Jacek Partyka

Stitch, Stich and Stichomancy: Poetry by Other Means in Susan Howe's *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*

Abstract: Drawing on Marjorie Perloff's concept of "unoriginal genius" as well as on the contextual framework provided by the works of Walter Benjamin, William S. Burroughs, and Dodie Bellamy, the article analyses Susan Howe's *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives* (2014), a printed version of a lecture, which, as is argued, not only offers an illuminating perspective on the notion of originality in contemporary poetics, but can, as such, be read as an instance of "poetry by other means."

Keywords: innovative poetics, cut-up, literary montage, originality, copying, archive

> I think the idea is to be unoriginal but in as original way a—
> s possible.
> Charles Bernstein "Me and My Pharaoh"

It was in 1975, in her *Poetry Today* radio series, that Susan Howe introduced Charles Reznikoff reading a selection of his poetry, which for past decades had occupied a rather marginal position on the map of American literature. It was more or less at the same time, in a way that obviously was not as clear then as it is now, that the twilight of Reznikoff's non-spectacular career coincided with the dawn of Howe's, whose official debut came about a year earlier with the publication of *Hinge Picture* (1974). Such a juxtaposition in chronology, or against the backdrop of the history of American twentieth-century poetry, finds its meaningful justification in the fact that both writers, when we consider the bulk of their achievement, are seen today as the exemplars of a life-long dedication to history, examined by means of verse, whose qualitative label in critical opinions oscillates between innovative and, to borrow Marjorie Perloff's term, "unoriginal."

In the first known treatise on literary theory, the author of poetry extracted from archives, records, or inspired by witnessing real events, i.e. the poet-historian, or the historian-poet, is treated as an impossible compound-figure—a contradiction in terms. Aristotle famously asserts:

> It is... not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would

> still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for *poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular*. By the universal, I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages. (emphasis added)

As rhythmical language can be employed for various ends (e.g. for, say, modification of Herodotus' work), Aristotle rejects the understanding poetry in purely formal terms as metrical composition, proposing instead to view it as a subset of a larger group of human activities—imitation. Poetry, whatever its exact definition, springs from human instinctual proclivity to imitate, which is a source of pleasure (*Poetics* IV).

To understand what Aristotle means when he contrasts history and poetry, it is important to remember a more general distinction he makes between perception and rational understanding (*epistêmê*), and his assertion that, while the former refers to particulars, the latter is a domain of universals (*Ph.* 1.5, 189a5-8). Specifically, perception belongs to the realm of the observable fact (the "that") and *epistêmê* concerns the intelligibility of the fact (the "why"). In the *Poetics*, the job of the historian is understood as restricted to mere recording of what happened. Any attempt to delve into an analysis of events is seen as tantamount to renouncing this role and embarking on a typically philosophical enquiry. Compared with the historian's task, i.e. how to reconstruct a series of past events, the endeavor of the poet, i.e. how to construct a series of events, is superior and more challenging—in order to achieve an effect of universality, the events constituting a sequence must be presented by the poet as complying with the "law of probability or necessity."

If all of Western philosophy was once described by Alfred North Whitehead as a series of footnotes on Plato, then, respecting the difference in scale of the issue, all of Howe's volumes of textual and visual collages, which she has been publishing for over forty years now, may be treated as a series of footnotes on the laconic fragment from Part IX of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Limited by the intended—modest—scope of the present paper, and fully aware of the fact that even a book-length study would hardly do justice the intricacy and sophistication of Howe's literary achievement, I do not venture into any in-depth analysis of the way the twines of poetry and history are manifested and problematized (and perhaps recycled) in her consecutive publications that already add up to thirty-three. Instead, resorting to a synecdochic gesture, I offer a brief reflection on the connections between history and poetry in Howe's recent publication, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives* (2014), and do this by reconsidering the notions of "innovation" and "(un)originality" as manifesting themselves in her book.

To demonstrate that in the case of Howe's works the distinction between poetry and scholarship (history and literary criticism) is, more often than not, blurred

would not be an audacious or trailblazing endeavor. Apart from numerous critical articles dedicated to particular aspects of her "poetic" or "scholarly" achievement, the generic indeterminacy and the way it impacts the reception of her (exceptionally demanding) books among readers has been one of the main recognitions in two seminal studies in the field: Stephen Collin's *Through Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism* (2006) and Will Montgomery's *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority* (2010). Interestingly, the former—in its choice of major critical categories, which are highlighted in both elements of the title—draws strictly on terms proposed by Howe herself.[1] To a certain degree, then, the whole analysis that went into Collin's study is as if controlled by the poet he writes about. Accepting the suggested terms of critical reference—doubtless, a deliberate decision—Collins presents himself as a mere enabler of Howe's voice as well as the voices of others to sound *again* in a different discursive montage. Plus, by doing so, he emulates the well-known compositional and quotational method of Howe,[2] which obviously does not—in any way—depreciate the academic merit of his project.

These two urges—the scholastic and the anarchic—that govern Howe's writings are basically a not-mutually-exclusive convergence of her apparently contradictory feelings about ordered and restricted contents of archives. The scholastic impulse imprisons her in the rigor of meticulous and methodical library research, and makes her attentive to the materiality of the page, marginal notes, even doodles and scribbles (often not considered in so-called critical editions). The anarchic urge is detectable in her rebellion against hierarchy, order and received ideas, as well as in her critique of the institution of publication, which she sees as structured, based strongly on interpretation, and—most importantly—striving for definite versions of texts. As can be expected, this assumed attitude of scholastic anarchism, or anarcho-scholasticism, as Collins (9) puts it, requires the development of an equally paradoxical discourse and a scholastic or literary form that would be able to contain it within—i.e. a collage/montage. Heavily dependent on citation and reproduction of visual, or better: emblematic material, interspersed with Howe's own remarks, this is a radically open, decentralized, and non-linear discourse. The reader is often left in the dark as to what in such discourse is to be considered commentary and what an original creation, which snippets of language are primary and which secondary texts, and—in certain cases—whether poetry is subordinated to prose or vice versa:

> They are Janus-faced works—part exegesis, part original expression—'creative' in their own right, but their creativity is often located in the collagist's eye for the found objects and critical juxtapositions.... [I]t is

1 The phrase "through words of others" appears in *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (92); the notions of "anarchist" and "scholar" are reconsidered together in *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (72).

2 For example, Part 2 of Collin's tripartite monograph study consists of Howe's selected correspondence with George Butterick (79-106).

> difficult to tell where authority (and authorship) lies: is it in the citation, or the commentary? Which is a footnote to which? Which text is there for explication of which? (Collins 9-10, 17)

Or perhaps, the above dilemmas—binary-set, dichotomous and locked as they are in an apparent inevitability of choosing one option, which is not always the best interpretive strategy—lose their reasonableness, and are not only abolished but overcome in Howe's anti-hierarchical collages. As it seems, a much better (or at least more fruitful) explanation of the phenomenon of her texts is to look at them as anchored in and deriving from three fundamental ideas—of relation, love, and gift. In fact, relation is the main constructive principle of her writing and, at the same time, one of the primary concerns, which urges her to uncover the marginalized and/or the suppressed (and even the so-far-nonexistent) links between other acts of writing (the acts of writing *of* others). Above all else, however, her books document moments of attention, enthusiasm and love—the driving forces between her scholarship and proper (if such an adjective applies at all) poetry. Texts of others are welcomed as gifts, and what comes out of them once they have been processed ("Howed") in the crucible of juxtaposition and montage is a gesture of gratitude. The gratitude, let us add, which appears boundless: "I have plagiarized... I have borrowed... I am indebted to everyone" (*Birth-mark* 37–39).

Indeed, the strategy of "plagiarism" pervades Howe's oeuvre—merging or at least linking modernist and postmodernist aesthetics—and, at the same time, constitutes a manifesto of its own, significantly broadening the understanding of the creative act as such. Obviously, the idea is not new at all as in his 1920 essay on Philip Massinger, T. S. Eliot famously praised the art of stealing as a legitimate component of writing:

> One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. (*The Sacred Wood* 206)

In Eliot's case the discussion on the ways Massinger borrows from Shakespeare confirms more than just the approval of welding somebody's words into one's own discourse—it testifies to the overlap of the author of *The Waste Land* as critic and poet. The *newness* of this then-provocative statement is best seen against W. H. Davenport Adam's remark—written twenty-two years earlier—on Alfred Tennyson's poetry, in which he valuates "borrowings" in a starkly opposite manner, asserting that "great poets imitate and improve, whereas small ones steal and spoil" (628). In 1978, adhering to an analogical foothold as Eliot, Bernadette Mayer's opening of the third issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* encouraged fledgling poets to "[r]ewrite someone's

else's writing" and to "[e]xperiment with theft & plagiarism in any form that occurs to you" (1). So, despite its alleged singularity, the writing of Howe is clearly doomed to an inevitable association with the exhortations of Eliot or Mayer (to give but two names). Still, what makes her stand out on the landscape of contemporary American literature is not only the radical character of her project, but also her consistency in developing a "new way of meeting the text—upon the ground of its polyvalent mutability" (Collins 26).

In most general terms, echoes of montage-thinking can be detected in disciplines other than fine arts or literature, namely those which draw on permutation of basic elements or components—in chemistry (the periodic table), atomic physics (e.g. quantum physics), or mathematics (set theory). Considered from a historical perspective of its development, montage of literary and non-literary material turns out to be not only a matter of aesthetic preference but also a manifestation of the artist's understanding of the world, and his/her ideological or political stance. In literature, early avant-garde montage by Eliot, Pound or William Carlos Williams—years ago perceived as oppositional and emancipatory practice—ultimately questioned the so-far prevailing categories of original and appropriated text, as well as problematized a distinction between original and translation from it, or even fiction and non-fiction (which was even more noticeable e.g. in John Dos Passos's novels). As Marcus Boon observes (145-146), in its essence, montage consists in the consecutive acts of "destruction" and "copying"—i.e. it involves an arbitrary isolation of a fragment from the pre-existing whole so as to graft it onto a new context, often in a form of a citation. The artist dedicated to such a strategy of creation asserts the liberty to (ab)use, (mis)appropriate and transform the chosen fragment to make it serve new purposes.

When in the 1960s, William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin began experimenting with cut-ups in different (or mixed) media—text, picture, photography and film—this was meant as something more than a purely mechanical method of juxtaposition. Initially, for Burroughs, the cut-up redefined the understanding of the work of art—it was not the sole property of the artist, but a processual act of collaboration with the reader/viewer, and, with other artists—the method offering "literally infinite extension of choice... [and leading] to a collaboration between writers on an unprecedented scale to produce works that... [are] the composite effort of any number of writers living and dead" ("Censorship" 7). This was by no means an original or groundbreaking proposal, but a project parallel to, say, the developments of aleatory (or indeterminate) music, in which significant parts of the composition are left to be determined by the musician or virtually subject to an element of chance (e.g., by Henry Cowell, Alan Hovhaness or Witold Lutosławski); or owing much of its inspirational force to so-called action painting (gestural abstraction), with its understanding of art as a process rather than a product (e.g. by Jackson Pollock or Franz Kline); or, last but not least, bearing some distant analogy to happenings (performance art) as theorized first in the late 1950s by Allan Kaprow,

which ultimately annulled the chasm between the artwork and its viewer. After initial experiments following in the footsteps of Dada artists (e.g. Tristan Tzara), things became more "serious" and a whole theory of the cut-up was developed, in which Burroughs attempted to examine the ways in which language and human mental constructs functioned as invisible agents of control.[3] As he claimed, words and man-made images around tend to shape and condition our reasoning, perception, even ways of speaking by imprisoning them in fixed patterns, and, consequently, distorting our relations with society and the world around (nature). And it was the cut-ups that came to be perceived—now more "philosophically"—as a means of liberation from this epistemological trap, laying bare and then removing (as they, allegedly, did in an act of reading) a cocoon that wrapped human consciousness. Burroughs' montages, putting together randomly picked fragments (his own and not his own) with images from Gysin's paintings, came to be treated not only as deconstructive gestures aimed to cope with traditional—and preservative—notions of the text and the author, but as forms of investigation into hidden meanings of particular texts, as well as a method of divination ("If you cut into the present, the future leaks out"[4]). Thus, the cut-up would cut three ways: sustaining the revolutionary (even if inherited from modernism) notion of a creative act, sounding the past, and predicting the future.

And Burroughs' idea was by no means an ephemeral fad. Dodie Bellamy's *Cunt-ups* (2001) and *Cunt Norton* (2013), to take some recent examples, are two conceptual projects not only continuing his experiments, but—more importantly—providing a feminist variant of the Dadaistic cut up technique. The former blends fractured male and female voices—each "cunt-up" derives from four cut squares (appropriated from Bellamy's own texts as well as from those of others), and as such is typed and reworked for print. The polyvalent "Frankenstein pages" display perversion both in their contents and in the syntax of their sentences, implying resistance to rules of formal ordering, as well as textual and sexual violence. *Cunt Norton*, the sequel to *Cunt-ups*, is a montage of fragments cut up from the second edition of the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* (1975), in which Bellamy brings together a series of prose writings that respond to and comment on snippets of verse by established (mainly male) writers. Her commentary is predominantly pornographic in character and not purely "original," but rather an amalgamation of remarks (the "porno-erotic texts") lifted from her own e-mail correspondence with another poet ("From Cut Up to..."). The bits of canonical poetry, often selected in a nitpicking manner by the *Anthology*'s "editor," transform the understated into the explicit, the elegant into the grotesque, virtually re-tuning the reader to new ways of reading the cannon, and reclaiming the vulgar from the masculine literary discourse ("Cunt Whitman," "Cunt Lowell," etc.). But the primary rationale behind this astonishingly

3 Brion Gysin writes: "all language is essentially mystification, and everything is fiction" (Burroughs and Gysin 15).

4 See: YouTube "Cut-Ups William S. Burroughs" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rc2yU7OUMcI , 1:16.

slim volume (seventy-five pages for an anthology) is a critique of tokenism, political correctness, and alleged inclusiveness that inform contemporary canon-formation as exemplified in various anthologies of literature. Bellamy, acting in the spirit of the New Narrative movement, wants to be ostensibly "feral," and her decision to count in one female ("Cunt Dickinson") and one Afro-American ("Cunt [Langston] Hughes") is an obvious gesture of mockery.

Considering cut up and montage techniques in the context of feminist practices, it is interesting to note, as Boon (162) does, that they echo the stereotypically female domestic arts, such as knitting, sewing, quilting, and even cooking, all of which emulate basically the same principle of creation—a rearrangement of preexisting, ready-made components. Cook books, for instance, provide recipes, which act as manuals of montage, detailing the necessary ingredients and ways of processing them to bring out a particular dish. Making food, then, is an art of copying (somebody's ideas) and then assembling (in the very act of preparation) what has been copied. As for Bellamy's projects, taking inspiration from derivative and therefore—allegedly—unoriginal domestic arts is, it can be argued, a statement in itself. Inasmuch as it involves the use of scissors, it consists, first, in symbolic destruction of the previous order, and, subsequently, in imposing a new one, both acts being aptly demonstrated in *Cunt-ups* and *Cunt Anthology*.

As was and is the case with the above-mentioned publications, Susan Howe's most recent volume, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*, can pose a slight problem for library classification systems that control the process of adding new books to their most appropriate shelf locations. Initially conceived as a lecture with a slide show presentation, it is, in fact, is a collage of citations and reproductions of manuscripts with authorial comments, written in the language that often subverts the rigor of academic discourse. Arguably, the final, published version is a visual and textual hybrid—call it photo-writing—akin to Walter Benjamin's posthumous *opus magnum*, *The Arcades Project*, to which Marjorie Perloff assigns an exceptional poetic value:

> This encyclopedic set of handwritten notes... is not, strictly speaking, a poem, certainly not a lyric one. Nor is it a narrative or even a fiction. And yet... its juxtaposition of poetic citation, anecdote, aphorism, parable, documentary prose, personal essay, photograph, diagram—indeed every genre—makes Benjamin's assemblage a paradigm for the poetry of 'unoriginal genius' to come. (23)

As preparation of the ground for formulating her notion of "unoriginal genius," Perloff recalls Edgell Rickword, one of the earliest critics of *The Waste Land*, who downplayed the significance of Eliot's experiment by judging it an "indolence of imagination" (quoted in Perloff, 2). Drawing on citation and appropriated text as major building materials of the poem contravenes the very core of poetry, whose aim should be, as Rickword demands, to convey and demonstrate the poet's

unique, individual sensitivity translated into language. The judgment is for Perloff an "important document" (2) that facilitates a better comprehension of changes occurring in poetry written at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Arguably, it is the criterion of verbal originality that informs not only poetic projects that are marked by the shift towards a distinct individualistic idiom—for instance the poetry of the 1960s and 70s, such as Ginsberg, Bishop, Lowell, Plath or Levertov—but also by L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. However, both groups are driven by their manifested or unacknowledged unwillingness to be cramped by earlier poetic models, and display—to a lesser or greater extent—a certain dose of confidence in innovation. Perloff calls them all "Originals" (9).

It is interesting to think for a while why should *The Arcades Project*—for years a legendary unpublished tour de force of the German philosopher and critic—be treated as a paradigmatic work for recent developments in American (but not only) poetry. A brief outline of the context of its conception may illuminate such a theoretical proposal. Making use of French library archives, Benjamin gathered his reflections and observations, along with quotations from an overwhelming variety of sources, into bunches of papers, referred to—from the German language—as Konvoluts. The first readers of the Konvoluts, notably Rolf Tiederman and Adorno, were—to put it mildly—flabbergasted by the alleged lack of continuity in its perpetually shifting contexts and juxtapositions, and by the fact that at least 75 % of the manuscript was unoriginal transcription of found texts. Among the first sketches from notebooks 1927-1930, Benjamin admits: "Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall appropriate no ingenious formulations, purloin no valuables. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not describe but put on display" (860). This then-bizarre way of constructing a discursive text on history began to intrigue literary critics, such as Perloff and Montgomery, not only for its original philosophical stance but also for the visual character of the Konvoluts (some of them containing drawings and pictures) and the dynamics of particular elements, which enter into dialogue with each other. Benjamin paid exceptional attention to the structure of his essays, articles and literary pieces (some of them took years to assume final, acceptable forms); what is less often emphasized, however, is the fact that he undoubtedly took pleasure in the visual aspect of his writing, being extremely meticulous with calligraphy, and carefully positioning and dividing his text on the page (as is best demonstrated in the volume *Benjamin's Archive*). The design of the page (its architectonics) may have been a by-product of the research, but it may well have been the aspect of the intended book that the author wanted to see retained in the final published form. We do not know how Benjamin would have used his material if he had lived to be able to finish the project and submit it to print. How exactly he would have arranged the position of lithographs, photographs, drawings in a given Konvolut will remain an open question. Yet, whatever the true authorial intention was, for Perloff, the project in the form it was left by Benjamin (but not necessarily in the forms that it is given by different publishing houses) is "best

understood as ur-hypertext" (32) and as such makes a huge, lasting difference in the development of contemporary innovative poetics. She goes even further, suggesting that the numerical classification of the notes that direct the reader's attention from link to link would be certainly easier in a hypothetical digital version of the whole. From the contemporary perspective, *The Arcades Project* is an ideal textual/visual set to function as an on-line hypertextual publication, which—it is to be hoped—will happen someday.

In *Spontaneous Particulars*, through archival research, Susan Howe investigates the American microhistories as they appear in writings of Emily Dickinson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Jonathan Edwards, and Noah Webster, and reproductions of material culture: scraps of envelopes, manuscripts, even lace and fragments of fabric belonging to female members of the eighteenth-century Edwards family. The research, or the published outcome of it, becomes a work of mourning, displaying the poet's gnostic urge and serendipitous relation to archival research as a form of trance-like summoning of the dead that exist as textual spirits. If, in *In the American Grain* William Carlos Williams reframed early American history through liberal quotations or paraphrases from source texts to discover the desired unmediated truth about the founders and the makers of America, Howe, by contrast, dedicates lots of her effort to the physical surface of texts. In reviewing the Edwards family papers, for example, she scrutinizes the fabric upon which family members wrote. Thus, the fabrication of the homemade and hand-stitched writing surface itself comes to be seen as an essential aspect of the overall creative composition. Interestingly, Howe prefers on-site rather than digitalized archives. Observing the gradual, and inevitable, transformation of archives from brick and mortar sites to online digital formats, she laments the loss of the "need to see and touch objects and documents" (9) as part of a synesthetic experience that foregrounds the embodiment of history in our examination of its textual remains. Accordingly, she classifies her book as "a collaged swan song to the old ways" (9). The paradox of this confession is that whatever the original intention, for the reader the postulated experience must remain at most vicarious. What you get is only reproduction.

Howe advocates for study in "traditional" repositories because, as it seems, she is less interested in interpreting a document's semantic content, and more affected by gaps, blank spaces, marginalia, showing, for instance, how Emily Dickinson utilized second hand surfaces—a torn envelope—to sketch her goodbye note. Examining the quality and composition of the page—often in case of the Edwards family, writing surfaces were from repurposed cloth—is an important part of Howe's telepathic reunion, her compositional strategy requiring actively engaged readers to, as it were, co-create meaning by collating and then interpreting intertextual resonances and echoes between the disparate pieces of text that are put in relation to each other. The spatial-oriented poetics, privileging associational logic, and the recognition that textuality precludes closure, is voiced, second hand, by Henry James's comments from the "Preface" to the 1907 edition of his novels:

> Where, for the complete expression of one's subject does a particular relation stop—giving way to some other not concerned in that expression? Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so. (22)

James, still quoted by Howe, goes on with his elaboration on a text's unstoppable momentum with an allegorical anecdote about a "young embroiderer of the canvas of life" who works in horror of "the vast expanse of that surface, of the boundless number of its distinct perforations for the needle" and with "a thousand lures and deceits," that accompany the process (22). In her materialist approach and feminist manner, Howe completes this Jamesian excerpt with a photographed sliver of an anonymously made fabric called "PRICKED PATTERN," and in a characteristically paronomastic manner, running over affinities and relations, groups three headwords from the 1844 edition of Noah Webster's dictionary (allegedly, one in possession of Emily Dickinson):

> STITCH
> STICH (a line of poetry)
> and STICHOMANCY (divination of lines or passages taken at hazard)

The three words thus become alliterative coordinates that integrate the way in which the fabric of *Spontaneous Particulars* unfolds. As Howe notes (19), there is a direct link between the English word "text" and the Medieval Latin term *textus* ("style or texture of a work"). Significantly, the latter, deriving from the past participle stem *textere* ("to weave, to join, fit together, construct"), brings to our mind a "thing woven." This is an etymological connection, but in the context of the whole volume also an important interpretive clue for the reader. Accordingly, Howe's poetic strategy comes down to thinking and writing in sti(t)ches. Her poetry—if we agree, as I propose here, to treat this whole book (including the quotes, reproductions of manuscripts and other visual material) as a poem by other means—works, at various levels, through a questioning of sequence, its multidirectional logic of collage replacing that of narrative. It is a form of writing that is dense with secondary associations—often of paramount importance—and finely tuned to the intriguing dependence of sound and sense on the basic unit of the letter. That being said, the adjective "spontaneous" from the title of the volume is a trap, as the montage gives the impression of being well thought out and carefully crafted.

The appropriation of other voices is obviously never an innocent act, but in the case of Howe, it often assumes the form of a radical semantic "mutilation," for which she, admittedly, takes responsibility ("I plagiarize"), but which nevertheless carries with itself a certain dose of irony, if considered with due seriousness. In the act of reading a text (or, for that matter, in the act of scrutinizing a manuscript scrap

for its physical peculiarities, examining calligraphic doodles or scribbles or pieces of texture), each fragment she comes across is first isolated, reconsidered, and sometimes given a new meaning, which is a direct result of the very isolation itself as well of the act of re-grafting the fragment onto a new context. The process may be best illustrated by Howe's use of the lines and archive reproductions from William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, Part III "Library." This is (almost) the opening of the whole volume—setting the tone and presenting the reader with the exact nature of the patchwork discourse that is to be expected on pages to come. Four reproductions of Williams' yellowish typed manuscript with pencil and ink corrections are interspersed with selected quotations typed by Howe against blank background of her *own* page. Thus, the discourse shuttles between two orders of the same text, or between two temporal phases of its existence—as one being worked on (the draft) and one completed (the final version). Howe's choice of lines labors toward the creation, or re-creation, of the feeling of spiritual (if not quasi-religious) happiness and relief, which takes hold of one (Howe for sure) upon entering the library:

> A cool of books
> will sometimes lead the mind to libraries
> of a hot afternoon, if books can be found
> cool to the sense to lead the mind away. (11)
> ……

> For there is a wind or ghost of a wind
> in all books echoing the life
> there, a high wind that fills the tubes
> of the ear until we think we hear a wind,
> actual
> to lead the mind away. (13)
> ……

> Searching among books: the mind elsewhere
> looking down .
> Seeking. (15)

If we read the whole original Book III of *Paterson*, we recall immediately that in contrast to Howe's elation at poring over old papers, manuscripts, and other material scraps of the past, which finds its manifestation not only in the way she writes (and talks) about them, but in the very meticulousness and exactness of the collage prepared for print, Paterson's visit to the local library is a spiritual and emotional upset—his initial remarks, such as "[t]he Library is desolation, it has a smell of its own/ of stagnation and death" (101) and "[t]he place sweats of staleness and of rot... / a library stench" (103), soon turning into a most radical resolution, "I cannot stay here to spend my life looking into the past" (145). Numerous, repeated attempts at "loaning blood / to the past" (101) lead to nothing but disillusionment and resignation: "[t]he writing is nothing" (113).

Like Howe, Paterson sees the potential hidden in the library collections (and, let us assume, those of the archive), understood as sets of amassed documents that under certain conditions—i.e. when chosen, whether at random or not, and juxtaposed—may enter into a dialogue with each other, yielding a new discursive and semantic quality:

> Texts mount and complicate them-
> selves, lead to further texts and those
> to synopses, digests and emendations. So be it.
> Until the words break loose or—sadly
> hold unshaken. Unshaken! So be it. (130)

However, for him, there is a point (the point of no return, as Kafka would have it) when such re-bricking of words and texts, and associative games become indefensible, walling up the furthest reach of what finally must turn out to be a literary *cul-de-sac*. Unlike Howe, Paterson is not an archival or library mystic, who revels (believes) in acts of serendipity. And, therefore, as the following (somewhat pompous) exhortation has it, any single word is to be handled responsibly, in a controlled way:

> A chance word, upon paper, may destroy the world. Watch carefully and erase, while the power is still yours, I say to myself, for all that is put down, once it escapes, may rot its way into a thousand minds, the corn become a black smut, and all libraries, of necessity, be burned to the ground as consequence. (129)

In contrast, Howe will certainly not miss the benefit of serendipity; and a chance encounter with an archival item, even a single word, is for her yet another step on a long way in search for never-ending and still-surprising connections. And this is done so as to build up a discourse out of other voices and weave a poetic fabric of appropriated sti(t)ches.

Of Yale's Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Howe notices that even if the collections kept there retain traces of "acquisitive violence," they also generate "a sense of peace" (46). And this conflict within the archives is structurally echoed by the tension that appears on almost every single page of her book—the chosen citations are themselves traces of some past violence, being torn, sometimes literarily, from their original contexts, and then redrafted onto new ones. Generally speaking, the strategy of echoing goes much deeper than that—Howe's visit to Beineke (and other notable repositories of volumes and manuscripts) soon finds its counterparts in Paterson's research in a local library and in Henry James' "sniffling the very dust... of the old" (58) in the Law Library at Harvard in 1905. Thus, real and imagined events are made to operate in a relation of strict correspondence. Or telepathy.

In *Spontaneous Particulars,* we are confronted with ways of sounding or re-considering the "end(s) of art" of poetry (which is also the title of one of Howe's

seminal early essays) in the multiple sense of the word, i.e. borderlines, limits, and goals. Incurably immersed in and obsessed by history, Howe's selection of archival material is presented to the reader on pages that are, in fact, visual fields: sometimes hardly quotable (although she *can* be a mesmerizing performer when reciting her own verse). And, indeed, her volume (and not only this one) somehow *rhymes* with Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, the grouping of those archival and documentary bits that re-present the ethos of the Second Empire from the perspective of a soon-to-be-Nazi-occupied Paris of the 1930s. In fact, it is Benjamin that outlines the task of historian (be it social, political or literary) in terms that, in all probability, would be embraced by Howe herself:

> The events surrounding the historian, and in which he himself takes part, will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink. The history which he lays before the reader comprises, as it were, the citations occurring in this text, and it is only these citations that occur in a manner legible to all. To write history thus means to *cite* history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context. (476)

Still, it would be rather risky, if not entirely far-fetched, to draw an exact and unmistakably unequivocal link of influence between the way of thinking about historical (poetic) discourse represented by the German thinker and the American poet. The affinity between these two that Perloff and, earlier, Montgomery note in their critical studies is not inspirational but, as it seems, accidental. Due to editorial problems and hesitancies, the original bilingual (German and French) manuscript of Benjamin's project remained unpublished until 1982. The English (monolingual) rendition by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin came out in 2002, when Howe was already an author of established reputation and widely recognizable poetic idiom. The more probable source of direct influence (one of many) comes from the works of Charles Reznikoff, who famously reconstructed the criminal history of the United States at the turn the nineteenth century. Reznikoff, a lawyer, historian, and a poet styled legal documents so as to allow the events themselves to "speak" directly to the reader. His alterations to such documentary hypotexts are not always unbiased in manner, and this can be seen when the end-products (Reznikoff's "poems") and the original, inspirational documents are compared. By inviting other voices into his own literary discourse, he became part of a certain modernist tradition of collage epic poetry, which includes Pound with his *Cantos* or William Carlos Williams with his *In the American Grain*. The formal bizarreness of the volumes thus created—notably *Testimony: The United States 1885-1915, Recitative* and *Holocaust*—makes their generic classification most problematic: they crossbreed poetry and prose, literature and document, the objective account and the subjective compilation thereof. The original testimonies are carefully selected, edited, and arranged into thematically homogenous sections, but the voices, often anonymous, are not Reznikoff's (he,

allegedly, did not contribute to the content). Still, his name, is printed as the author.

But—we may argue—the author who mainly quotes, deliberately disappears. Susan Howe's preoccupation with texts of others and her highlight on the fiction of self-authorship are both radical (certainly much more radical than Benjamin's and Reznikoff's) and, if I may say so, autoimmune as in her "poetry by other means" there can be observed a tendency to self-erasure—the attitude perhaps springing from the same source as Samuel Beckett's ironic remark that "every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness" (210), implied and applied consistently as a directive in his late short pieces for theatre or TV: *Breath*, *Nacht und Traume*, and *Quad*.[5] Starting her career as a painter (she holds a degree from the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts), Howe has, in fact, never ceased being one, probing visual possibilities of language, and remaining a utopian for whom "the most beautiful thing of all is a page before the word interrupts it" and for whom poetry represented as painting "would be blank. It would be a white canvas. White" (in an interview with Lynn Keller). Yet, at the end of the day, the poet who is so captivated by silence and absence, and who prefers the citational and appropriative strategy, offers us publications that are products of her own idiosyncratic choice. Unoriginal as this may appear, this does do not prevent her from being creative in the best sense of the word.

Howe's life-long archive project plays with the intersections between prose and poetry in the domain of the appropriated, verging on divinatory "practices" and "rituals" based on chance, which are not very far from the ideas propounded by Burroughs in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, she reaches back to an ancient tradition of inspired texts—i.e. such that have been existing in the form of mere potentialities, as if waiting to be received, discovered and recorded by a contemporary shaman-poet-archivist. As is in the case with Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, and with many ostensibly experimental writers, one is always tempted to structure and order the material Howe has collected, but, in the end, the books such as *Spontaneous Particulars* turn out resistant to such endeavors, even to the point of frustrating the reader. And this is the moment when we realize that the umbrella terms "poetry," "essay," "art book," or "lecture" all simultaneously apply as labels and are forcefully defied as no longer precisely relevant. Plus, inevitably, the analogical fuzziness begins (more and more) to cloud the notions that have been commonly federated with "poetry," such as tradition and avant-garde, or convention and innovation. Which, in turn, hints at a much larger issue at hand: namely, that the definition of "poetry" is increasingly expanding before our eyes, welcoming as it does *copy/paste* acts as its constitutional components. On even more abstract scale, however, the compositional method of *Spontaneous Particulars* exemplifies the twist that so-called creative writing has taken over the period of one hundred years—now, with the rise of the Internet, we have all

5 Interestingly, in a 1966 interview by Conrad Knickerbocker, William S. Burroughs similarly asserts that silence is "the most desirable state" (*The Third Mind* 2).

become, as Perloff observes, "copyists, recyclers, transcribers, collators, and refiners" (49). So, when Howe asserts that her volume is "a collaged swan song to the *old ways*" (9, emphasis added), we do not necessarily go along with it.

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