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Line Breaks in America: the Odds and Ends of Poetry

Susan Howe's Caesurae

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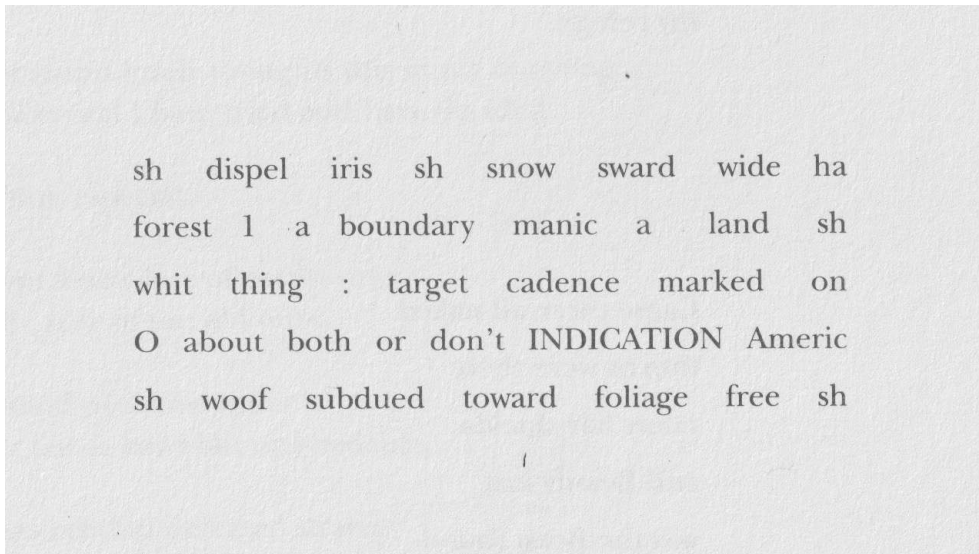
Susan Howe's Caesurae

Andrew Eastman

- 1 The works of the American poet Susan Howe explore the visible intimations of writing. After studying at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts School, Howe was active as a painter in the New York art milieu of the 1960s before publishing a first book of poems, *Hinge Picture*, in 1974; she has described her work as “visual art [...] on pages with words” (Howe, 1995 8). Her poems, in modernist fashion, bring the historical archive to the space of the page, exploring how the material processes of writing and printing and archiving inform what a culture remembers, and disremembers. Starting with her first collection, Howe’s poetry has often taken the form of centered or decentered blocks of quoted text whose more or less justified, widely-spaced lines seem to hover somewhere between verse and prose. Habitual orientations of reading are unsettled in the oft-cited “A Bibliography of the King’s Book or, Eikon Basilike,” published in *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (1993), where lines of text drawn from a body of writings supposedly bequeathed by King Charles I at his death are scattered across the page, crisscrossing and overlapping. In Howe’s most recent books, *This That* (2011) and *Debths* (2017), sections of block-like poems alternate with series of her “type-collages,” strips or fragments of prose or verse text pasted over each other and then photocopied; in these works, letters, words, and lines have been scissored through while syntax is necessarily discontinuous, leaving partially-legible scraps of printed matter: text in tatters. In the introduction to an interview with Howe, Maureen N. McLane notes of her work: “The page, not the line, is her unit” (Howe, 2012).
- 2 But Howe’s unit is also the line. Or, rather, if it may be questioned whether poems, and *a fortiori* poets, have units, the line of type as rhythmic gesture is an indispensable part of what her poems do. Craig Dworkin, in a study of Howe’s earlier works, made the acute observation that “deviations from the conventional horizontal axis in her texts arise primarily from the manipulation of lines rather than individual words or letters,” such that “the *line* [...] forms Howe’s basic unit of both prosodic and spatial composition” (393).¹ One approach to Howe’s works might then see them as using the page to frame, disrupt, comment on their verbal content; but so saying, we oppose the visual and the linguistic, and treat language as though it were the poem’s “material.” In a compelling account of Howe’s use of facsimile reproduction, Chelsea Jennings argues

that the visual, comprising linguistic and nonlinguistic elements, “exceeds the textual” (667); an example of this would be “Eikon Basilike,” where “the book’s moment of maximum violence, the execution itself, is represented in its most unruly typographic layout” (662). Yet Howe’s work seems to be all about displacing, or erasing, the distinction between “linguistic” and “nonlinguistic”; she herself has described those “unruly” pages as a “theater” of voices (“An interview” 13). The infralinguistic and the suprasegmental are at stake in the way her works approach the verse line. Whereas “free verse” as practiced in the twentieth century tended either to build the line out of the speech or syntactic unit (Whitman, or D.H. Lawrence for example), or use the line to disrupt it (Williams, or Oppen), Howe’s visual works compromise in one swoop the coherence of syntax and the integrity of the line. Read against the history of free verse, her more or less regular, architectonic forms, drawing on the tradition of the classical or Renaissance pattern poem, altar or tomb, seem to be ways of simultaneously muffling and calling forth voice: the scissorings of found texts in Howe’s short lines are ways of critiquing the lyric from inside, while eliciting emotion from the interstices of speech.

- 3 These poems work at the juncture of visual and aural. How this is the case may be seen, for example, in the last poem of *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, a collection published in *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974-1979*:



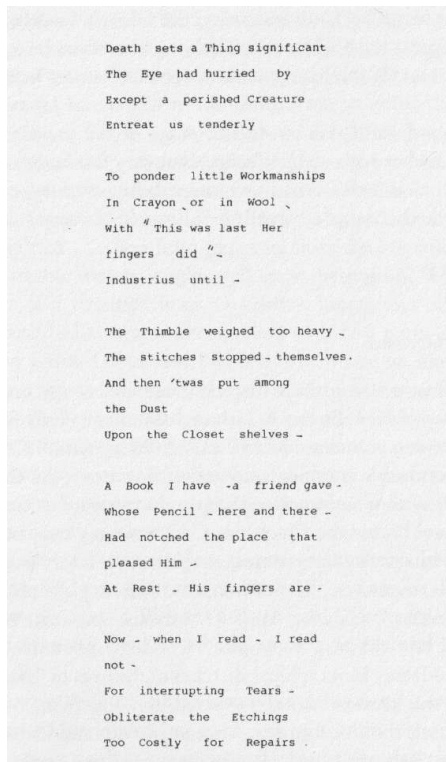
(Howe, 1996 122)

- 4 Words are set here in a rectilinear frame, which, in a poem which takes as its starting point eighteenth-century accounts of surveying the boundary between Virginia and North Carolina, gestures towards our culture’s deeply entrenched understanding of the relation between political authority and spatial organizations, as shown, for example, in Benveniste’s analysis of the relations between Latin *rex*, *regio* “point reached by a straight line” later “region,” and *regere fines*, the religious act of “tracing borders in straight lines” (14; my translation). The frame determines the length of the lines; yet these are not purely “visual.” The spacing of the words within this “dividing line” is a syntactic and rhythmic gesture: the reader is not sure, for example, whether “a” and “land” in the second line are to be read, and rhythmized, as separate, cited, words, or as a phrase; not sure what kind of caesura *links* the words. In a text about political boundaries, what is at stake is the grammatical distinction between “land” and “a

land,” or what is called in grammar “boundedness” itself; the line invents multiple voicings inseparable from a grammar. This poem, and Howe’s work more generally, explore how bodily energies of reading meaning occupy and move through the visual scape of the page. As such they are heavily invested in the linear sequence of discourse and in the line as typographical and rhythmic grouping. To speak, then, primarily of a “visual” effect would be to miss the point; an orality is at stake, in the sense in which Henri Meschonnic uses this term, as “the primacy of rhythm and prosody in the organisation of sense” (202).

Text as gesture

- 5 In her collection of essays, *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history*, Howe shows continually that the disposition of the text is a rhythmic gesture essential to what is being said, and to reading it. As a striking instance she presents a transcription of a Dickinson poem which begins “Death sets a Thing significant,” representing, even, the approximate length of spaces between words and the precise orientation of Dickinson’s dashes. Here is the poem as Howe has transcribed it:



(Howe, *Birth-mark* 29)

- 6 One of the most forceful effects induced by this transcription is found in the fifth stanza, where the word “not” has been allotted a line by itself, as it has in Dickinson’s manuscript: speech breaks off, and there is the suggestion of a strong and rather unhabitual accent to be placed on “not.” The line break thus makes it possible to read “not” as both adverb of negation and noun, as the direct object complement of “read.” Yet Howe has subtly and significantly modified the poem as we read it in Dickinson’s hand. Whereas in the manuscript the verse line “runs on” to the space beneath when it reaches the page’s right-hand edge, Howe has presented the poem with substantial

white space to left and right, so that the placement of “not” appears intentional—a decisive intervention. If we compare the version given in what was for many years the standard edition of Dickinson’s poems, Thomas H. Johnson’s, we see that Johnson preferred to align the poem’s visual presentation with its metrical pattern:

Now - when I read - I read not -
 For interrupting Tears -
 Obliterate the Etchings
 Too costly for Repairs.
 (Johnson 171)

- 7 Isolating the negative particle, Howe makes the line break analogous to the cessation of life. A similar gesture appears in stanza 3, with the isolated line “the Dust.” But in this case, we might wonder: does this phrase need to be made prominent? The emphasis points us directly to the dust of mortal bodies; but Dickinson is talking, in homely fashion, about household dust. Here is stanza 3 in Johnson’s version:

The Thimble weighed too heavy -
 The stitches stopped - themselves -
 And then ’twas put among the Dust
 Upon the Closet shelves -
 (Johnson 171)

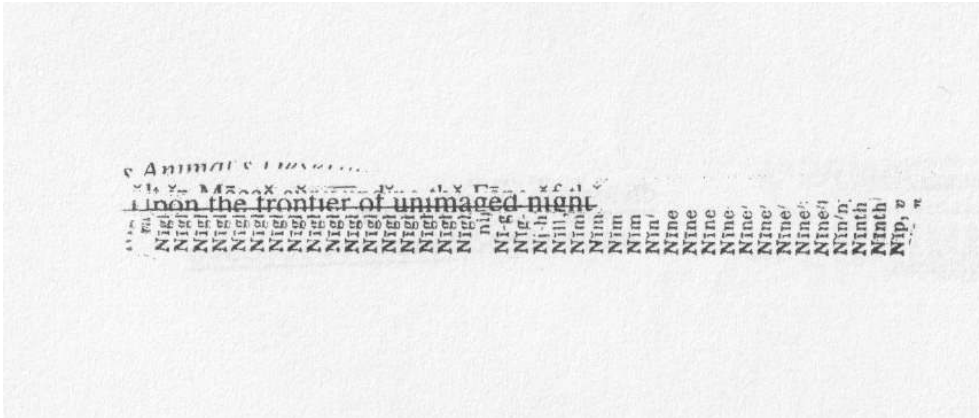
- 8 This reading, as soon as we have compared it to the transcription, seems too smooth, too metrical, yet at the same time deftly identifies without actually saying so the object put away in the closet and the body put away in the grave; and this cool understatement is seemingly compromised by the clumsy insistence involved in attributing a line to “the Dust.” A charge, a surprise, we might say, is hidden *within* the line. It is lines like this, I will argue, that we find in recent work by Susan Howe.

Crossing the line

- 9 Howe’s transcription of Dickinson’s poem highlights a problem of poetic form, or, on one account, what is left of poetic form after modernism: the idea that poems are made of lines, a conception defended, for example, in James Longenbach’s *The Art of the Poetic Line*, published in 2008. Longenbach, in his introduction, argues: “Poetry is the sound of language organized in lines. More than meter, more than rhyme, more than images or alliteration or figurative language, line is what distinguishes our experience of poetry as poetry, rather than some other kind of writing” (xi). Even the prose poem depends on it, because, writes Longenbach, “We couldn’t be attracted to the notion of prose poetry if it didn’t feel exciting to abandon the decorum of lines” (xi). He goes on to study, in often interesting ways, the distinctive functioning of lines and groups of lines in individual poems. The line, he argues, cannot be reduced to its visual appearance on the page; its function is “sonic” (xi). But, we might ask, what then *is* a line, or, more properly, a “poetic line”; what makes it “poetic,” aside from its appearance in a “poem”? As far as I can tell, Longenbach does not say. It is this identification of poem and line which Howe’s work directly puts into question; and in doing so, she invents a specific practice of the line and a specific mode of orality.
- 10 Howe’s most recent collection, *Debths*, published in 2017, may be read as so many ways of using, and abusing, the “poetic line.” The book opens with a prose or mostly prose-like essay, entitled “Foreword,” which combines personal reminiscence, odd historical fact, and discussions of the readings, works, and contexts out of which the rest of the

book has been made. The four sections which follow adopt diverse textual formats all working with lines: "Titian Air Vent" is a sequence of short texts modeled on the descriptions of art works in museum displays, inspired by Howe's stay as artist-in-residence at the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum in Boston. "Tom Tit Tot" is a sequence of collage poems, or what Howe calls "type-collages," prepared by photocopying passages of printed text, strips or swatches of which are then cut out, taped together and photocopied again to form a composition of printed matter. "Periscope," whose title is borrowed from a work by the American artist Paul Thek, another tutelary presence, is a series of brief texts presented in short, left-justified, double-spaced lines of approximately equal length; while "Debths" makes up a second, shorter series of type-collages, works from which readable linguistic content seems to have drained away. Though the back cover of *Debths* bears, at the top, the mention "POETRY" in capital letters, it would seem that what poetry is or how it is to appear is precisely in question in this book.

- 11 A first sense of what Howe is doing with the line might be gathered from looking at a collage poem from the closing section of *Debths*; a collage which makes a long horizontal "line" or stripe across the center of the page, foregrounding a horizontal line of text:



(Howe, 2017 139)

- 12 The most prominent part of this work seems to read: "[Upon] the [f]rontier of unima[g]ed nig[h]t"²: this is a fragment from the transcribed manuscript of one of W.B. Yeats's last poems, "The Circus Animals' Desertion."³ Howe, who was born in 1937, tells us that she has returned to Yeats, a childhood favorite through the influence of her Irish mother, in old age; Yeats, in this poem, speaks of the "masterful images" he can no longer summon up. The editors have struck a line through this passage to show that it was crossed out in the manuscript. Behind or rather slightly above this line, and obscured by it, is another line of text, this time a passage from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Mahomet: A fragment," all that remains, apparently, of Coleridge's and Robert Southey's intention to write an epic in dactylic hexameters about the life of the prophet Muhammad. The most commonly-published version of this line reads: "Loud the tumult in Mecca surrounding the Fane of the Idols"; but Howe has used an editor's transcription of a version in Coleridge's manuscript to which he added marks of metrical scansion. To the upper left, partially obscured, is a reproduction of the title "The Circus Animals' Desertion"; and, along the bottom, set perpendicularly to the other lines of text, what appears to be an alphabetical list of words from an index, or concordance, varying, as though in reverberation, from "Night" to "Ninth." Given the

contexts it brings to bear, Howe's type-collage, one might say, makes up a picture of death, the crossed-out line a visual analogue of annihilation.

- 13 Yet the poem speaks to us in a multitude of ways which have little to do with its formal properties as verse. In one sense, Howe's work would seem to validate the identity or mutual implication of line and poem by producing a poem, a collage poem, composed, centrally, of a single line, a line which we recognize as a traditionally "poetic" line, because of its initial capital letter, a "U," and its ten syllables (even if it scans awkwardly). Yet if poetry requires organizing language, giving it form, introducing the "decorum of the line," what then is the value or status of a crossed-out line? We tend to think of the line as cutting or scissoring words or speech, but here it is the line which is cut across—by a line. Rather than a finished aesthetic product, it is the image of something said-not said, of a speech, then, beyond words. It is, further, the detritus of history, the dregs, if one likes, from the "foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" out of which, "The Circus Animals' Desertion" tells us, poetry is made. At the same time, this quasi-enunciation or suppressed enunciation is so precious to us that it has been dredged up and printed in a book, made to speak a second time thanks to the extreme care and veneration of the editors' transcription. Yet Howe presents it covered over, smudged, obscured, struck through in such a way that we cannot actually see the line, but must imagine it, since the letters themselves are not fully or actually visible; we are obliged to "make it out," reading "night" where only "nigt" is visible. In so doing we miss seeing that Howe has grafted the negative particle "nt" into the word "night," as though "night" were a verb, as though night itself were a grammar.
- 14 The appeal to our visual imagination, of course, does not end there. The type-collage is not strictly speaking a picture, but the poetic line enters here into another, visual dimension; the printed text and its meaning cannot be separated from the ways in which we organize visual space, or see the world as lines. Yeats's line refers to a "[f]rontier" separating, or delineating, presumably, a metaphorical night from day, and works simultaneously as a horizon line; similarly, in a nearby type-collage, the words "[RIDING WESTWARD]" in capital letters rise, half-obscured, above lines of *P*'s and *L*'s (here the title is of course from John Donne's poem "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward," the *P*'s and *L*'s, perhaps from a concordance of *Paradise Lost*). The type-collage builds the line into a metaphysical landscape which it seems to describe.
- 15 This landscape, however, is pervaded with absence. The line as unit or whole serves to highlight the fragmentariness of the syntax, a prepositional phrase attached to nothing; while "[Upon] the [f]rontier" suggests a suspended moment. As the text leads nowhere, our attention is refocused within the line. What stands out? The word "unima[g]led" and its relation to "nig[h]t." For what is "unimaged night"; and how can it have a "frontier"? What does "unimaged" even mean? This indefinite negative word opens like a gap in the middle of the line, hovers like a smudge or blur which our sense cannot make out, which our voice is unsure how to pronounce: should "un-", which rhymes with "fron-" in "frontier", take an accent? The line—order, horizon, frontier in Howe's type-collage—appears to frame a break, the rhythmic caesura which we may be led to pronounce as "un-imaged"; the center or pivot of this line, we might argue, is "un-". Yet "unimaged" points to the mystical, referring, implicitly, to the prohibition on images of God. Howe's type-collage leaves us on the threshold of the mystery, of an experience which can only be gestured to by being crossed out.

- 16 We see then a possible connection to the text which Yeats's line obscures, drawn, as noted, from Coleridge's "Mahomet: A Fragment"; the line reads in full: "Loud the tumult in Mecca surrounding the Fane of the Idols", and describes crowds raging against Muhammad and the prophet's subsequent flight from Mecca. Yeats's vision of personal destruction is here contrasted with an image of social upheaval; a line evoking the mystical contemplation of "unimaged nig[h]t" is collaged with, and obscures, a scene of religious violence, of violence predicated on questions of belief in the invisible. Who then are the idols? Yeats himself, perhaps, and Coleridge, for whom critics, scholars, and editors build a fane of textual scholarship, while the poet remains invisible, only pointed to, gestured at, by some marks on a page.

Line-breaks

- 17 The line, as usually understood, is a visual and rhythmic unit, a unit of grouping, and grouping means unifying, organizing continuity. It is nothing in itself, James Longenbach contends, but only as it interacts with connected speech. The key to the line is then the line *end*: this, notes Longenbach, is where "the work of pleasure takes place (70)."⁴ We are familiar with this argument: verse is defined by the possibility of enjambment, as Giorgio Agamben noted, and exploring possibilities of enjambment, from Williams to Creeley to Louise Glück and Nathaniel Mackey is what characterizes one typically American practice of the line. Yet just as important would seem to be what breaks into the line from inside, those pauses, silences, or punctuations we traditionally call *caesurae*;⁵ not how the line affects the syntax, but how the syntax affects the line. Both points of view would seem to imply that line and syntax are identifiable entities which may then interact. For Longenbach, "syntax" or "sentence," identified with "thought" (40), is a preexisting "content" given "form" in poetic lines; the form can then be judged in terms of its adequation to content, as necessary or appropriate to what is being said. The binary categories of traditional accounts of poetic language (sound and sense, form and content, meter and rhythm) are thus maintained; and the line, as poetic universal and common denominator, can reconcile, in this consensual account, American poetry with itself, erasing and transcending distinctions of metrical and free, rhymed and unrhymed; for, exactly like meter in its traditional formulations, the line's virtue is said to be "variety of effects" (Longenbach 48), the variation with respect to a norm.⁶
- 18 What happens, then, if the linguistic material which makes up a poem is not continuous speech, if there is no "syntax" in the common sense of the term? What if a poem's lines, without being prose, are still pre-determined, or partly determined, by the mechanical typesetting processes which go into printing prose? This is exactly the kind of problem we find in those of Howe's type-collages into which she has introduced snippets of prose. Take, for example, this type-collage from "Tom Tit Tot", presenting a writer's account of writing in relation, it appears, to sleeping habits:⁷

ming finish my play. ~~Triumphant,~~
 rpiece. That night, sleeping draft,
 . Next morning begin ballad about
 nt. Bad night. Next morning finish
 nt; believe I have written a master-
 zach. Will take a whole Broadside
 ct my wife's suggestions for next
 over press. She explains that my
 incapable of facing practical life. Ill
 Good night. Then on Wednesday
 and decide to do no serious work
 and this morning perfectly well
 *** ORIGINAL FEATURE ***
 Move with "green radiance"

(Howe, 2017 74)

- 19 This text's justified right-hand margin is apparently that of a prose text, as the hyphen after "master-" in line 5 suggests; while the poem's left-hand margin, scissoring syllables, clearly is not. Here the fact that parts of the text are missing or obscured leads us, again, to conjecture, to imagine words, to look for pattern in what is, finally, a highly patterned text. At the upper right hand corner, we can make out the word "[Triumphant]," linked, it seems, to a conjectural "master[piece]" at the beginning of line 2; and this inference seems to be confirmed when we read "believe I have written a master-" below at line 5; while this passage, we note, is preceded by the "nt" which appears at the end of the word "[Triumphant]." Howe has "cut out" a swath of this text to organize these patterns; meanwhile, the fact that she is working with the right-hand margin of a prose text means there can be no question of enjambment.
- 20 In our day and age, it is not difficult to discover the text Howe is working with: the 1964 edition of the letters of W.B. Yeats to the poet Dorothy Wellesley, with whom Yeats collaborated in the late 1930s on poetry collections published as "Broadsides" by the Cuala Press, and, in an impassioned correspondence, exchanged poems and ideas about poetry.⁸ The letter in question, from 1936, reads in part:

[...] Here however is the emotional diary of my week. Saturday night sleepless; thought I fell asleep for only a few minutes. Dreamed I was in a great country house. Dorothy came to my room in the middle of the night. She was in some trouble about Dante, thought of turning Catholic. I was furious. Rest of the night tried vainly to sleep. Next morning finish my play. Triumphant; believe I have written a masterpiece. That night, sleeping draft, artificially quieted, good sleep. Next morning begin ballad about the poet the lady and the servant. Bad night. Next morning finish ballad in the rough. Triumphant; believe I have written a masterpiece. Twelve verses, six lines each. Will take a whole Broadside. That afternoon—despair. Reject my wife's suggestions for next *Cuala* book. Beg her to take over press. She explains that my name is necessary. I say I am incapable of

facing practical life. Ill. Doctor told to hurry his visit. Good night. Then on Wednesday I finish ballad in the smooth and decide to do no serious work for some days. Good night and this morning perfectly well; capable of facing anything. What the devil is that doctor coming for? (Yeats, 1940 64)

- 21 Aside from the humorous vivacity of this account, we see what must have caught Howe's attention: the odd repetition of the sequence "Triumphant; believe I have written a masterpiece" which is Yeats's ironic comment on his own emotional vicissitudes, but also sounds like a mistake, like babble or echolalia. By cutting the text so that the word "[e]ach" appears at the following line, Howe invites us to read "believe I have written a masterpeach", giving an absurd twist to a writer's anxiety about the value of her or his work.
- 22 What the type-collage makes most immediately visible is the sequence of letters "nt", which appears as the concluding letters of the half-visible "[Triumphant]," then, in isolation, at the beginnings of lines 4 and 5. Having introduced "[nt]" as the concluding letters of "[Triumphant]," Howe introduces it again, at the beginning of line 4 and, again, partially visible, at the beginning of line 5. What is "nt"? Normally, of course, an English morpheme, a bound form, the contracted adverb of negation, negation itself reduced to a vowel-less expression. But here, in Howe's poem, "nt" functions as an independent word. Whereas the negative particle "n't" is an enclitic, the fact of placing "nt" here at the beginning of the line before a stop, full stop in line 4, semi-colon in line 5, leads us to place an accent on it—on a phoneme, syllabic *n*, which generally does not receive word stress. Furthermore, Howe has built it into a syntax, as complement of "about" ("Next morning begin ballad about/ nt" at the beginning of line 4), and as complement of "finish" ("Next morning finish/ [n]t; believe I have written a master-" at line 5). We are led to understand that "nt" is both the subject matter of a ballad ("about/ nt") and the ballad, or by extension art, itself ("finish/ [n]t"). We find here, then, a specific mode of lineation, quite different from James Longenbach's description of the art of the poetic line; in the type-collage, the line does not interact with syntax, comment on or annotate syntax, organize a pre-existing syntax by scissoring it—form acting on content; it is the way Howe has cut lines which makes the syntax, and it makes a new syntax.
- 23 At the same time, "nt" enters into close contextual association with a series of words associating /n/ and /t/: "[Triumphant]" in line 1, "that night" in line 2, "next" in line 3, "Bad night" and "next" again in line 4, "written" in line 5, and we read it again in the swath of letters "[INCIDENTAL F]EATU[RES]" cutting across the bottom of the text. What Howe seems to be showing us is at once non-sense and the sub-morphemic value, in English, of the phonemic and graphic combination n-t, as we see it in the association here of "not" and "night."⁹ Crucial to the value of *nt* here is the fact that this sequence appears at the end of a syllable, word, or sentence, where /t/ following /n/ effects at once a stop and a de-voicing. The text invites us to read "[nt]" in "[Triumphant]," as though the ultimate nothingness of triumph were written into the word. "nt" placed at the beginning of the line before a stop is a way of bringing silence into the line, making the line a frame for silence. Something speaks, hidden in or under Yeats's words, and that something is a "nt," itself a kind of silencing; Howe's collage makes it visible. What is this silence? The bewilderment, of course, which lurks in our every word. The book Howe is working with here documents Yeats's relationship with the poet Dorothy Wellesley. A note in the appendix to the manuscript edition of Yeats's *New Poems* tells us that Wellesley became more and more frustrated with Yeats's tendency to rewrite

her poems, so that she was led to disown them; perhaps it is also *this* silence which Howe discovers even in the ironic posture of the triumphant writer.

“Sound-hemmed naught”

24 In the type-collages, then, making and breaking the line is a way for Howe to inscribe herself in, and against, literary tradition, by interrogating reading practices and the way they construct our encounter with a “subject.” We find a similar practice of the line in the texts from the section “Periscope,” which look somewhat more like what we are accustomed to think of as poems. These texts adopt a recognizable, but somewhat curious, linear disposition on the page: “blocks” of five, six, seven, at most nine, relatively short, apparently non-metrical lines of approximately equal length, separated by a wide interlinear space. Centered on the page and set off by wide margins, divided, often, in two parts by an intermediary blank, these poems seem somehow slight, sketchy, quiet, unfinished, baffling. Their visual disposition frames a paradox: they appear, on the page, like self-contained, completed wholes, eschewing the jagged long and short line endings of free verse, or the dispersion of words over the page practiced by Howe in earlier works; they give an impression of discipline, decorum, and “good form.” At the same time, the spaces between the lines suggest that language is here no spontaneous flow, but something to look at and look through: these layered lines give a sense of depth and perspective, concentrating and focusing like the lenses of an optical device.

25 Inevitably, these texts, in contrast with the “type-collages” from the same volume, offer themselves to be read as “poems” according to our habitual reading protocols; and Howe read them at the awards ceremony for the 2018 International Griffin Poetry Prize. Yet the architectonic stability of these forms is brought into question by the way syntax and line leak, or proliferate, meaning. Speaking out of what Howe calls “the distant present” (2017 16), one particularly inscrutable poem from “Periscope” offers a capsule history of evolution contrasting, perhaps, worlds of language and worlds beyond language, natural history and social realities:

Mystical accidentalism for
 sound-hemmed naught in
 night’s botanical glossary
 Over unnamed cycles see
 the rich on that rust heap
 (Howe, 2017 103)

26 We see how line works with and against syntax here, for example in the sequence “sound-hemmed naught in/ night’s botanical glossary”: the fact that the line break cuts across the phrasing, leaving the preposition “in” at line end, means that “in” will receive some kind of prominence in reading, while producing a /t-n/ sequence inverting and heightening the /n-t/ echo of “naught” and “night’s.” Meanwhile the prepositions “for” and “in” placed at line end are marked as important: “for” implying a purpose or beneficiary allows “sound-hemmed naught” to refer, possibly, to a ghostly human existence as it takes form in words, while “in” locates it in a scene: here human being as a creation of language seems to be at stake. At the same time, “sound-hemmed naught” would seem to describe the patterns made by Howe’s lines and by the poems themselves, fictions of meaning caught, “contained” and so “hemmed” by the sounds of words: “hem” relates to traditionally feminine cloth-making while suggesting

limitation or framing, if it means, as OED notes, “to confine or bound by an environment of any kind; to enclose, shut in, limit, restrain, imprison” (*hem* v.¹). But “hem” is also an inarticulate sound, which is to say, an articulate word used to represent inarticulate sound, bodily sound on the edge of language, since it means, also, “to give a short sharp cough as a signal, etc.; to clear the throat; to stammer or hesitate in speech” (*hem* v.²); a “hem” is a linguistic “naught” in that it has, as sound, no conceptual or logical “content,” yet of course “means” in any discursive context. “Sound-hemmed naught” uses a vocable framed or hemmed by the consonants /n/ and /t/ to refer to the relations between body and language, the human being suspended between them. And a “sound-hemmed naught” is a caesura.

- 27 The poems in “Periscope” appear to reflect on language as means of human connection, on the space, or “sound-hemmed naught,” which language opens for intersubjectivity, and which is emblemized by the construction of the line. The first poem of the sequence uses enjambment and *rejet* to multiply mid-line breaks:

Closed book who stole
 who away do brackets
 signify emptiness was
 it a rift in experience
 (Howe, 2017 101)

- 28 Here the scissoring of the syntactic unit by the short line again dynamizes the echo between “who” and “who,” subject and object of the verb “stole”: these pronouns, “empty words” as they are used without antecedent, suggesting a renegotiation of identity which takes place through reading, a recognition of self in other. Another poem, opening with an invitation to the reader, builds to a statement about human relation:

Come lie down on my shadow
 Being infinitely self-conscious
 I sold your shadow for you too
 Let’s let bygones be bygones
 Dust to dust we barely reach
 (Howe, 2017 111)

- 29 At stake in the poem, as the last line suggests, is the possibility of meeting in or as the linguistic shadows we cast, and thus of a “we” that can “reach” and connect us to others; and this depends, implicitly, on how we relate to the shadows of the past. The poem presents no conflict between line and syntax. Howe, however, builds the closing line out of two syntactic units whose interrelation seems to be at stake: the noun phrase “dust to dust” and the clause “we barely reach”.¹⁰ The phrase “dust to dust” comes of course from the funeral service of the Book of Common Prayer and describes the mortal human being’s course of life, created from earth and returning to earth. The poem’s context re-applies it to a relationship between human beings, macabrely suggesting, even, touch or bodily contact with “dust.” Is “dust to dust” an apposition applying to “we,” describing the relationship implied by “we” in terms of mortal bodies (in “dust to dust,” “us to us” is heard); or is “dust to dust” the moment of our earthly passage, in which we “barely reach”—but reach what? Perhaps the syntax cuts across the traditional phrase, positing a “dust we barely reach.” To the extent that our “reach” depends on or is made through language, the passage seems to reflect on how our connections to others depend on how language and body interact. Here the varied senses and constructions of the verb “reach,” as well as the grammatical ambiguity of “barely,” create a tantalizing play of suggestions and possibilities of meaning, working

in the context of the book's preoccupations with end points and after-lives, held, here, in suspension: while the line describes the attempt to connect, it is the syntactic gap at its center which holds it, paradoxically, together.

- 30 Here we see Susan Howe doing something rather different from what she did with the Dickinson poem that was our starting point: the line, here, is not a gesture, not a way of cutting against syntax: rather, it is a place where something happens to language, a frame for a caesura, a space where a silence can take place. Syntax and its caesuring "make" the line, rather than the other way round. The line's apparently smooth continuity serves to frame a problem, a conundrum, a bewilderment in language. It resembles, then, the "empty brackets" manuscript editors use to "signify," as Howe notes, "a tear or a worn place" (*Debths* 22). Perhaps, then, it would be a mistake to describe Susan Howe's writing simply as "disjunctive": "a tear or a worn place" brings us back to Dickinson's poem and its "interrupting Tears." What is at stake in Howe's lines is the way the body wells up into language: "It's the stutter in American literature that interests me," Howe noted in *The Birth-mark* (181). The line is then part of a reflection on the ontological status of the language-body, on poetry as "physical act" (181). Caesura or "sound-hemmed naught"—something like the pronounced-unpronounced "b" in the middle of *Debths*—is the gap where subjects, interacting, are formed.

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NOTES

1. Dworkin makes Howe's "visual prosody" the focus of his analysis, but meanwhile holds that Howe's pages "do not constitute [...] a score for performance" (391), though he is then obliged to recognize in a footnote an extensive attention in the texts to voice and matters of voicing (398); in recent years, Howe has made performances and recordings of her at first glance illegible type-collages in collaboration with the composer David Grubb. The concept of "visual prosody" which Dworkin brings to bear on Howe's work thus remains a somewhat vague metaphor, and Howe's prosodics, or the line as a continuum of syntax, grouping, and speech sound patterning, is not concretely studied. Rather, Dworkin focuses on the way the disposition of the lines on the page "enact[s]" or "illustrate[s]" (396) thematic issues, reading Howe's poems through the concepts, borrowed from information theory, of "message," "noise," "data," and "channel."
2. I place conjectured letters between brackets.
3. *Last Poems* 378-379. The crossed-out line appears isolated in the middle of the manuscript page, below a group of lines placed at the top.
4. This focus on line end is characteristic of other late-twentieth-century accounts. Denise Levertov's article "On the Function of the Line" (1979) considers the line uniquely in terms of "line-break." She sees "line-break" as the "tool of the poetic craft" which, more than any other "yields [...] subtle and precise effects" (265); line-break "can record the slight (but meaningful) hesitations between word and word that are characteristic of the mind's dance among perceptions" (266), and in this way make possible a poetry which "incorporates and reveals the process of thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking" (266). Levertov's view echoes Robert Duncan's account of the "junction" created by line end in William Carlos Williams's verse practice, which Duncan described as "the vehicle of a meaningful hesitation in American speech that conveys the pattern of a highly energized emotional-intellectual complex, the movement of a mind that does not take its consciousness for granted" (102). T.V.F. Brogan, in his article "line" in the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, likewise views the line essentially in relation to line end; the thrust of his article concerns the tension between line and syntax brought into play by enjambment. Brogan also proposes the idea of the line as a "frame" (695; 696).
5. Brogan defines *caesura* as "a break or a joint in the continuity of the metrical structure of the line" (159).
6. As for example in one of the classic statements on meter in English, Beardsley and Wimsatt's "The Concept of Meter: An Exercise in Abstraction." For these authors, meter is the "principle of monotony," against which variations in the number of stresses "come and go" (592); a consequence of the binary conception of meter itself, here compounded by adherence to the "relative stress principle" which reduces all stress to a binary strong or weak. The authors introduce the term "interplay" (597) to describe metrical effects as deviation from a norm, an expression reintroduced by Longenbach (49).
7. *Tom Tit Tot* was presented as Susan Howe's first solo exhibition at the Yale Union in Portland, Oregon, in 2013; Chelsea Jennings describes the exhibition (689-90). Marjorie Perloff provides information about the complicated publishing history of this set of collages (§28). For Perloff, the interest in these works consists in that they "track the movement whereby we process the information that constantly bombards us" (§34).
8. Chelsea Jennings notes that the type-collages "gesture toward documents and historical circumstances that remain inaccessible" (686). They are not always inaccessible, however, and, as I argue here and in *Eastman* 2014, both the source text in itself and how it has been treated appear significant.
9. As already suggested by "Upon the frontier of unimaged night" where the lattermost word appears as "nigt", "nt" connects, phonemically with a series of significant and suggestive words in *Debths*, among which are "Lake Armington" (New Hampshire), the location of a summer camp

to which Howe was sent as a child, mentioned in the opening passage (*Debths* 9); the Boston medium Leonora Piper's "trance-talk with 'Phinuit' 'a former native of this world'", discussed with William James (11); also "Negative infinity melodrama" (117); "A nearest faint ghost alias—" (119); "Our tininess on earth as such" (124); and in the cryptic, suggestive last line of "Periscope", "logic a not-being-in-the-no" (126).

10. Reading this line at the awards ceremony for the 2018 International Griffin Poetry Prize, Howe markedly separated these two phrases, which appear on separate slides in the video presentation accompanying her reading, the line unit being visually erased. This performance is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYxsmcz6jss; accessed July 15, 2019.

ABSTRACTS

Readings of Susan Howe's visual poetry tend to focus on how she uses the space of the page to act on language, through an opposition, then, between the visual and the textual. This paper argues that Howe's works are specified precisely by the way they obscure the line between what is and is not linguistic. The paper looks into the ways in which Susan Howe's poems, specifically in her recent collection *Debths*, depend on and work with the line unit, use and abuse our sense that poems appear in typographic lines. Three examples from *Debths* look at problems raised by the various ways in which Howe scissors the line, arguing that the line is a place where something happens to language, a frame for a caesura, a space where a silence can take place—as seen in the book's title. Syntax and its caesuring then "make" the line, a line which works as a way of intimating voice, exploring the interstices of language and body.

On lit souvent les poèmes de Susan Howe, poèmes à voir, en montrant comment Howe utilise l'espace de la page pour travailler le langage, en opposant, donc, le visuel et le textuel. Cet article cherche à montrer que les œuvres de Howe sont notamment caractérisées par leur manière d'obscurcir le rapport entre ce qui est, et n'est pas, langage. On envisage ici les façons dont les poèmes de Susan Howe, dans son livre récent *Debths*, travaillent l'unité rythmique et typographique de la ligne. Trois exemples tirés de *Debths* évoquent les problèmes soulevés par différentes manières de couper la ligne : on cherche à montrer que la ligne est un espace où quelque chose arrive au langage, où un silence peut avoir lieu — comme dans le titre du livre. La syntaxe, ainsi, « fait » la ligne, plutôt que la ligne la syntaxe. Cette ligne césurée fonctionne dès lors comme oralité, comme une façon d'explorer les interstices entre le langage et le corps.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Susan Howe, poésie visuelle, ligne en poésie, saut de ligne, oralité, césure

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AUTHOR

ANDREW EASTMAN

Université de Strasbourg