

# ARCHIVAL TACTICS AND THE POET-SCHOLAR: SUSAN HOWE AND CHARLES OLSON

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1

Emily Dickinson is my emblematical Concord River. I am heading toward certain discoveries ....<sup>1</sup>

I am willing to ride Melville's image of man, whale and ocean to find in him prophecies. (*CMI* 18)

THERE ARE A HANDFUL OF EXAMPLES OF POETS' PROSE that beg close comparison and, perhaps, even their own sub-genre or special category. I am thinking of those few works of creative (often considered eccentric) scholarship undertaken by poets over the past fifty-plus years: Charles Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*, Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, Robert Duncan's *The H.D. Book*, and Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson*. The grouping of these works—with the addition of William Carlos Williams's *In The American Grain*—is suggested both in comments Howe has made in a rejected preface to *My Emily Dickinson*, as well as in that book's back cover copy comments by Michael Palmer and Don Byrd.<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Perloff also makes a similar association of works (Howe's with Williams's, Olson's, and Duncan's), referring to them as “texts in which one poet meditates so intensely on the work of another that the two voices imperceptibly merge” (13). This suggestion that what distinguishes the “genre” (Perloff refers to it as such) of poetic scholarship is its attempt at *fusion* with the other rather than academic distance from, and disinterest in, the object of study is a good start, but does not tell the whole story. In this paper I will explore the poet's single-author study via two of its most comparable examples—Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* and Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*—the titles of which alone emphasize the degree of fusion and personal investment at play in these texts. It is my contention that the scholarly prose of these poets is as deserving of close literary analysis as their poetry is, for these are works in which the usual distinctions between “primary” and “secondary” texts—as well as the boundaries between poetry and

prose, “expression” and “interpretation”—break down.

In referring to these works as poet’s *scholarship* I am purposely resisting the word “criticism.” In part this is to emphasize another of the distinguishing characteristics of the poet’s study: its relation to documentation and the archive, and the degree of long-term engagement and “saturation” involved in such primary scholarship. Poets are very often critics, with T.S. Eliot still one of the archetypal examples of the poet-policeman of taste. Ezra Pound, on the other hand, sets out the model of the modern poet scholar, particularly in his *Spirit of Romance* (an important example for Duncan’s *H.D. Book*) and the archivally obsessed *Cantos*. Yet even Pound (and Williams in *In the American Grain*, for that matter) did not pursue one scholarly site to the Olsonian saturation point. Olson spent his “14 years” on Melville, and Howe was nearly ten years at Dickinson before publishing *My Emily Dickinson*, and has continued to work on her through the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> The critical essay is just that—an *essay*, an attempt, an evaluative reconnaissance into some nearby territory. Scholarship implies a longer-term settlement in that territory—as well as an obsessive interest in it. This is not to disparage criticism—certainly Olson and Duncan, all the poets mentioned above in fact—have written a good deal of criticism. The point is to note that the poet’s single-author study involves more than evaluative criticism (although it obviously incorporates elements of it) or the working out and application of literary theories (although it participates in this too)—as well as to emphasize its difference from the great deal of evaluative criticism written by both poets and professional critics throughout the century. These works are about immersion and saturation—of one writer in another’s work—and, as a number of critics have noted, they are examples of prose *about* poetry which shares as many characteristics with the poetry it purportedly analyses as it does with other examples of analytical prose.

I pause over these considerations because so much has been made of the relationship, and often enough the divide, between poetry and writing about poetry. The debate is at least as old as Plato, who severed the interpretation of texts from their creation, and was given perhaps its clearest pronouncement in the nineteenth century, in Matthew Arnold’s famous notion of separate ages for criticism and creation. Charles Olson appears to be under the sway of this Arnoldian paradigm when he complains, in a journal entry while still an undergraduate, that “if I really have no creative flair I should write to master a tool of

expression for criticism,” as if one really had to choose one or the other.<sup>4</sup> Years later, Carl Van Doren appears to be policing this barrier when he cautions, in response to the publication of Olson’s essay “Lear and Moby Dick,” that “a critic has to be very clear himself when he deals with a sometimes-turgid original.”<sup>5</sup> The kind of scholarly writing both Howe and Olson produced purposely flouts the conventions of this divide, as Howe notes when she expresses her desire “to write ... in a way that *is* the thing I am talking about at the same time I am anchoring it down with certain facts” (“Encloser” 189). This is to work “At the threshold of academicism and poetry,” a place where “sympathy,” rather than analytical distance, is the scholar’s “passionate morality” (“Commander” 6).

Two recent anthologies of poets’ prose support Howe’s notion of a hybrid genre between “academicism and poetry.” In *Artifice and Indeterminacy*, editor Christopher Beach notes the efforts of the authors in his anthology to “break down formal boundaries between poetry and prose, criticism and creative writing, theory and practice” (ix-x). Mark Wallace and Steven Marks, introducing *Telling it Slant*, also maintain their support of “a critical form more subtly related to poetic form” (2). Nevertheless, not everyone interested in the poetic avant-garde has been confident that such a blending of critical and poetic forms is possible, however desirable it might be for poets. Jerome McGann poses the problem that Howe and the above mentioned editors might be seen to be answering: “The question is whether critical writing can find formal equivalences for its subject matter and still preserve its communicative function.” “Poetry,” he continues, “is a discourse committed to the display and exploitation of contradiction”—with criticism, presumably, being a discourse committed to the *dissolution* and *explanation* of the same (*Black Riders* 101). But it doesn’t have to be—not for Howe, not for Olson. The poets might answer McGann’s question by extending another of his postulates—that “The object of poetry is to display its textual condition” (*Textual Condition* 10)—to their kind of scholarship as well. This might be, in Charles Bernstein’s words, “a criticism intoxicated with / its own metaphoricality,” as well as its textuality—a “criticism of desire: / sowing not reaping” (Bernstein 9).

Howe and Olson are interested in a prose of sowing rather than reaping. They find in their nineteenth century predecessors not anxious influences but fecundating sources in which they might sow their scholarly desires. What they produce is, as Howe notes, both a writing that *is* the thing they are talking about

(the particular writing under examination) and, simultaneously, a text “anchored” by archival “facts.” Between fusion and forensic detail, readerly absorption and the “unreadable” materiality of the document, the poet-scholar mines a literary seam parallel to, but separated from, both poetry and criticism.

2

Dickinson ignored the worst advice from friends who misunderstood the intensity of her drive to simplicity, and heeded the best, culled from her own reading. Her talent was synthetic; she used other writers, grasped straws from the bewildering raveling of Being whatever and whenever she could use them. Crucial was her ability to spin straw into gold. Her natural capacity for assimilation was fertilized by solitude. (*MED* 28)

Melville’s reading is a gauge of him, at all points of his life. He was a skald, and knew how to appropriate the work of others. He read to write. Highborn stealth, Edward Dahlberg calls originality, the act of a cutpurse Autolycus who makes his thefts as invisible as possible. Melville’s books batten on other men’s books. (*CMI* 39)

I want, in this section, to offer a preliminary outline of various characteristics—some external/material, some internal/thematic—shared by Howe’s and Olson’s work—characteristics which generally mark *My Emily Dickinson* and *Call Me Ishmael* as unique scholarly texts. It is not possible to deal with all of these attributes in depth here in this short paper, but I would like to offer this schema as a list of possible entry points for further study.

Structure and Style: It is fairly easy to identify their reliance on parataxis rather than hypotaxis—a juxtapositional and fragmented style that does away with the normal essay conventions of transitions and narrative connections. The Poundian ideogram and/or seriality is preferred, and it is this above all else which links these poets’ prose with their poetry. However, one could argue that certain “paraliterary” poststructuralist texts also employ paratactical writing strategies—certainly, in our postmodern age, avant-garde poetic techniques are not limited to the repertoires of poets (one only has to think of advertising’s

appropriation of such techniques to become entirely dismayed).<sup>6</sup> What might more clearly separate texts like Olson's and Howe's from other scholarly works is their willingness to play with the "textual condition" of the page in terms of layout, and their use of collage techniques employing a large amount of unincorporated citation. The page is often a palette upon which the poet thinks (I have in mind here both poets' use of lists, citations isolated amidst otherwise blank pages, clearly demarcated, and frequent, textual caesuras, *etc.*). In terms of collaged citations one scholarly parallel does jump to mind—Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, where commentary and citation, as his translator notes, can "be perceived as intersecting at a thousand different angles, setting up vibrations across the epochs of recent history .... [A] discontinuous presentation deliberately opposed to traditional modes of argument" (Benjamin xi). While Zukofsky, amongst the poet-scholars, takes this process to its extreme in *Bottom*, Howe's reliance on collage becomes clear when one views her repeatedly cut, pasted, and overlaid manuscripts of *My Emily Dickinson*. Howe places quotation beside quotation and largely leaves it to the reader to make what she will of their relationship. Both Howe and Olson also deploy disorienting and anomalous structural tactics which once again force readers to account for form before content, the visual page before its discursive meanings. Howe titles Part Two of *My Emily Dickinson* "Child Emily to the Dark Tower Came," but does not discuss Robert Browning's poem "Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came" until the beginning of Part Three, entitled "Trumpets Sing to Battle;" she transcribes Dickinson's "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun" at the beginning of Part Two, only returning to analyze it mid-way through Part Three. Olson similarly plays with logical structures, preferring short, associative chapters (five, as there are five acts in Shakespearian tragedy) amongst which paratextual "Facts" are deployed without commentary or anything other than paratactical relationship. In the table of contents the book's first section reads "FIRST FACT is prologue," on the next page the section opens entitled "FIRST FACT as prologue." Anything, it seems, to cause bibliographic meltdown is to be preferred.

Institutions and Economies I: At the time they published their studies both Howe and Olson were non-academic, "amateur" scholars, and they published their texts with non-academic publishing houses.<sup>7</sup> They both saw their work as

indebted to literary rather than purely critical models, the latter of which they found less to their taste. Significantly, both also chose to see their books primarily as transactions within literary gift-economies rather than as a part of purely commercial or academic exchanges. Poets' scholarship tends to take the tribute as its point of genesis, something which Duncan makes clear in *The H.D. Book*, as does Howe in *My Emily Dickinson*: "For years I have wanted to find words to thank Emily Dickinson for the inspiration of her poetic daring" (*MED* 35). Her text is her thanks, as Duncan's was his gesture of thanks—his return gift—for the gift of H.D.'s inspiring work, and as H.D. herself wrote tributes to Freud and Pound.<sup>8</sup> In *Call Me Ishmael* Olson weaves his tributes to his instigators and "kin" into the fabric and body of his text (rather than leaving them in their typical, paratextual space outside the text proper). His acknowledgements, like Howe's, become a part of the textual play, buried amidst citation and exposition. At the close of a chapter in which he introduces the centrality of Shakespeare via his great, archival discovery of Melville's own edition of the plays, "seven volumes, with passages marked, and comments in Melville's hand," he notes that "this is the right place" for his "note of thanks" to the "Melville people" who have helped him in his long endeavours (*CMI* 42). The acknowledgement is personal rather than professional, as it is when he similarly offers a dedication to Edward Dahlberg more than two thirds of the way into the text. When a poet writes about another poet it is always an admission of a gift received, of source and influence as instigation and inspiration.

Institutions and Economies 2: Despite these qualities which distance poets' scholarship from academic scholarship, both Howe's and Olson's work participates in, and at times anticipates, the wider scholarly trends in their respective "fields." Both poets entered work on their nineteenth century predecessors at moments of resurgent academic interest—Olson amidst the general revival and canonization of Melville in the 1920s and 30s, Howe amidst the re-visioning of Dickinson in light of feminism and then, after 1981, as a participant in a reinvigorated textual study of the poet's work following the publication of R. W. Franklin's *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*. Olson's interest in the economics of the whaling industry and the imperialist politics of manifest destiny as historical contexts for the understanding of Melville's work contradicts

the New Criticism of his day and marks *Call Me Ishmael's* anticipation of such postmodern critical approaches as culture studies and materialist criticism. More particular to Melville studies, Olson's activities in the 30s and 40s placed him at the forefront of the pursuit of Melville's library and his reading—efforts given academic authority by the work of Merton Sealts and, later, Mary K. Bercaw. As an interesting gauge of Olson's fluctuating impact on Melville studies it is worth noting that while Sealts places the poet as a key predecessor and participant in the field, Bercaw leaves him out of her retelling of the history of the academic recovery of Melville's books. Another marker of Olson's impact on Melville scholarship is to be found in his prominent acknowledgement in F. O. Matthiessen's seminal *American Renaissance*, although for Olson this appears to have been little more than the sign of his erasure by the academic establishment.<sup>9</sup>

Howe's reading of Dickinson obviously shares much with feminist scholars; however, she is careful to note her desire to resist reducing Dickinson to any particular critical paradigm. Feminists, Howe notes, have tended to accept the image of Dickinson as a "madwoman in the attic," a "spider-artist" about her womanly weaving—a picture of the poet Howe finds unfortunate, referring to her instead as "uncompromising" and as a "scholar" (*MED* 14-15). Nevertheless, Howe's work does connect with current trends in Dickinson scholarship in two important respects. First, in the attempt to re-historicize Dickinson as a writer not oblivious to the social and political world she dwelt in—work undertaken by Margaret Dickie and Domhnall Mitchell, amongst others. Howe does this subtly, by reading Dickinson's "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" alongside Shakespeare's historical plays and their shared contexts of civil war. Second, in her response to Franklin's *Manuscript Books*, the centrality of which she claims alongside critics such as Dorothy Oberhaus, Sharon Cameron, and Marta Werner—the latter a former student of Howe's who acknowledges the poet's instigating influence in her *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios*.<sup>10</sup>

Reading: As scholars, Howe and Olson ply a time-honoured trade: (more-or-less) traditional source-study. Howe writes of Dickinson that "the way to understand her writing is through her reading" (*MED* 24)—in many ways a restatement of Olson's claim that Melville "read to write" (*CMI* 39). The issue

of reading goes to the heart of the poet-scholars' desire for fusion with the other. As I will return to this below in my discussion of the archive, I will be very schematic here.

FUSION. Call *me* Ishmael—and Ishmael, Olson tells us, has a “choric function” in Melville’s novel, a “cleansing ubiquity” dispersed throughout the text’s dramatic structure, enacting its narrative (*CMI* 55). This is in keeping with Van Doren’s backhanded criticism that scholarly distance is just where Olson falls short—a “failing” that Olson, like Melville (desiring to write “those sorts of books which are said to ‘fail’”) welcomes as the whole point (*CMI* 41). Howe concurs: “Through long study and great love for another, Olson reached his own Prime—‘I am’” (“Commander” 4). Self is found in the reading of the other. Olson writes to Melville scholar Jay Leyda: “that I could make the man come alive without biography.”<sup>11</sup> Howe: “not to explain the work, not to translate it, but to meet the work with writing .... a kind of *fusion*” (*Birthmark* 158, my emphasis). Howe on the reading of a Dickinson letter: “Subject and object were fused at that moment, into the immediate *feeling* of understanding” (*MED* 51, her emphasis). Understanding is feeling and fusion. Epistemology via sympathy. No separation, no critical standpoint. One can only *stand under* what one holds up to the light: the letter, the document—the poet’s passionate embrace of the archival remnant the other has brushed with her hand.

USE. “H[erman] M[elville] is STOREHOUSE,” Olson writes to Merton Sealts (Sealts 104). An archive of materials awaiting scholarly use. “He was a skald, and knew how to appropriate the work of others” (*CMI* 39)—as Olson was too, a fact which his “Usufruct” chapter makes all too apparent. Usufruct: the right to use or enjoy something belonging to another, to use the fruit of another’s work or property. After a chapter comprised almost entirely of transcribed marginalia from Melville’s copy of Owen Chase’s “Narrative,” Olson adds the footnote “I publish these notes for the first time through the courtesy of the present owner of the volume, Mr. Perc Brown” (31)—although whether or not Olson actually had permission, or precedence, to do so is another question.<sup>12</sup> Howe, too, is a skald: “To feed these essays I have dived through other people’s thoughts .... I have plagiarized .... I have borrowed .... I am indebted to everyone” (*Birthmark*

37-39). Her Dickinson is just as much a user: “listening to, and learning from others” (*MED* 27), she “used other writers” (28). At one point Howe argues that after reading Robert Browning’s “The Last Ride Together,” “Dickinson re-wrote his poem” (70). “What is writing but continuing,” Howe asks in *The Birthmark* (143). Poets are places other poets may go to begin. To begin again.

GIRDING. Which brings us to cannibalism. Olson was fascinated with Melville’s fascination with it. Saw it as the “first fact” for understanding *Moby Dick*. Readers who read to write read with cannibal’s eyes. In a discussion of “absorptive” and “antiabsorptive” reading strategies, Charles Bernstein cites a passage from Claude Lévi-Strauss on cannibalism in which society is divided into those who deal with otherness by “absorption” of the other’s “power” (the cannibal) and those who deal with otherness by “ejecting” and “isolating” the other (qtd in Bernstein 11). “[T]he refusal of absorption is a prerequisite to understanding,” Bernstein writes, but it may not be understanding that cannibalistic scholar-poets like Howe and Olson are after. They seek to absorb the “power” of their predecessor, by “consuming” them textually, by fusing text on text, as a way of “girding” themselves for the poetic endeavour.

Olson and Howe both came to their vocation as poets fairly late in life. Olson wrote *Call Me Ishmael* before he made his first foray into the public sphere as poet, although the scholarly work is in many ways part of the process of recreating himself as a poet. Howe follows a similar pattern, her early work as a poet accompanied by her scholarly research on Dickinson. It is thus inevitable to see poetics active in the scholarship—to see their prose as itself “A long poem” and “A continuation of my work on prosody in my other writings,” as Zukofsky writes of *Bottom* in a note published in *Prepositions* (159). One can see foreshadowings of Olson’s key poetics piece, “Projective Verse,” in *Call Me Ishmael*: “ENERGY,” “SPEED,” he capitalizes, calculating the kinetics of Melville’s accomplishment (64). Howe, too, appears to be testing the qualities of her own poetics when she discusses Dickinson’s propensity for “hesitation” (*MED* 21), or notes “that she found sense in the chance meeting of words” (24). In *Call Me Ishmael* and *My Emily Dickinson* we have two burgeoning poets finding their words in words of others, cannibalizing their textual bodies for the powers they possess.

**Futurity:** As reading processes involved in absorbing the power of fecundating precursors, Howe's and Olson's scholarly work fashions the future (their own poetic work in the present and to come) out of the past. "My precursor," Howe writes, "attracts me to my future" (*MED* 97). Elizabeth Grosz is a philosopher who writes of "the fundamental openness of time to futurity" (3). What she has in mind here—"a future that has the capacity not only to rewrite but also to entirely overwrite events of the past" (5-6)—is very much like the poets' attitude to their scholarly subjects. "Melville went back ... to come forward" in a "creative act of anticipation," Olson writes, continuing to see himself as one of "the last 'first' people," involved in readerly and compositional processes similar to Melville's (*CMI* 19, 104). Howe appears to echo Olson: "time lived forward is only understood backward" (*MED* 54), seeing in Dickinson the same sensibility (regarding time and sources) as Olson sees in Melville. That the "future will forget, erase, or recollect and deconstruct every poem" (13) is simply one consequence of "dwelling in Possibility" (76): "the past, that sovereign source, must break poetic structure open for future absorption of words and definition" (116). That "sovereign source" is so often—for the poet—embodied in an archive awaiting its future uses.

### 3

I go to libraries because they are the ocean. (*Birthmark* 18)

He based himself on document. And that, I argue, is in turn a via of life, now most clear to us characters who face the twentieth century world. (qtd. in Sealts 104)

In a scholarly context, the writing of the past typically comes into contact with the writing of the future in, or through, the archive. As Jacques Derrida makes clear in *Archive Fever*, "The question of the archive is not ... a question of the past .... It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow" (36). As prosthetic cultural memory the archive provides a "pledge ... a token of the future"—a "spectral response" for the future, in turn, to respond to (18, 64). However, the archive, while "open to the future" (due in part to its incomplete and fragmentary status), is a fraught site which both "preserves and reserves, protects and patrols,

regulates and represses” (Voss and Werner 1). Derrida notes this paradox when he writes that “Anarchiving destruction belongs to the process of archivization and produces the very thing it reduces” (94). The archive is at once an *anarchive* because it is the point of confrontation between “archival desire”—the desire for remembrance, origin, and source—and “archive fever”—the death drive longing for forgetting, erasure, and repression. Furthermore, while a putative “resource” of materials for various “uses,” the archive is riddled with—even defined by—its omissions, restrictions, repressions, and exclusions. Derrida refers to this latter effect as the “archontic power”—from the “archons” who originally instigated and continue to administer the archive-as-institution—and relates it to patriarchy and privilege (3). The archive preserves what the privileged want preserved, for their *own* use and benefit.

Howe and Olson have experienced, and made much of, the dual nature of the archive. Their scholarly activities have made them familiar with and at once wary of the archive as container and content. For Olson this reveals itself most clearly in his battles over “fair use” (and his upholding of the principle of “usufruct”) and in his interest in the margin (and marginalia) as the locus of one text’s opening onto the possibility of another. For Howe the duality of the archive has often presented its excluding, institutional “blank wall” while simultaneously preserving what for her is the key to Dickinson’s textuality: her handwritten manuscripts. In his Melville studies, Olson worked in many archives—the Widener library at Harvard, the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library Archives—but he also participated in the creation of the Melville archive in significant ways, helping to reconstruct the author’s library by personally tracking down dozens of his books and carefully transcribing his marginalia (this long before Wilson Walker Cowen compiled *Melville’s Marginalia*).<sup>13</sup> Olson makes a show of his archival documents, constructing his book around them rather than making them fit his critical argument. “I insert here a document of our history left out of the published works of Herman Melville,” he announces in *Call Me Ishmael* (25). Later in the text, introducing his key Shakespeare discovery—Melville’s fly-leaf comments in his edition of the “The Plays”—Olson writes: “I transcribe them as they stand” (51). Documentation itself is the point—that the writer is embodied in it, that what an author ultimately leaves to the future is an archive, that the unwritten, the new, is born out of the broken and cannibalized remains of the old.

Howe takes Olson's fascination with the archival document a step further, interested even less in its referentiality than in its opaque and mysterious materiality. In *My Emily Dickinson* she includes a facsimile of Dickinson's manuscript draft of "My Life has stood—a Loaded Gun," leaving its strangeness virtually uncommented upon—a scribal and visual disruption, pause or hesitation in her print text—two non-discursive pages, a bit of concrete poetry. As Howe's access to Dickinson's largely restricted manuscripts has improved she has continued to foreground the disruptive materiality of the poet's scribal texts. Transcription into print provides wider access to what is restrictively archived, but it also "domesticates" the "'halo of wilderness'" which surrounds Dickinson's fascicles: variant words and lines, line breaks, spacing, the very shapes of letters and the texture of her handwriting (*Birthmark* 136). Marginalia is another site of literary wilderness for Howe, who shares Olson's fascination in this regard, noting that "margins shelter the inapprehensible Imaginary of poetry" (29). It is in the archival margin that the author being read engages in "a conversation with the dead" authors he or she is in turn reading, and through which the scholar, seeking poetic fusion, may also join the archive's ongoing conversation: "I thought one way to write about a loved author would be to follow what trails he follows through words of others" (*Melville's Marginalia* 89-92).

One way in which the poet-scholars appear to deal with their complicities with the archontic functions of the archive is to envision their scholarship as "antinomian," to use a term preferred by Howe. To be antinomian is to be forever disjunctive, interruptive, unclassifiable, undomesticated, heretical. Howe insists repeatedly that she is "not a critic" and not "a trained scholar," suggesting that she has willfully "trespassed" into academic disciplines not the purview of the poet.<sup>14</sup> Howe and Olson both condemn much of the mainstream, academic scholarship in their fields—particularly over the "issue of editorial control" which Howe relates to "the attempted erasure of the antinomian in our culture" (*Birthmark* 1). "If you are a woman," Howe notes, "archives hold perpetual ironies. Because the gaps and silences are where you find yourself" (158). Nevertheless, she admits the complicity inherent in her archival desire:

I am drawn toward the disciplines of history and literary criticism  
but in the dawning distance a dark wall of rule supports the  
structure of everyletter, record, transcript: every proof of authority

and power. I know records are compiled by winners, and scholarship is in collusion with Civil Government. I know this and go on searching for some trace of love's infolding through all the paper in all the libraries I come to. (4)

In part, complicity is unavoidable as scholarship always seeks its place in the archive, is always consumed by the archive it investigates:

the interpretation of the archive ... can only illuminate, read, interpret, establish its object, namely a given inheritance, by inscribing itself into it, that is to say by opening it and enriching it enough to have a rightful place in it .... By incorporating the knowledge deployed in reference to it, the archive augments itself, engrosses itself, it gains in *auctoritas*. (Derrida 67-68)

Thus archives can function, as Libby Rifkin has written, as “extensions and even instruments” of “writerly agency” (12): they are fecundating, open to the future.

Furthermore, in its Derridian *anarchivization* the archive may just as likely preserve as erase the sort of textual (and historical) antinomianism Howe is interested in. Thus for Howe “the manuscripts of Emily Dickinson represent a contradiction to canonical social power” (*Birthmark* 1). Dickinson's case is an excellent example of a paradox described by Paul Voss and Marta Werner in “Towards a Poetics of the Archive”: “The archive's dream of perfect order is disturbed by the nightmare of its random, heterogeneous, and often unruly contents” (2).

In inscribing themselves into the archive, Howe and Olson suggest a relationship to the archive-as-institution that is more *tactical* than *strategic*. I have in mind Michel de Certeau's use of these terms in *The Practice of Every Day Life*. A strategy, Certeau argues, “postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as a base from which relations with an *exteriority* ... can be managed” (36, emphasis his). It is thus institutional and authoritative, while a tactic, on the other hand, “is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus”—“a maneuver ‘within the enemy's field of vision,’” involving “poaching” and “deception” (36-37). In his essay “The Insufficiencies of Theory to Poetical Economies,” Steve McCaffery suggests that theory, and institutionalized liter-

ary criticism in general, is strategic in de Certeau's terms—dependent upon a locus (the university) and resulting in a manageable “discursive production” (263). McCaffery opposes the avant-garde's “deployment of reading *as a tactic*” to the institution's strategically based production of interpretation: “Between the production of poems and their annexation by theory lies the non-discursive practice of reading whose range might be fixed as a passive voyeurism at one end and an unfettered, idiosyncratic usage at the other” (262-63). I would argue that Howe and Olson, in their attempts to achieve *fusion* through writing “like” the supposed “object” of their study, enact tactical readings rather than strategic interpretations. They also do this by “diverting” the archive from its academically sanctioned use in institutional scholarship into antinomian uses as poetry and poetic-scholarship. They practice “idiosyncratic usage.” The tactical, de Certeau remarks, finds “*ways of using* the constraining order of the place” and “establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity” (de Certeau 30). Howe's and Olson's work has “remained other within the system ... They diverted it without leaving it” (32). Their scholarly works are neither wholly academic nor the kind of “poets' prose” on which Stephen Fredman has written.<sup>15</sup> A tactical invasion of the academic by the poetic produces a writing that is both practice and theory, creation and commentary—an antinomian negation of traditional generic differences. In this way Howe and Olson reveal that even scholarship has its avant-garde.

One issue I hope to have drawn attention to here, and which the works of poet-scholars make clear, is the problematic (and often detrimental) distinction we draw between primary and secondary texts. When one writer writes of another we might assume and investigate apparent literary influences. But when that later writer writes criticism—or better yet scholarship—on his or her predecessor influence, in its typical, Bloomian dynamics of anxiety and repression, goes out the window: “secondariness,” which “creative” writers supposedly fear, desirous as they are of primacy, is the very nature of criticism and scholarship.<sup>16</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 *My Emily Dickinson*, unpaginated introduction. I will use two abbreviations throughout this paper: *MED* for *My Emily Dickinson* and *CMI* for *Call Me Ishmael*.
- 2 Howe's papers are located at the Mandeville Special Collections Library at the University of California San Diego.

- 3 In "A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn," Olson suggests that "one saturation job might take 14 years"—the amount of time between the beginning of his Melville studies and his completion of *Call Me Ishmael* (Olson 307). Howe was beginning to work on Dickinson at least as early as March 1976—the date of a letter at San Diego to Dickinson biographer Richard Sewall.
- 4 Journal entry dated February 11 1933 (34?), the Charles Olson papers, Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut, Storrs CT.
- 5 Letter, Van Doren to Olson, dated October 23 1938, Carl Van Doren Papers, Manuscript Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Published with permission of the Princeton University Library.
- 6 Rosalind Krauss refers to certain poststructuralist works—notably Jacques Derrida's and Roland Barthes'—as "paraliterary." See *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*, 291-95.
- 7 Olson published with Reynal & Hitchcock, Howe with North Atlantic Books. Olson's "academic" positions were limited to the alternative Black Mountain College in the 1950s and a brief stint at the State University of New York in Buffalo in the mid 1960s. Howe's first work at an academic institution came in the late 1980s at SUNY Buffalo.
- 8 See my essay "Formed by Homages: H.D., Robert Duncan and the Poetics of the Gift." *The Spirit of the Gift*. Ed. Mark Osteen. London/New York: Routledge, 2002: 209-26.
- 9 See Merton Sealts's *Pursuing Melville* for "Olson's resentment at Matthiessen for appropriating ideas he believed to be his" (Sealts 112)—especially pp. 106-113. Matthiessen's acknowledgement of Olson's "generosity" is on p. xviii of *American Renaissance*. There are some intriguing possible reasons for Bercaw's erasure of Olson's contributions, mostly having to do with Olson having angered Melville scholars with his own unacknowledged "plunderings" and in his "Letter for Melville 1951." See Maud's remarks on these scholarly intrigues in *Minutes of the Charles Olson Society* #5. Bercaw could easily be seen to be choosing the side of officially sanctioned scholarship.
- 10 Werner writes that she is "Led by Howe's work," which she refers to as "groundbreaking scholarship" (xi). Interestingly, Werner echoes H.D.'s dedication in *Trilogy*—"for Karnak 1923 / from London 1942" (HD 1)—with her "To Amherst, c. 1870 / from Buffalo, c. 1993" (Werner 1), suggesting her connection with the kind of gift exchange dynamics at work in the sphere of poet-scholarship.
- 11 Letter dated February 4 1946, Olson papers, Storrs.
- 12 The question is raised by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker and G. Thomas Tanselle in the Northwestern Newbury edition of *Moby Dick* (652-53). Ralph Maud has gone to great lengths to refute the accusations of these editors in his *Minutes of the Charles Olson Society*.
- 13 Olson's pursuit of Melville's library is one of the credits given him by the editors of the Northwestern Newbury *Moby Dick* (649).
- 14 These comments are made in *The Birthmark* (2, 172), but Howe also stated them in an unused preface for *My Emily Dickinson* (Howe papers, San Diego). One can understand the institutional reasons for what was probably her publisher's discomfort with printing such a disclaimer.
- 15 See Fredman's *Poets' Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*.
- 16 See Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*.

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