may have embellished stories to express a sense of the existence of multiple truths, Howe follows Finlay's model and strips poems down to uncover the multiple truths hidden underneath. The creation of "another" perhaps reflects the idea that another truth exists.

Yeats' poem presents a stereotypical image of feminine devotion to a lover, to which Howe's mother did not ascribe; her greatest devotion seems to have been to theater (Eastman 154). In presenting "another" Howe is perhaps illuminating her mother's complexities and multiple devotions. Howe's mother loved poetry, the theater, and Ireland, thus Manning loved more than what was expected of a typical woman devoted to her lover, as depicted by Yeats. Howe uses the materiality of poems to explore the obscured space between artifacts and text and break them down to create new meanings. The new meanings that Howe creates illuminate the multiplicity of truths that exist in histories, poems, and words. She then builds upon this unveiling of the multiple truths through her exploration of the materiality of words.

Howe uses slippages to weave her family history into the texts she explores and recreates. The final section of *The Midnight*, 'Kidnapped,' draws upon and recreates scenes from Japanese Noh plays, translated by Yeats, to create "transitional spaces" in which she can uncover multiple and conflicting stories. Yeats was introduced to Noh Theater by Ezra Pound who was also working to translate the plays into English; however, the subtlety, symbolic imagery, and emphasis on gesture make translating the Japanese poetics and stage directions to English difficult, and thus the plays lost much of their "character as theater art" (Martin 770). The act of translation itself creates new meanings for the text, as the translator uses their own interpretations to present the text in a different language. Howe sees this translational space as a "transitional space" for her to investigate the multiple histories and meanings of this text and how they relate to her familial history. According to Catherine Martin, Howe's recreation of scenes from these plays seeks to "resuscitate" the marginalized theatrics of Noh (Martin 771).

Howe weaves this desire to "resuscitate" the lost poetics of the Noh with her desire to "resuscitate" her mother's voice and stories. Howe recreates a scene from the play *Ikuta*

Atsumori twice in ‘Kidnapped’ with slight changes on the second recreation; importantly, the line “Material image and her mate” becomes “Maternal image and her mate” (Martin 769; Howe 168,170). Below are the two stanzas side-by-side:

A character walks on thatch	The child of Atsumori old coat
bridge across the deep stage	faded gown sleeve flung open
Material image and her mate	Maternal image and her mate
Chanting within her role she	Where is he going because the
cannot step beyond invisible	play is famous for April sage
right foot lifted in half step	green kagota under two cross
Where is he going because this	sticks the apparition a young
play is famous for April sage	girl’s ghost the boy’s mother
green kagota kneeling piety is	Double play of double meaning
a dominant restraint he does	Noh lies in its concentration
not stoop as in pitiful reign	(Howe 170)
Noh lies in its concentration	
You child of Atsumori old cloak	
faded sleeve flung open	
(Howe 168)	

With the change of one letter, Howe has drawn her mother into this exploration of what is lost in the space of translation. While the translation of Noh theater created multiple meanings and histories of the texts, the *transition* of Howe’s mother from an actress in Ireland across the Atlantic to a mother in Boston created multiple truths that often conflicted. Howe’s mother struggled, much like Susan Howe does, with a sense of a dual identity, split between Ireland and

America.¹ For Manning, this dual identity caused her a sense of “restlessness” that “puzzled” Howe’s father, who “had problems with the nature of randomness.” She quotes him saying, “Your mother doesn’t know what truth is,” but then asks, “How could he believe she believed with evangelical fervor in the literal truth of the theatre” (Howe 134). As discussed earlier, Howe believes her mother had multiple loves and devotions that did not always align with what was expected of women. Manning did not leave Ireland and leave behind her love for her home, nor did she become a mother and leave behind her love for theater and poetry. Instead, Manning raised her daughters with a connection to Ireland and the Irish theater and poetry she loved, imparting upon them a sense of dual identities. Howe uses these instances of wordplay to explore the “transitional spaces” that contain what is hidden within words and then re-presents “scraps” of her mother’s “spectral self” (Howe 139). In this “transitional space,” she uncovers the multiplicity of histories and truths that exist in a single person and single word.

This is one of the many instances in which Howe explores the materiality of words to excavate the stories of the past. Through her exploration of the materiality of poetry and history, Howe can reveal lost histories and demonstrate the power of poetry in uncovering the past. Her technique of exposing the materiality through the juxtaposition and interweaving of artifacts with poetry to create “transitional spaces” allows for buried stories to come to light. This use of poetry and archives is important in creating polyvocal narratives and uplifting the voices of marginalized and oppressed people throughout history. Often the stories of marginalized people are the ones that are lost and erased because they do not fit into and are not valued by Eurocentric and chauvinistic narratives thus Susan Howe’s work provides an example of how

¹ Much of Howe’s work grapples with her affinity for Ireland and her connection to another country while maintaining a connection to her American identity and roots, she says “One of the problems I have always had has been the pull between the countries. A civil war of the Soul” (Arnold 172).

modern poets and scholars can deconstruct narratives of marginalization. *The Midnight* is a powerful demonstration of poetry's unique ability to uncover and uplift one's obscured histories.

Further, the infinite multiplicities that exist make Howe's book an endlessly rich text with a myriad of intricate stories to investigate, this essay only focused on a few key areas of Howe's poetic archival exploration. Her book is so infinitely packed with allusions, imagery, and invocations that this essay simply could not contain. The archival nature of her books meant that all my reading of *The Midnight* was conducted in Special Collections, which demonstrates the interconnection between archival history and poetry as they are inseparable in this book. Furthermore, given that 'Bed Hangings I' and 'Bed Hangings II' were published in two separate parts initially, and what became 'Scare Quotes I' and 'Scare Quotes II' were initially published together as *Kidnapped* makes *The Midnight* itself almost an archival compilation of sources. Comparing the full volume of *The Midnight* with the composition of each of the individual books was vastly interesting and illuminating. The distinct differences in the original publishing of each work, such as the inclusion of a real interleaf and imitation tip-ins throughout *Kidnapped*, or the distinct artwork from Susan Bee that accompanies *Bed Hangings*, compared to their presentation in *The Midnight* merits further discussion. *The Midnight* is a book of material processes: of bookmaking, poetry writing, and grief, and thus viewing the book as a collection of previously published work reflects those processes that Howe undertakes. I believe that exploring the differences in these works and their presentations may further illuminate the power of poetry intertwined with archival work to provide a voice to those passed, lost, or marginalized. *The Midnight* is a powerful exploration of how materiality and poetry can be used to evoke, remake, and re-present histories for those whose stories have been lost, obscured, or erased.

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