

Susan Howe, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*. New York: New Directions, 2007. 144pp. \$16.95

The question of poetic vocation has come to the fore in Susan Howe's work. In "Personal Narrative," a prose piece in her recent book, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, Howe returns to the epiphany in the library stacks that began her career as a poet: "I vividly remember the sense of energy and change that came over me one midwinter morning when, as the book lay open in sunshine on my work table, I discovered in Hope Atherton's wandering story the authority of a prior life for my own writing voice." Atherton was a minister in Hatfield, Connecticut, who was separated from his band of pioneers during a military excursion against a tribe of local Indians; he is a central figure in several of Howe's early poems. "Personal Narrative"—the title pays homage to Jonathan Edwards's recollection of his religious awakening—goes on to reinterpret this vocational moment, furnishing a close reading of the first word of Howe's 1987 poem about Atherton, "Articulation of Sound Forms in Time":

"P r e s t"—gives the effect of rushing forward into a syntactic chain of associative logic under pressure of arrest. Ready for action in a mind disposed to try but being upset in advance of itself by process of surrender. "In our culture Hope is a name we give women."

"Prest" is typical of the archaic-sounding neologism one might find in Howe; the term is succinctly sprung in the phrase "pressure of arrest." To capture its many valences, Howe reworks the OED entries for "press" in rhythmic pattern: def. 1, "ready for action"—def. 3, "ready in mind, disposition, will"—("Ready for action in a mind disposed to try")—def. 2, "alert, active, eager" ("rushing forward"). That final citation, "In our culture Hope is a name we give women" (grafted here from the poem's prose frame in Howe's *Singularities*), comments on the disparity between cultural naming conventions of Hope Atherton's time and our own (he would be a she, now). Why give us this interpretation? The answer is a new one for Howe: clarity. Howe seeks to show us, theatrically yet explicitly, the kind of cognitive and artistic work she is doing as a poet. The motivation of "Personal Narrative" is that the personal (the intimate as well as the autobiographical) not be lost in the work's difficulty and obscurity, its engagement with the authority of "prior lives."

Souls of the Labadie Tract contains two long poems that sketch encounters with such lives: French religious leader Jean de Labadie ("Souls of the Labadie Tract") and poet Wallace Stevens ("118 Westerly Place"). Howe has often and eagerly stated in interviews that Stevens is her favorite twentieth-century poet, and so his presence may come as no surprise to avid readers. And the two men are connected: Howe unearthed Jean de Labadie in the course of

studying Stevens' genealogy. In 1684, Labadie led a communal sect of Dutch Quietists to a plot of land in the New World at the confluence of what is now Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland. The Labadists were one of many early American utopian Christian sects who traveled to the New World to find a Promised Land. Quietism involves physical withdrawal from the world to find absorption into the Divine, but the practice of detachment from the world comes in the context of communal congregation. As Howe elaborates in the poem's prose introduction, "They held all property in common (including children) and supported themselves by manual labor and commerce." Here is an earthly paradox: unity and separation, fellowship and seclusion.

The speaker in the title poem finds mutual affirmation within the Labadist commune. Indeterminacy here is not the product of the unstable wandering of a lyric subject—the violence characterized by the fragments of Hope Atherton's poem—but rather a result of gathering together many voices into the poet's own. This "we" contains "I" and "you":

Indifferent truth and trust
am in you and of you air
utterance blindness of you

That we are come to that
Between us here to know
Things in the perfect way

Howe begins by meticulously noting the closeness—etymologically as well as graphically—of "truth" and "trust," as well of being "in you" and "of you" ("indifferent" thus meaning "not different"). But we are cut off from coherence at first: an implied "I" is not quite here, and the "you" may be an address, but it may also be quotation; "air" might be the first of three qualities "of you," the antecedent of "you" or a description of what being "in you and of you" means. But when we cross the horizon of the stanza break, we scan a kind of resolution to the problem of indeterminacy through a pronoun shift: the "we" and "us" gather speaker and addressee(s) into an immediate present tense. While what "that" is remains beyond vision, "we are come" to it, we are "here"—geographically, spiritually "here" because the two are the same. The affirmation of mutual presence overcomes the indeterminacy of who "you" and "I" are.

Otherwise obscure references take on meaning within this communal authority. Obscurity in prophetic language conceals the divine, a visionary mystery made sense of by belief; what we can't understand now will be re-

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vealed in the light of future events. And it is belief itself, or the communal conventions of it, that sustains the speaker. One word missing from what is an otherwise religious poem is “God.” The apex of “Souls of the Labadie Tract” may be this powerfully cryptic charge:

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

What is “the great wicked city”? Is the article here marking a particular city or city life as seductive to the pioneering Labadist? Probably, the city is wickedness itself, the Whore of Babylon, that “great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth” in Revelation 17. And indeed the unknown speaker’s emphatic denial suggests the agony of human frailty we trace throughout the poem. Partly, the flexibility of language sharpens the human’s sense of his own frailty by contrast. “It’s not only that you’re not” works as definitional, attempting to describe what “it is”; and “It’s not only that” is also a phrase of casual speech, meaning “it’s not only the case that...” or “the matter doesn’t only involve...” But the more profound frailty is the substance of belief: can we trust an authority greater than ourselves? We must actively choose to commit ourselves to deed, not just avoid the wicked city (the “will” triumphs over what “you’re not”). Further, we must abolish ourselves in our commission: it’s *what* wills and will not, not *who*. Ultimately we are no more than souls waiting for rapture, caught in frail bodies. The phatic aspects of speech and formal prayer (where the former involves a human interlocutor and the latter a spiritual one) converge in this stanza. Obscurity is not about the instability of subject or object; it is about grappling with the need for and ultimate submission to authority.

The poem “118 Westerly Terrace” is dramatically different, and, with respect to its plain diction and clear narrative arc it stands unlike anything in Howe’s oeuvre. The poet fictionalizes an encounter with her poetic master, Wallace Stevens; the poem dramatizes her care for and then ultimate rejection of the literary authority Stevens represents. Stevens made his vocation clear in a late collection of aphorisms titled “Adagia”: “After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption.” The Stevensian poet finds that life itself holds meaning only in poetry; additionally,

poetry is for Stevens both a solitary activity and an expression of solitude. This inward focus emerges biographically in the isolation of Stevens's life, as well as poetically in a hermetic diction and an utter confoundedness regarding the inner states of other beings, especially in his later work (two titles from the 1947 book *Transport to Summer* are exemplary: "Continual Conversation with a Silent Man"; "Wild Ducks, People and Distances"). But for Howe, isolation and self-reflection cannot offer authority for poetry because they do not lead to communication and therefore community with others. There is no such thing as the private utopia for Howe. (And here the genealogical link might be motivated: embrace of Jean de Labadie might recover for Stevens a true lineage that he had forgotten or rejected.)

Howe's turn to direct, intimate language in "118 Westerly Terrace" makes a philosophical and poetic challenge to Stevensian hermeticism. That challenge through tête-à-tête engagement is partly literal. Howe stalks Stevens to his "house-island," as she calls it, (the title's street address belongs to Stevens's longtime Hartford residence) and makes herself at home: "Don't worry I go with the / house," she writes, "your living's where / you walk or have walked." The language here takes on an intimacy far from the abstraction of Stevens; it is at times casual, often clear. When Stevens cherishes the domestic scene in "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," he savors the inscrutability of what the reader is reading and the silence of the house. Howe wants chatter and clarity: "I address you at random / on the subject of doors" she proclaims, gently mocking Stevens's abstraction and solipsism with the familiarity of a cohabitant. The "I-thou" model of lyric address grounds this wry scene in a hesitating narrative:

For a long time I worked
 this tallest racketty poem
 by light of a single candle
 just for fun while it lasted
 Now I talk at you to end
 of days in tiny affirmative
 nods sitting in night attire

The halting of work at "end of days" is a gentle irony: not only the stoppage of daily writing, not only the end of a career, but of the world. The poet's youth is filled with language experiments (the "tallest racketty poem") seen in retrospect as "fun while it lasted"; in maturity, the poet turns to direct speech and the intimate gesture of "affirmative nods." There is something a bit ridiculous about these "tiny" nods, and this "night attire," though:

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She ironizes the urgency of her direct address in the staged tableau. She talks "at" Stevens; he's drifting off to sleep.

Language among cohabitants can be opaque to outsiders. Likewise, where obscurity surfaces in the poem, it is in Howe's attempt to find meaning in that most elusive of pronouns in Stevens's work:

Face to the window I had
to know what ought to be
accomplished by predecessors
in the same field of labor
because beauty is what is
What is said and what this
it—it in itself insistent is

Standing at the window, she can see that the "it" of all things, inside and out, is "beauty"; right where he had stood a thousand times, she "had / to know" (that is, couldn't but know; and also desired, needed to know). Howe inhabits Stevens's gaze and finds language adequate to understand beauty but inadequate to communicate it. What is beauty? "What is"—what the poet writes ("what is said") and whatever it (what the poet sees) is.

This encounter with Stevens, an encounter with a poetic tradition, is not enough for Howe. The master poet withdraws into himself—whereas Howe's "I" withdraws into the "we" of the Labadie poem, into a community of believers. The concluding moments of "118 Westerly Terrace" recount the inevitable drift of the domestic relationship; first, cryptic detachment from intimacy ("I began to feel you turned / from me—if only turned / round then why not stay") and then physical split: "I haven't the / heart he said and he raised / the latch and went upstairs." Howe desires to be with Stevens, but Stevens must be alone. In this turn, the poem expresses the paradox of Stevens's ultimate belief in poetry to sustain one's life: Stevens must find redemption in his own writing practice, but cannot allow others to enter into it. He thus writes for himself—an insupportable claim for vocation in Howe's poem. Nevertheless, in the conclusion Howe sees signs that do "authorize" her, inasmuch as they provide access to a prior life: "historical fact the / fire on hearth or steam in / a kettle year and year out." When the owner is gone, the house itself provides traces of its inhabitant. These marks of "prior life" are not poetry—but they prompt it.

Joel Calahan

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