

THE AMERICAN DISSIDENT

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE, DEMOCRACY, AND DISSIDENCE

EDGY FRESH
GROUND-BREAKING
ECCLECTIC
REAL AND FEARLESS
POETIC VOICES
FROM ALL WALKS
OF LIFE

ABOUT AS
FRESH
AS A
FRESH
PILE OF
STEAMING
DOG SHIT

ON THE EDGE
OF WHAT?
THE DICTIONARY?



THE
NEW
SCHOOL
THE
OLD
P.C.

THE GATHERING
AT HEYSTONE COLLEGE
TARTH
OR SORT OF

University
of San Diego
A Safe Space
for Poets

ENTARTETE KUNST
PLATE #26
PUBLISHERS OF POETRY
ON THE EDGE OF FLUFF



THIS IS A POET?

By John Lauritsen

This was a Poet — It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species
That perished by the Door
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it — before.
— Emily Dickinson

Last month my Poetry Discussion Group discussed the work of Susan Howe, “one of the preeminent poets of her generation” (Poetry Foundation). The woman who presented Howe to our group gave a brief history of her many awards and accomplishments, and added that, although Howe meant a lot to her, she found her poetry difficult. Apparently we were expected to regard Howe’s poetry as a challenge — to understand and then admire.

In a genially dissident mood, I said that in the twenty pages of Howe’s writing we were looking at, I couldn’t detect anything that could be called poetry. All of it was devoid of rhythm, sound, imagery, or symbolism. It aroused no emotion or feeling. It had nothing to say — indeed, it made no sense at all. Here’s a stanza (?) of one poem, “Cabbage Gardens”:

The past
will overtake
alien force
our house
formed
of my mind
to enter
explorer
in a forest
of myself
for all
my learning
Solitude
quiet
and quieter
fringe
of trees
by a river
bridges black
on the deep
the heaving sea
a watcher stands
to see her ship
winging away
Thick noises
merge in moonlight
dark ripples
dissolving
and

defining
spheres
and
snares

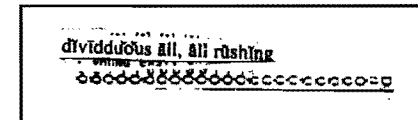
And the poem goes on and on, incoherent words and phrases sprinkled like confetti on the paper. Is Susan Howe a difficult poet, or is she an imposter posing as a poet? She has navigated a successful career, so she cannot be completely mad.

Except for me, the members of the poetry discussion group were in a quandary—too Bostonian polite to say anything negative, but at a loss to say anything positive. One woman said she had found some “beautiful lines”, but neglected to say what they were. The group members are intelligent people, but apparently they were reluctant to go against the authority of critics, academics, and in general, the Establishment.

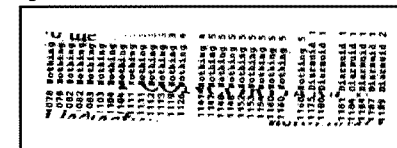
Born in 1937 to a Boston Brahmin father and an Irish actress and playwright mother, Susan Howe has at least two dozen books to her credit. She has received numerous awards and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Although her education ended with graduation from the Boston Museum School, she became a full professor, and even a “distinguished” professor, in several universities.

Harvard’s Lamont Library has a Poetry room, which has about a dozen of Howe’s books. To ensure I was being fair to her, I read them — sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. At least her prose sometimes says something, if ineptly. Out of all these books, the only thing that had merit in my eyes was a snippet of prose, where she said that when she has hard decisions to make, she asks for advice from her dead friends. This is an interesting idea for a short story or poem, but Howe was not up to the task.

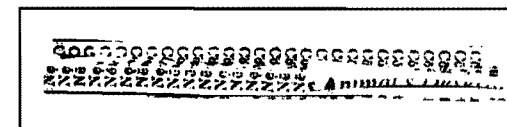
The back cover of her book, *Debths*, is filled with accolades. Suffice one of them: “Winner of the Bollingen Prize and the Frost Medal, she has been acclaimed as ‘the still-new century’s finest metaphysical poet’ (*The Village Voice*) and ‘as fascinating and compelling as any writer we have’ (*The Harvard Review*).” After a rambling Foreword by Howe are 16 pages of very short “poems” — of which it would be kind to say they are meaningless. Then is a section, *Tom Tit Tot*, which has no fewer than 56 pages of little scraps of nothing, one on each page.* Here is a typical one:



Well now, can anyone not stoned on psychedelics detect “amazing sense” in this? Is there even any “ordinary meaning”? Here is another *Tom Tit Tot* piece:



Is there “Attar so immense” here? Still another:



Then, after a few more dinky poems, the book ends with a section, *Debths*, which has 16 pages of things like these, one per page:

aim his hopes and fears about a life's wor
n makes the eariler poet speak with alt
vning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower (

anh | For pastime in the dusty thoroughfare

Coleridge walked with me to
standing in the room he kisse.
Almost forgets numan words he said
To see
Spinoza's face in the title-page.
To judge the

the tower with the bell ringing at
the speaker has left the dark wood:
light walk out
NO W A I T I N G

My sense of humor fails me. Here Professor Howe shows her true face, the face of a Fraudster—the sour, self-satisfied face of a woman who has contempt for poetry.

We have an abundance of boring poets, including more than one poet laureate. There are also plenty of bad poets, past and present. But at least the bad and the boring poets were trying to write poetry, to say something. In the case of Susan Howe, there's nothing there.

Residual gallantry tells me I shouldn't be too hard on the old lady. Maybe it's not all her fault, but rather the fault of the poetry magazines, critics, foundations, Academia, et al. — the culture whores who built up her fraudulent reputation. But then my concern for truth speaks up: at every stage Susan Howe had choices. She could have declined her many awards, saying that she was not worthy of them. She could have declined her various professorships, saying that they should go to better qualified people. But she accepted them, and continued submitting her "poems" for publication. She is not blameless.

We live in an age where truth is subversive. A man is a woman if he says that he is, and heaven help you if you use the wrong pronoun for "her". Someone proclaiming him/herself as a poet, or said by critics to be a poet, really is a poet. I dissent.

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty", — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.
— Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

*[The editor questioned John on the images to make certain they were those intended. He responded.] Yes, they are gibberish! That's the point. A whole page in the book will have just one of these little torn pieces of something. Some of them don't have any words at all. We are expected to believe that anything at all—scraps of nothing—can be considered poetry. Sick and cynical. I enjoyed writing this. At first I thought I was being mean or churlish, but then I thought of all the unemployed or under-employed people with doctorates, and of all the unknown but good poets who are unsuccessfully trying to get published. And I thought of all the people who ought to love poetry, but are turned off by the phony stuff like Susan Howe's. [John attended Harvard College (AB 1963), is a retired market research analyst, and is now a full-time writer and publisher: Pagan Press (<http://paganpressbooks.com/pl>).]