“A Cormorant of Libraries”: The Future-Past of Susan Howe’s “Melville’s Marginalia”

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In his influential essay “The Translator as the Creator of the Canon,” Jerzy Jarniewicz outlines the characteristics of what he identifies as “but two of the most interesting species” of translator, the ambassador and the legislator. The aim of the ambassador is to bring into the target language a spate of widely regarded masterpieces from the source language and culture—Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Proust translated into Polish, for example; the aims of the legislator, however, are decidedly more personal:

This type of translator realizes that each translation becomes a fact of the literature of the language to which they translate. ... For such a translator, the hierarchies, rankings or lists existing abroad do not matter in the least. They choose the texts for translation by themselves, guided not by the fact that they are representative for the culture from which they originate, but because their translation may enter into a creative dialogue with the native literature, offering it new paradigms, new languages, and new criteria. The translator of the second species establishes a new artistic law for their native literature (and if they happen to be authors, also for their own writing). (Jarniewicz 26)

In Jarniewicz’s view, the legislator-translator can be seen as one who privileges idiosyncratic prerogatives or interpersonal relationships over pecking order, and may eschew deference to decorum or to critical authority. This stands in contrast to the ambassador-translator, who depends upon—or leverages—the stature of a writer in the source language/culture as (inherent) justification or grounds for importance elsewhere.

However, translational energies here can be understood more broadly to include creatively rewriting or reconfiguring language-based source materials from much earlier eras or contexts and transferring them into a new era. In turn, one may hypothesize a hybrid offspring that merges the aims of the ambassador and legislator, that blends a desire to bring to light both esteemed works from the past as well as
affords the “creative dialogue” with “new paradigms, new languages, and new criteria” that Jarniewicz highlights—namely, the *excavator*. This can be seen as an outgrowth of what Sasha Colby has previously termed “the poetics of excavation”—although her objective was to situate a range of Modernist poets—as her work focuses on literal and symbolic forms of archaeology within poetic practices. According to Colby, from its beginnings, archaeology “was not just a discipline: it was a series of imaginative templates—a sequence of methods or approaches enriched by the constant oscillations between the object and the civilization it evoked, the fragment and the totality it called into being,” where “the texts themselves are the topographies of sedimented meanings and encrypted significances” (Colby 2; 3). Certainly, Susan Howe’s formally bold and historically grounded poetic oeuvre is consonant with Colby’s “sedimented meanings and encrypted significances,” and Howe’s archaeological impulse toward the literary canon can be seen as a magnetic field pushing and pulling on both the present and the past; along with Howe’s radical deformations and reconfigurations of the space of the page, her acts of literary excavation are among the most recognizable elements of her poetry. Indeed, Howe’s “signature formal strategies have regularly hinged on a sort of textual eavesdropping. Among the most snooping of found poetries, her vocal collages catch the drift of literature’s more intrepid voices” (Allen 397). The *excavator* can be understood as someone who braids an exploration in canonical writers/writing (à la Jarniewicz’s ambassador)—what Colby calls “dynamics of disinterment” (11)—with deeply individual (legislator-like) prerogatives, what Vincent Broqua terms “activated inquiry” (114–17).

It is also worth remembering that Howe’s work from *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* roughly tracks with the so-called canon wars of the 1980s and 1990s, which many scholars see as having been triggered by Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). The vigorous debate was to a large extent framed as traditionalism versus multiculturism, the retention of Great Books curricula and the celebration of some of the best ideas and expressions in the humanities (albeit largely from Western white men) versus more expansively inclusive and individual prerogatives, favoring modes of inquiry or interpretation over any such attempts at a shared or unified canon. Two noted critics offer differing but related analyses of canonicity from the time. Firstly, Charles Altieri observes succinctly: “there are obvious social roles canons can play as selective memories of traditions or ideals... [but] we will find the theoretical terms needed to speak about a canon severely tarnished by the history that authorizes them. Ideals often cloak the most practical of special interests” (37). For his part, Altieri aims to avoid what he sees as a false dichotomy between a Ricoeurian “hermeneutics of suspicion”—which can only produce disparaging or deflating assessments of a canon—and “the fantasy of a best self to be excavated from our historical being” (38–39). Instead, Altieri rejects the either/or central to the debate, and argues

that the past that canons preserve is best understood as a permanent theater helping us shape and judge personal and social values, that our self-interest in the present consists primarily in establishing ways of employing that theater to gain distance from our ideological commitments, and that the most plausible hope for the influence of literary study in the future lies in our ability to transmit the past as a set of challenges and models. (40)

This is not rhetorical sophistry on Altieri’s part, but the recognition of the tautology that buttresses concepts of canonicity: “We have ideas about canons because we learn to think about literature within cultural frameworks that are in part constituted by
notions of the canonical” (41). Secondly, Marjorie Perloff uses a range of examples of poetics that are radically different from each other with respect to form—contrasting John Cage, Lyn Hejinian, Michel Leiris, Brad Leithauser, and others—to demonstrate how even a supposedly canonical term such as “lyric” in poetry can, in fact, be woefully inadequate and empty, a clumsy and ineffective synonym for poetry itself (7–13). The scholar concludes that it is “impossible to talk about something called ‘the lyric’ as if the genre were a timeless and stable product to which various theoretical paradigms can be ‘applied’ so as to tease out new meanings” (29). Indeed, Perloff could have had in mind precisely the kind of work Susan Howe writes when she argued that “perhaps the ‘poetic,’ in our time, is to be found, not in the conventionally isolated lyric poem, so dear to the Romantics and Symbolists, but in texts not immediately recognizable as poetry” (18). For her part, Susan Howe clearly expresses sympathies with what Ricoeur called a “hermeneutics of suspicion” when she likens her poetic process to “a search by an investigator for the point where the crime began” (Difficulties interview 21).

6 A quintessential convergence of ambassadorial and legislative impulses can be evidenced in Susan Howe’s long sequence “Melville’s Marginalia,” which appears in her 1993 book The Nonconformist’s Memorial. Megan Williams asks, “How does Susan Howe’s use of Melville... reveal literary history and history itself to be a series of choices that must be rethought and rewritten? What are these choices, and where do they leave Howe’s work for posterity?” (106). By excavating spectral figures like Philip Massinger or James Clarence Mangan, as Howe does, she circumscribes issues of literary posterity as fluid negotiations between individual historical and canonical authors and readers. This activates a sort of collapse of the macro-scale, i.e., canonical literature with a reach across decades or centuries and a potentially countless, ever-aggregating number of readers, into the micro-scale—the particular reader engaging with Howe’s poetic text at a given moment in time. Howe herself observes that “[a]s well as translation or transmission, there is a mystery of change and assimilation in time. I always have to back into the past for some reason. Where and how the English seventeenth-century voice becomes the seventeenth-century, the nineteenth-century and even twentieth-century American voice” (Birth-mark, ch. 6). Indeed, these are moves of excavation, the initial engine to Howe’s investigative and creative poetics, where the poet becomes “[a] kind of rogue archivist” (Melillo 17). In some sense, her poetics is an outgrowth of the Modernists’ interest in the reconfigurations of the archaic and its unpredictable fissures into contemporary life (Colby 7), but is also a foundational element of archaeology: “[a]rchaeology and literary studies share an unparalleled and unsettling intimacy with the vestiges and leavings of past life—-with the words the dead wrote, said, or heard, with the object they made, held, or lived within” (Schwyzer 19).

7 Part of Colby’s formulation of a poetics of excavation can be seen as a more sweeping extension of the mutually modulating past and present that T. S. Eliot articulates in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted” (Eliot). For Colby, a poetics of excavation traces the archaeological impetus over centuries; she observes that “variegated ideological and historical fragments were played and replayed in an endless combination of imaginative constructions and reconstructions. Adopted, absorbed, and translated from the archeological, these excavational dynamics are contained within the vaults of the written” (3). In the
context of Howe, legislative translation can be broadly understood here as precisely such an “excavational dynamic,” a poetic strategy or mechanism that allows for a peculiar rendering or recovery of historical/linguistic/literary materials from one source context into another:

Marjorie Perloff, Peter Nicholls, and Kathleen Fraser have celebrated the ways that Howe combines scholarship and radical formal experiments, both in her interrogation of authority and power within the canon of literary history and in her determined attempts to find an adequate textual space to convey the (ignored or silenced) feminine perspective. (Wilkinson 266)

My interest here is to consider the extent to which “Melville’s Marginalia” can be seen as part of a sustained effort by Howe to situate herself and her work precisely within the frame of canonical literary figures. While Williams argues that Howe’s efforts “combat the notion of a fixed canon or of any canon at all” (107), I would like to propose that, in fact, they reflect the undergirding and expansive versatility of canonical figures—such as Melville, Dickinson, and others—even if these efforts include a clear critical dimension.

Howe’s collection of essays, The Birth-mark—published the same year as The Nonconformist’s Memorial—could be seen as a companion piece to her poetry collection, particularly given the fact that the book contains chapters entitled “Submarginalia” and “Quasi-marginalia.” In her introduction, Howe’s excavational dynamics are in full view when she writes:

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 every letter, 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. (Birth-mark, intro.)

In “Submarginalia,” Howe offers a kind of commonplace book, her reading through marginalia and marginality via various historical and canonical figures. She quotes Poe, “In the marginalia... we talk only to ourselves; we therefore talk freshly—boldly—originally—with abandonnement—without conceit” (Poe) as if to signal the more personal prerogatives Jarniewicz identifies as legislative. Howe then proceeds to relay various biographical narratives of canonical writers, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s (neglectful) relationship with his daughter Sara, and Sara’s remarkable talents amidst extraordinary difficulties—her brother’s burdening her; her husband’s death; the survival of only two of her seven pregnancies. Another example is Elizabeth Shaw Melville’s recounting how her conception of her husband was so deeply tied to his books that to part with them would be akin to another burial (Howe, Birth-mark, ch.1). These moving accounts provide an affective access point to people long deceased. In addition, “Submarginalia”—much like “Melville’s Marginalia”—demonstrates that many canonical figures read widely, and their works draw from others, much like Howe’s: “Coleridge, a cormorant of libraries, dives deep in books as if they were a sea” (Birthmark, ch.1). However, while the detailed biographical information pertaining to Sara Coleridge can be both fascinating and heartbreaking, this does not erase her father’s stature as a noteworthy Romantic poet. Rather, the more Howe uncovers about Sara, the more apparent is another talent in the Coleridge family, whose efforts reward sustained attention. In a critique of canonical poetry in her chapter “Canon and Loaded Gun: Feminist Poetics and the Avant-Garde,” Marjorie Perloff similarly aims to not only complicate simple gender binaries of nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets in
relation to canonicity, but also maps out how women poets such as Emily Dickinson and Lorine Niedecker read widely (31–51). In a similar way, in "Melville’s Marginalia" and elsewhere, Howe demonstrates the breadth of Melville’s reading as well as her own.

Howe’s excavations negotiate the literary canon as a kind of textual masonry, an aggregation of time and the continuous adding of new information, analysis, and reflection, which makes it extremely difficult to dislodge earlier established foundational bricks. New textual bricks can be added or appended, however, and the context and values can change, (d)evoke, or be redesigned. Thus, a poetics of excavation necessarily implies a subsequent, potentially endless, reconfiguration or addition. Moreover, as regards The Nonconformist’s Memorial, the time of publication—1993—is also worth considering. Within a few years either side of that publication, a number of Howe’s contemporaries published works that were very much indebted to, consciously acknowledged, and in various ways reconfigured or queried the work of prominent canonical literary figures: Leslie Scalapino’s Defoe; Michael Palmer’s “Baudelaire Series,” included in his book Sun; Keith Waldrop’s Hegel’s Family; David Markson’s Wittgenstein’s Mistress (doubtless itself a deeper rabbit hole). And if we pull back only slightly, we could include Tom Philips A Humument project, a reworking of William Hurrell Mallock’s Victorian novel; Rosmarie Waldrop’s “Hölderlin Hybrids”; and Jen Bervin’s Nets (which constructs new poems within Shakespeare’s famed sonnets via subtraction). Of course, the gesture itself—to build a new work out of an existing one—is not a particularly new strategy, and has been applied to various media from mixed-content Byzantine codices, to Henry Fielding’s Shamela (the parody of Richardson), Marcel Duchamp’s readymades (though perhaps L.H.O.O.Q. is most apt here), Kathy Acker’s Great Expectations, or even Woody Allen’s film Zelig. In Williams’s reading, Howe is concerned with eliminating the possibility of historical erasure and finding a home for posterity (107), and by excavating and reconfiguring the work of a canonical figure such as Melville—hitching her poetic wagon, so to speak—she is able to achieve that.

Williams may contend that Howe’s work “combats the notion of a fixed canon or of any canon at all” (107), but the exact modus operandi requires more analysis. While indeed we can observe that Howe’s “Melville’s Marginalia” is not exclusively amplifying Herman Melville per se in the body of the poetry, instead attempting to give a voice to James Clarence Mangan as the model for Melville’s famed “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” a number of details require consideration. To begin, the title carries prominence of place, and thus, of association. In addition, on the second page of the sequence, the reader sees the subtitle (?) “Parenthesis,” followed by “Brief Chronology of James Clarence Mangan”—which is several font sizes smaller than the subtitle, and the smallest font of any text on the page. The statement itself—Parenthesis—points to a kind of framing (Mangan as peripheral or secondary), and in the punctuation mark’s standard usage, such information is, in fact, non-essential. In other words, Howe opens her sequence by identifying Mangan, while at the same time minimizing him typographically. Given how typographical placement is one of the key features of Howe’s work, this compression should not be understood as merely accidental or the prerogative of the book designer.

Scholars have offered an assortment of descriptors for Howe’s visually distinctive poetry.1 Enikő Bollobás’s term “rough book poetry”—indebted to Michael Davidson’s term “notebook poetry,” while Davidson also deploys the neologism “palimpsest”—is
instructive as it allows for a poetic practice that enables the reader to see the poetic mind in action. “Rough book poetry,” in Bollobás’s usage, highlights a certain coarseness or crude quality to the dispersal or deployment of language (82). John Melillo argues that Howe “creates cascades of language sound that reimagine the function of voice in the midst of noise” and offers “a multivalent reappraisal of the historical record as a concrete text” (17). Stefania Heim underscores that Howe’s work evades easy classification and is “[v]isually fractured and syntactically challenging” in that it “feature[s] diagonal, upside-down, and curved lines of language, often rendered illegible through palimpsest” (Heim). Certainly one of the reasons for such descriptive difficulty is the sheer fact of just how dynamic Howe’s open-field/collage work is. The linguistic scaffolding necessary to explain or position a given set of poetic lines is immense and doomed to inadequacy, given that Howe’s page often functions more like a pictorial canvas—and one without any indicator of true north or elemental balance. The old adage “show, don’t tell” can be apt to the extreme when examining Howe’s poetry. Consider this brief fragment from “Melville’s Marginalia,” which demonstrates what Heim posits in her description of Howe’s work:

(Susan Howe, “Melville’s Marginalia,” p. 96; “Melville’s Marginalia” by Susan Howe, from THE NONCONFORMIST’S MEMORIAL, copyright ©1993 by Susan Howe. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.)

In this arrangement, the lines or language segments collapse (or perhaps redefine) the notion of what constitutes a couplet or stanza. The opening phrase “Magnanimity cannot” appears to be a forceful (albeit incomplete) thought, undercut immediately with the subsequent line upside down (“in going from one house”), prompting the reader to either rotate the book 180 degrees or glide to the next line, “naturally” and “Life deceives.” One reading could be that “naturally” acts as a pivot to the previous, “Magnanimity cannot,” but could just as well modify “Life deceives.” Yet this only takes into account lines that appear along the contours of conventional typography. The
inverted lines could also be read as their own thread: “The bark of parchment / THE MANNER OF LIVING / WITH // GREAT MEN // Led I used not to see // Whose life was spent // in going from one house.” This configuration then becomes one part of a dialectic within the poem, the upside-down lines having a kind of Dickinsonian lexical quality (they would not be out of place as opening lines in Dickinson’s alluring and elliptical poetry), and concluding with the conflict between living with “GREAT MEN” and the limits of “going from one house.” In these lines, we can detect only the faintest glimpse of James Clarence Mangan by excavating a paronym from “Magnanimity cannot”—itself a deeply ironic gesture by Howe, essentially ghosting generosity—and Melville is largely absent as well, although either one could be implicated as “GREAT MEN.” What is more, as Howe takes considerable care to instruct in the earlier preface, the lines are found material. In addition, although lines are inverted here and in various other parts of the long poetic portfolio, Jessica Wilkinson aptly observes that “Howe does not invert Mangan’s situation by presenting him as a central character on the page, but instead preserves his marginality through various poetic devices” and spectrally suggesting him in the text (Wilkinson 275). Wilkinson traces the ways in which Mangan is “present” (in some sense) in the poem via found or repurposed fragments, but she underscores that “not all readers will (have the time to) grasp the extent of Howe’s intertextuality—whilst some readers may recognize that these lines are “copied” and identify the irony of such borrowing in this instance (Mangan being himself a copyist and detesting this practice), others may be unaware of this fact” (283). This leaves the reader to perform basic acts of explication throughout the poem, serving as another kind of excavator. Wilkinson highlights that, in fact, there is no causal connection between Mangan’s manuscript and Howe’s roundabout study of him in “Melville’s Marginalia” (274). For instance, Howe notes in “Melville’s Marginalia” that she found an edited version of Mangan’s very brief “Fragments from an Unfinished Autobiography” in Yale University’s Sterling Library, but her use of that work is hardly extensive: she borrows a single passage to demonstrate the difficulty of obtaining a consolidated portrait of Mangan from even his own personal history. Interestingly, this passage, where Mangan describes the “hovel” in which his family lived, had been annotated by James Meehan as being “purely imaginary” (Howe, Memorial 97).

The already marginally reliable information on Mangan is then subsequently undercut in the next segment of the poem:
The margins are, in fact, the most prominent feature of this portion of the poem, the articulated and activated periphery that surveys silence where literal lines outnumber the single word “SIMPLETONS”—both a claim positioned on the margin and emphasized with its full capitalization. This excerpt could function as a distillation of one of Howe’s major preoccupations: poetically speaking, how to make a violin heard in the void of history? One answer could be to make silence visible; another, to remake the map.

Moreover, Howe’s choice of title is significant, signaling to the reader a relationship to the author of Moby-Dick, in the same way that Michael Palmer’s title “Baudelaire Series” alerts the reader to the presence of one of France’s most important poets. Just because readers of “Baudelaire Series” can discern references to Mei-mei Berssenbrugge (“Mei-mei, here is the table / Who knows the word for it” [Palmer 11]), Bernadette Mayer (“Bernadette has written Utopia,” Palmer 11) or Paul Celan, albeit via purposeful misspellings of his invented and actual surnames, (“by the name of Ceran / or Anlschel // ‘blooming fields of weeds,’”21), this in no way erases Baudelaire. Rather, given the divergent aesthetic qualities of the poets referenced, Palmer asks in what way Baudelaire might still be present or insists on querying the relationship between these poets.2

Apart from typographical concerns, what is a margin when talking about poetry? Given poetry’s peripheral cultural position, does using a term such as marginality when discussing it not risk redundancy? Mangan was once relatively well known, but his gradual fading from attention was brought about by several factors, including his refusal to conform to the “spirit of the age” and publish in British journals or
newspapers (Howe, *Memorial* 106). Howe observes that “the man with the name so remarkably like *margin*, has been all but forgotten by serious literary criticism” (Howe, *Memorial* 105). Stephen Greenblatt argues that “new literary histories,” poised to find a place for marginalized subjects, “should do more than put them on the map; they should transform the act of mapmaking” (18–19). In this respect, Howe's restless innovative use of two-dimensional space and vigorously open-field poetics certainly satisfies one half of Greenblatt's definition. Indeed, in *My Emily Dickinson*, Howe writes of the isolation that nineteenth-century writers like Dickinson, Poe, and Melville felt, “the falseness of comparing” as they sought out their own idiom (Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* 20). Clearly, Howe seeks to create her own idiom as well. In fact, more than a few lines in “Melville’s Marginalia” have a Dickinsonian tinge, the inviting and evocative quality of opening poetic conceits: “I think him to be natural / deeply by those books” (111); “The salary coyly said yes” (112); “Question of a happy life / any asylum in moderation” (113); “Morality I will not thought” (116); and “Because he stole the light / my heart is feminine” (146). Perhaps the Dickinsonian elements of such lines subtly underscore the way that Howe’s poetry can “subpoena history for an investigation of its violent crime against women” (Ma 718).

Williams argues that “Melville’s Marginalia” can be read as a poetics of excavation alert to history’s penchant for erasure and as expressing Howe’s desire to buttress herself and her work against such historical erosion (107–10). This characterization is indeed compelling—yet it is not the same as erasing the notion of the canon. Jessica Wilkinson notes that Howe “explicitly and poetically acknowledges that her encounters with documents and artifacts in these repositories have a direct influence on the work that she produces on her subjects” (13); John Melillo argues that “Howe's manipulation of preservation and change recalibrates the movements of language to longer transformations over time” (19). In other words, Howe’s long sequence neither erases Herman Melville nor the notion of a canonical writer. Like the bulk of Howe’s poetic output, “Melville’s Marginalia” is part of a long line of poetic excavations that explore and build off of canonical and historical works; this includes other poetry in *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* as well as the collections *Pythagorean Silence*, *Defenestration of Prague*, *Singularities*, *The Birth-mark*, and *THAT THIS*. Rather, the inventive scope and breadth of Howe’s long poem exposes Melville as—like Howe herself—a voracious and curious reader who culls his ideas from a plethora of sources to produce a body of work that sustains numerous readings across the decades and centuries. Howe's relentless historical mining combines the features and impetuses of Jarniewicz’s ambassador- and legislator-translators into a position of a dynamic excavator-poet. Indeed, James Clarence Mangan is contained within Howe's “Melville’s Marginalia,” but Melville's literary status is not marginalized by her poetic excavation: her efforts reveal Melville’s creative process to be fueled by more than American provincialism. Without Howe’s creative scholarly preamble, Mangan would be scarcely visible to the vast majority of readers of “Melville’ Marginalia” (Montgomery 39).

To be clear, I am not interested in attempting any major value judgement of Howe's poetry and “Melville’s Marginalia”—e.g., that Howe's work is somehow less ‘important’ or ‘inventive’ because she habitually reverts to canonical and historical figures as starting points or source material. Instead, I read her literary output as an overt way to interrogate and reinvigorate canonical writing and figures that have, in many cases, been ossified into socio-cultural statues of sorts. Thus, in my reading, the combination of Jarniewicz's translational terms, ambassador and legislator, clarify Howe's poetics.
Using the rather different examples of Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein, two women poets renowned for their particular forms of innovation, Howe explains part of what animates her poetic imagination: “Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence? What inner articulation releases the coils and complications of Saying’s assertions?” (My Emily Dickinson 11–12). For Howe, excavations of canonical writers or texts are of a piece with formal innovation, they are the two sides of the same poetic coin. This is admittedly somewhat at odds with Perloff’s contention that the avant-garde and canonicity are adversaries: “The genuinely new, the revolutionary, so history teaches us, is hardly apt to be quickly enshrined by the Academy” (34). Howe’s work can stand as a stark counterexample to such a binary.

Howe’s excavating can also be viewed as one form of what Michael Leong has termed documental poetics: “an ongoing site of contestation for competing documentalities and monumentalities whose multiple trajectories exceed any unified literary history” (Leong, ch.1). However, in an oft-cited line from Howe, she wants to “lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate” (Europe of Trusts 14). While figures such as Sara Coleridge or James Clarence Mangan could be among literary history’s slighted, they are neither anonymous nor inarticulate. Considering the work of several contemporaries, all of whom are clearly inheritors of Howe’s trailblazing in various ways, can elucidate how the anonymous might be poetically ‘lifted’ by what Colby calls the “dynamics of disinterment.”

The poetry of C. D. Wright, Don Mee Choi, and Sarah Mangold offer three distinct and contrastive “species of source-based poetics” (Leong, ch.1), but while Howe takes an individuated exploration through the canon and its margins—however amorphous (or circular, to borrow from Altieri) that might be—Wright, Choi, and Mangold more explicitly seek to give literary voice to those who would quite literally not be heard otherwise. For example, C. D. Wright’s One Big Self: An Investigation (2003) is a book-length poem that renders prison inmates in Louisiana poetically visible. The causes for incarceration (and even capital punishment sentences) are not shied away from, and at times they present grim reading. At the same time, the shared humanity of the prisoners is not ignored, either. If this were a project undertaken by Howe, the reader might be faced with a reconfigured poetic space based on a nineteenth century treatise on the nature of the penitentiary; Wright takes a different path, and instead, she interviews inmates, spends time with them, listens to their stories, and from those fragments and episodes, weaves together an expansive poetic narrative. One segment aptly demonstrates the isolation of solitary confinement while giving voice to an inmate:

Mack trapped a spider
Kept in a pepper jar
He named her Iris
Caught roaches to feed her
He loved Iris
When Iris died
He wrote her a letter. (Wright 39)

Mack, in solitary confinement, reaches for a gesture as old as literature itself, the epistle. Wright’s book-length poem is populated with people like Mack, whom polite society endeavors to forget (if they think about prison inmates at all).

Similarly gazing upon American invisibility, across several poetry collections Don Mee Choi critiques and humanizes the impact and consequences of the Korean War and U.S. militarism on macro- and individual levels. *Hardly War* (2016) succeeds in pressurizing and ironizing the adjectival forms such as “hardly”—“It was hardly war, the hardiest of wars. Hardly, hardly. It occurred to me that this particular war was hardly because of kids, more kids, those poor kids” (6)—or “partly” (“It was partly history,” 12). At the same time, it exposes the grotesque enthusiasm of promotional materials for missile manufacturers—“NEW TARZON GUIDED BOMB HITS BULL’S-EYE!” (30); “BOMB WITH A BRAIN AKA ‘THE TARZON’ GUIDES ITSELF TO TARGETS” (31)—and establishes visual analogies to American, Korean and Vietnamese children affected by the wars in their native lands. In the poem “Suicide Parade,” for instance, Choi writes:

Let’s take a closer look at the most feared weapon by the US in the Korean War, a gelling powder composed of naphthalene and palmitate (hence napalm)

65% oleic acid + 30% coconut fatty acid + 5% naphthenic acid

necessitates most arguably necessary clinging burning

necessitates gasoline and stirring (hence gasstir)

which is to say South Korean laborers funnel napalm powder into gasoline tanks

Moisture is the greatest problem in mixing napalm

Reds dead without a mark on them (hence hardly). (*Hardly War* 20)

Choi’s use of a language of flat affect succeeds in undercutting emotional distance, reappropriates perspective and chemical details to invert meanings. What for decades many Americans referred to as the “forgotten” war was, in fact, not “hardly a war,” but fully one, the effects of which the Korean peninsula continues to deal with.

Choi’s most recent book, the award-winning *DMZ Colony* (2020), expands and continues subjects and motifs introduced in *Hardly War*, and includes a series called “Orphans.” Here, she offers “imaginary stories... based on reality—history—yours and mine, and dreams—theirs and mine, and memory—theirs and mine” (126). Inspired by oral testimonies, Choi traces the accounts by hand to create a tenuously documental sequence of poetic epistles (in both Korean and English) with the name and age of the child—and in some cases, drawings—to give voice and form to those orphaned as a result of the war and other military massacres on the peninsula. With “Orphan Kim Gap-sun (age 8),” Choi presents a kind of list poem:

- commie grandma
- commie grandpa
- commie rice paddy
- commie mother
- commie skirt
- commie father
- commie sickle
- commie sisters. (57)

The child speaker concludes that “we are all commie bastards” (57). Here the reflections of a child implicate anybody reading the poem in the jargon and jingoism of the Cold War and American solipsism, but unlike Howe’s spectral vision of Mangan, Kim
Gap-sun is heartbreakingly visible—both in Choi’s English and Kim’s native Korean. For Choi, the documental is more likely to be found in a family scrapbook, her father’s wartime photography, or old advertising than in a special collections library.

28 As with Choi, Sarah Mangold’s documental poetics are visible across several books. Her newest collection, *Her Wilderness Will Be Her Manners* (2021), involves excavating and building literary and visual collages of women scientists, artists, and taxidermists whom history has relegated to existing “as acknowledgments / in other people’s prefaces / the way historians will not / see women in the museum / unless she seeks them out” (14). Rather than place the burden of mapping out these women’s trajectories on the reader, however, Mangold takes them out of the margins and places them front and center, names and all: “Mrs. Chapman and Miss Cherrie” (15); “Miss Mary C. Dickerson” (18); “Miss Alice Eastwood” (22). The segment beginning “Miss Ruth Ballard” performs a kind of historical retracing of painterly steps and restores the artist to visibility:

Miss Ruth Ballard took notes
on painting methods
how to paint shadows
what paint was on her palette
how to paint skies
how to draw receding perspective
how to size birds on the painted background. (16)

29 No longer are the women footnotes to a patriarchal history or existing spectrally; they are the focal point and intrepid innovators with their names cited, routines and expertise on full display. As Leong argues, “[c]ontemporary writers of documental poems often appropriate found documents in extensive and extreme ways that go beyond modernist techniques of quotation, continuing to redefine what it means to author a poem” (intro.). Certainly, Wright, Choi, Mangold, and Howe are part of “the documental turn” in American poetry, and reflect “archiving—in broader terms—as a cultural practice... [with a] focus on ‘archive’ as a verb rather than as a noun” (Leong, ch. 3). However, Wright, Choi, and Mangold’s work aims to erase anonymity in visibly and visually different ways than Howe’s project.

30 As Howe reminds us, “[t]he past is present when I write” (*Difficulties* 20). Put another way, Howe’s excavational dynamics are a creative form of genetic scholarship. According to Ma (720), this “meeting with the past, then, occurs simultaneously in several dimensions: temporal (‘in time’), geographical (‘from place to place’), perceptual (‘from writer to writer, mind to mind’), relational (‘friend to friend’), and linguistic (‘from words to words’).” Howe’s poetics echoes what Michael Palmer calls “the future-past”: the dialogic unsent letters across space-time. Such a confluence certainly satisfies Colby’s understanding of archaeology and a poetics of excavation, a site where the past is disinterred and reconfigured in new contexts within the present. But such disinterments can serve very different purposes. Howe “disinters” Mangan in her genetic reading of Melville’s famed story “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” yet rather than lifted, he remains spectral. The expansive, visually and narratively rich long poem that Howe creates in “Melville’s Marginalia” establishes that Howe, like Melville or Coleridge, is “a cormorant of libraries,” and the work of all the writers rewards new readings. But when Howe’s speaker wonders “who will be the interpreter” amongst the “[v]ulturism trimmed for binding,” she is posing this question in a kaleidoscopic
historical mirror that transforms the risk of obsolescence—for both Melville and her—into an enduring frame.
NOTES

1. Bearing in mind the overall focus of this essay and the limitations of space, I do not wish to recapitulate or re-litigate the considerable formal, historical, and analytical depth in the sixty-seven-page long poem that is Howe's "Melville's Marginalia." A number of scholars have written extended articles providing invaluable analysis. See Williams “Howe Not to Erase(her),” Wilkinson “Out of Bounds, the Bound Margin’: Susan Howe Meets Mangan in ‘Melville’s Marginalia.’” Criticism, vol. 53, no. 2, Spring 2011, pp. 265–94.

2. Another contemporary of Howe's, Carla Harryman, published a poem entitled “Not-France” around this same time, which is not an ode to Luxembourg or Belgium, but instead a kind of
poetic afterimage or psychological sleight of hand in a similar vein to René Magritte’s famed Ceci n’est pas une pipe, the parodic effect of which very much reinforces a sense of France-ness (677).

ABSTRACTS

In his influential essay “The Translator as the Creator of the Canon,” Jerzy Jarniewicz outlines the characteristics of what he identifies as “but two of the most interesting species” of translator, the ambassador and the legislator. Building off of Jarniewicz’s framework (while also being indebted to Sasha Colby’s concept of a “poetics of excavation”), in this essay I propose a hybrid offspring of the ambassador and legislator—the excavator—through the example of American poet Susan Howe’s work “Melville’s Marginalia,” from her 1993 book The Nonconformist’s Memorial. Megan Williams asks, “How does Susan Howe’s use of Melville... reveal literary history and history itself to be a series of choices that must be rethought and rewritten? What are these choices, and where do they leave Howe’s work for posterity?” (106). It is Howe’s relationship to posterity that is of particular interest here. Whereas Williams and others take extraordinary care to analyze “Melville’s Marginalia” as a discrete text and to avoid making broader remarks about that text’s potential relationship to Howe’s oeuvre more generally, in my essay I consider how “Melville’s Marginalia” is consistent with a sustained effort by Howe to situate herself and her work within the frame of canonical literary figures. Moreover, by offering the contrast of poets such as Don Mee Choi, Sarah Mangold, and C. D. Wright, I suggest that Howe’s efforts, in fact, reveal and solidify the expansive versatility of canonical figures—such as Melville, Dickinson, and others—even if there is a clear critical dimension.

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Keywords: contemporary poetry, Susan Howe, Herman Melville, marginalia, poetics of excavation

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