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“What I lack is myself”: The Fluid Text and the Dialogic Subjectivity in Susan Howe’s *Debths*

ABSTRACT

James Joyce’s neologism “debths” (*Finnegans Wake*) that Susan Howe elects for the title of her 2017 volume of poetry points to at least three semantic coordinates of “obligation,” “trespass,” and “demise,” never—due to its implied transaction between the sound and the spelling—fully yielding to or being appropriated by any stable signification. In *Debths*, the end of life, writing, and, perhaps, literature are palpable, if overtly manifested, currents of poetic discourse. In my article, I advance the idea of recognizing this tripartite taxonomy as a variant of what Divya Victor calls “extremity.” Within this context, I demonstrate the emergence of a dialogic, intertextual, and appropriative subjectivity of the poet.

Keywords: Susan Howe, Jorge Luis Borges, James Joyce, found poetry, textual fluidity, extremity, dialogic subjectivity.

“Live in fragments no longer. Only connect”
(Forster 197)

“He thought he kept the universe alone;
For all the voice in answer he could wake
It was but the mocking echo of his own”
(Frost 338)

“urlop od siebie?”

tylko przez odmianę
siebie
przez ten sam przypadek”
(Białoszewski 154)

“The earth is an oyster with nothing inside it,
Not to be born is the best for man”
(Auden 152)

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I

The postulate of extreme poetry put forward by poet and scholar Divya Victor in the thematic issue of *Jacket2* magazine, published in 2019, has solid political, social, and economic contexts.¹ From 2017, Donald Trump’s presidency had already meant that part of American society had to learn how to live an everyday life under less-than-normal conditions, braving the violation of civil rights, misogyny, racism, transphobia, supremacist politics, isolationism, and xenophobia. The novelty of the circumstances did not lie in their sudden appearance—they were neither new nor sudden in contemporary America—but in the intensity, scale, and social support they gained. Or better: their extremity. The word “extreme” and its synonyms were a significant part of the vocabulary used by the Republican president, a verbal signature of his radicalism noticeable in his obsessive use of adjectives such as “big,” “huge,” “major,” and “vast,” and in the emphatic multiplication of words that reinforce meanings, for example, “major, major,” “many, many, many.” But Victor’s exploration of the significance of the term for America is not limited to radical politics. Taking a longer historical perspective, she sees “extreme” as pertaining to

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American consumer practices, comfort, security, and class privilege: “[e]xtremity . . . is one way of assuring the consumer-citizen that what is theirs . . . is theirs in some ultimate, final, complete, total way.” This process is not conditioned by the degree to which the right or the left dominates the political scene but reflects the American attitude to material possessions and understanding of what a “secure” life, devoid of randomness, is. It is a token of the naive but persistent American belief in people’s ability to control individual destiny and existential fulfillment. Thus, there emerges a double connotation of the word “extreme” and, at the same time, its valuation meaning. For Victor, this becomes a pretext for plotting aporetic directions in the development of contemporary poetry.

According to Victor, the notion of “extreme” should invigorate the kind of poetry that does not run away into the domain of abstractions but critiques contemporaneity, broadening the field of reflection on topics that anchor us in the here and now. Extreme conditions demand extreme reactions; therefore, she “intuit[s] that poetry (and writing about poetry) could argue against this particular and peculiar condition of the term in the twenty-first century.” She seeks and invites writing digressive verse that is extreme in its search for new formal solutions. Her proposition has a transgressive character, although the notion of transgression is unclear and persistently eludes a precise definition. “A truly potent abstract concept avoids, resists closure. The rough, blurred outlines of such a concept, like a net in which the fish have eaten large, gaping holes, permit entry and escape equally. What does one catch in such a net?” asks Donald Barthelme. Transgression is inseparable from a limit and possesses a contradictory quality. The acts of violating or infringing on the law, commandment, or convention simultaneously announce the same law, commandment, or convention. Denial is tantamount to affirmation. Extremity, transgression, and limit are the coefficients of thinking through Victor’s idea of poetry. Yet, at the same time, they do not guarantee that the poetry defined in this way will affect any change in the non-textual world, especially in the realm of politics and social affairs. Let us try to grapple with the apparent insolubility of this contradiction.

II

James Joyce’s neologism “debths” appearing in *Finnegans Wake* that Susan Howe chose for the title of her 2017 volume of conceptual poetry points to at least three semantic coordinates of “obligation,” “trespass,” and “demise,” never—due to its actual transaction between the sound and the spelling—fully yielding to any stable signification. In *Debths*, the end of life, writing, and, perhaps, literature are palpable, if overtly manifested,

currents of poetic discourse. This article advances the idea of recognizing this tripartite taxonomy as a variant of what Victor calls “extremity.” The interpretive method I adopt is a direct echo of the compositional method used by Howe herself. It assumes a meandering, rhizomatic form and uses a whole range of texts that wrap around the poet’s designated paths of intertextual forays. I choose productive, associative texts, ones that, in my opinion, resonate meaningfully with the discourse of *Debths*, for in the case of this book, it is difficult to apply a critical perspective that is not at least partially eclectic. In the conclusion of my reflections, Howe is recognized as an author whose writing strategy is not fully embraceable and whose inconclusive text-non-text narratives, scraps of other people’s words, cross over to the realm of autobiography. A certain kind of writing subjectivity emerges in the interpretive process, and I am convinced it is of a supra-individual quality, one that may provide (some) mental inoculation against the extremism of the world around. To demonstrate this, the theoretical framework for my reading of *Debths* engages Craig Dworkin’s metaphor of “echo” describing an act of poetic transcription, one tale by Jorge Luis Borges, John Bryant’s notion of the “fluid text,” and Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of a dialogic self.

Whenever images and stories of death and resurrection appear in *Debths*, the boundaries between them are always fluid. The book contains two epigraphs. The first is taken from *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce’s version of the story, in which a dead, drunk Finnegan is “resurrected” by a good dousing of spilled aqua vitae (whiskey).² The other, inserted before the “Periscope” series of poems, comes from chapter 93 of Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, “The Castaway,” a kind of resurrection story where Pip, another character falling in and out from under the water, saw “God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom” (304). Joyce and Melville, Ireland and New England are the extreme poles between which Howe’s intellectual life and works develop. Howe’s affinity with Irish culture and the modernist panache for experimental writing, deliberately difficult, requiring a rethinking of reading habits, is primarily linked to her mother, Mary Manning, an actress and writer, who once produced a theatrical adaptation of *Finnegans Wake*. She admired Samuel Beckett and W. B. Yeats, and extracts from the latter’s poetry appear in the pages of her daughter’s book.

Debths’s poetry emerges from the depths of the Atlantic. In the final parts of the volume, in a collage-like series of shreds of printed fragments, only single, “floating” words can be identified. And they are significant: “the

² “. . . childlinen scarf to encourage his obsequies where he’d check their debths in that mormon’s thames, be questing and handsetl, hop, step and a depend, with his berths in their toiling moil . . .” (Joyce 198–99).

frontier” (129), “infant” (131), “Nothing,” “Diarmuid” (136), and “Death, the TREE OF KNOWLEDGE” (137). In the lexical-symbolic layer, the whole book comes full circle. After all, it begins with an autobiographical childhood memory and ends with the memory of Diarmuid (Diarmuid Ua Duibhne), a figure from Celtic mythology, the son of Donn, the god of death, whose name will appear in the cyclically constructed *Finnegans Wake*. Diarmuid, in turn, takes the reader back to the early parts of the book, again to an autobiographical essay that mentions Yeats, author of the poetic prose “Diarmuid and Grania” (written 1901 in collaboration with George Moore). Howe’s discourse develops in motion; it is a dynamic of morphic meanings that allow no fixed signification. Equally unclosed remains the identity of the writing subject. This is a subject as uncertain as the next possible version of Yeats’ manuscript of the poem—Howe is clearly fascinated by the unfinished and the infinite—that is quoted verbatim, retaining the original crossing of lines:

I thought that old age might show
grow old to show
I thought I could show me what
What
That line of Robert Browning ment
‘An old hunter talking with gods’
But now
But o my god I am not content
dream
rem[?]ent (21)

For Howe, “draft” words and meanings are not to be lost or extinguished, even in the case when the manuscript version of a poem was, in fact, later discarded or deleted (as Yeats himself decided). In a more general manner, the past-ness of somebody’s text needs to be preserved. Then it can be, for example, assimilated into Howe’s own discourse. And it is out of such textual layers that her own writing emerges.

“Debths,” a semantically loaded neologism, signals Howe’s literary borrowings, her self-identification strategies, and—perhaps—her biological demise. This is evident from the very first page of the introductory essay, which begins with excerpts from Bing Crosby’s 1939 song “Little Sir Echo” and then starts with a recollection of a childhood trip. The essay—which is an autobiographical feature but, in an important way, also clarifies the contexts of the poems that will appear later in the volume—is inscribed in a matrix of relationships and connections. The life and identity of the poet remain dependent on places, people, texts of others, history, and myth. Howe begins by recalling her stay at Little Sir Echo Camp for Girls on

Lake Arlington, stressing the experience of childhood anxiety when her parents left her “alone with my dread of being lost in the past; absent” (9). In adulthood, the echo of that fear will be overcome and turned into a passion for the past, the absence, repetitions, intertextual dialogues, and the inflow of other texts. “Echo,” in fact, is at the core of conceptual writing as its value lies in the act of duplication. Echoing a primary text comes down to transcription—often the first, by no means last stage of composition—thus leaving behind or sidestepping “the confessions of Narcissus” as a traditional manner of expression in verse (Dworkin xlvi). As repetition, echo also functions as a figure of “secondariness” (Jockims 102), requiring the presence of an/other as a prerequisite for the secondary text to come into textual being. An act of transcription pulls out poesis from its original root, and, as a consequence, “[w]hat is made . . . is not something new, but the old newly seen” (Jockims 102–03). Or, put differently, resurrected.

The text of *Debths*’ introductory essay unravels as a series of associations, drawing together diverse elements of experience across space and time so that “odd analogies assume a second life” (13). Recalling one of Wallace Stevens’s most beloved poems, “Chocorua to Its Neighbor,” Howe admits to a desire to “face things exactly as they are” (10), but it turns out a paradoxical statement, for in her view of reality she navigates a web of densely woven, hardly penetrable, and mainly textual connections. What reality does Stevens’s poem give her access to? “Chocorua” points to Mount Chocorua, near a small town in Carroll County, New Hampshire, and a Native American chief or a prophet who, according to one legend, fell or jumped from the mountain while hunting. It was an accidental death or suicide. Stevens’s text, local legend, and death motif momentarily return to the autobiographical recollection:

In the fall of 1899 Leonora Piper, the famous Boston medium, spent a week with William James and his wife at their house at Chocorua for discussions concerning various aspects of trance-phenomena including her trance-talk with “Phinuit” “a former native of this world.” One afternoon they took a break from work and went fishing. Mrs. Piper caught the largest bass ever recorded in the lake.

There. Messages flow through clear lake water and yes, gravity pulls matter together to form a cosmic web. Even if this looks like the end of my Picnic at Lake Armington story the three of us are strung together like beads on a necklace. (11)

The name “Piper” soon reappears in the title of the sculpture, “The Personal Effects of the Pied Piper,” seen by the poet at New York’s Whitney Museum.

Known as the Pan Piper (of Hamelin), this character from German folklore is a cunning rat-catcher who lures rats with the help of melodies he plays. But provoked, he can pose a threat as a child kidnapper.

The two extensive cycles of poems included in *Debths*, “Tom ‘Tit ‘Tot” and “Debths,” are intersemiotic works inasmuch as verbal and non-verbal modes of signification are intertwined and dependent on each other to convey messages of sorts—often vague—drowned in a chaotic accumulation of lines, repeated words, figures, and symbols. Fragments of printed texts, cut up with scissors and then grouped and superimposed on the glass surface of a photocopying machine, are instances of intended illegibility and inaccessibility that confound attempted reading. They cannot be contextualized and interpreted unequivocally, and comprehension of the black intersemiotic fields on the white pages requires a paradoxical ability on the part of the reader to unread them, i.e. to acknowledge the illegible. Placed in the center, “Tom ‘Tit ‘Tot” contains fifty-seven collage pieces and is the most extended section in the entire book. The alliterative title, which could, thanks to its one-syllable structure, bring to mind a case of echolalia, refers to one of the books Howe copied and cut, Edward Clodd’s *Tom Tit Tot: An Essay on Savage Philosophy in Folk-Tale* (1898). Even with a cursory perusal of these scraps, two phrases give the impression of functioning as the farewell of an elderly poet: “the rhymes I made” and “hopes and fears of life’s work.”

III

Howe’s authored and un- or dis-authored volume declares its unoriginality and uncreativity by liberating and re-purposing poems of others, narratives of others, and scraps of unidentified printed pages. The mode of transcription leads to the cross-breeding of genres, for example, the transgressive movement from document to verse or, more generally, from the original to the cut-up or unacknowledged quotation. In seeking illuminating parallels to Howe’s compositional method, she can be situated next to a certain well-known literary figure.

One of the pioneers of “secondariness” in modern literature is the protagonist of Jorge Luis Borges’s “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*.” The story begins with an evocation of the death and funeral, taking the form of an elaborate obituary. An unnamed critic pays homage to an apocryphal poet, Pierre Menard, presenting a catalog of both his “visible” and his “underground” or “invisible” works. Among the latter, there is Menard’s *Quixote*, a fragmentary, incomplete work that coincides, word for word, with Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. The narrator adamantly maintains that Menard’s word-for-word magic emulation of the original

words is not simply a copy of the original text. Instead, as the story suggests, Menard produced a much more nuanced text than Cervantes:

Cervantes' text and the Menard text are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. (More *ambiguous*, his detractors will say—but ambiguity is richness.)

It is a revelation to compare the *Don Quixote* of Pierre Menard with that of Miguel de Cervantes. Cervantes, for example, wrote the following (Part I, Chapter IX):

“. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.”

This catalog of attributes, written in the seventeenth century, and written by the “ingenious layman” Miguel de Cervantes, is merely rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

“. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.” (94)

The repetition of the original text is, therefore, not a repetition in the literal sense of the word; it is instead the generation of meanings hitherto non-existent, meanings needed for arbitrary purposes (thus, in a way, anticipating the Roland Barthes-style hermeneutic flippancy of the 1960s). Menard's *Quixote* is a lost manuscript. We have no option but to rely on the narrator's testimony (a risky enterprise) even to assess the existence of such work because Menard “did not let anyone examine these drafts and took care they should not survive him. In vain [the narrator] tried to reconstruct them” (95). At the end of the story, readers cannot be certain to what extent the narrator might have examined or read Menard's manuscripts. In any case, for the tenacious narrator, it is of no consequence that Menard's incomplete *Quixote* was destroyed because he has artfully redefined the act of reading to compensate for the partial, or total absence of Menard's text. It is again the unreliable narrator, not Menard, who posits the “true” significance of the text, and who deems the latter's *Quixote* subtler and richer than the original. The story raises questions about the meaning of authorship, touches on issues of literary appropriation, and is a penetrating, if ironic, study of the questionable “essence” of the writer's identity.

In a similar manner, Howe's early, famous *My Emily Dickinson*, a volume containing elements of literary criticism, cultural history, personal essay, and aesthetic manifesto, is both an open admission of a non-objective un-academic

critical perspective and an emphatic statement of ownership. The book is largely a transcription of passages, often with minimal or no commentary, from poems and letters by Dickinson and other sources (Emily Brontë, Shakespeare, Jonathan Edwards, and Mary Rowlandson). It is a seminal monograph on the work of the Amherst poet but also an autobiographical narrative. What Howe has to say about Dickinson repeatedly expresses something pertinent about her own writing.³ Published in 1985, it set the path of her own creativity, which Howe has never abandoned, and which is exemplified in the volume under consideration in the present article.

IV

In *Debths*, the liberated, re-purposed poems and narratives, collaged and collapsed together, are freed from the proper names of original authors attached to them, fished up from the deep richness of Howe’s reading life. The river of changes flows from manuscript to draft to editorial revision to proofs to printed text and corrections in subsequent editions. Not only is this fluidity a constitutional quality of any literary text with several versions, but, as John Bryant points out, it characterizes all works (1). The current of fluidity overflows its banks and affects the exactness of rendition of the writer’s thought or idea into their writing, the crossing between the mental and the material (even if it is beyond readers’ or critics’ verification), translations of the text into other media as adaptations, into other languages, or the tampering with private papers for publishing them posthumously without the author’s consent. Thus, it both matters what specific texts and authors Howe fashions her collage poems out of (as she thereby declares affinity with particular authors and traditions) and, at the same time, does not matter, since her point is that literary texts are contrived through acts of literary borrowing and recycling and that authorship is

³ An apt description of Howe’s peculiar method of reading Dickinson’s work is given by John Taggart: “In time poets and their poetry become critical cartoons. The great value of Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson* is that it neither reproduces nor produces such criticism. What it does produce is a picture of mystery and power. The poet is a hunter consciously and aggressively active in the hunting process of composition; the poetry is what’s hunted down and transformed by that process in wilderness of language. Power has been exerted to be transformed and exerted again upon us as readers of the poetry. Because Susan Howe’s reading is attentive both to the poet’s historical contexts and to her texts—passionately attentive and open-ended in interpretation—the final mystery of the poet’s motivation is respected and the exertion of the poetry’s power is given free play. It is a picture, but a picture that releases to mystery and power. It is a picture of Emily Dickinson, an and it is a picture of the poet in the act of composition that applies to the practice of contemporary poets” (264).

collaborative rather than individual. This recognition compromises the very idea of a definite text and, at the same time, introduces the problem of “shifting intentionality” and definite authorship:

No doubt readers gravitate to so-called definite texts because they desire the . . . comforts that definite texts propose to offer: authenticity, authority, exactitude, singularity, fixity in the midst of the inherent indeterminacy of language. We are happy to acknowledge that any single text can yield up multiple interpretations; but the mind resists the thought that single literary works are themselves multiform. (Bryant 2)

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V

In one way or another, Howe’s book measures itself “with the social role of poetry in the contemporary political landscape,” just as Victor wants. This, however, is done in a camouflaged manner. In *Debts*, the literary and non-literary discourses are read in their historical dimensions. But in the present article, I look at her work from a somewhat different angle, namely, as one that is probing the limits of the author’s self, or, rather, as a Bakhtinian exercise in determining the identity of the writing self:

[A]ll words (utterances, speech, and literary works) except my own are the other’s words. I live in a world of others’ words. And my entire life is an orientation in this world, a reaction to others’ words (an infinitely diverse reaction), beginning with my assimilation of them (in the process of initial mastery of speech) and ending with assimilation of the wealth of human culture (expressed in the word or other semiotic materials). (Bakhtin 143)

The premise of Howe’s compositional method, which involves collaging and stitching textual and visual fragments, is relatively simple. It is the recognition that there is no such thing as a self-contained, out-of-context statement. This, granted, is not an original recognition, but its realization—yes. In Howe’s case, the recorded utterance, the sentence, and the fragment are always chain elements. The chain has no end. It begins, as befits a poetic text, *in medias res*.

The related voices of “others” are social in nature. They are an assemblage of fragments of other authors’ consciousness. Intertextuality in writing cannot be separated from how the author exists as an identity and their relationship to language. In this sense, Howe follows Bakhtin, who admits: “I realize myself initially through others: from them, I receive words, forms, and the tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of myself” (138). All this invites generalization (a word Howe seems to dislike). Human

subjectivity, including that of the author, crystallizes in intersubjective relationships. The more we recognize the dependence of our expression on external factors, the closer we come to the ideal of freedom in the use of language. There is a paradox in this. In the case of the writer, there is, first of all, a critical awareness of one’s dependence on the context of tradition and history, including the history of silences and omissions.

All of Howe’s publications derive from now-classic books such as Charles Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael* and William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain*, which address American cultural history in a way that balances the assemblage of scholarly work, anthologies of source texts and literary discourse.⁴ The idea is to encounter the past in the text in the least mediated way possible, as Benjamin did, for example, in his compilation of texts collected in the bound volume *The Arcades Project*.⁵ The contexts that she charts with chains of dependent quotations and allusions sometimes render a notion of the historical and literary era irrelevant. Reading someone else’s text or manuscript, studying a photograph, Howe recognizes herself, her uniqueness, and, at the same time, an awareness of the otherness of the other. What was another’s voice is appropriated, internalized, and overtly claimed as a possession.

Howe’s appropriations seem to aspire to acts of identification in the spirit of Pierre Menard, the idea which Borges, however, mocks in his short story. In her fluid texts, the appropriation as identification seems an ultimate point on the flow chart. Can one go beyond the threshold? Is it the limit of extremity? Silence, illegibility, absence, and coupled fragments of texts, form the logosphere of discourse. So, another problem arises here. Is it critically appropriate to treat Howe’s books as largely autobiographical (as they almost always are) or as reports from archival research? Is it Susan Howe or a persona she creates every single time, with every new context triggered by a new quote? In other words, how to tell Howe from “not Howe”? On one of the pages, we come across a clue, a trace:

If to sense you are
alive is pleasant itself
or can be nearly so—
If I knew what it is
I’d show it—but no

What I lack is myself (110)

⁴ For the discussion of other affinities between Howe and Williams, see Partyka (211–25).

⁵ For a discussion of parallels between the compositional method used in Benjamin’s posthumous book and modernist and postmodernist poetry, see Perloff (24–49).

But is it the answer to all questions that crop up in the analysis of a discourse notable for its tendency to defer answers? Therefore, we ask ourselves—and this is perhaps the last stage of our interpretation—whether this is a question uttered by a human writing subject or by the self-defining literary text.

In a sense, *Debths* is part of an important dispute in contemporary philosophical reflection about the status and meaning of subjectivity—in this case, the subjectivity of the writer, the author. Howe seems to disbelieve in the writing *cogito*, which in the act of simple reflection adequately captures itself and therefore is perfectly transparent to itself. Her doubt, in fact, is more extreme and undermines the subject understood as the principle of inner unity and singularity of thought. But even if the “I” of the author comes to be seen as the arena of many different forces, Howe’s way of creating poetry is not about replacing the erstwhile exaltation of the subject proposed by Descartes with its humiliation and rejection. To answer the question “Who am I as a poet, as an author, as a person?” it is not enough just to reflect directly; no intuitive insight into oneself will suffice. Only an indirect method comes into play here: interpretation of what I write, how I write, and why I write it. Subjectivity shows itself through various objectivities—other people’s words, other people’s material practices, other people’s discourse assemblies, other people’s view of the world, other people’s metaphysics, etc. The writerly “I” co-shapes all these “objectivities” and is co-shaped by them. To be oneself as a writer, to be able to label oneself with the word “I,” does not mean to resemble an essential entity, an unchanging causal factor. In other words, “I” will not express itself as “I am” but as “I relate to something.” The writer’s subjectivity is relational and extreme in the scope of contexts it embraces and then internalizes.

Subjectivity understood dialogically arises in Howe’s work primarily from the inscription of the author’s “I” in a network of interacting other’s texts (voices), although it can be seen in the specific formal solutions of individual poems or poem-collages, and more specifically in the way they “compromise . . . the coherence of syntax and the integrity of the line” (Eastman 2). The series titled “Periscope,” whose title alludes to a painting by Paul Thek, contains highly compressed content in which the semantic message is heavily compromised by broken syntax. An illustration of this grammatical-ontological procedure is the opening of the series:

Closed book who stole
 who away do brackets
 signify emptiness was
 it a rift in experience

Mackerel and porpoise
 was this the last us (Howe 101)

Recognition of oneself in another, or, in other words, “intersubjectivity” (Eastman 11) is presented through the specific construction of individual lines, the use of enjambment, and the omission of some—grammatically required—lexical elements. The doubling of “who” introduces the indeterminacy of subject and complement, thereby suggesting “a renegotiation of identity” (Eastman 11).⁶

From a very different, more general, ethical-ontological perspective, the renegotiation of human subjectivity appears in a post-humanist interpretation of the passage, where Howe challenges currents of thinking about the supposed centrality and privileged position of humans, while opening up new ways of representing humans in relation to the non-human. Pirnajmuddin and Mousavi, for example, highlight in their analysis how the resounding voice (or voices) throughout the series challenge the boundaries between human and non-human, animate and inanimate, thus challenging liberal humanist models of subjectivity. Howe creates a visionary engagement and encounter with the natural world and “anthropomorphized things” in an attempt to give voice to the inarticulate Other:

The title [Periscope] indicates the desire to communicate a new perspective of humanity and its place in the universe. Periscope-like, the poem offers the desire . . . [to explore] the possibility of withdrawing from any anthropocentric or human-centered worldview. Instead, the poem privileges engagement with and immersion in the natural world to expand the possibilities of vision and to evoke “imagined” imageries rather than to capture only real images. (Pirnajmuddin and Mousavi 194)

VI

In 2018, when Howe’s book was awarded the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize, American novelist, poet and critic Ben Lerner pointed out not only the inspiring encouragement implicit in the book for readers to seek their own idiosyncratic constellations of the personal and the archived but insisted that *Debths* does not surrender to the “trivial criterion of relevance,” shows “other orders of thinking,” and, significantly, “stand[s] in opposition to the fascist amnesiac buffoonery of the present U.S. government” (“Griffin Poetry Prize 2018”). And it is for this “distinctly

⁶ In a similar direction follow the considerations of Nicky Marsh, who, when considering the concept of subjectivity in the works of Howe, points to another side of the construction of such a dialogical structure: “the fear that she [Howe] feels in writing verse that demands a moving beyond the subjective boundaries of the self” (128).

un-American” dimension that Lerner was particularly grateful to Howe. As the poet of found language, she finds her own language in archives to reconnect to various points in her life and build up her subjectivity in writing. In the onslaught of various political and social extremes, the unpredictability of such extreme art created by an idiosyncratic dialogic subjectivity is a mental salvation. Or at least a hope for it.

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