

## Linda Reinfeld ON; "Hope Atherton's Wanderings"

~~Linda Reinfeld

Articulation of Sound Forms in Time can be read first of all as a journey of literary scholarship: it begins as a chronicle of Howe's researches into the myth of her own very specific locality as it appears in the printed histories of Hadley and Hatfield, Massachusetts. The focus of her investigation is the story of a seventeenth-century New England minister, Hope Atherton, who disappears during the course of a riverside battle between white settlers and American Indians and is thereafter presumed dead; some days later, however, he mysteriously reappears, unharmed but not entirely coherent, miles from the scene of the battle and on the opposite side of the river. Like the experience of the poet who explores the edges of consciousness, Hope's experience may be impossible to reconcile with the experience of what we think of as "mainstream" America.

Howe's Hope, in a dark moment, can sound like this:

rest chondriacal lunacy velc cello viable toil quench conch uncannunc drumm amonoosuck  
ythian

The apparent opacity of this discourse is deceptive. Given that the historical Hope Atherton, in the very process of crossing the river, must have been suffering from severe fatigue and hunger (he is reported to have gone for four days without food or drink), the passage opens into a number of possible and plausible (re)constructions: lunacy denotes madness but also carries with it a cyclical quality, an innocence that turns impotent in conjunction with the want and severe deprivation--here specifically the desire for and lack of rest--that precede it. Spatial dislocation, loss of ground, parallels "chondriacal" dislocation in time. The neologism chondriacal evokes a sense of periodicity but suggests more than the "chronicle" of a "hypochondriac," or "chronic" restlessness: the lunatic unpunctuated repetition of goodness uprooted and gone mad. The word velc--like Velcro--sticks, has the quality of a gulp; also, backward and truncated, it recalls cleave, pathetic in an instance where there is nothing to cling to. Sliding Is evoke a slippery medium: as language liquefies, it flows almost out of control. The lyricism of cello breaks down into the singular containment of cell and senses of isolation, while lo exactly places the speaker in the deep. As Lyn Hejinian remarks in another context, "To listen to music too closely resembles drowning."

[ . . . ]

The process is necessary because the ordinary unbroken literary language, as we have it literally exemplified in historical documents, has not been able to dramatize or even to record for public consideration the historical Hope Atherton's erratic, nondialectical journey through British and Indian forces, through the strong current of the Connecticut River, into a living present that would still prefer not to listen. When Atherton claims to have been left unharmed by the native Indians, for instance, his speech either is not believed, and is dismissed as crazy, because Indians are known to be heartless (such was the response he met from his contemporaries) or is believed, but then is dismissed as merely heartfelt, sentimental,

because Indians are known not to be heartless (such is more likely to be the response today). Either way, his account is cast away, for the story does have holes in it. To my mind, the excellence of the kind of writing Howe attempts lies in its lacy, elliptical texture, the play between what one might call the discursive and dramatic Emersonian part of her poetry and the dark part, the refusal of that cocky American greeting (Good morning, good morning) so many of us as readers of American literature have grown to count on. The sound forms here articulated are sometimes more like gurgles than greetings. Such things happen: the trail can disappear.

[ . . . ]

In *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, Hope Atherton is first introduced by citing (without correction) the matter-of-fact and by no means fictional "EXTRACT from a LETTER (dated June 8th, 1781) of Stephen Williams to President Styles." Howe goes on to quote a substantial portion of this letter (literally, an account of an account) and by this doubled set of citations enacts the textual distance--and difficulty--through which Atherton is perceived: "Mr. Atherton gave account that he had offered to surrender himself to the enemy, but they would not receive him. Many people were not willing to give credit to this account, suggesting he was beside himself. This occasioned him to publish to his congregation and leave in writing the account I enclose to you."

For Hope--as for Howe in her dual role of scholar and poet--fugitive meaning is followed as it retreats from the complex battles of fact and theoretical speculation (how do we know what we know?) back into the black and white of primitive imagination, a vast minimalist canvas relieved only by bits of hearsay and copies of old letters.

[. . .]

The sixteen sections of "Hope Atherton's Wanderings"--each unnumbered section from two to fifteen lines long and each centered on its own unnumbered page--can be read as sixteen temporally consecutive and prosodically various articulations, that is, sound forms, of distress.

[. . .]

[A]s the journey unfolds, Hope moves from an only slightly disturbed language of narration at the beginning of Part I of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*--

Prest try to set after grandmother relieved by and laid down left ly little distant each other and fro Saw digression hobbling driftwood forage two rotted beans & etc. Redy to faint slaughter story so Gone and signal through deep water Mr. Atherton's story Hope Atherton

--where, in spite of the absence of the I and the conventions of reportage, distortion is relatively minimal (compression and omission, effects of haste and fatigue, produce a "hobbling" after-the-battle discourse, which, in view of the wreckage evidenced by driftwood and digression, we can interpret as a mode of imitation within the given narrative frame), into a world of militant accents more and more rigid and threatening:

Rash catastrophe deaf evening Bonds loosd catcht sedge environ Extinct ordr set tableaux hay and insolent army Shape of so many comfortless And deep so deep as my narrative our homely manner and Myself Said "matah" and "chirah" Pease of all sorts and best courtesy in every place Whereat laughing they went away

At this point in his wanderings Atherton seems to have encountered some soldiers from a British regiment, remnants as it were of an "extinct order." They are "insolent" and by their insolence insulated from the tragedy around them, "deaf" to the "catastrophe" and "so many comfortless" of whom Atherton is so keenly aware. They are deaf also to the language natural to Hope, speaking as they do in accents unfamiliar to natives, white or Indian, of America. Howe cites *matah* and *chirah*; similarly, "Pease of all sorts" breaks down into a variety of meanings in conflict with one another: "Peace" as a greeting or term of surrender; "pease" as a form of porridge and by extension a plea for food. The verbal structure of this section, moving from the staccato of the first line, where each separate word demands an accent and refuses to move into syntactic combination, to the short two-word phrases of the third and fourth lines ('set tableaux'), then on to the more fully developed combinations of the fifth through eighth lines ("Shape of so many comfortless") and the narrative statement of the final three lines ("Whereat laughing they went away"), figures the predicament of individual person in relation to collective language, for as the words come together into coherent patterns of "courtesy in every place," all pattern is ironized and Hope is abandoned. If Hope Atherton survives, if poetry survives, it is, oddly enough, by virtue of isolation from human company and communion. To the extent that language makes sense, to the extent that it forges connections, it risks falsity and bad faith: it becomes regimental, the enemy. Only those chosen are saved and only the poet--specifically, the poet set apart by a capacity for visionary experience--can hope to emerge from chaos with something like self-possession ("My voice, drawn from my life, belongs to no one else"). As we move toward meaning, "deep so deep as my narrative," we move into a language so fluid that the rescue of reason becomes impossible. But then, it is not in reason that Howe has put her faith.

Faith should make it possible to read even the most profoundly mysterious visionary script. In the two sections preceding Hope's public address to his "loving friends and kindred" (one wonders who may be counted among them) language approaches perfect innocence, empties itself in the perpetual motion of reflection and refraction. Thought dissolves into the medium of thought so that the word alone, like Hope in the destructive element immersed, generates the zero degree of meaning that makes possible a providential imagination of grace and the renewed possibility of life.

[. . .]

The relation of the two "Posit gaze" sections of the poem to each other--where each of the lines performs a specific reflective action--dramatizes the constructive role of the poem in action: simple repetition, for the first line of either section is a simple duplication of the first line of the other; reverse reflection and condensation, inasmuch as the second through fifth lines of the two sections are composed of the same words exactly but with the words repeated backward and placed closer together in the second section; double repetition mixed with reverse reflection, since the sixth and seventh lines of each section work like a refrain ending with a one-word exchange: upside and sideup become sideup and upside in the second section. Language is inevitably caught by its capacity for imitation. As so often happens in the poetry of deconstruction, meaning or the negation of meaning resides not in the perception of formal depth but in the contingent activity of lateral motion.

Howe's Hope walks the fine line between art and chaos: "Nothing deserves to be called an art work that keeps the contingent at bay. For by definition, form is a form of something, and this something must not be allowed to degenerate into a tautological iteration of form. And yet the necessity of this relation that form has to something outside itself tends to undermine form.

Form seeks to be pure and free of all heterogeneity, but it cannot be because it needs the heterogeneous. The immanence of form in heterogeneity has its limits" (AT, 315-16). It is possible to argue that language pushed to the limit of form cannot work successfully as art--to argue, for instance, that the heterogeneity of a line like "MoheganToForceImmanenceShotStepSeeShowerFiftyTree" is threatened by Howe's attempt "ToForceImmanence" or, conversely, to argue that "tree fifty shower see step shot Immanence force to mohegan" disintegrates into an undistinguished mix of unrelated and incommensurable vocabularies. "This tendency of English syntax to break thought down into its smallest, self-contained parts is probably the most formidable barrier to dialectics," comments Weber in his preface to *Prisms* (P, 13); Howe's poetry extends this tendency within the language to the point where translation into the order of legible prose becomes nearly impossible. Howe is no dialectician. It is not possible, however, to dismiss the argument provoked by such writing without at the same time dismissing the possibility that the human capacity for argument is inseparable from the human capacity for hope--or, in the allegorical figure of this instance, Hope. Hope is possible precisely because of, not in spite of, the decadence of language, our inability to bridge the great gap between the one and the many, truth and reason, faith and mystery. "In a world of brutal and oppressed life," writes Adorno, "decadence becomes the refuge of a potentially better life by renouncing its allegiance to this one and to its culture, its crudeness, and its sublimity" (P, 72).

It is a marvelous tour de force, this attempt by Susan Howe to read a surface from beneath it, to "posit" or position the self within language just below the level at which it might appear to make sense--no less wonderful than the somewhat more simply presented reading of the historical Hope Atherton as he addresses his congregation upon his return from underwater exile:

Loving Friends and Kindred:-- When I look back So short in charity and good works We are a small remnant of signal escapes wonderful in themselves We march from our camp a little and come home Lost the beaten track and so River section dark all this time We must not worry how few we are and fall from each other More than language can express Hope for the artist in America & etc This is my birthday These are the old home trees

"There is nothing that gives the feel of Connecticut like coming home to it," wrote Wallace Stevens. "It is a question of coming home to the American self in the sort of place in which it was formed. Going back to Connecticut is a return to an origin." Like Stevens, like Eliot, Howe goes back, back to a significant landscape ("words are my way in sylvan/imagery," she writes at the outset of *Pythagorean Silence*) and back to the fragments of significance rescued from the works of an earlier time. These bits and pieces broken from their contexts--dislocated, as Hope Atherton is dislocated--have something pathetic, childlike about them:

[. . .]

What is most touching in the discourse of Hope, what makes it appear as art, is in part its presentation in a mode of almost childlike fragility: Hope cannot quite say what he means, but his moments of articulation, his perception embodied in the poem as a work of art (Howe's Hope) are meant--for a time--to go beyond the limits of intention.

Excerpted from a longer essay, "Susan Howe: *Prisms*," in Linda Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue*. Copyright © 1992 by Louisiana State UP.

**Publication Status:**  
Excerpted Criticism [1]

**Publication:**

- Private group -

**Criticism Target:**

Susan Howe [2]

**Tags:**

Historical [3]

sound forms [4]

articulation [5]

Hadley [6]

Hatfield [7]

Massachusetts [8]

seventeenth-century [9]

Hope Atherton [10]

New England [11]

mainstream [12]

consciousness [13]

Ameican Indians [14]

Lyn Hejinian [15]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/linda-reinfeld-hope-athertons-wanderings>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/susan-howe>

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/historical>

[4] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/sound-forms>

[5] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/articulation>

[6] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/hadley>

[7] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/hatfield>

[8] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/massachusetts>

[9] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/seventeenth-century>

[10] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/hope-atherton>

[11] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/new-england>

[12] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/mainstream>

[13] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/consciousness>

[14] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/ameican-indians>

[15] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/lyn-hejinian>