Reading the Margins:  
The Futurity of Susan Howe's Archival Recovery  

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Introduction  
Archival space forms a central concern in many of Susan Howe's works. The word "archive" literally means "[a] place in which public records or other important historic documents are kept" (OED). From My Emily Dickinson (1985) on, Howe has devoted her poetic and critical energies to stretching the word's meaning both through prose and poetry, specifically by associating "archive" with the act of recovery¹. Among others, Howe's "Melville's Marginalia" (1993) — a hard-to-classify work composed of prose and poetry — constitutes one of her extended meditations on archival recovery. At the heart of "Melville's Marginalia" is Howe's experience of reading the margins of books owned by Herman Melville. The work pivots upon the issue of archival recovery and of forgotten, silenced voices in the margins of texts. In this work she relates her encounter with a voluminous book titled Melville's Marginalia (1987) in a library when she was preparing to teach a course on Melville's Billy Budd. This earlier text by Walker Cowen consists of minute transcriptions of comments and marks that were made by Melville in the margins of his vast array of books. What Howe seeks to achieve in "Melville's Marginalia" is to bring to the forefront Melville's margin writings, thereby subverting the hierarchy between the "central" and the "marginal."  

With much reference to her other works dealing with archival recovery, namely The Birth-Mark (1993) and My Emily Dickinson, among others, this essay interrogates Susan Howe's archival enterprise in "Melville's Marginalia" by focusing on the "epistolarity" that informs this work. By the term "epistolarity," a critical term first coined by Gurkin Janet Altman in her classic study on epistolary fiction, I mean to foreground several aspects of the work's treatment of letters. First, "Melville's Marginalia" takes as its central subject Bartleby, the titular character of Melville's novella "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), who is rumored to have once worked in the Dead Letter Office. Second, when writing about dead authors, Howe employs an epistolary address: "you." Her recourse to prosopopeia makes it appear as if she were writing intimately to the dead. Third, Howe quotes a number of letters in "Melville's Marginalia," taking them as a primary object of her archival recovery. By shedding light on her investment in epistolarity, this essay ultimately aims to present Howe's archival recovery in "Melville's Marginalia" as communication between the living and the dead.

Communication with the Dead  
Crucial to Howe's archival recovery is the possibility of communication with the dead. For her, archival recovery amounts not to operating on past works one-sidedly and retrospectively, but to engaging in an imaginary conversation with dead authors. Reading Cowen's Melville's Marginalia, Howe recognizes margins as spaces where Melville communicates with an array of dead authors ranging from Aristotle to Shakespeare: "Marks he [Melville] made in the margins of his books are often a conversation with the dead" ("MM" 97)². Through her own archival encounter with Melville, Howe is made

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¹ The archive remains Howe's favorite topic in her recent works. In Kidnapped (2003), she takes up Robert Louis Stevenson as the object of her archival recovery. In The Poems Found in a Lost Museum (2009), she continues her examination into archival space by interrogating the relation between archival space (museum) and memory contained therein.
² "Melville's Marginalia" is hereafter abbreviated in parenthses as "MM."
into an active participant in the dialogue. Describing the moment when she hit upon a possible connection between Bartleby and James Clarence Mangan, the Irish poet, Howe employs the expression "poetry telepathy": "I saw the penciled trace of Herman Melville's passage through John Mitchell's introduction and knew by shock of poetry telepathy the real James Clarence Mangan is the progenitor of fictional Bartleby." ("MM" 115; italics added). Through the word "telepathy" Howe articulates her sense of transcending the temporal distance that separates her from Melville and Mangan, and suggests herself as part of the dialogue between them.

Howe’s interpretation that posits Bartleby’s progenitor as Mangan actually goes beyond the interpretation of this single novella by Melville, addressing a broader issue of literary historiography. Strictly speaking, Howe’s conjecture about the possible connection between Bartleby and Mangan lacks the rigor and precision that solid historical research usually necessitates. There is no substantive evidence that Melville knew about Mangan at the time of his composition of "Bartleby." As Howe herself admits, Melville came to possess a copy of Mangan’s collection of poetry in 1862, nearly a decade after the publication of “Bartleby” in 1853. Yet, as Lynn Keller maintains, Howe “deliberately resists the restrictions of academic paradigms” (3). What matters in her “speculative joining of historical author and literary character” (Davidson 85), then, is that her imaginative reconstruction of the relationship between these two authors is not an academically viable method of analysis. By retrospectively and imaginatively inventing the progenitor of Bartleby, I will henceforth argue, Howe struggles to resist and rewrite a literary history established by male critics.

**History as a “Record Written by Winners”**

Critics have recognized Susan Howe as a poet particularly concerned with history. Peter Quatermain, for example, elucidates Howe’s engagement with history by calling attention to her persistent concern with the elision of women from history: "Howe is . . . burdened by history: The burden, of retrieving from erasure and marginality of those [women] who have been written out” (194). As a telling indication of her attitude toward history as such, Howe repeatedly associates history with "winners." In her interview with Edward Foster, she notes that history is "a record written by winners" (BM 158). In The Birth-Mark, she invokes the same association: "I know records are compiled by winners, and scholarship is in collusion with Civil Government" (BM 4). These words convey Howe’s strong interest in historiography and the marginalization of certain facets of history by the “winners” who control its writing.

To better articulate Howe’s engagement with "a record written by winners," it is important to note her deep ambivalence toward libraries. For her, they represent both a fascination and a threat. While expressing her love in saying, "I go to the libraries because they are the ocean" (BM 18), she also perceives them as a symbol of patriarchal authority. Throughout several of her books, Howe repeatedly recounts her vexed experience of visiting Harvard University’s Houghton Library: "Standing at the center of this reservoir set apart for public traffic, I feel myself the parasite object of Institutional Gaze. What is being evaluated?” (The Midnight 121-22). In her mind, libraries are intimately associated with a forbidding authority that contains books and documents within their institutional barriers.

Howe’s traumatic experience with her father during her high school years provides the most telling index of this sense of exclusion from libraries. Her father, then a Harvard Professor of law, commanded her not to go into the university’s library: "I needed out-of-the-way volumes from Widener Library. My father said it would be trespassing if I went into the stacks to find them” (BM 18; italics added). While this episode is only tangentially inserted into the introduction to The Birth-Mark, the forbidding authority of Howe’s father receives particular emphasis in immediately following a note on the exclusion of female authors from the literary cannon established by male critic, F. O. Matthiessen: "In 1941 women

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3 On Howe’s attitude toward academia, Megan Williams observes: “According to Howe, academic institutions require that an author’s voice be violated and stolen, that her intentions be erased and repossessed by a figure desiring to establish its own authority” (107).

4 For discussions on Howe’s engagement with the issue of history, see Back 10-13 and Nicholas 586-601.

5 _The Birth-Mark_ is hereafter abbreviated in parentheses as _BM_.

6 On Howe’s troubled relationship with her father, see Montgomery 27-53.
were banished from Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (BM 18).

Given this sense of exclusion from libraries, Howe’s archival recovery can be better understood as a daring attempt to “trespass” the forbidding and patriarchal barriers that have distanced her from voices contained therein. In the introduction to *The Birth-Mark*, Howe articulates her project in the book by invoking the word “trespass”: “I have trespassed into the disciplines of American Studies and Textual Criticism through my need to fathom what wildness and absolute freedom is the nature of expression” (BM 2). Howe’s sense of estrangement from libraries, as shown in the repeated use of “trespass,” resonates with Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* (1995). Derrida describes books in archive as being under a “house arrest” to stress the point that those books are hermetically guarded by the authority of the archons, “the superior magistrates . . . who commanded” (2). Howe’s archival recovery thus emerges less as a mere act of *recovery* than as a desperate act of *rescue*: she makes a foray into the forbidden places of academia and archive, seeking to rescue contained voices from their “arrest.”

Establishing history necessarily entails a kind of violence. On the canonization of literary works, Howe observes: “I am suspicious of the idea of a canon in the first place because to enter this canon a violation has usually been done to your work, no matter what your gender might be” (BM 170). To understand this relationship between history and violence, Howe’s *The Birth-Mark* again serves as a good case in point. Howe’s book borrows its title from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story of the same name, which revolves around a physical mark on a female character’s face. Aylmer is a scientist, and his wife, Georgiana, is a young and beautiful woman whose cheek has a birth-mark. While the wife considers the mark to be a “charm,” the husband calls it a “defect” and a “mark of earthly imperfection” (765), demanding its removal by his pseudo-scientific means. A significant implication of the story is the infliction of male violence upon the female body. Howe’s archival recovery serves precisely to counteract this violence, thereby bringing what is considered to be defective and unnecessary into a central place to reclaim its worth.

7 Stephen Collis deploys Derrida’s theory in *Archive Fever* to understand the concept of the archive in Howe’s works. See Collis 18-20.

In *The Birth-Mark*, Howe focuses her critique on F. O. Matthiessen, the author of the seminal *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), which established the canon of mid-nineteenth-century American literature. As is evident in the already quoted line, “In 1941 women were banished from Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance*” (BM 18), for Howe, Matthiessen embodies the male authority that has “banished” female voices from the American literary history. Worth noting in Howe’s approach to this canonical figure of American literary criticism is her close attention to Matthiessen’s love letters to his partner, Russell Cheney. By quoting their correspondence, she puts Matthiessen’s public, academic writing in dialogue with private, marginal writings. By foregrounding letters, a kind of writing usually considered marginal, Howe attempts to undermine Matthiessen’s authoritative public persona that his authoritative text (*American Renaissance*) established. By focusing on the love letters to Matthiessen’s partner, Howe sheds light on the critic’s homosexuality that was “banished” by himself and his posthumous critics: “F. O. Matthiessen increasingly banished his homosexuality from his public and intellectual life as a professor and critic” (BM 13). Howe finds this banished, marginalized element of Matthiessen that is revealed through his private love letters—writings denied a central position in his public persona—to be crucial. In her engagement with Matthiessen, letters are a synonym for marginalia. By taking up his marginalized texts and not his authoritative text, she brings the former into the central arena for critical inquiry, thus obfuscating the boundary between “central” and “marginal” texts.

Howe’s persistent effort to collapse the dichotomy between the central and the marginal becomes clearer when she writes that even notes scribbled in the margins qualify as another kind of “writing” as much as published writing: “The marginal marks Herman Melville made in his copy of Hawthorne’s *Moses from an Old Manse* are another kind of writing. . . . Editors too often remove these original marks of ‘imperfection’ or muffle them in appendixes and prefaces” (BM 9). By pointing to editors’ “violence” perpetrated on texts, Howe collapses the boundary established by editors and other authoritative figures. As if driven toward a similar effort, “Melville’s Marginalia” is characterized by its sheer lack of a unified form. Howe’s own poems and quoted letters therein are
juxtaposed without any hierarchical relation between them, thus visually and textually presenting her resistance to the controlling authority.

**Howe’s Anxiety as a Poet**

The discussion has thus far focused on the vulnerability of writings to imposing male authorities that can silence and banish them by containing their physical presence within the institutional barriers of an archive. In her efforts to counter such authority, as we will see below, Howe stresses the importance of the reader as an indispensible agent in archival recovery as she conceives it, an agent with the power to recover and resurrect silenced voices from the contained spaces of the archive.

Herself a poet, Howe’s meditations on dead authors expressed in "Melville’s Marginalia" and other works inevitably lead her to self-reflection on her status as an author. Several critics have pointed out Howe’s anxiety about the loss of control over her own writing. Elizabeth Joyce provides a cogent analysis of this point: "Writers must lose control over their work the moment that they have finished writing, for the work is not done yet, that central feature of the words on the page; it must still meet the requirements of the subeditors, outside readers, head editors, and so on" (210). Joyce further points out “the anxiety of the artist who cannot control reception of the work, who is worried that the words will not say what she wants them to and that she will not be around to explain difficult sections" (211). Indeed, Howe’s sense of dispossession in regards to her own writing is persistent through several of her works. In *My Emily Dickinson*, she notes: "My voice formed from my life belongs to no one else. What I put into words is no longer my possession. Possibility has opened. The future will forget, erase, or recollect and deconstruct every poem" (*My Emily Dickinson* 13). Behind Howe’s archival recovery lies her own anxiety as a writer regarding her possible erasure in the future. In this sense, it can be argued that her archival recovery is charged with movements toward double temporalities: the past of the dead and the future of herself.

Howe’s understanding of the written word as such not only poses a negative prospect, but also a positive one. It is significant that while expressing her fear of oblivion and erasure in the future, Howe also refers to the “possibility” of future readers to “recollect” her poetry. The unmooredness of writing opens itself to the dual, contradictory possibilities of erasure and recollection. It is precisely this uncertain possibility that allows Howe to make a speculative connection between Mangan and Bartleby in "Melville’s Marginalia" by "free association" ("MM" 114). By posing a possibility and not imposing a definitive interpretation, Howe seeks to open up a space where the dead and the living can engage in a conversation that transcends the constraint of temporal distance. It is in this context that Howe’s creative reconstruction of Bartleby’s progenitor can be better understood. If the reader can silence, marginalize, and even “kill” words, the same reader also possesses the power to recollect and resurrect them.

The material production of "Melville’s Marginalia" urges us to consider the significant role of the reader in archival recovery. The printed pages of Howe’s "Melville’s Marginalia," where words are imbricated over each other to the extent that they become barely readable, visually and figuratively present an archival space to the reader’s eye. The work invites the reader to tackle its physical decipherment. The reader needs to excavate words by continuously turning the book one way or another and closely examining the overlaid words in order to make sense of the fragmented texts. On this visual arrangement of words, Michael Davidson notes: “Since many of her lines physically overlap, leaving little room to read them, she calls attention to the physicality of the print medium and its presumed transparency to something more ‘real’ beyond the page” (79).

In thinking further about the role of the reader, it is suggestive that Howe uses the word “burial” when she reflects on the forgotten works of James Clarence Mangan: “The eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1911) says his fame has been deferred by the inequality and mass of work, much of it *being buried* in inaccessible newspaper files under so many pseudonyms” ("MM" 118; italics added). The word “bury” here powerfully invokes the image of death, furnishing a trope of “dead,” forgotten words. This trope metaphorizes Howe’s archival recovery of Mangan as the act of resurrecting the words buried dead in the archival space. By visually presenting her own words as “buried,” Howe demands the reader not to be a bystander to her archival recovery, but to be an active participant in the experience of excav-
tion. In this archival recovery, Howe foregrounds the significance of the reader’s role, whose presence only can save the buried words from death.

**Reading Dead Letters:**
**Archive as the Dead Letter Office**

This trope of death brings us to consider the Dead Letter Office episode in Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” Bartleby is famously known as one of the most problematic characters in American literature, a scrivener who proverbially “prefers not to” do anything, until he is finally removed to a jail where he suffers a tragic death. Although she does not make an obvious connection between her archival recovery and Bartleby, it is nonetheless fitting that Howe should take this character as the principal concern of her archival enterprise in “Melville’s Marginalia.” Bartleby embodies silence and marginalization, offering himself as an apt object of archival recovery. Employed as a scrivener in a lawyer’s office in Wall Street, but remaining an outsider to the capitalist economy by refusing to perform his duty, Bartleby finally gets removed from the society to “the Tombs,” then New York City’s penitentiary. Deemed a “defect” and then “removed” from his society, as if to resonate with Georgiana’s birth-mark in Hawthorne’s tale, Bartleby figures as another metaphoric embodiment of the marginalia that Howe seeks to salvage. If the goal of archival recovery is to bring silenced voices out of containment and make them heard, then Bartleby qualifies as a fit candidate for that endeavor.

It is also significant to note that the year in which the Bartleby story was published (1853) corresponds to a period of increasing marginalization for Melville in the literary marketplace after the critical and commercial failures of *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852). We should also recall that Melville had remained a marginal figure in literary history long after his death until critics wrote him back into it in the 1920s, thus turning him into the very object of recovery. With this in mind, Howe’s focus on Melville’s “Bartleby” emerges as part of her broader concern with a literary historiography that has sought to canonize certain works and silence others.

Bartleby is further significant in Howe’s “Melville’s Marginalia” due to his rumored connection with the US Dead Letter Office. Near the end of the story, the narrator ruminates on Bartleby’s past, recalling a rumor that he used to work in the Dead Letter Office: “The report was this: that Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration. When I think over this rumor, hardy can I express the emotions which seize me. Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men?” (45). Although Howe does not make a direct reference to this dead letter episode in “Melville’s Marginalia,” her attraction to the mysterious phrase “dead letters” is unmistakable. In *The Birth-Mark*, she meditates on Bartleby’s past by echoing the passage above: “Bartleby may have once been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington. He would have continually handled undelivered letters. He would have gathered them together to be burned” (*BM* 15).

Historically speaking, the Dead Letter Office is not Melville’s fictional invention, but that which actually existed in antebellum America at the time of Melville’s composing the story. The Dead Letter Office was one of the departments at the post office in Washington D.C., where letters that failed to reach their destination, either due to a missing address or the absence of the addressee, were temporarily stored until their rightful recipients claimed them. If the letters failed to be retrieved after a certain lapse of time, as the narrator of “Bartleby” observes, they were eventually committed to flames. What should be emphasized here is that dead letters were not “dead” in the Dead Letter Office. In his historical analysis of postal communication in nineteenth-century America, David M. Henkin notes that dead letters “were not quite dead, but they were in a critical condition” (159; italics added). Dead letters were “not quite dead” because they were waiting for their intended recipients to appear and resurrect them. The phrase “dead letters,” then, should be understood as referring not to their actual end/death, but to a suspended state of fluctuation be-

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8 Howe’s strong interest in letters might have originated with her thoughts on Emily Dickinson. Discussing Dickinson’s letters that contain her poems, Howe notes: “Poems will be called letters and letters will be called poems” (*BM* 140). A few pages later, Howe reinforces this obfuscation between letters and poems: “Sometimes letters are poems with a salutation and signature. Sometimes poems are letters with a salutation and signature” (*BM* 144).

9 See John 78.
between life and death where a letter waits to be recovered and read in the future. The life or death of the letter hinges upon the advent of a future reader.

Against this historical backdrop, the figurative meaning of the Dead Letter Office can be better understood. Given Melville's state of marginalization and exclusion at the time of composing "Bartleby," his unrecognized writings could be taken as dead letters. Though they went relatively unread during the period of their publication, they were later recovered as literary masterpieces. In rescuing unread texts buried in archives from a temporary death, Howe's archival recovery resembles reading dead letters as such. In this context, the archive as conceived in a series of Howe's texts can be figuratively understood as the Dead Letter Office.\(^\text{10}\)

**Writing Letters to the Dead**

Howe's treatment of letters includes not only the act of reading dead letters, but also that of writing letters to the dead. Reading and writing letters at once, Howe seeks to generate imaginative correspondence between the living and the dead. Noteworthy in this context is the epistolary style that she employs when meditating on dead authors. Howe addresses the dead authors with the word "you," as if writing a private letter to them. When she writes in *The Birth-Mark* about Anne Hutchinson, a woman excommunicated from her Puritan society due to her antinomianism, Howe's use of address shifts from the third-person "her" to the intimate second-person "you": "Voices I am following lead me to the margins. Anne Hutchinson's verbal expression is barely audible in the scanty second- or thirdhand records of her two trials. . . . you. Fate flies home to the mark. Can any words restore to me how you felt?" (BM 4; italics original). Here, Howe addresses Hutchinson with the word "you," creating intimacy and immediacy between herself and the historical figure despite the temporal distance that separates them by hundreds of years.\(^\text{11}\)

The deployment of such an epistolary address is most conspicuous in "Melville's Marginalia," in which Howe again makes recourse to the epistolary style when writing about James Clarence Mangan: "I have traced what books I can find by or about you in America. . . . Did you see the young Shelley in Dublin? Some say you influenced Poe, others say it goes the other way. You are everywhere in Joyce's writing" ("MM" 117). This passage illuminates Howe's desire to address Mangan directly. Megan Williams discusses this passage by employing a trope of letter-writing: "Howe speaks to the reader and to Mangan in the letter-into-the-past form. . . . In the direct address into the past employed here, history unfolds as a one-sided conversation in the present between Susan Howe and the individual voices she rediscovers" (114-15).

Howe's investment in the epistolary style calls to mind an issue of temporality. Generally speaking, letters are a means of communication that encapsulates the present moment. In her analysis of letters' myriad functions in fiction, Janet Gurkin Altman theorizes their temporal aspects by calling attention to a host of gaps entailed in letter-writing: "Epistolary discourse is a discourse marked by hiatuses of all sorts: time lags between event and recording, between message transmission and reception; spatial separation between writer and addressee; blank spaces and lacunae in the manuscript." Thus, letters foreground temporal, spatial distance between the addressee and the addressee. "Yet," Altman hastens to add, "it is also a language of gap closing, of writing to the moment, of speaking to the addressee as if he were present. Epistolary discourses is the language of the 'as if' present" (140).

Indeed, Howe writes to Mangan "as if present." In "Brief Chronology of James Clarence Mangan," the opening section of "Melville's Marginalia," Howe uses only the present tense to tell Mangan's life history. More important, while a biography usually follows a person's life from birth to death, Howe lets Mangan figuratively escape the fate of death. After the description of Mangan's death in 1849 ("Dies in the Meath Hospital, Dublin, June 20, probably from starvation"), Howe resurrects him in the guise of Melville's Bartleby: "1853. At sunrise on November 8, 1853, there appears, suddenly as Manco Capec at the lake Titicaca, a figure, pallidly neat, pititably respectable, incurably forlorn, in Putnam's Monthly Magazine in New York City. It is Bartleby" ("MM" 95). Mangan's chronology ends with his death.
seamlessly transmuted into the birth of Melville's fictional character.

It should be emphasized that this epistolary mode of communication with the dead ultimately remains conditional, essentially constrained by the unbridgeable distance separating the living reader and the dead author. This distance, however, engenders rather than frustrates the reader's desire to transcend it, creating an imaginary space where a conversation between the living and the dead is made possible. Howe's archival recovery exists within such a contradictory tension between the possibility and impossibility of correspondence. In her interview quoted earlier in this essay, while lamenting the fact that history has been written by winners, Howe also calls attention to the futurity of the archive: "History may be a record written by winners, but don't forget Nixon taped himself for posterity. If you are a woman, archives hold perpetual ironies. Because the gaps and silences are where you find yourself" (BM 158). Howe makes a significant reference to posterity here, suggesting that the archive is not a space where the past is hermetically contained, but that which carries the possibility of future communication with the dead.

Such a dim possibility of communication strongly resonates with the notion of the Dead Letter Office, where unread documents await the advent of the reader who might resurrect them. Dead letters keep fluctuating between life and death, forever awaiting a future reader without guarantees of being retrieved. Susan Howe's "Melville's Marginalia" and the other texts discussed in this essay coalesce to demonstrate the significance of the reader's role in archival recovery, and point to the ways in which the reader can resist and even rewrite a history written by "winners." Dead letters in the archive are directed toward the future, consigned to the uncertain yet possible advent of a reader like Susan Howe herself, who has sought to reclaim silenced voices from the hands of male authorities. For this reason, Howe's archival recovery can be seen as an attempt to address a larger question of American literary historiography. It is therefore possible to regard Howe's archival recovery as contributing to the rewriting of the American literary canon, a critical concern that has preoccupied scholars for the past several decades. However, this is not to say that Howe's engagement with the archive is just another instance in the lineage of attempts at the reconcanonization of American literature. The merit and uniqueness of Howe's enterprise reside in the fact that she makes such efforts not through academic methodology, but through the creative and imaginative act of writing poetry, ever challenging academic premises not from within, but from without.

**Works Cited**


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