

***Souls of the Labadie Tract* by Susan Howe**

Reviewed by Kim Minkus

I wished to speak a word for libraries as places of freedom and wildness.

Susan Howe's *Souls of the Labadie Tract* invites the reader to sift through the "forest of letters, theories and forgotten actualities" catalogued and classified in archives and libraries. She continues on her palimpsestuous journey in *Souls*, assembling the scraps of various local and personal histories, including her own, into a visual and musical celebration of the word. Howe's acts of poetic possession and resurrection have traversed human subjects as diverse as Emily Dickinson in *My Emily Dickinson*, to pragmatist and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce in *Pierce-Arrow*. *Souls of the Labadie Tract* carries all the hallmarks of Howe's poetic practice: the pinning or placing of unrelated or found portions of text to create a lyric line; the use of assemblages or collages of either words or image; the presence of facsimiles of archival documents; and finally a generous use of white space. *Souls*, however, marks a significant shift in Howe's work to a sparer, more minimalist approach. This book does not look like an historical essay; it looks like poetry. In *Souls* Howe moves closer to the purity of the blank page; essays are brief and the use of image is scant. The final poem appears as a vertical cut in the page, with portions of letters barely showing through – a broken mark on the purity of the paper.

Souls of the Labadie Tract is neatly divided in two. Each half of the book begins with a section called "Errand." These *errands* (or missions) are strongly connected to Howe's own process of creation and to the double-hinged meaning that Perry Miller, a strong influence on Howe, describes in his essay "Errand into the Wilderness." *Errand* implies both a short journey and an "actual business" that is undertaken. In the first *errand* she describes how the Minister Jonathan Edwards pinned small pieces of paper to his clothing as an insight or idea occurred to him while traveling. When he reached his destination he would unpin the pieces, the location of the paper on his body serving as a reminder for the insight which he then wrote down. In the second half of the book Howe's *errand* relates Wallace Stevens's method of working with ideas and perceptions that he had written down on scraps of old envelopes or laundry bills while strolling to work. These scraps were handed to an assistant who typed them up and then returned to Stevens, who transformed these miscellanies into poems during his evenings and on weekends. Both Edwards and Stevens perform the double meaning of *errand* by simultaneously being on a journey and completing the business that lead to their creative work. Each of these writers' creative processes were collage-like, similar to Howe's own creative process of pulling together a singular work or poem from the disparate papers, scraps and notes of an archive. Both Edwards and Stevens also mined their own personal archives, stored on their body, scribbled on scraps, in inspired acts of spiritual and poetic invention.

In the first essay, "Personal Narrative," Howe performs a similar task of self-archiving. This essay includes poems and prose portions from "Articulations of Sound Forms in Time" which appeared in *Singularities* (1990). The essay "Personal Narrative" also became part of an MLA paper that Howe delivered in 2006. Howe is performing multiple palimpsestic strategies here: she reworks two old essays and at the same time reinserts past poems and new images for a new

work. Howe, in effect, is turning to her own *body* of work in a continuance of her creative process. Just as Edwards and Stevens mined their own archives, stored on the body, so Howe becomes her own archive or source for her work.

Using the history of an obscure utopian sect known as the Labadists, the titular piece *Souls of the Labadie Tract* is a spare, jewel of a work. Here is pure love of language; its presence on the page, its meaning and its sound weaving into short lyric pieces that are gorgeous in their singularity, yet also resonant of each other. This can be seen (and heard) in the following two pieces:

Now go back to sleep we
can't be crazy the truth is
we couldn't we couldn't

we're the past – we're too
close – to covet – you're
not to be afraid – breathe

Compared to:

There it is there it is – you
want the great wicked city
Oh I wouldn't I wouldn't

It's not only that you're not
It's what wills and will not

You, we, I – the multiple voices coalesce in the repetitive use of the words *not* and the rhymes and repetition of *couldn't* and *wouldn't*. Howe's spare lyric line resonates with the past and a ghostly *you*. Like a prayer each poem invokes and pleads to something outside itself, taking the form of a chant. The Labadists as persons are barely present in these poems; instead we encounter fragments and hints that speak to their spiritual practice. Howe once again uses single words with double meanings to generate an aura or *sense* that reaches beyond these actual meanings. The word *rapture* is one that carries not only the general meaning of *ecstasy*, but also the specific religious meaning of “meeting Christ on his return to earth,” and it is used in the following lines to connote a spiritual *calling out*. In these lines there is the sense both of an impending meeting and the ecstasy the meeting with generate.

silk moth fly mulberry tree

Come and come rapture

The second half of *Souls* echoes the first. In “118 Westerly Terrace” Howe reworks a piece that was published in 2005 as a Belladonna chapbook with the same title. She continues her historical research into the lives of Wallace Stevens and his wife in the *Souls* version but there the similarities stop. The Belladonna version of “118 Westerly Terrace” is a concrete poem. The words spill, weave, tumble over one another and overlap in the chapbook as to make the text virtually unreadable. The *Souls* version resembles the poems in the “Labadie” section, spare and highly readable and also personal. The spiritual, the prayer weaves through these poems as well. In reading the poem below, the reader must wonder whether Howe is addressing an individual or a god.

I began to feel you turned
from me – if only turned
round then why not stay – I
cannot stay quiet as an old
woman why can't you stay
quiet in your corner what
sails do you use for flight

In the final poems of *Souls*, “Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards,” Howe returns to her customary practices of collage and assemblage. A photocopy of the dress fragment begins the piece and each page thereafter presents a different visual with language as its medium. These ‘image words’ are painterly in the way they are strewn over the canvas of the page and can be appreciated by the viewer/ reader as either one distinct image or as an object that can be disassembled with each part a separate and appreciable idea/poem/sound. Howe returns to her artistic roots as a collage artist in pieces such as this. These poems cannot be read in the traditional sense, since words disappear, overlap each other, are stretched, flipped upside down and reversed. Each page is reduced to an image until the final poem, already described in the introduction to this review as a ‘broken mark’ on the page. Howe, with this final gesture, is close to what she considers perfection, as she describes it in an interview with Lynn Keller that appeared in a 1995 issue of *Contemporary Literature*: “I would say that the most beautiful thing of all is a page before the word interrupts it.”

In *Souls of the Labadie Tract* the reader is less a witness to Howe’s autobiography than to her love of the aural and visual presence of language. Unlike her previous book, *The Midnight*, that was rich with stories from her Irish past and drew upon her mother’s library as visual media, *Souls* returns to the poem and the collage. In *The Midnight* there was a strong sense of an *I*; in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* there is less essay, less sense of an autobiographical *I* and more extraordinary poetry. The poems in *Souls* are pure, scintillating, minimalist compositions distilled from Howe’s favourite haunts – archives and libraries.

True wildness is like true gold; it will bear the trial of Dewey Decimal

Works Cited

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