NEGOTIATIONS 1, March 2011

Transatlantic Influence: Some Patterns in Contemporary Poetry

Nick Selby

I

In talking about transatlantic influences in contemporary American poetry, this essay finds itself exploring a double-edged condition. As part of such a double-edged condition, the idea of influence is about power-relations (between texts, between poetics, between nations) and, in the ways that this essay is framing it, the idea of poetic influence across the Atlantic is about senses of possession: possession of, and by, something other. My title promises 'some patterns in contemporary poetry'. But any patterns that emerge in this essay will be neither as orderly nor as clear-cut as this title might imply. What the essay is seeking to do is to trace some ideas and themes that might develop from a consideration of influence in terms of a transatlantic poetics: the essay's first half examines the work of two British poets – Ric Caddel and Harriet Tarlo – whose work seems unthinkable without the influence of post-war American poetics upon it; and in its second half the essay thinks through three American poets – Robert Duncan, Michael Palmer and Susan Howe – whose work specifically engages the idea of influence in its debating of issues of the textual, the bodily and the poem's culpability (and influence) within structures of political power.

The idea of influence might be seen to be marked in, I think, three ways in the work of these poets. First, is the idea of direct influence – where one poet acknowledges the influence of another poet upon her / him: an example of which might be Ezra Pound's petulant acknowledgment of Whitman as a 'pig-headed father' (and which is the sort of agonistic view of influence espoused by Harold Bloom in his *The Anxiety of Influence*);[1] or, perhaps, in Michael Palmer's interest in writing poetry out of his contact with and reading of other poets – Celan, Zanzotto, Dante, Robert Duncan (and many others). Though I'll talk a little about this sort of influence, I'm more concerned to explore the idea of influence in a couple of other, less tangible, ways. Indeed, the sorts of influence I want to consider in this

1 Ezra Pound, 'A Pact' in *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952), 98; and Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry* (New York: OUP, 1973).

essay are mostly patterned covertly, are poetically implicit – veiled perhaps – and are *experienced* at the level of poetic inter-relations, or textures. In fact, OED definitions of influence (as a noun) bear witness to this sort of sense, in describing influence as 'the exercise of power or "virtue"; or of an occult force'; or as an action whose 'operation is unseen or insensible (or perceptible only in its effects)'; or as the ability to produce 'effects by insensible or invisible means … not formally or overtly expressed'. So, to my second sense of how the idea of influence might be marked in the poets under examination: this can be seen in terms of how one poet's attitude or methodology – a poetics, perhaps – results from the influence of another poetics upon it. This type of influence seems to me to be about – in Olson's terms – the 'stance toward reality' adopted by a particular poet, or poetics.[2] It informs, that is, my sense of how the idea of a transatlantic poetics might constitute itself. And, finally, my third sense (a more tricky formulation) is the argument that influence is *properly* always already the poem's domain, its mode of being. This is because – as this essay argues and exemplifies – any poem necessitates a consciousness of its own textuality, its texture and fabric (I'll come back to this idea of fabric, specifically, towards the end of the essay in a discussion of Susan Howe), it recognises itself, inevitably, as woven from other poems and texts that influence it. The argument being made here is that the idea of influence becomes a metaphor for the very act of reading itself: to read is to give yourself over to influence, it is to be possessed in and by a text whilst claiming it as your own. The idea of influence, therefore, defines the terms of your position as an ethical subject.

Such a position – and thus the very idea of influence – is at the heart of the relationship between British and American poetics. We might see a convenient starting point for this process in Whitman and in initial English reactions to Whitman. Whilst Whitman's deliberately provocative 'Preface' to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), declares his nationalist agenda as a deliberate writing *away* from Old World influences, 'The Americans of all nations … have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem', such a declaration was met with derisive sneers by most of his English reviewers.[3] 'But what claim has this Walt Whitman to be considered a poet at all?' asks one critic, before going on to describe him as a 'Caliban throwing down his logs'

2 Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' in *Collected Prose*, eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 246.

3 Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Francis Murphy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 741.

and his poetry as merely the monstrous offspring of English poetical supremacy.[4] From this encounter it is clear that the poetic relationship between Britain and America is profoundly engaged with – indeed helps to encode – debates about the formation of national and cultural identities. The idea of poetic influence, in other words, is a useful ideological index of the mutual fascination and mutual antagonism of Anglo-America's 'special relationship'. It plays out what Paul Giles has described as a series of 'double-edged discourses' that are 'liable to destabilize traditional hierarchies and power relations, thereby illuminating the epistemological boundaries of both national cultures'.[5] In broad terms, a history of transatlantic poetic relations witnesses a marked, though gradual, power shift in the double-edged discourse of poetic influence. Initially American poetry was under the powerful sway of English poetic influence. But, since the early years of the Twentieth Century, English poetry's power of influence over American has steadily declined. Despite this broad pattern of declining English influence and increasing American, there remains a sense of cagey unease about the mutual influence and relationship between the two traditions. Effectively the relationship between both poetic traditions has always been one of destabilization in which each tradition feels itself ill-defined by – because it is always, to some extent, in comparison to – the other. In this context, then, the linking of nationhood with an idea of the greatest poem introduces into the Anglo-American compact precisely that 'element of strangeness' that constitutes, according to Giles, transatlantic cultural relations.[6] It is for this reason (and so as to justify the choice of poets in this essay) that I want to argue that ideas of influence have, throughout the history of Anglo-American poetics, more frequently – certainly more visibly – been engaged at the margins of each poetic culture, at their respective epistemological boundaries. Indeed, it has been the avant-gardes in both traditions that have embraced, challenged and made specific use of each other in ways that have, ultimately, come to re-invigorate the whole tradition.

II

I want to start with two English poets – Ric Caddel and Harriet Tarlo – whose work is profoundly influenced by a tradition of English landscape poetry. However, in terms of the major poets and theories of poetics

4 Anon. review of *Leaves of Grass*, the *Critic* (London, 1 April, 1856).

5 Paul Giles, *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 5.

6 Giles, *Virtual Americas*, 5.

(which are American, avant-garde, and 'post-modern' in Charles Olson's sense of the term) that have influenced them, their poetry represents a *writing away* from a native (pastoral) tradition of the English nature poem. Indeed, Caddel recognises such '*away-ness*' as the condition of alienated consciousness from one's immediate surroundings that permeates modern thought. He writes that 'Nature poetry has always been about away', and his own poetry looks away from its groundedness in the English landscape towards influences from America: Pound, Olson, Lorine Niedecker, for example.[7] By looking at some brief examples from Caddel (his sequence, 'Fantasia in the English Choral Tradition' (1987)) and from Tarlo (her 'Away' and 'Love/Land' (2003)) I want to suggest that their writing away from the English poetic mainstream, and towards American influences, provides the poetic coordinates through which the process of cultural triangulation, which Paul Giles has argued is necessitated by the idea of a transatlantic poetics, can take place. For Caddel and Tarlo, that is, the idea of influence, as a writing away from home, becomes an ironic index of the attention their poetry gives to very English senses of place and of dwelling poetically. That a negotiation with real and poetic space is fundamental in Caddel's poetry is clear from the opening lines of 'Fantasia in the English Choral Tradition'. What we immediately encounter is Caddel's careful tracking of the embeddedness of 'the poetic' within the moment-by-moment detailing of experience both in the world and in the poem.

signals:
pact or parts
corresponding
in January
bonfires smoke
down the river bank
a way off
moving (lunchtime)
out of the realm of
false, muddled argument
into that contact
with the world in which
(for which)
I live –

7 Richard Caddel, 'Secretaries of Nature: Towards a Theory of Modernist Ecology', in *Ezra Pound, Nature and Myth*, ed. William Pratt (New York: AMS Press, 2002), 139.

to point towards –
because there is no 'away'
to sling things to
and to live here
is not to escape[8]

The delicate rhythms and musical cadences in this opening passage of the sequence present a poetic here-and-now that recalls the there-and-then of a lyric, pastoral tradition. These lines seem influenced equally by the real and poetic landscapes they survey: one the one hand, the drifting smoke of bonfires provides an image of flow and spread, the influx of one matter into another, that etymologically is at the heart of the idea of influence; one the other hand, these lines echo with the influence of Pound's *Pisan Cantos* and with Olson's open-field poetics. Such influences mean that what is set in place in these lines is not an escape, a drawing away from the world and into an idealized pastoral, but rather they signal a complexly engaged, or poetically entwined, sense of being in the world.

It is this sense, that one's being is inescapably and poetically entwined within one's influences, that underlies Caddel's assertion that 'there is no "away" / to sling things to'. His work asserts, that is, that all things are contingent, and that poetic experience is indispensable because it can trace the lines and details of such contingencies and influences. This might be seen further in the following passage which is clearly part of a keenly evoked experience (seeing a bird's fleeting tail feathers), and yet it also evokes a very English musical tradition ('A Lark Ascending' seems never far away, here) despite the fact that its open-field poetics has a distinctly American flavour, and that it recalls Ezra Pound, at Pisa, annotating the music of birds in Canto 79.

bird in flight
but held its point
you out there
violin parts
(tail feathers)
twine and cross over
was it
chance brought us
silent, dark

8 Richard Caddel, *Magpie Words: Selected Poems, 1970-2000* (Sheffield: West House Books, 2002), 42.

and now with these
small voices
(elements)
accords[9]

The accord of small voices within the choral tradition that is evoked here, and elsewhere in the sequence, is vital. It delineates Caddel's generous reciprocity in which voices, violin parts and the visual scenery are elements that 'twine and cross over' in poetic space. And – crucially – this space is interpersonal. The exclamatory 'you out there' is a call of (and to) human relations and influences: counterpoised with the gesture of flinging things away at the sequence's opening, it calls the poet back to the experiential whilst – I think – avoiding a collapse into the all too easy self-assurance of a lyrical egotistical-sublime.

Caddel's call for a poetic accord that doesn't fling our attention away from the world is, however, not without irony, and it is this sense that I want to explore in relation to Tarlo's work. As with Caddel, the sense of place in Tarlo's poetry is complicated – ironized – by the fact that it has learned much about the poetics of place from 'away', from American poets such as Pound, Olson, William Carlos Williams, and most particularly, Niedecker. Her poem 'Away', clearly ecological in its concern not to waste – to throw away – old garments, hints at other – poetic – acts of recycling whereby earlier influences come to constitute the fabric of the current poem. Its attention upon the everyday, and the (literally) homespun, both recalls Niedecker's concern with the objects of women's everyday labour, and thematises, in its imagery of the poem as words woven from old words, both the idea of influence which underpins its poetics, and the 'radical philosophy of reciprocity' that Tarlo has described as operating in Niedecker's poetry:[10]

knit underpin
in that wool
imprint
in-print
knit thru

9 Caddel, *Magpie Words*, 43.

10 Harriet Tarlo, 'Lorine Niedecker On and Off the Margins: A Radical Poetics out of Objectivism', in *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth-Century Women Poets*, ed. Vicki Bertram (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997), 204.

running machine
turning our cloth
viscose cotton polyester fleece
silk turn words round
each other and round
other in argument – new clothes
for old, when old
would do
as we only know know know
they would[11]

For Tarlo, then, the idea of influence signals, therefore, not a writing away from her text, but a recognition that poetic knowing – what 'we only know know know' in the act of reading a poem – binds together the present text with an earlier poem or poetics. As with Niedecker, the sort of gesture of openness, here, and its poetics of reciprocity, deliberately recalls Olson's projective verse with its demand for a 'new stance toward reality' and its theorising of the poem as a flow of poetic, environmental and bodily energies.

However, precisely because Tarlo's work acknowledges the influence of American poetics upon it, it is able to explore its position at – and between – the margins of both English and American poetic traditions. Throughout her sequence *Love/Land*, such an exploration is not without cost to the body and voice of her lyric self as it discovers the ruptured space between poem and land, self and expression that occurs through the desire of the poem to make discriminations, to divide into parts, to name.

compartments – separating

campanula flax mallow thrift
internal division cuts off

that long body or this
how do we
with what the world throws
sometimes produce
in to pressure

11 Harriet Tarlo, *Poems 1990-2003* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2004), 56-7.

dry thrift vetch yellow thyme[12]

What we witness here is the process of the effacement of selfhood at the very margins of legibility, at the edge of one's ability to name (and thus experience) the landscape as it *is*, and not as we have been taught to read it. As a woman poet, Tarlo's is a voice almost erased from the poetic landscape that nevertheless looks to that landscape in order to develop a poetics of radical engagement. It seeks, that is, to read the influence of American poetics upon it as a double condition – both disabling *and* empowering. The sort of rupturing of poetic space this leads to is, at heart, a textual matter for Tarlo: repeatedly throughout her work the stumbling rhythms and broken off locutions are an index of the incommensurability of words and experience, though they also mark the stammering attempt of two poetic traditions to speak to one another.

At least in part, this would seem to be – as already hinted – a result of Tarlo's reading of American experimental poetry by women, most especially that of Lorine Niedecker whose poetics of porous landscapes, based in and of her life at Black Hawk Island, Wisconsin, traces the metaphorical margins between poem, water, land and twentieth century experience. Such porosity might be read as a metaphor for Tarlo's poetics of influence, the influx of one poetic tradition into another. If, then, the idea of influence for Tarlo involves an act of 'looking away', it also encodes a poetic means of properly engaging the world, of being responsive to 'what the world throws' at you.

Curiously, for both Caddel and Tarlo, it is postwar American poetry's resolute poetic attention to the things of the immediate environment (Pound at Pisa, Olson's Gloucester, Niedecker's Black Hawk Island) that provides them with a model for the ways in which a poem is both a structure of remembrance and a means articulating loss, the slipping away of the poetic subject within the space of the poem. And for another reason, Niedecker's influence on Caddel and Tarlo is profound. In her first collection, *New Goose* (1946), Niedecker's poetic sense of language is combined with a powerful feeling for the folk idioms of her local community. When read carefully (rather than dismissed as 'mere' folk poetry) the poems in this collection reveal a sharp political edge, and environmentally aware politics of place that I have implied we can witness throughout Caddel's and Tarlo's work. Niedecker's famous four-line poem about a 'little granite pail', for example, quietly gestures to the hardships of a life of labour through its imagery of distance and loss and its play of

12 Harriet Tarlo, *Love/Land* (Cambridge: Rem Press, 2003), n. p..

intimacy and distance between speaker and addressee:

> Remember my little granite pail?
> The handle of it was blue.
> Think what's got away in my life –
> Was enough to carry me thru.[13]

Niedecker skilfully brings together, here, the work of manual labour and the work of the poem through her minimalist evocation of a solid object, a 'granite pail'. The poem's poignancy is the fact that although the work of the poem and the work of a life are seen as interdependent they are also felt to be mutually exclusive. While the one carries the other, it also witnesses – necessitates, even – its slipping away.

And so, here, we return to the trope of things slipping away as necessary to our (poetic) engagement of the world. For both Caddel and Tarlo, the poet's place is at the margins, at the thrown-away edges of our dwelling 'in' and 'for' the world, in the remaking of the poem. Ironically, it is the cultural displacements of their poetics, their refusal to be mainstream and their reliance upon the poetics of a different land, America, that allows their respective poetics to sound so powerfully across the space of an English poetic tradition.

III

I want to cross the Atlantic, now, to examine a little the work of three American poets that plays in and away from the influence of the 'late' modernism of Pound, Olson and open field poetics. Recalling my three initial categories for thinking about influence I'm also – in this transatlantic transition – shifting my focus a little from the idea of how one poetics bears the traces of influence of another towards a consideration of the idea of influence as the necessary condition of the poetic. This consideration, as I hinted earlier, seems also to be about the poem's articulation of an ethical position, and I take it that this is something central to Caddel and Tarlo, but it is in the work of Robert Duncan, Michael Palmer and Susan Howe that I want to pursue a little further this association between an idea of influence and an idea of ethical and readerly responsibility.

In his introduction to Robert Duncan's *Ground Work*, Michael Palmer notes of his late friend and mentor:

---

13 Lorine Niedecker, *Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002), 96.

> Duncan was prominent among a generation of poets who sought to recover poetry's exploratory capacity from the strictures of orthodox critical propriety. Perhaps no one among his peers committed himself more profoundly to the magical, Orphic dimension of the poetic voice, and to the dynamic tension between the flowing currents of a restlessly associative mind and the demands of construction.[14]

Here, Palmer characterises Duncan as radically exploratory, committed to poetry as a means of unfixing, and thereby questioning, established and settled ways of thinking about, and of reading, the world and its texts. His responsibility – as a poet – is to weave the influences upon his 'restlessly associative mind' into a text that 'sings' out from the dynamic tensions in which it is grounded. The demand of poetry, indeed the demand of an idea of influence – when read as that force of influx into the domain of the poem – seems to rest in Duncan's ability to be open to all sorts of influence, for it is that which lies at the heart of his ability to sing magically – like Orpheus – a song that might heal the world.

Some of this is evident in the poem 'A Song from the Structures of Rime Ringing as the Poet Paul Celan Sings' throughout which the circling interplay of 'something' and 'nothing' flowing throughout the poet's performance sounds a lyric voice that is neither Duncan's nor Celan's (though its rhythm provides a restless association between them), nor is it Pound's (though the wrecks and errors that lie across this broken poetic world resonate with the smashed poetic enterprise detailed by Pound in Canto 116). I quote just the first half of this poem:

> Something has wreckt the world I am in
> I think I have wreckt
> the world I am in.
> It is beautiful. From my wreckage
> this world returns
> to restore me, overcomes its identity in me.
>
> Nothing has wreckt the world I am in.
> It is nothing
> in the world that has

14 Michael Palmer, introduction to *Ground Work*, by Robert Duncan (1988; rev. ed. New York: New Directions, 2006), xiv.

workt this
wreckage of me or my "world" I mean

the possibility of no thing so
being there.

It is totally untranslatable.[15]

If the domain of the poem is to heal – that is to 'make whole' again – then this is witnessed in the very tension that is here articulated between the poet's broken vision of the world, and an openness to that world which is restorative: 'From wreckage / this world returns / to restore me'. But such a poetic openness to the world's influence, sings here of the 'overcoming' of identity, of a poetic writing away from oneself and into the mysterious condition of things. And it is 'totally untranslatable' not because it thus signals Whitman's 'barbaric yawp' and so the opening call of a specifically American poetics ('I too am untranslatable / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world'[16]), but because it demonstrates the poet's necessary giving up of himself to the processes – let's say, the influences – of the poetic.

This might help in an understanding of Duncan's statement in *Bending the Bow* that 'poetry / is a contagion' with 'the ear / catch[ing] rime like pangs of disease from the air'.[17] For it is with the figuring of disease as a creeping influence upon his poetic work, upon his body, and upon the American body politic (it is important not to forget the Vietnam conflict as a profound influence on Duncan's writing in this period), that the second part of Duncan's *Ground Work*, the section entitled 'In the Dark', moves towards its conclusion. The poem 'In Blood's Domaine' attests to that sense I noted earlier of influence as something that works through unseen, insensible or invisible means. Of course, this sense of influence as invasion and disease is linked etymologically to influenza, but here it is cancer that is invading Duncan's body, and it is figured as a textual contagion:

there are
spirochete invasions that eat at the sublime envelope, not alien,
but familiars

15 Robert Duncan, *Ground Work*, 12.

16 Whitman, *Complete Poems*, 124.

17 Robert Duncan, *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 32.

> Life in the dis-ease radiates invisibilities devour my star
>
> and Time restless crawls in on center upon center cells of lives within life conspire
> Hel shines in the very word *Health* as *Ill* in the Divine Will shines.[18]

Even at the level of the sounds that the poem makes here – the profusion of 'il' and 'el' sounds in this passage – we witness Duncan's poetics of influence. In the flowing currents of his restlessly associative mind he is able to demonstrate the poetic process of influence through which one word is transformed by our reading of it against, and into, another word. The idea of influence for Duncan is, therefore, not a writing away from, but a poetic reaching towards, the wholeness that is (etymologically) embodied in the poem's conception of 'health'. It is in this sense that, for Duncan, the poem discovers influence as the exercising of an 'occult force'.

For Michael Palmer the processes of poetic influence enact and thematise the working of cultural power in a global context. His book, *At Passages* (1995) is named after the open-ended, proliferating sequence of poems entitled 'Passages' that spreads across Duncan's later collections and which Palmer was reading through as he was writing this book. The poems in this collection seek to investigate moments of transition, the passage of one thing into another, moments that might be thought of as being at the heart of any idea of influence. If, for Duncan's poetry, influence spreads like a contagion into his very bodily passages, marking thus the passage of body and text into the dark, Palmer's book sees the passage of one poem into another – into his own work – as constitutive. This is seen throughout *At Passages* in Palmer's playful re-working of other poets – Dante, Zanzotti, Duncan, Celan, Rumi – and in his marking of the passage of their texts into the fabric of his own text. As Lauri Ramey has noted of Palmer's work: 'Using the words of others brings a multiplicity of perspectives into his poetry … [so as] to broaden and enrich the poems, to fill them with as much information as possible'.[19] This, I want to suggest, has important ethical and political dimensions for him.

In the sequence 'Seven Poems Within a Matrix of War', from *At Passages*, and written during the first Gulf War – Desert Storm – in 1991,

---

18 Robert Duncan, *Ground Work*, 249.

19 Lauri Ramey, 'Michael Palmer' in volume 4 of *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Poets and Poetry*, eds. Jeffrey Gray, James McCorkle and Mary Balkun (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2005), 1204.

Palmer attempts to trace the consequences of military invasion, and – as with Duncan's 'spirochete invasions' – discovers a figure for the ethical operation of the poem. In this sequence, the idea of influence seems figured as a sort of information overload that leads to senses of slipperiness and transformation such that the bodily and textual alterations that result from warfare become, ineluctably, the domain of the poetic. The poem entitled 'The Construction of the Museum' from this sequence seeks, therefore, a poetic language properly responsive to such alteration, to the ways in which influence is about change, to the ways in which a poem itself might handle its information (and somewhere at the back of this is a memory of Shelley's meditation on power and mutability in 'Oxymandias'):

> In the sand we found a tablet
>
> In the hole caused by bombs
> which are smart we might find a hand
>
> It is the writing hand
> hand which dreams a hole
>
> …
>
> We never say the word desert
> nor does the sand pass through the fingers
>
> of this hand we forget
> is ours
>
> We might say, Memory has made its selection,
> and think of the body now as an altered body[20]

What this seems to call for is a poetics that is both responsive to the past, to the multiplicity of histories and voices that it sounds, and one that seeks to construct a poetics of responsibility from its broken locutions. Here, Palmer's stuttering sense of participation in the broken fabric of a poetics of influence becomes a measure of the honesty and difficulty of the poem's ethical and political position. Whilst recognizing the obfuscation of calling bombs 'smart', it also does not allow us the 'forget' our hand in the processes of war. Like sand passing – or not – through the fingers, what

20 Michael Palmer, *At Passages* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 18.

passes through the textual material of the poem – influences it – allows us to rethink the bodies, poetic and physical, that we occupy. By exploiting and exploring the play between selective memory – the cultural amnesias upon which political power operates in global contexts such as the Gulf War – and information overload – texts, histories and collateral damage – Palmer's poetry uncovers a place for the poetic. For it is in his poems' consciousness of the idea of influence that new acts of reading – signified in 'altered poetic bodies' – might be seen to emerge.

With this in mind I want to move on, now, to thinking about Susan Howe, another contemporary poet for whom an idea of influence is profoundly embedded in the body of her poetic texts, in their fabric and in the very sounds they make. For my final example, then, I want to look at Howe's collection *The Midnight* (2003), most especially its fascination with cloth, clothing and fabrics and how this allows the book to reflect upon the idea of poetic influence within a transatlantic context.

Cloth, clothing and weaving figure importantly throughout *The Midnight*: in its list of cloths and bedclothes, and the silent craft that made them: 'Alapeen, Paper, Patch Muslin / Calico Camlet Dimity Fustian / Serge linsey-wolsey';[21] in the 'colony / of refugee weavers'[22] from Ireland and the west of Scotland who emigrated to the New World at the same time as those itinerant preachers, dressed in their 'Presbyterian cloak[s]'[23] inspired America's first 'Great [religious] Awakening'; in the reference to Yeats' poem 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' that Howe recalls her mother reciting to her as a girl[24]; in the various references to Malachy Postlewayt's definitions of different cloths (for example; 'Calamanco as a "woolen / stuff manufactured in Brabant / in Flanders" chequered in warp / wherein the warp is mixed with / silk or with goat's hair'[25]); and in the 'source' for the 'Bed Hangings' sections, *Bed Hangings: A Treatise on Fabrics and Styles in the Curtaining of Beds, 1650-1850*, a book which Howe tells us she discovered in a giftshop in Hartford.[26] Howe's text, that is, is self-consciously interested in its own constitution as a text woven from its transatlantic sources and influences.

---

21 Susan Howe, *The Midnight* (New York: New Directions, 2003), 4.

22 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 102.

23 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 23.

24 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 74-5.

25 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 37.

26 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 43.

Indeed, one of the book's most important sources – the late C12th-early C13th debate poem *The Owl and the Nightingale* – is intricately associated with an examination of cloths and clothing. Serendipitously, one of the only two extant manuscripts containing this poem is the Cotton manuscript (Caligula A.ix) (held in the British Library). Already, then, the material – textual – fact of this poem is bound into, however playfully or accidentally, a web of allusions to cotton. In fact, it doesn't seem like stretching the point too far to suggest that Howe's text sounds delicately the profoundly interwoven histories of America and of the cotton trade. Supporting this contention is the fact that one of the sources for the medieval poem is an C11th Latin debate poem, *Conflictus Ovis et Lini*, or the 'Debate between Wool and Linen'.[27] Interestingly Howe refers to this poem near the start of the section entitled 'Bed Hangings I' when she notes, 'Contest between two / singers *Conflictus ovis / et lini*'[28], in terms that both indicate her awareness of a literary tradition of debates about the superiority of linen to wool and that see such debates as part of the fabric of a lyric tradition, a contest between singers.[29]

Some measure of the conflicting historical voices that are raised – woven into the texture of Howe's bed-hangings – can be heard in those sections that directly allude to *The Owl and the Nightingale*. On facing pages – 30 & 31 – two blocks of text, each 9 lines long, seem dedicated respectively to the owl's song, and then to the nightingale's. As one might expect, the owl speaks wisely and well, and for the most part, clearly. The voice is mildly Latinate, perhaps a ready-made veil, hiding the power and privilege on which it so easily rests:

> Evening for the Owl
> spoke wisely and well
> willing to suffer them
> and come flying night
> from the Carolingian
> mid owl falcon fable
> In their company saw
> all things clearly wel

27 Henry B. Hinckley, 'The Date, Author, and Sources of *The Owl and the Nightingale*,' *PMLA*, 44-2 (1929), 354-55.

28 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 6.

29 See Hinckley, 354.

Unfele I could not do[30]

For the most part, this sounds conventional, it is woven from the familiar sounds of modern English, and with a feeling for assonance and alliteration. However, the final line acts like a strand of goat's hair in the warp of this voice. Both the sound and the look of the word 'Unfele' trips us up, makes us suddenly active as readers, aware of a textual history that sustains this passage. Perhaps the line suggests that once felt, this interruption in the poem's texture, cannot be eschewed: I can't 'unfeel' it now. Or, perhaps alerted by the spelling of 'wel' in the line above, we feel back towards Middle English, 'unfele' perhaps – in the Midlands dialect of the *Owl and the Nightingale* – a negative of 'felen', to conceal, or hide. Here, the text reveals the impossibility of final meaning by demonstrating that it is always already a tissue of itinerant texts, a contest of voices. Its poetics is therefore always sceptical.

This is even more apparent on the facing page, which we may take to be the nightingale's 'reply' to the clear speaking of the aristocratic owl. Immediately the difficulty of sounding this passage is apparent, yet it is clear that its concern is with unembellished speech, with a poetic attempt to 'still', or even 'distil', one bare word so as to speak against the owl's taunting of the songbird that, as Philomel, is the figure of lyric poetry:

Nihtegale to the taunt
Owl a preost be piping
Overgo al spoke iseon
sede warm inome nv
stille one bare worde
Go he started mid ivi
Grene al never ne nede
Song long ago al so
sumere chorless awey[31]

Jeffrey Jullich wonders if, in this passage 'we're facing "nonsense" words' here, and even speculates as to whether these odd spellings and apparent neologisms are 'un-English-like'.[32] This is, I think, to miss the point

30 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 30.

31 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 31.

32 Jeffrey Jullich, 'Review of *Bed Hangings*', *Electronic Poetry Review*, # 2, accessed January 27, 2011, http://www.granarybooks.com/reviews/bed_hangings/electronic_ poetry_review.html

completely. If, rather than 'nonsense' we begin to hear the sounds of medieval English poetry here (and I think we should), then we are engaging the whispered tissue of texts and sounds that are woven into our understanding of an English poetic tradition, the 'Song long ago' to which Howe's poetics provides an answering 'also'. The text, that is, engages us precisely because of, and through, its engagement with its own debt of influence, through its poetic patterning of transatlantic poetic relations.

This play of poetic answering is – of course – implicit in the debate tradition of this medieval poem, but I am suggesting that it is also implicit in any text's act of absorbing and transforming another text, in the patterns of influence we witness at play in our reading of Howe's poem. Indeed, this seems to me to be at the heart of the lyric force of *The Midnight* because of its ability to make explicit this process by and within Howe's poetics of America. What I am arguing, here, is that the sense this engages of poetic sound as transformative, as tracing a history of linguistic, poetic and cultural change, helps define Howe's poetics as one of exile. Voice, especially vowel sounds, defines Howe's sense of how she might inhabit a personal history that is also interwoven into larger, national histories: of migration and cultural metamorphosis, the answering of Europe with America. And personal anecdote in *The Midnight* answers this lyric sense of voice as that which folds us into language, into history, when, as a child, Howe realises the distance and difference of herself and her sister Fanny from her family in Ireland: 'Our voices are grotesquely shrill – the way we pronounce r's and u's, Amuu*rr*ca, waatu*rrr*. Our long nasal a's: Baaast-n, haarr-br, paak, caa.'.[33] Leavings, both poetic and migratory, come to be traced in such whispers of sound.

Indeed, because of the attention that it places upon the processes of textual production, of how the poem's domain is always already a tissue of influences, the ways in which our leafing through of *The Midnight* might come to feel like a 'tangible intangible murderously gentle exile' become clearer.[34] The poetic trace of leaves, leafings-through and leavings that constitute Howe's text also underscores her sense that exile is the primary condition of her poetics (of lyric). Exile, *The Midnight* asserts, is witness to the metamorphic, a sentence left unfinished that proceeds from a tissue of other texts and a poetics of interweaving. It issues from a sense of the textual that is sceptical (in that its poetics of deferral and attention to intertextual influences is not unrelated to philosophies of scepticism which contend that real knowledge is, finally, unobtainable) about origins and can

33 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 32.

34 Susan Howe, 'Preface' to *The Midnight*, n. p.

thus only mutely sing a native tongue. Howe exhibits this sort of scepticism in the *The Midnight*'s description of her great-aunt Louie Bennett's copy of *The Irish Song Book with Original Irish Airs* (of 1895). She notes: 'How can the same volume contain so many different incompatible intrinsic relations? The Bennetts and Mannings are Irish and not Irish so we haven't the secret of our first ancestral parents. Names are only a map we use for navigating'.[35] Self-conscious, here, of her own book's procedure, Howe's mapping of her sense of exile from family (that is '*intrinsic*') relations, is instructive because it offers up a model of how her text works as a tissue of interwoven texts, of how it is intrinsically constituted from a notion of influence.

We may well recall, at this point, Julia Kristeva's contention that 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another'.[36] And Kristeva's notion of *intertextuality*, which arises from this observation, sees poetic language itself as always already 'at least *double*'.[37] Throughout *The Midnight*, Howe plays with this question of doubles, the 'double play of double meaning'[38] – poem / prose; text / image; tangible / intangible; noise / silence; asleep / awake; Europe / America – from which her text is composed (we may, in fact, even hear the sound of her mother's birthplace, Dublin, echoing through this play). Roland Barthes, too, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, similarly sees any text as generated from other texts. The terms he adopts are very suggestive in relation to Howe's text and its poetics of influence:

> *Text* means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue – this texture – the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web.[39]

35 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 59.

36 Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez; trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, & Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1980), 66.

37 Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 66.

38 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 170.

39 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 64.

Howe's text, however, rather than unmaking its subject in the way Barthes imagines here, seems more interested in the physical qualities – be they of voice or of paper, of book or of body – that are its constitutive tissue. For her, the 'quick rustling', as she calls it, of her poetic lines and pages is alive with the touch of the bodies, books and voices that her text weaves together.[40]

Noticeably, the nightingale passage I quoted earlier, takes place 'mid ivi grene'. The Nightingale's transformative voice – a figure for the poetic – sounds, that is, amongst rustling leaves (of ivy, of pages) and therefore figures Howe's own textual process of lyric transformation. In the rustling of Howe's poetic leaves, *The Midnight* wryly describes itself as an 'Ovid cloth',[41] and such a reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* indicates the extent to which any poetics of influence necessitates a consideration of the structures of poetic and cultural power that deliver a new text to us, in Michael Palmer's words, 'as an altered body'. It witnesses, that is, the transformative power of the transatlantic poetic imagination. For Howe this can be heard in the story of Daphne's metamorphosis (a story that, incidentally, fascinated Ezra Pound in his early years as he was setting out to establish his poetic reputation in London). Daphne's transformation into a laurel tree, whose leaves are used to crown poets, whispers, throughout Howe's sequence, of America and of its transformative promise of a new cultural text, a blank sheet. First we hear,

> the merest decorative suggestion
> in what appears to be sheer white
> muslin a tree fair hunted Daphne[42]

and then, later,

> 1775 landscape America
> blindstitched to French
> edge silk damask cover
> … lonely ecstatic incessant
> white on white coverlet[43]

40 Susan Howe, 'Preface' to *The Midnight*, n. p.

41 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 27.

42 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 17.

43 Susan Howe, *The Midnight*, 101.

Howe's poetics is sceptical about such whiteness, sceptical about the significance of whiteness and cotton within the transatlantic imagination. Ultimately it is through such scepticism that we might hear another lesson about the idea of influence that emerges from a reading of these poets. A common strand that unites all of the poets I've discussed in this essay is, perhaps, the powerful (maybe even overbearing) influence upon them of Don Allen's groundbreaking anthology of 1960, *The New American Poetry*.[44] The most important voices in British and American experimental poetry have all acknowledged the crucial influence upon their poetic work and practices of Allen's anthology. This is, I take it, because of the anthology's bullish assertion that poetry matters precisely because of its testing – even disturbance – of the cultural *status quo*. Its own poetics, and the power of its influence, that is, lies in its act of destabilization, in its radical questioning of what *things* might constitute a poetic identity. Such destabilization characterizes transatlantic poetic relations and the cross-currents of influence from which they arise. Throughout its history, the negotiation of complex and difficult relationships and influences within Anglo-American poetics has provided a rich point of energetic and self-questioning poetic renewal in both English and American poetry. It has also helped shape those double-edged discourses that make up transatlantic cultural relations.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of some of the material on Ric Caddel and Harriet Tarlo has already appeared in *Textual Practice*. The author is grateful to the editor of *Textual Practice* for permission to draw on this material for this current essay.

44 Don Allen, ed., *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (New York: Grove Press, 1960).