

Books Becoming Museums: Exploring Intertextuality and Pictorial Influence in Susan Howe's *Debths*

Isabel María Nieto Castejón
University of Salamanca, Salamanca, Spain

At the end of the seventies, science, philosophy and arts became a succulent material for poets, especially for those belonging to experimental groups like Susan Howe. *Debths* (2017), probably Howe's last book, is a museum for any reader as it is not just an ensemble of memoirs and related poems, but also a source of pictorial and literary information. It includes extracts from 19th and 20th century texts (fairy tales, essays, and other genres) by her favorite influential authors as well as her ekphrastic poems that evoke paintings and sculptures from the Isabella Gardner Museum where she once found the inspiration. Even music has a place in this book, as Howe tends to include sound effects, interferences and references to musical pieces in her poems to make them multidimensional works of art. Along the pages, Howe highlights the materiality of writing, as well as the relevance of the form, especially in "Tom Tit Tot", where she shows her mastery of the collage technique. All these carefully chosen pieces have the mission of representing the eternal return, the relativity of time, and how death can also be a beginning.

Keywords: poetry, experimentalism, art, sculpture, painting, music, collage, form

"Only art works are capable of transmitting chthonic echo-signals".
(Howe, 2017, p. 11)

Since the end of the 1970s, scientific discoveries, philosophy, and arts have become a succulent material for poets, especially for those belonging to experimental groups who were thirsty for knowledge and change. This was the case for the well-known author Susan Howe (1973-) and her contemporaries in groups like the Language Poets, who loved experimenting with the possibilities and limits of language.

Even if women had not had an easy path to access recognition in the fields of literature and poetry throughout history, these were the golden years of feminism and a good opportunity to multifaceted artists like Howe. A few women like her did attain this deserved recognition and, although she does not identify herself as a part of the Language Poetry movement and its way of reshaping poetry and language, the truth is that her techniques, poetic resources and style were compatible with those of this school, something that also helped her follow the artistic currents and reach a greater amount of curious readers.

Debths (2017), which may probably be Howe's last book, is a museum for any reader—with academic intentions or not. This is probably the book that best represents Howe's love and respect towards all kinds of arts. For her, they can all be shaped into poetry.

Isabel María Nieto Castejón, translator and language teacher, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Salamanca, Salamanca, Spain.

Debths is much more than a poetry book, as Howe composed it by mixing music (references to musical pieces and sound effects created with text patterns), paintings (poems that evoke the paintings in the rooms of the Isabella Gardner Museum where she spent a month as artist-in-residence), sculptures, extracts of 19th and 20th century literature works, fairy tales, or dictionary entries. As she considers this book as her last, she probably wanted to show through its pages *morceaux* of her own life and her most pure writing style and love towards any other literature or art she ever found inspiring. All elements in this book are connected; nothing is set aside or fortuitous.

The book's name is the first hint we have about its multidisciplinary character. *Debths* is a combined name suggesting us three words: depths, debts, and death: depths, as Howe examines deeply her memories and the literature somehow attached to them; debts, as she still has something to give to her readers, for example, something related to her Irish origins; and death, for this will be her last book and also because of the importance of time as its central element. Time here is a flowing river in which all these elements from different historical moments and fields reunite in the present as a never-dying entity that engenders other artists' works. As Howe claims, "only art works are capable of transmitting chthonic echo-signals" (2017, p. 11).

The word *debths*, however, was not invented by Howe; it appeared in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and constitutes the first glance to the intertextuality in this poetry book. Furthermore, Joyce's works are as cryptical as Howe's, one more reason to use this invented word as the title.

The first part in *Debths* is a preface where Howe exposes her memories as a child. She explains her beginnings in reading and writing and ends with the episode of her adult self reproducing what she saw in the Isabella Gardner Museum with an awesomely rich poetic language that makes us recreate every corridor in our heads. Her taste towards structures and architecture is patent in some of her lines, full of details:

...they decided to build an addition to the original structure in order to relieve pressure on the aging interior spaces. In 2012 the added wing, designed by Renzo Piano—a soaring glass, steel, and copper-clad structure “crisp, light, and transparent, reminiscent of nautical design, and thus a deliberate foil to the closed ‘plain brown wrapper’ of the palace”, opened to public. (2017, p. 13)

She also lists the materials used in the paintings she is in front of, highlighting their artistic component like in Page 15: “*Fishman in Excelsis Table* (1970-71). Mixed media: wood, latex, wax, metal, paint, fabric, string and Styrofoam, 29^{1/2} x 35 7/16 x 94 1/8 in (75 x 90 x 239 cm)” (2017, p. 15).

Furthermore, Howe presents poetry and literature itself as tangible and material activities like the aforementioned arts. This becomes a fact in her poems as well as in the foreword where she describes some of her favourite books:

I treasure my edition of *The Secret Languages of Ireland* by R. A. Stewart Macalister. It's reprinted by Craobh Books (Armagh, 1997) and has a paper over board cover, a plain light blue jacket with text normally reserved for the inside flap in simple serif typeface, so the effect is both dryly pedagogical and rebellious. According to Macalister the work is based on a random collection of loose sheets, letters, manuscript notebooks, scraps of paper, dictionary slips ... *Secret Languages* is wonderfully littered with etymological particulars, diacritical characters, hieroglyphs, wordlists, oblique slashes. (2017, p. 21)

The poems included in this book are: “Titian Air Vent”, “Tom Tit Tot”, “Periscope”, and “Debths”. The first one and the third have a more traditional form, while the second and the fourth show a very disruptive collage style.

The first poem's title, "Titian Air Vent" refers to the Titian Room in the Gardner museum. It evokes the soft roar of the air vent in this room as some kind of background music, so Howe is already adding a layer of sensorial experience that completes the mere exercise of reading. In the first lines of the poem, this becomes a fact: "...I recall each little motto howling its ins and outs / to those of us who might as well be on the moon" (2017, p. 27).

Each part of "Titian Air Vent" is framed with big blank spaces and positioned in the center of the page as the paintings were exposed on the walls of the museum where Howe found the inspiration. Some parts of the sequence that composes the poem appear with a name and a list of materials used, as if they were paintings or sculptures (Figure 1 in the appendix). Along the pages, there are references to artists from different disciplines as this book presents a holistic point of view of art and, for Howe, every artist has a poet inside: "a work of art is a world of signs, at least to the poet's/nursery bookshelf sheltered behind the artist's ear" (2017, p. 27). Some artists who appear on these paper walls are Mary Temple, Ellen Sturgis, Mary Howitt, or sculptor Paul Thek.

We can distinguish a particular kind of ekphrasis in "Titian Air Vent", as paintings and art installations are somehow described in the verses and constituted as the origin of the thoughts and feelings expressed:

Certain bronze elements found among the Pied Piper's/personal effects have been moved from one exhibition/room to another. Here are messages. "The Face of God."/"Dust." "Time is a river." Props and other disinherited/paraphernalia are never enough./I have to go in and catch my breath. (2017, p. 29)

There is also a reference to the sculpture of "Odysseus Creeping Forward During the Theft of the Palladium" (2017, p. 31), something quite interesting as in later poems Howe includes more references to Greek mythology maybe inspired by these sculptures she contemplated in the museum. Howe's taste for mythology and legends is also noted when she includes the story of *Peter Rugg, the Missing Man* by William Austin in some of these "poem-paintings": "Peter Rugg with child, horse, and open/chair. 'Is this the way to Boston?'" (2017, p. 37), "Boston shifts with the winds and plays with the compass" (p. 38). This story that became a part of the English folklore is also related to the main topic of this book: time and repetition, as the protagonist is condemned to wander eternally on his way to Boston.

As we all know, paintings and sculptures require an interpretation exercise to be made by the person in front of them, especially when it comes to modern art. Howe feels this works and inhabits them. As Marjorie Perloff says, the key in Howe's case is a fierce empathy, a sense of becoming the other in what Howe herself has called an act of "spectral telepathy" (2016, p. 2). We can see a good example in these lines inspired in the painting of *Saint George Slaying the Dragon*:

I am here to slay the/dragon in the ready-made name of an earlier Susan. While/there is still time do you know anything about my watch/being stopped? Put your hand over my eyes and say I have/got it in my mind. (Howe, 2017, p. 28)

This aesthetics re-appear in "Periscope", the third poem in the book, named after one of Paul Thek's late "picture-light" paintings that shows a periscope coming out of the water. This poem also contains references to Greek mythology, the Russian myth of Baba-Yaga or, again, the story of Peter Rugg that continues looking for Boston.

Something even more special occurs with the second poem, "Tom Tit Tot", which continues with the topic of time, life, and death but with an innovative form. This poem was confected by using the collage technique that Howe has mastered for years, with which she also highlights the relevance of intertextuality and of the old

myths and legends as the origin of all arts. A few extracts make this clear: “structure of layers...”, “age placed on top of another...”, “as if to infinite...” (2017, p. 66). This poem is so craftily composed that it was even exhibited in Yale Union given its aesthetic value. In the middle of the pages, traces, strings of letters, and incomplete pieces of texts appear together. The communication between pages is definitely not easy, but this way of presenting the texts has a meaning too: Nothing has a beginning nor an end, the eternal return and the relativity of time seem to be undeniable, in literature as well as in life. To treat this topic, form and content go in hand. The chosen texts come from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, or from poems by William Butler Yeats, like “The Gyres”, on the topic of aging, death, and on how we as humans are condemned to repeat what our ancestors did. Apart from these, myths and legends have a special protagonism in this poem, for Howe includes the norwegian fairy tale “The Giant Who Had No Heart in his Body”, the German “Rumpelstinskin”, or the Irish myth of Cuchulain.

Among these pieces of text, Howe creates some textual interferences that can occupy the whole page, evocating both sounds and the materiality of writing. These interferences remind us of a radio when trying to find a station (the different texts and writers in this collage can be compared to radio stations). A fingerprint on one page, or strings of—apparently—meaningless text reminds us of the process of traditional writing and printing, and the mechanisms involved. In addition to these interferences, music is also included in the poem when Howe dedicates Page 73 to a piece of music she made in collaboration with musician David Grubbs: *Woodslippercounterclatter* (2013). The name of this piece appears overlapping itself on the page, creating an echo effect.

Continuing with the aesthetics of “Titian Air Vent”, the fragments in “Tom Tit Tot” are framed with blank spaces or even doubly framed or ornamented with strings of letters as in Figure 2 (in the appendix). As Howe uses the page itself to complete the meaning of her poems, pages as those in Figure 3 (in the appendix) can have different interpretations. Howe may be trying to look at the two pages of the open book as a canvas where she can “paint” her poems ignoring the line that splits it in two halves. On the other hand, it is possible that the exercise of the right page is nothing more than another way to play with the reader and make him/her explore the book and open it as much as possible to fully read the words (which is also a metaphor itself, for the whole book needs this huge amount of attention). These pages could also be the result of simulating a page touched by a broken printing machine that was not well calibrated. They can even be just another artistic resource to approximate the text on the right side to the one on the left, showing they are related in some way. These varied possibilities make us attentive and even more creative as readers and co-creators of a work that needs us to be complete.

“Debths”, the final poem, continues with the collage style in “Tom Tit Tot”, but the pieces here are smaller, sometimes just a line. These lines shortening as we arrive to the end of the book are probably another way of adding the musical effect in these multidimensional poems: As the lines shrink on the pages, they recreate the sound getting lower and gradually moving away from the reader’s symbolic ear. The textual interferences increase as well: text chunks that seem again to imitate the effects of the broken printing machine, or typing errors that approach this work to Howe’s loved facsimiles occupy several pages.

If we look at each page carefully and catch the words or sentences that are partially hidden under symbols or even crossed, we can extract much more information. In this poem, lifetime is represented. The first pages show a few words related to beginnings: “upon the frontier” (maybe prepared to be born), “religious music” (maybe related to Baptism), “whose first beheld...” etc. After that, Howe introduces texts by English and Irish

authors, as we can read—not without some effort—words or sentences like “The destiny of nations” (poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge), “Our death, the tree of knowledge” (from *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton), “diarmuid” (demigod in the Irish mythology whose story is related to the phenomenon of reincarnation), or “upon the frontier of unimaged night”, a line by Yeats that appeared before, but that is now complete with the word “night”, maybe suggesting death. This final part regarding death and using the same sentence of the beginning evokes the eternal return, where death is nothing but going back to the start. Nothing really ends. Closing the poem, one more extract from the religious poem “Mahomet” by Coleridge: “its waters abreast”, as life and death have always been a mystery, inevitably tied to religion.

Before concluding this article, I would like to highly recommend an attentive reading of the studied book, because it contains much more than it seems at first sight. The reader who becomes really involved in the reading ends up learning from many different disciplines and getting inevitably inspired by such a creative exercise.

References

- Howe, S. (2017). *Debths*. New York: New Directions Publishing.
- Perloff, M. (2016). *Spectral telepathy: The late style of Susan Howe*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.8146>

Appendix

Beacon

A tiny artificial theater of the world. I am here to slay the dragon in the ready-made name of an earlier Susan. While there is still time do you know anything about my watch being stopped? Put your hand over my eyes and say I have got it in my mind.

Ceramic, plaster, laquer, newspaper

Figure 1. "Poem-painting".

O H & T S I G S I & T H
 & the crowne on her head
 With a scepter sett in her
 Thus louely to looke vpon
 Merry were the meanye of
 Blyth bearnes of blec, brigh
 Dallygance & Disport, [two]
 With all beawtye [&] blisse,
 There was minstrelsy made
 Who-soe had craft or cunning
 A I N O M E R E E E E E E E E
 we did whether we spoke or sang

Figure 2. Ornaments and frames.

A document, the parasitic
 involve a structure of layer
 age placed on top of another
 am its other, as if to infinit

PORTABLE OCFAN

... and loop
 ff words from images twi
 om their original source.
 istory scattered to the fou
 a page it was you playir
 here are those of us w
 mwilša? ga mi (in) grit
 mwilša(s) kam (and

Figure 3. Especially interpretable poems due to their appearance on the page.