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*what syllables will flood utterance*¹
On Susan Howe and Dominique Fourcade

Abstract—This paper shows how stuttering occurs at the level of the syllable as the meeting point between writing and speech. Stuttering results from Howe’s and Fourcade’s efforts to bridge the gap between signifier and signified, to utter the unspeakable, while maintaining separation and preserving the veil over the illegible core of language. Hence the role of the glottis as the interface of murmur and speech where Howe’s and Fourcade’s missed Orphic encounter with the ineffable is played out.

Before I begin, I want to risk three flat-footed intuitions and one hypothesis concerning the unreadable, its causes and its relation to modernism.

1. Language exists simultaneously under two guises, oral and written. The unreadable may arise in the hinge between speech and script; or in Fourcade’s striking formula: “j’écris de l’entendu que je n’entends qu’en l’écrivain” (SBU 33);
2. Since the late nineteenth century literature has increasingly taken language itself as its object, operating a turn from the world to the word. Or to put it in Greenbergian terms, with the advent of Modernism each art focused on “all that was unique in the nature of its medium.”
3. To simplify outrageously, modernism might, at least partly, be seen as literature coming to terms with Saussure’s scientific demonstration of the arbitrary nature of the sign.
4. My hypothesis is a direct consequence of the three previous points. The unreadable² is the effect of the ineffable, of the writer’s attempt to utter the essence of language.

In the discussion which follows her essay *Encloser*, published in *The Politics of Poetic Form*, Susan Howe recounts an anecdote that might exemplify what reading is.

To try to understand one chapter of *Moby Dick* let alone the book, I was led away nearly forever. . . disaster [laughter]. That was when I got mired in British colonialism, enclosure laws in England, etc. All through Melville’s use of the word “Delight” (194-195).

One word can lead you a long way. Reading consists in following that word to the very end, keeping track and traces of that wandering, possibly going too far out and foundering.

¹ *The Birth-mark. Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), p. 37.

² Whether Susan Howe and Dominique Fourcade are unreadable is open to discussion. Both would certainly be shocked and grieved at being called unreadable. By unreadable I mean that which challenges reading(-habits).

I never got past the first page. This inquiry is part of the excursus I made trying to make sense of the very last word(s)³ on the first page of Susan Howe's first book — or what she edited with hindsight, as her first book, *Hinge Picture* (1974):

invisible angel confined
to a point simpler than
a soul a lunar sphere a
demon darkened intelle
ct mirror clear receiv
ing the mute vocables
of God that rained
a demon daring down in h
ieroglyph and stuttering

(*Frame Structures* 33)

It considers script and speech in terms of the unreadable and unsayable, the undecipherable and unspeakable. Formally, the poised stanza contrasts with the violent wrenching of letters: mangled words, dangling letters, amputation and castration of script.

Many limbs and leaves float free in Howe's texts. To be gathered and buried like the limbs of Osiris, as two lines in *Thorow* suggest:

Let us gether and bury
limbs and leves (Singularities 48)

The misspelling of *gather* suggests togetherness, implying that the community may be established on the buried remnants of the dismembered god.

Always in Howe one finds the two-fold impulse towards scattering and gathering. Howe's benevolent avatar is that of Isis, the cradling mother and caring sister.

*She was looking for the fragments of the dead Osiris, dead and scattered
asunder, dead, torn apart, and thrown in fragments over the wide world. D. H.
Lawrence*

*under her drift of veils,
and she carried a book. H. D.* (Singularities, epigraph)

Howe is on a quest to retrieve and shelter *other* voices. "I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted-inarticulate." (*The Europe of Trusts*, 14) "For a long time I thought it was my political purpose to find some truth that had been

³ This is a paper with a limp, proceeding on one leg only, *stuttering*. The *hieroglyphic* strut remains to be gathered.

edited out of our history” (PPO 195). A wrong-righter, Howe also has as a fierce avatar, a Black-eyed Susan who will occasionally hiss:

Words are like swords. “S” makes word a sword. When you slice into past and future, what abrupt violence may open under you? The stories of Pandora and psyche must have been told before the Flood (Falon 34).

Defined by Aristotle as a grouping of letters forming a sound, the syllable is a phonetic, acoustic, metrical and articulatory unit. A unit of pronunciation, a single breath, the syllable is a sound without meaning. The smallest unit relevant to both speech and script, the syllable is their hinge: “Sounds have paper-thin edges” (*Frame-Structure* 26). In his 1950 manifesto “Projective Verse” Charles Olson sketches a genealogical myth of the syllable, which he defines as “particle of sound,” “the smallest particle of all,” “the king and pin of versification,” “the minimum and source of speech”:

the mind is brother to this sister [the ear][...] it is from the union of the mind and the ear that the syllable is born. But the syllable is only the first child of the incest of verse — (always, that Egyptian thing, it produces twins!) [...]
The other child is the LINE. And together, these two, the syllable and the line, they make a poem.

And he famously sums up:

Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE

the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE (*Collected Prose* 242).

I set out to read Susan Howe and Dominique Fourcade as twin avatars of the Isis and Osiris of verse, the syllable and line. It is a working hypothesis, not a comparison, nor am I suggesting influence — though this might pertain to Howe’s definition of *poetry as telepathy*. In a tiny booklet entitled *Stutter*, published on Thanksgiving day, 1990 and reprinted as section XXXVII4 of *IL*, Dominique Fourcade asks: — “Susan dearest brother / may I be your sister” (*IL*, 61). Indeed, this hypothesis will be an opportunity to consider murmur and stutter, spelling and lisping, utterance and silence, doubling and gendering.

TERROR

Throughout the twentieth century, poets have inhabited the intermediary space between words and things, whether playing with it or dwelling in it in awe and terror. In an interview with Ed Foster, Susan Howe discusses unreadability and the hostile reactions that it triggers:

⁴ Both Susan Howe and Dominique Fourcade were born in 1937.

I think that one reason there is so much ugly antipathy to writers who are breaking form in any way is because people know that language taps an unpredictable power source in all of us. It's not the same in the visual arts [...] Try the same thing with language, certainly in this culture, and you may find your writing lost. This is because words are used as buoys, and if they start to breakup... (BM 177-178)

In her work, in interviews, in letters, Howe repeatedly expresses this radical terror that language might no longer ensure communication, that reference might dissolve, that words and things might drift apart: "Words are the only clues we have. What if they fail us?" (BM 178). Words are not only our access to reality, they are reality: "What those actors could do with their voices and what they loved to do! It's as if words were the only thing that was real and could be changed constantly and that was the reality. Everything that could be said was true just by saying" (Falon 41). Words create the world and, conversely, the subject: "Sans langue pas de monde, pas de soi. Pas de moi" (SM 12).

OCEAN

What makes this prospect so terrifying is that it is terribly alluring, of course. This song of the sirens is repeatedly couched in images of the sea. In a letter to Lyn Hejinian, Howe praises Ashbery's *Tennis Court Oath*:

[I]n that book he is out there swimming in the waters of pure inspiration, delight in words, language, images, the page, swimming around for all he is worth. Taking any wild chance, any combination — like a collage — that will form a final picture. You can float around in those poems and never find a specific meaning, message, or whatever. I suppose that is a part of all Art that doesn't go dead on one. That there is no logical explanation only a new being born every time one reads or looks or listens to it (UCSD, MSS 0074).

There is something clearly amniotic about floating in a sea of language, language in its undifferentiated state, before articulation, before meaning, a pure and infinite potentiality that vivifies what Howe elsewhere calls the *cinder* of the printed word. A sea of pure sound. Unless it be pure silence with the potential for sound, a conception Howe develops with Ed Forster in the interview, elaborating on Thoreau's image of the mole. The image strikes her so that she uses it in *Sorting Facts; or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker*: "Thoreau calls a pier a 'noble mole' because the sea is silent but as waves wash against and around it they sound and sound is language"(319). In the interview with Foster she specifies the nature of the fright and lure:

EF: There's silence, and then there's language.

SH: That's true. I don't know why it gets so caught up in fright for me. If you answer the lure of the silence beyond the waves washing, you may enter the sea and drown. It's like

Christ's saying if you follow me, you give up your family, you have no family. . . It's following. . . If you follow the word to a certain extent, you may never come back (BM, 178).

Fourcade expresses the lure of the deep with a similar image:

Savez-vous ce que c'est que surfer? Le seul fait d'écrire le mot me donne l'expérience de son sens; chaque fois qu'il se pose sur la page je me trouve mené à la crête d'une vague, en flexion sur une planche au bord d'un rouleau qui n'en finit qu'avec le poème, et pas toujours vers le rivage. (PPM 37)

Howe experiences the fear and lure of going too far out as a specifically feminine curse, a *hubris* punished by madness — or is it poetry?

I remember being afraid that if I worked too hard with words *I* might start hearing voices. I had this lesson of these two writers [Woolf and Dickinson] whose language was exemplary but whose mastery told the other story that a woman could go too far. When you reach that point where no concessions in art are possible, you face true power, *alone*. But if you have young children you will make all sorts of concessions (Falon, 34).

Still, the original epigraph of *Pythagorean Silence* was to be a quote from Kafka: “Beyond a certain point there is no return. This point has to be reached.” Both Howe and Fourcade repeatedly attempt to reach that point. And still come back. Repeating book after book Orpheus’ attempt and failure.

VOID WALL VEIL

Dwelling in this impossible intermediary space between words and things, trying to account for it has generated various images, of which the two extremes are a wall — obdurate and claustrophobic — and a void — agoraphobic and abyssal, “such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows” (Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ch. 42). In her will to prevent the great divide, Howe postulates a translucent language, and the image of the veil becomes the central trope in *The Midnight*. The language-as-mole is defined as a “screen” that “keeps spirits back” (BM, 328) but, one assumes, affords a glimpse of them. In an interview she defines “a word as a curtain between something outside and something very present” (Creeley / Howe, February 19) — alternatively drawn or raised. Elsewhere, language becomes a ladder which enables one to climb way up and down, but not beyond.

Strange translucencies: letters, phonemes, syllables, rhymes, shorthand segments, alliteration, assonance, meter, form a ladder to an outside state outside of States. Rungs between escape and enclosure are confusing and compelling (BM 46).

Similarly, Fourcade rebuffs transparency in favor of translucency: “[L]a langue ne travaille pas la transparence elle établit le translucide” (SBU). *IL*, the poem, can only be glimpsed as a mist, breath condensed on a mirror.

[J]e l'ai surpris bégayant dans un miroir *j'ai soif* et le miroir se couvrit de buée (ces mêmes gouttelettes) de mimosa
bégayant sans un éclat de voix
j'ai vu pour la première fois son visage (reflété dans le miroir) de mimosa
de face Il est une buée (IL, 68)

The veil, of course, is an invite to lift it — or at least to wonder whether to.

AT THE BLIND POINT BETWEEN WHAT IS SAID AND MEANT, WHO IS SOUNDING HERSELF?

Language was spoken against an ideal of lost perfection. ¶ Plutarch, who had been initiated into the secret mysteries of Dionysus and believed the soul was imperishable, once translated an epigraph from an Egyptian statue of the Goddess Isis: "I am all that is and all that was and shall be, and no mortal hath lifted my veil." At the blind point between what is said and meant, who is sounding herself? (*My ED* 82)

What is behind the veil? By definition what one is not allowed to see and desires to see: truth, origin, meaning, “an ideal of lost perfection.” How can words say what one means? An alleviated variant of the radical terror that words no longer refer is that of the inadequacy of language: a veil, *une buée*. Accounting for *Eikon Basilike*'s shattered and scattered appearance, Howe explains the book was “about the impossibility of putting in print what the mind really sees and the impossibility of finding the original in a bibliography” (BM 175). This fear that words cannot adequately say what one means is recurrently articulated by Howe when she discusses correspondence. She points to its possible origin in her father's censored wartime letters. “Thoughts delivered by love are predestined to distortion by words” (BM, 4). The pain is all the more acute since a relation by letters appears as a unique means of approaching “the word made flesh.”

Do you ever have the feeling that you could have a relationship with someone by letter, completely intensely made up of words? And not flesh. It's like the word made flesh, you know what I mean. (Creeley / Howe, February 22)

Howe finds these words made flesh in Dickinson's letters. They bridge the gap, provide fusion and fulfillment by the *feeling* of understanding and the trust in sound.

SOUND AS COMPASS

Each word is a cipher, through its sensible sign another sign hidden. The recipient of a letter, or combination of letter and poem from Emily Dickinson, was forced much like Edwards' listening congregation, through shock and through subtraction of the ordinary, to a new way of perceiving. Subject and object were fused at that moment, into the immediate *feeling* of understanding. This re-ordering of the forward process of reading is what makes her poetry and the prose of her letters among the most original writing of her century (*My ED*, 51).

This feeling of understanding is striking and revelatory, instantaneously bridging the rift between sound and sense, feeling and thought, matter and spirit, thus providing the lure of fusion. It affords a glimpse of its working or technique: "Each word is a cipher, through its sensible sign another sign hidden". Rather than a classic description of the sign, I understand this to mean that the material side of the sign also is already meaningful. Certainly Howe insists repeatedly on the primacy of sound: "Sound was always part of perfect meaning" (*My ED* 55), indeed: "sound creates meaning" (Falon 31). For Fourcade and Howe alike, sound is the sole compass:

Nous [écrivains] qui sommes en fuite
Et avons tout oublié pour entendre
Nous faisons naufrage quand se perd le son par quoi seul nous identifions le il
faut et nous identifions (*Xbo* np)

This compass that indicates the writer's course and his identity — which might be one and the same, "car on écrit [...] seulement vers soi" (CD, 17). This sound compass is continually analyzed, tested, permuted: "I pick my compass to pieces" writes Howe in *Thorow* (*Singularities*, 55). Sound is as indicative in essays as in poems — if this distinction has any meaning. In an interview, Howe explains: "every once in a while I say something simply because it sounded right, it *sounded* right — so there'll be an odd statement somewhere, but the sound was something... I really feel I'm dictated to in a way. If a thing *sounds* wrong I simply have to go and change it." (Bachman, np)

Here again, the lure of fusion and the desire for the feeling of understanding coexist with and are countered by their opposite, the need for separation and hesitation: "Interruption and hesitation used as a force" (*My ED*, 192).

STUTTER

What voice when we hesitate and are silent is moving to meet us?

“When I sing I stop stammering” (BM 82) writes Howe, calling attention to the well-known fact that stutterers do not stutter when they sing. Both Howe and Fourcade are firmly rooted in the lyrical tradition, yet they often resist the lure of song and fluidity in favor of: *prose*, a pedestrian gait, even a stumbling (“c’est écrit en boîtant”), rather than flight; *stutter*; and a strong *accent*.

Voici comment la question se pose: je n’ai jamais eu de langue maternelle (vous vous rappelez, la merde à laquelle je faisais allusion), c’est pourquoi j’ai un accent si prononcé. [...] l’accent n’est là que pour pallier l’absente (PPM, 9)

They relinquish the “fluent language of fanaticism” preferring to “Enunciate barbarous jargon” (*Singularities* 31). “Autant dire qu’un grand écrivain est toujours comme un étranger dans la langue où il s’exprime, même si c’est sa langue natale” writes Deleuze in “Bégaya-t-il” (138), arguing that great writers invent a minor use within the mother tongue. This accounts for the feeling of exile one finds in both works. “I write from the outside” writes Howe in a letter to Lyn Hejinian, a situation exemplified in the recurrent image of the waif at the window. Fourcade is periodically expelled from his writing: “il ne faut pas vouloir rentrer on serait refoulé [...] On est écrivain on est refoulé d’un corps (SBU 81).

Let me risk a hypothesis about the cause of the stutter. This vibration, this vertical dimension, results from opposing forces pushing forward and holding back. The stutter is the local effect of the twin impulses to utter and to be silent. On the one hand, one finds the impulse to say, to speak out and, ultimately, to say the unsayable, speak the unspeakable. Indeed, to utter is to utter utterly, to excess, to go too far, to overshoot the mark.

ce IL qui est la figure du poème, la figure de l’éloigné
la figure de la parole, celle qui par essence va trop loin (*IL* 9)

On the other hand, one finds awe, the terror that speaking will be punished, the fear of lifting the veil. This awe adopts several guises, for example the fear of making a move for fear writing will elude: “On préfère ne pas bouger qu’écrire de peur de s’éloigner en écrivant” (*Xbo*, np). Or a need to be authorized: “Je demande l’autorisation — je ne sais à qui je la demande, ou à quoi, mais je sens bien qu’il y a un interdit d’écrire auquel je dois demander toute chose” (PPM, 55). Or a cult for secrecy: “Clear unutterable / secret” (NCM, 41)

To tell the Beauty would decrease
To state the Spell demean—
There is a syllable-less Sea
Of which it is the sign— (Emily Dickinson, n° 1700)

With the verb *demean*, Dickinson suggests that explanation lessens, that to state the spell removes its meaning.

Addressing Howe, Fourcade praises “the disphony of [her] breath.” And Howe talks about how the voice forks: “my own work is doomed to be hesitant — breathy — but then I can find many places where his [Wallace Steven] source or his voice divides from itself.” (Falon 28). Howe calls a word a “a catastrophe of bifurcation”. (BM, 177). “Chaque mot, compris comme chaque plan, est à la fois le lieu et l’agent de deux opérations simultanées, un *push* et un *pull*. L’intelligence de la logique lumineuse de ce push-pull revient à l’écriture” (OU 46). “Mais si le système apparaît en perpétuel déséquilibre, en bifurcation, avec des termes dont chacun parcourt à son tour une zone de variation continue, alors la langue elle-même se met à vibrer, à, bégayer.” (Deleuze136) Deleuze goes on to define two kinds of stuttering: “C’est comme si la langue tout entière se mettait à rouler, à droite à gauche, et en arrière en avant: *les deux bégaiements*” (Deleuze 139). The ladder of language could not lead out of language, but the stutter promises to show —and be— the outside of language, which Deleuze defines as silence or music:

Et de même que la nouvelle langue n'est pas extérieure à la langue, la limite asyntaxique n'est pas extérieure au langage: elle est le dehors du langage, non pas au-dehors... un silence dans les mots. (Deleuze, 140)

The slighted, inarticulate, anonymous voices that Isis Howe wants to “tenderly lift from the dark side of history” (*The Europe of Trusts* 14) are to be found in the stutter, “what is silenced or not quite.”

I read somewhere that Olson once said that in *Billy Budd*, “the stutter is the plot.” There you have Charles Olson at his wisest. “The stutter is the plot.” It's the stutter in American literature that interests me. I hear the stutter as a sounding of uncertainty. What is silenced or not quite silenced. All the broken dreams (BM 180).

That writing (like fathering⁵) is a sounding of uncertainty is found on the very last page of *The Birth-Mark*. Fourcade calls writing a practice of uncertainty : “Encore une fois, coller au sujet, qui est l’écriture, elle-même une pratique de l’incertitude (SM, 16). Test the deep and make it sound.

About a childhood mispronunciation, Howe writes “But it stuck” (*The Midnight*, 118).

⁵ “Comme dira Joyce, la paternité n'existe pas, c'est un vide, un néant, ou plutôt une zone d'incertitude.” Deleuze, *Critique et Clinique* (Paris: Minuit, 1993), p. 108.

To stick: to stay, remain, endure; to hesitate, to remain present, stretching out the present moment. The stutter draws attention away from what is said to the drama of enunciation. What is more, “[i]t is not what is to be said that makes the stutterer hesitate, but that it must be said.” (Shell 8) One might suggest that it is her attempt to record the enunciation, to stage the (traces of) utterance in writing and more specifically in print that induces the brokenness of Howe’s pages. This hypothesis is confirmed by her avowed fascination with and borrowal from genetic texts, Melville’s *Billy Budd* or Shelley’s, and her rejection of authorial intervention, editorial modernization and all processes that do away with a text’s idiosyncratic marks in the name of standardization and so-called legibility. “Reason will trample on a force-field of passionate enunciation” (PPF 189); all the more so if it be the reasons of an “outside editor / ‘robber’” (*My ED*, 23). Ultimately, one detects a desire to relinquish writing’s ability to go back and correct, a desire to subject writing to the irreversibility of speech — a phenomenon Barthes calls *le bredouillement de la langue*⁶. If only because Howe, a relentless corrector, despairs of her “fanaticism of care” which causes her to devote hours, sometimes days, to a single word.

An insightful but sadly untranslatable opposition drawn by David Lespiau *apropos* of Jean-François Bory opposes “[le] balbutiement (non-savoir) au bégaiement (excès de savoir)”⁷. Stutter-as-fumbling would indicate lack of knowledge while stutter-as-repetition would signify an excess of knowledge. Fumbling and repetition are excessively clear-cut glosses for two words that remain virtually indistinguishable for most French native speakers. Dominique Fourcade adds a third impediment to the poet’s set, *zézaiement*, lisp.

Mes problèmes de zézaiement sont allés croissant. S'y sont ajoutées les difficultés du balbutiement — par exemple, j'arrive tout juste à balbutier les mots « il va sans dire » ; en vérité, j'ai abordé le balbutiement lors de ma première communion (vous l'avez faite, vous ?), j'y suis entré très confiant et maintenant je suis coincé. Sans parler de mon bégaiement, au point que la formule “est-ce que j'peux placer un mot?”, la formule même de la poésie, je ne m'y risque plus. Tout ça fait qu'aujourd'hui, dans ces trois disciplines, je suis loin d'être un débutant (PPM 49).

Est-ce que j'peux placer un mot? (“may I get a word in?”), the title of the book, is said here to be the very formula of poetry. In the same book Fourcade says that what he cannot say is doomed to repeat itself endlessly and identically: “Ce que je ne peux pas dire ne sais pas dire se manifeste de diverses façons en restant lui-même, heureux et atroce, et se répète comme s'il apparaissait dans une centaine de miroirs.” (39) In *IL*, Fourcade writes he stutters (*balbutier*) because he shies from pronouncing words, and stutters (*bégayer*) because he knows the share

⁶ “La parole est irréversible, telle est sa fatalité. Ce qui a été dit ne peut se reprendre, sauf à s'augmenter: corriger, c'est, ici, bizarrement, ajouter. En parlant, je ne puis jamais gommer, effacer, annuler; tout ce que je puis faire, c'est de dire ‘j'annule, j'efface, je rectifie’. Bref de parler encore. Cette très singulière annulation par ajout, je l'appellerai ‘bredouillement’”.

⁷ “Jean-François Bory : d’une nuit du signe à l’image”, (*Les Intensifs. Poètes du XXI^e siècle*, ed. M. Cohen-Halimi et F. Cohen, *Critique*, n° 735-736, août-septembre 2008), p. 686.

of shade which invades each word and because the shade-light whole cannot be said at once and because IL knows the tragedy of enunciation:

je balbutie parce que je n'ose pas prononcer les mots tout est à jamais si confus je ne
sais pas qui IL est
tu balbuties tu es une balbutieuse je sais qui tuée
IL bégaie parce que IL sait la part d'ombre qui gagne chaque mot et que l'ensemble
ombre-lumière ne peut pas se dire en une fois et parce que IL connaît la tragédie de
l'énonciation
nous balbutions
vous balbutiez (IL, 67)

Among other things, *IL* records the shock of the encounter with Susan Howe's work, to whom the book is dedicated: "L'écriture de IL, son développement, ses écroulements et son échec sont dédiés à Susan Howe. « JE » est le contemporain de *The non-conformist's memorial*." (166) "Love may be a stumbling" (NCM, 14). The three books that precede the publication of *IL* (1994) are *Outrance Utterance* (1990) which is very much about utterance, *Xbo* (1988) which deals with the unpronounceable and *Son blanc du un* (1986) which reflects on prose and murmur.

TOWARDS THE HEART OF LANGUAGE

In *Xbo*, Fourcade articulates the paradoxical quest of the poet, drawn by a poem he cannot understand, both illegible and unpronounceable, and which raises issues of *reconnaissance* or recognition: paternity, authority, knowledge, foray.

Le poème auquel je suis appelé est un poème que je ne puis comprendre, mais sensuel comme du Rembrandt. Un poème écrit dans aucune langue. S'impose un poème illisible. Avant d'avoir reconnu? Après que toute reconnaissance a été menée? C'est un produit imprononçable.

Again in *Xbo*, Fourcade identifies most clearly the object of the ongoing quest: the illegible, a blinding black, the hard and meaningless heart of language which attracts but cannot be reached but which alone must be written:

Il me reste à faire un pas décisif vers l'illisible, vers l'aveuglant noir. Ce cœur dur de la langue est vide de sens, lui seul mérite à mes yeux d'être écrit. On est irrésistiblement appelé et absolument entravé; on s'élance et l'on ne se rapproche pas.

This passage vividly conveys the contradictory forces experienced by the poet simultaneously drawn to and pushed back. The same tension which accounts for the poet's stutter is described

by Howe in the “inertial journey” of “the well dressed stranger” afraid to “step on a crack” in *The Midnight* (115). In the same book, Howe points to tautology as an alternative symptom to stuttering. “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?” (70) Both Howe and Fourcade ascribe the fragmentation of their work to the very nature of their quest. From the heart of language, they can only bring shards.

A lot of fragmentation in my work is because this unapproachable space of negative energy is one that attracts me. (Thomson)

Que distingue-t-on? Ce noyau n'est pas identifiable, je n'en rapporterai que des bribes auxquelles on ne reconnaîtra rien. Seule est identifiable notre souffrance à ne pas nous en approcher. (*Xbo*)

I want to end by following Fourcade and Howe on two tentative forays into the heart of language, one with the demon of analysis⁸, the other down the throat.

e n d l e s s P R O T E A N L i n k a g e s⁹

The mangled words, the fragmented syllables that occur in both works constitute scraps wrenched from an unapproachable kernel. Through them we gain insight into the secret life of words and letters. “Je vois des voyelles-raies pleurer d'autres prendre les couleurs de l'arc-en-ciel au moment d'entrer dans un mot”. In *Xbo*, Fourcade perfects the sensibility of his film to capture the permutation of letters, their entry into words:

le g ne cesse d'aller de san à kilog
le s passe dans bleu et le b rejoint sang
Donnant un bang un sleu goutte à goutte
En atroce incompatibilité avec la seringue (*Xbo*)

The unit for these permutations is the syllable, which is indeed the unit of stuttering defined narrowly as “the breakdown of the syllable unit, characterized by rapid amplitude fluctuations with the syllable” (Marc Shell 95). “Seul le corps des syllabes varie;” “l'espace syllabique est refondu”(*Xbo*). “Les syllabes d’un mot à l’autre se heurtent ou copulent” writes Pierre Klossowski¹⁰. “[A]tomies dare tangle” writes Howe, permuting antimony into antinomy,

⁸ “L'idée qu'en détruisant les mots, ce ne sont ni des bruits ni de purs éléments arbitraires qu'on retrouve, mais d'autres mots qui, à leur tour pulvérisés, en libèrent d'autres, cette idée est à la fois le négatif de toute la science moderne des langues, et le mythe dans lequel nous transcrivons les plus obscurs pouvoirs du langage, et les plus réels. C'est sans doute parce qu'il est arbitraire et qu'on peut définir à quelle condition il est signifiant, que le langage peut devenir objet de science. Mais c'est parce qu'il n'a pas cessé de parler en-deçà de lui-même, parce que des valeurs inépuisables le pénètrent aussi loin qu'on peut l'atteindre, que nous pouvons parler en lui dans ce murmure à l'infini où se noue la littérature.” Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*. (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Tel, 1966), p. 119.

⁹ “Defenestration of Prague”, *The Europe of Trusts* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1990), p. 91.

¹⁰ Quoted by Michèle Cohen-Halimi in *Seul le Renversement*, Bordeaux, Éditions de l'Attente, 2006, p. 25.

looking back to Lucretius's theory of atoms, a theory made possible by the invention of alphabetical writing, claims Michel Serres¹¹.

1.	antimony	one		
two	antinomy	2.		
splash	atomies	dare		
tangle	3.	trinity I		
Liberties	sigil	C		
willow	whitethorn	yew		
1.	2.	3.	x	
one	two	three	=	
poesie	sign	wave	9.	(<i>The Europe of Trusts</i> , 216)

This may look back to the Kabbalah or any mystic doctrine that words hold other words. “Une monodie [...] faite avec quelques-uns des mots qui sont dans le mot”(Xbo). It testifies to a belief shared by Howe quoting Benjamin that “single letters in a word or name [can] be rearranged to cabalistically reveal a hidden purpose” (Marker, 332). “Each word is a cipher, through its sensible sign another sign hidden” (*My ED*, 51). In a letter to Hejinian, Howe quotes H.D.’s *Bid Me To Live*, her roman à clef: “The words themselves held inner words. She thought if you look at a word long enough, this peculiar twist, its magic angle, would lead somewhere.” (UCSD, MSS 0074) Incidentally, the economy of means of language accounts for its great density and weight:

Could mortal lip divine
 The undeveloped Freight
 Of a delivered syllable
 'Twould crumble with the weight. (Dickinson, n° 1409)

And its obduracy: “syllabe / quantité d'ombre” (*IL*, 70)

SPELL

Spell: tale, talk, speech; a charm, from Old French *espel(l)er*: to utter, relate, tell. Read letter by letter. Spare, stray letters materialize in both Howe and Fourcade’s writings, a relief to meaning and gender:

Erre une voyelle un corps irréfutable un a
 Un corps ininterprétable
 Ni masculin ni féminin (certitude)
 Une émission un corps sans genre (Xbo)

¹¹“Les atomes, on le sait, sont des lettres ou sont comme les lettres. Leur enlacement constitue le tissu des corps, de la même manière que les lettres, entre elles, forment des mots, des vides blancs, des phrases et des textes... A la projeter dans le temps d'une évolution, on pourra dire que l'idée atomique fut produite à l'invention de l'écriture ou des alphabets non idéographiques... Donc, les atomes sont des lettres”. Michel Serres, *La Naissance de la physique dans le texte de Lucrèce* (Paris, Minuit, 1977), p.175.

In *IL*, Fourcade spells backwards, to swim or reel back to the brink of utterance

et comme toujours je suis sommé j'épelle
l u e l l i t
je remonte jusqu'au seuil de l'outrance-utterance oh! Mère
honne et pénétrable

prenez garde je viens du dehors et ce sera fatal

Cette épellation cette remontée cette souffrance (IL, 104)

Howe is also beckoned back by writing: “It isn’t about reading forward: no, the interleaf beckons you back as if a lamp burned and there was warmth on the hearth at the center of everything familiar and foreign” (*The Midnight* 73.) Where stuttering dilates the present, spelling or reading backwards suggest the ability to unsay and to wind back the time. Only writing allows this reversibility, speech goes strictly forward. From the mouth, outward. Or does it?

MOUTH

Both Howe and Fourcade give striking readings and both attach great importance to the sounding of the poem. The first text in *Outrance Utterance* was written after Fourcade gave a public reading of his previous book, *Son blanc du un*.

M’ayant vu lisant vous m’avez vu écrire le poème. [...] La bouche ouverte: la voix m’éjecte et n’invente pas. Seul le poème se connaît cette voix qui n’invente rien. Ecrivain lisant écrivain écrivant c’est tout un, une absence. Les mots viennent dans la bouche, vous ouvrent la bouche. (OU, 24)

Writing is not a species of speaking. On the contrary. Writing is oral, implies the mouth, but in silence. “Silence becomes a Self. Open your mouth. [...] Silence calls me himself. Open your mouth.” (PPF, 182) “J’ai beaucoup parlé à mes jouets. Mais quand je comprenais que commençait le poème, d’instinct je me taisais. Je devinais que le poème devait se faire sans moi” (IL, 40)

EAR

The quest for the locus of the poem, for the locus of the voice of the poem (not the poet’s), continues in *Il* and *Est-ce que je peux placer un mot?* Not only is the voice the poem’s, not the

poet's, but the words too are the poem's. A poem is not a matter of expression but of swallowing.

On ne m'a nullement appris à envisager que la parole ne dépende pas de moi. La parole ne dépend que de la parole, peut-être que ça ne s'apprend pas. Comment voulez-vous que JE parle, dans ces conditions? Seule la parole parle, je suis loin de l'avoir su tout de suite. Je pensais qu'il fallait que je m'extorque un poème — c'est tout le contraire, ça s'avale, ça bascule en soi, et dans ces moments-là vraiment on ne parle pas. Ce n'est pas de ma faute, on ne m'a pas appris la grande directive de la poésie de mon temps, « *look in your own ear and read* », l'exhortation de Pound reprise par Zukofsky, c'était si simple, je n'avais qu'à regarder dans mon oreille et lire, et si je l'avais sue jeune j'aurais gagné tant de temps, au lieu de quoi j'ai fait le chemin seul, tard et nauséusement et en crabe (PPM 42).

The ban on expression does not imply a trust in impressions: “il ne faut pas coller son oreille contre la neige pour entendre la neige” — “The snow / is still hear” (*Singularities*, 48). A vortex, the poet swallows words and looks into his own ear.

GLOTTIS

The brink of utterance, the point of anguish, the glottis would be the locus of writing. Speech is a chain of sounds, punctuated by constrictions, syllable after syllable. The stutterer fears uncontrolled glottal stops. The poet works to push sounds down his throat, presumably to put them to rest.

Technique: je travaille maintenant avec des sons remontés du dehors vers le dedans, passant la glotte en sens inverse. Ainsi traités ces sons ne reviendront pas. Dans le désarroi, je pose la question de savoir si ce n'est pas comme ça qu'a été fait tout poème. Tout poème n'est-il pas un poème rentré, non un poème sorti comme je l'avais cru jusqu'alors? (*Xbo*, np)

The glottis may well be the locus of writing, but this locus is impossible to locate. “Que la glotte du poète soit flottante et non localizable” (*Xbo*, np). Like the womb of hysterics of old, it travels throughout the body¹².

Il y a un lieu de mon corps où j'écris mon poème. Je ne localise pas ce lieu. Pour comble d'angoisse, je sens qu'il se déplace dans mon corps selon le genre de poème qui s'écrit. (OU, 19)

¹²Rosmarie Waldrop also works “with the idea of the empty center as a place of resonance and fertility: the womb, the resonance body of an instrument, or, in logic, the excluded middle.” Joan Retallack and Rosmarie Waldrop, “Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop” (*Contemporary Literature*, 40: 3 1999), p. 363.

Incidentally, *Outrance Utterance* opens with the claim that poets are all women — “Nous les poètes, les meilleurs d’entre nous tout au moins, nous sommes des femmes” (9)—, a statement Fourcade explicitly declines to explain. Questioning the tenets of lyric poetry and avant-gardism, Fourcade argues that poetry — if it is to be truly contemporary — is not an overflow or a conquest but a descent, even a collapse: “un extrême contemporain, ce n’est pas l’émérite qui se porte en avant de contemporain, c’est quelqu’un qui s’enfonce en lui-même, à l’extrême d’un lui-même sans fond.” (OU, 20)

MURMUR

In *Son blanc du un*, Fourcade attempts to bypass the mouth, glottis and vocal cords altogether: “la bouche est inutile c’est une poésie par le nez” (24). He is striving for a continuous sound, without glottal stop, without pulse, without words, without lines. A drone, lips sealed, words slurred. He glimpses the sound he is after in the song of whales or a murmuration of starlings. “Exemple de un les sons des cétacés produits sans corde vocale véritable mystère véritable système du son des murmures poème pour sonar l’un d’eux siffle sous l’eau et tous ensemble se précipitent sur le rivage” (28); “le son même dont je suis en quête me jetant à la face cet enchaînement de mots glissés” (50) This oneness he calls a murmur: “un axe les mots sont des instantanéités des ruptures pas le murmure” (62). Howe’s murmur book would be *Melville’s Marginalia*, “where the letter ‘M’ takes on a life of its own. This too is anticipated in *The Birth-mark*” (Back 237): “Double yourself stammer stammer. . . . *Mosses Moses Moby muffled maybe*” (4).” A sort of infra-language or continuous bass, the murmur is what makes speech possible, writes Foucault.

Si le langage existe, c’est qu’au-dessous des identités et des différences, il y a le fond des continuités, des ressemblances, des répétitions, des entrecroisements naturels. La ressemblance, qui est exclue du savoir depuis le début du XVIIe siècle, constitue toujours le bord extérieur du langage: l’anneau qui entoure le domaine de ce qu’on peut, analyser, mettre en ordre et connaître. C’est le murmure que le discours dissipe, mais sans lequel il ne pourrait parler. (Foucault 135)

As the outer edge of language, the murmur would coincide with what Deleuze calls silence or music and defines as literature’s aim or realm.

Son blanc du un can also be read as a practical answer to Barthes’ question:

Et la langue, elle, peut-elle bruir? Parole, elle reste, semble-t-il, condamnée au bredouillement; écriture, au silence et à la distinction des signes: de toute manière, il reste toujours *trop de sens* pour que le langage accomplisse une jouissance qui serait propre à sa matière. Mais ce qui est impossible n’est pas inconcevable: le bruissement de la langue forme une utopie. Quelle utopie? Celle d’une musique du . sens; [...] la langue serait élargie [...] jusqu’à former un immense tissu sonore dans lequel l’appareil sémantique se trouverait irréalisé (100-101)

Certainly, *Son blanc du un* starts out with the hope of attaining a page without meaning or syncopation — “je crois possible une page sans effet de sens et sans syncope” (11) — and continuously attempts to reduce meaning. “Un mot c’est vite d’une lourdeur extreme” (12). Words are too heavy, there persists enough meaning in phonemes — or syllables: “dans le phonème persiste assez de sens suffisamment immensément forme dont le sens est la forme [...] Le problème est trop encore trop de sens encore” (34)

INEFFABLE

I went in search of the unreadable and encountered the ineffable — the unreadable as an effect of the ineffable. The poem records a quest, gathers wrenched shards brought back from the black heart of language that must be said but cannot be said. “Quests end in failure, no victory and sham questor. One answer undoes another and fiction is real. Trust absence, allegory, mystery — the setting not the rising sun is Beauty” (*My ED*, 23) — “jusqu’à ce que lui saute aux yeux que la révélation ne révèle rien d’autre que le néant de la révélation?” (PPM 12). The poet’s quest is stationary and (s)he doesn’t seek to acquire knowledge but to expose her/himself to the unknowable: “Disons-le, je vais sans avancer, ce n’est pas pour connaître que je vais, c’est pour m’exposer à l’inconnaissable” (OU 20). “[É]crire totalement ce que l’on ne sait pas (SBU, 92) — “Scribbling the ineffable” (*Singularities* 47).