

Talisman Interview, with Edward Foster

EF: I gather from what you said earlier that you are very concerned with the idea of a distinctive American voice.

SH: I don't know why I'm so concerned about it. I don't know why I have this obsession. I think it began with my close reading of Emily Dickinson's writing. It's where thinking about her poetry and her letters led me. Her writing is infinitely open. It's like Shakespeare—a miracle. To this day I can be utterly surprised by something new I find in it, or I can be comforted by familiar beauties there. The same way passages in the Bible soothe and comfort, or some music does. Her poems and her middle and later letters encompass whatever I want to bring to them. Need to bring to them. I often worry that I may be imposing my particular obsessions on her. Then Melville means nearly as much to me. Although I don't think of him as a comforter. These two writers couldn't possibly be English. Why? This is a question that I feel obliged to try to answer.

So when you say place doesn't matter, I think it does.

EF: And so, in a way, do I. What I was talking about earlier was Jack Spicer's idea that poetry in a sense preceded language and preceded voice, that it came, as he said, from East Mars and the poet was in that sense a transmitter of the poem and, of course, would have his or her unique vocabulary through which the poem would emerge. But I think that essentially he was suggesting at times that you read through the language to locate the poem. I seem to sense that what you are saying here is that the poem in some way is the voice and that it is distinctive.

Talisman magazine, no. 4 (Spring 1990). Editor: Edward Foster; Associate editors: Joseph Donahue, Zoë English, Elaine D. Foster, Theodore Kharpertian, Joel Lewis. This interview was conducted in July 1989 and edited that autumn.

X SH: Well, I do believe that Spicer radio-dictation thing, as I read it in Robin Blaser's essay on Spicer—that poetry comes from East Mars. But the outside is also a space-time phenomenon. I think the outside, or East Mars, partly consists of other people's struggles and their voices. Sounds and spirits (ghosts if you like) leave traces in a geography. It's Lawrence's sense of the spirit of the place—"Never trust the artist. Trust the tale." The tale and the place are tied in a mysterious and profound way. How did English Lawrence understand America so well? He did. So did H. D., though she left in her twenties and hardly ever returned. *The Gift* is alive with the atmosphere of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Space and time—America and England. Even Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Stevens says somewhere that you turn with a sort of ferocity to a place you love, to which you are essentially native. The more you try to catch at the particulars in a writer, the more particulars you think you have found, the farther you get from where you thought you were supposed to be going. I am finally learning to let myself drift. But there are different rivers and currents to drift on. Rafts or writers are made from different materials. The difference between say Melville and Dickinson would be (apart from gender) that Melville is from one side of the Connecticut River, and she is from the other side. There is an amazing difference between the history of upper New York State and the history of Massachusetts. Trust the place to form the voice.

EF: Using Spicer as an example again, there's that first book, *After Lorca*, in which he takes a poem outside his language and recasts it in his own vocabulary, suggesting perhaps that the poem is somehow midway between two versions. The poem is neither Lorca's Spanish nor Spicer's California English.

SH: You're right. I wish I knew Spanish, but I don't. Being half Irish, I am sensitive to variations in the English language. Now, you would say that Spicer is where the Spanish voice of Lorca becomes the California voice of Jack Spicer. As well as translation or transmission, there is a mystery of change and assimilation in time. I always have to look back into the past for some reason. Where and how the English seventeenth-century voice becomes the seventeenth-century, the nineteenth-century and even the twentieth-century American voice.

EF: Isn't that what *My Emily Dickinson* is getting at?

SH: I didn't know that's what I was interested in until I began writing the book. First I was all caught up in her use of Dickens and Browning, then her use of Shakespeare. I really was concerned to show that she didn't write in a rapturous frenzy, that she read to write. So there is an irony here. Because although on one level I firmly believe that messages come from Mars—in Spicer's sense—on another level I don't believe it. Here I was thinking about Dickinson and English writers of her time, and I more or less happened on Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative. And it was just a mind-boggling thing, I so nearly missed it. Anyway, I had to begin again. So I wrote the book in two distinct stages. Gradually, the book became a feeling toward this thing I'm talking about. Rilke writes, in one of the *Duino Elegies*, "Strange to see meanings that clung together once, floating away / in every direction—." This is always the way with Dickinson. She is always somewhere else. She is in many ways—and it has often been said—a seventeenth-century poet. And then again, she is so far ahead of us in 1989 that editing her seems to be a nearly impossible task. And maybe the poems must really be experienced as handwritten productions—the later ones as drawings. She abolishes categories. You just showed me Spicer's review of the Johnson edition, and Spicer saw quite clearly, in the late 1950s, the textual problems her letter-poems and poem-letters raise. You don't find this issue mentioned in the endless books now being churned out on Dickinson. All of them, including my own, to my shame, use the Johnson edition. It takes a poet to see how urgent this subject of line breaks is. But then how often do critics consider poetry as a physical act? Do critics look at the print on the page, at the shapes of words, at the surface—the space of the paper itself? Very rarely. In spite of Spicer's statement about East Mars, he knows that the messages must be written down. Messages must be seen to be heard to say.

EF: Your poems often involve some specific historical context. Were you ever interested just in history as such?

SH: I always have been. It was my favorite subject in school. When I was young, I devoured historical novels. My mother was of the generation that avidly read Sir Walter Scott. So I took her lead and plowed through several of those. My father read James Fenimore Cooper novels to us. And the now completely forgotten Captain Marryat. *Children of the New Forest* and *Masterman Ready* enthralled me. I am sure they are horribly colo-

nialist, but when I was ten I wasn't in a position to know that. So my parents shared that enthusiasm for history, and I got it from them. I had my Napoleon phase and my Queen Elizabeth phase and for a time was very concerned to prove that Richard III was a good king after all. I will never forget my joy on first reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*. I was so lost in the story I never wanted to come back out. So history and fiction have always been united in my mind. It would be hard to think of poetry apart from history.

This is one reason Olson has been so important to me. *Call Me Ishmael* enthralled me when I first read it. If he had written nothing else, he would be dear to me for that. I think that's also true of Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* and, of course, Williams's *In the American Grain*. Another short work about writing and place and force is Simone Weil's essay "The Iliad, Poem of Might." Maybe it's the same thing here as what we are talking about with Spicer and *After Lorca*. It seems to me that as writers they were trying to understand the writers or people (in Williams's case writers and others), not to explain the work, not to translate it, but to meet the work with writing—you know, to meet in time, not just from place to place but from writer to writer, mind to mind, friend to friend, from words to words. That's what I wanted to do in *My Emily Dickinson*. I wanted to do that. Not just to write a tribute but to meet her in the tribute. And that's a kind of fusion. That is what is so dear to me about Olson's book. It's a book of love even if it does rightly discuss cannibalism.

EF: So these moments of fusion are historical. But does history ever exist outside some intellectual fusion or agreement?

SH: I think so. Of course, I know that history can be falsified, has been falsified. Still, there are archives and new ways of interpreting their uncompromising details. I am naive enough to hope the truth will out. 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.

EF: Then you do feel history is an actuality?

SH: Yes.

EF: Against which the writer is working?

SH: In and against.

EF: Do you have any background in Marxist theory?

SH: No.

EF: Your sister described the Cambridge world in which you and she grew up as leftist [Fanny Howe, "Artobiography," in *Writing/Talks*, edited by Bob Perelman], and I was wondering if that . . .

SH: Well, I guess I wouldn't describe it quite that way. Yes, it was leftist in the sense that Democrats were considered to be leftists during the fifties. The shadow of the McCarthy hysteria was heavy over Cambridge then. And my father, unlike some others, was outspoken and very courageous. But he was a solid Truman Democrat. He worshipped the American Constitution. It really was his faith. Constitutional law and legal history were the subjects he taught. He was far from being a Marxist. My mother is more theatrical, but they basically agreed politically with each other, and their friends were probably about the same: saddened by what was happening but really pretty safe at the same time, simply because they were at a place like Harvard. Harvard, and I suppose most Ivy League universities, were more sheltered. Why this was so would be an interesting line to pursue.

Harvard was very privileged during the forties and fifties, so male. The Matthiessen book [F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*]: an intellectual and poetic Renaissance minus Emily Dickinson. Minus Harriet Beecher Stowe. Minus Margaret Fuller. Of course, minus Frederick Douglass as well. Women weren't the only ones subtracted. It's these kinds of contradictions that get me. I know Marxist-influenced scholarship, really exciting work now being done in American Studies, has made me more conscious of such contradictions. I mean it's important to try to get under the official history of Harvard. What does *that* place represent? I can't quite so simply say I grew up in a false community—a community that fancied itself as liberal. I don't want to be so hard on it because these were honorable scholars, careful researchers, and this was their profession, and they felt it was a calling. But you see, it *was* false if you were a girl or a woman who was not content to be considered second-rate.

EF: Did you know Matthiessen and Perry Miller?

SH: My parents knew them well, although I can't remember what Matthiessen looked like—I think I was about twelve when he killed himself. My mother says he got her the job directing plays at Radcliffe and Harvard. He called her the day before he died, and they talked about the theater. Then I think a note was delivered to Kenneth Murdock, and he tried to stop him, but it was too late. We were at breakfast, and the paper was flung down on the doorstep with the headlines—and their horror. They loved him. But I didn't know why. I never knew why he had killed himself. No one ever said. That was hidden. It was swept under the rug. My mother says he had had a breakdown earlier. I think there is now a biography, but I haven't read it. I am told it's a revisionist view. We never passed that dingy hotel in Boston, where he jumped out the window, without it being pointed out. It was near the Cape Cod Expressway. I suppose it's been pulled down now. I thought of his suicide as an irrational act from out of nowhere for no reason—it was doubly frightening that way. Recently I was looking over his book on T. S. Eliot, and it is so ordered, so gentlemanly, so polite and well-meant. At the same time it misses the passion in Eliot, and the doubt. What a sad thing. I think American Studies was a relatively new academic subject then, and he contributed so much to it, even if his contribution now seems dated. The doubt he left out of his studies could not so easily be repressed. Perhaps a great sadness engulfed him.

As to Perry Miller, he was one of my parents' best friends and was always around. But how did I know him? Only as a lecherous character who drank too much. He is supposed to have been an inspiring teacher. To us daughters of professors, he was the object of great scorn because we knew that if he was at one of our houses, he would quickly get red-faced and then his hands would start wandering. His wife, Betty, who I believe did half of his research for him, was silent and shadowy. What she must have endured. But she was devoted to him. They had no children. Another thing about Perry Miller—he always wore white socks and black shoes. And the skin on his ankles, always visible above the socks, was like polished porcelain. We were all struck by it. Even my parents.

EF: Good heavens! My idol!

SH: He should be your idol. So idols have feet of clay—in this case porcelain. I can't tell you how surprised I was to find, when I was working on

Dickinson, that this man, who in real life had seemed harsh and coarse, was completely different in his written work. He was and is indispensable for any real understanding of the early history of New England, of the intellectual and religious history of America. With one major exception. While Matthiessen leaves out women, Miller leaves out Native Americans. How could he have written so many books and essays, one of them called *Errand into the Wilderness* and have left out the inhabitants? Yet after faulting him for that I come back and back to his work. I am trying to indicate how conflicted the whole thing is in my mind. These democratic ("leftist" if you like) professors of English, law, and history were politically idealistic at the same time they were elitist and sexist. One of my vivid memories of that time is when Harvard hired their first woman professor of history, and she was only hired from Oxford or Cambridge on a temporary basis, the big joke among this group of friends was how they would keep toasting her at a ceremonial dinner so she would get drunker and drunker. I don't know if they ever did or only imagined they would or what. But what I do remember is that she was presented not as a fellow scholar but as a plain prim old maid who might be made a fool of. That was it. So I mean the hypocrisy here. . . . And then even so, I have come back, and these memories almost fall away but not quite. Not quite.

My father also was fascinated by the Puritans. He wrote a book about American law called *The Garden and the Wilderness*. Now, most books about the period and place must hesitate over the word *wilderness*. Because it wasn't a wilderness to Native Americans. Still it's a resonant typological word. A necessary emblem. I remember him in his study late in the evening with his light-shade on because his eyes must have been tired from so much reading for the Holmes book and students' papers, etc., but he would be bent over some old Mather or Sewell diary for relaxation! [Mark DeWolfe Howe, *Oliver Wendell Holmes*.] They said of Increase Mather that he loved his study to a kind of excess. In the 1950s, there was my father, who felt the same way, and all I could think of was acting and boys and whatever else I thought of then. And now I have taken this long journey back through Puritan history, although I entered another way. I find myself reading about the Mathers for relaxation, and I love my study to a kind of excess. I would dearly love to sit down and show my father what I know now. We would talk about the garden and the wilderness together, and all would be well. All manner of things would be well. Yet this place I want to come home to was false to women in an intellectual sense. It was false.

EF: I had sensed that Matthiessen and Miller would be somehow there, given the nature of your work, but I hadn't realized that it was that close a professional connection—as close as that with your parents. In any case, all that immediately leads me back to Olson and *Call Me Ishmael*, which seems quite explicitly to reject Miller's kind of thought, his version of literature.

SH: *Call Me Ishmael* was written back in 1947. I would have been ten; Fanny, seven. The times I am speaking of and I think she was referring to were in the early fifties. But I think it would have been impossible to write that book had he remained in academia or more specifically in Cambridge. Olson was close to some of the people there and admired them, but to do what he did, he would have had to get away. George Butterick told me he remained close to Ellery Sedgwick, who was the very image of Boston civility.

EF: Do you have any feelings about Sedgwick's book on Melville [William Ellery Sedgwick, *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind*]?

SH: I don't think it's very thrilling.

EF: I don't either.

SH: Henry Murray was an interesting Cambridge character. Olson seems to have been fond of him. In his blistering "Letter for Melville 1951," Harry Murray and Jay Leyda are mentioned favorably. I only recently ran down Murray's long essay on *Pierre*. I think he edited the Grove Press edition. He was a psychoanalyst with very odd theories. Anyway, the essay on *Pierre* has a lot of valuable information; at the same time it seems a little stale. I think the most exciting book on Melville recently is *Subversive Genealogies* [by Michael Paul Rogin]. Rogin's cross-disciplinary approach to the writing and the life cuts through that blank wall scholarship so often puts up. Families have their false fronts as universities and governments do. The Melville and Gansevoort families had theirs. Melville, like Hamlet, saw the ghost under the helmet. How do you act when you know what you know? As Olson puts it in the "Letter," "this beast hauled up out of great water was society" ["Letter for Melville 1951"]. The Leviathan. Moby. Rogin beautifully shows how Melville works in and around, for and against what he sees and says. *Subversive Genealogies: The Politics and Art of Herman*

Melville is the complete title of Rogin's book. Home, politics, and art are together here as they should be. You cannot separate an author from family, history, and ideology.

EF: I suppose a question some people might ask, then, is how you deal with a world before history, before Herodotus? With the Hittites, say? People who had a sense of chronology but for whom history as we understand it did not exist.

SH: Well, they are here too. I mean the mystery is time. The undying Hittites and Babylonians may be waiting in another chronology completely. Who knows? This summer I saw a television documentary about the astronauts who went to the moon and what they are doing now, etc. Most are high-powered salesmen. What twentieth-century America does to explorers! Only one has been freakish in the best sense, and he has been searching for Noah's ark on the top of some mountain in Tibet. But all of them in their reminiscences about their trips to the moon, twenty years ago now, all of them seem to have had an overwhelming impression of the beauty of our planet. They all said that as you got out of earth's atmosphere it was just vast darkness everywhere, vast space, pitch dark, no sound; and then far back you could see this thin clear blue, azure blue, that is the atmosphere, and then you saw our tiny little world under that thin blue veil and that is it. That's all.

EF: So the things we know aren't simply things we made up.

SH: Well, whatever they are, they're a kind of order. They're a kind of beauty, they're blue, they're light. Words are candles lighting the dark. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God." I think that there has to be *some* order if only order in disorder. And words and sounds are . . . they reach up out there. A little flicker in silence . . . a signal. So that would be what for Spicer . . . but what do I know? What do any of us know?

EF: I suppose at times it seems as if history is little more than a series of justifications. And no, of course, that's not it, obviously. But if you aren't content with the surface of time, poetry is the more reliable.

SH: Poets aren't reliable. But poetry may be. I don't think you can divorce poetry from history and culture. The photographs of children during

the war in Europe, when I was a small child and the Holocaust was in progress—not only the Holocaust but the deaths of millions of people in Europe and Asia—prevented me from ever being able to believe history is only a series of justifications or that tragedy and savagery can be theorized away. I've recently been editing the question-from-the-audience section of a book [*The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Form*] that consists of lectures some of us gave for a course Charles Bernstein gave at the New School last year. Someone in the audience said, "Is anything real? I personally don't know if anything is real." In the text, in a printed bracket, there is the word *laughter*. During the real event, the audience must have laughed, and I was too preoccupied at the time to notice. When I saw *laughter* in brackets, it made me angry. There is real suffering on this little planet. I mean we can discuss whether the Hittites believed in chronology and history before Herodotus, and in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, this month, a young African-American man was murdered by a gang of Italian-American teenagers. Where did the poison of racial hatred in America begin? Will it ever end? Why are we such a violent nation? Why do we have such contempt for powerlessness? I feel compelled in my work to go back, not to the Hittites but to the invasion or settling, or whatever current practice calls it, of *this* place. I am trying to understand what went wrong when the first Europeans stepped on shore here. They came here for some reason, something pushed them. What pushed them? Isn't it bitterly ironic that many of them were fleeing the devastation caused by enclosure laws in Britain, and the first thing they did here was to put up fences? Racism is by no means unique to America. There are things that must never be forgotten. It's not a laughing matter.

EF: Well, how then are poems related to history?

SH: I think the poet opens herself as Spicer says. You open yourself and let language enter, let it lead you somewhere. I never start with an intention for the subject of a poem. I sit quietly at my desk and let various things—memories, fragments, bits, pieces, scraps, sounds—let them all work into something. This has to do with changing order and abolishing categories. It has to do with sounds in silence. It has to do with peace.

EF: And the new order that results, it's historical?

SH: I don't understand you.

EF: Is it different from historical order or is . . .

SH: You mean is poetry an order that is distinct from historical order?

EF: Is it a different way of knowing things?

SH: Yes. It depends on chance, on randomness. So there is a difference. But history and even order is still there. I think it's the valid way, but again I could be wrong. I only really know poetry, but here I am.

EF: Some of your books begin with a prose statement, and the poems follow, and it seems that you move from the prose to fragments and bits and pieces of a text, another text.

SH: Actually, I don't. I begin with fragments and bits and pieces, and they take me to what I find, and then I write an introduction to anchor the poem. The beginning is usually the end.

EF: But in the book it occurs first.

SH: Only *The Liberties* and just recently *Eikon* have introductions that are part of the poem. I wrote introductions for *Articulation* and *Thorow*, but the poems are separate from them. It's an interesting problem though and not unlike writing an essay about a poem or an author: how to make the introduction answer the poem and not merely explain it as a footnote would do. Are they introductions or are they not? ☆

You haven't seen *Eikon* yet [*The Bibliography of the King's Book; or, Eikon Basilike*]. There is a section in *Temblor* and *The Difficulties*, but in this poem you need to see the whole thing to get the effect. I felt when I finished the poem that it was so unclear, so random, that I was crossing into visual art in some sections and that I had unleashed a picture of violence I needed to explain to myself. The end breaks out of all form completely. You could read the last page several ways.

The Liberties is another thing. I never started by thinking I was going back to write about Stella and Swift. I was in Dublin, and my mother was very sick in the Protestant hospital in the old section of the city. There are still separate hospitals there. After I would visit her, I used to walk around the streets, and St. Patrick's Cathedral was just near. That part of the city is called The Liberties. It also is built on top of Viking ruins, and

at the time there was a good deal in the press about how to save the ruins from being built over by developers. So you had the sense of life being covered up. And in the cathedral, Stella is buried under the floor near the entrance, or that's where her grave marker is. You walk over it as if there were a dog buried there. Swift's pet dog. At the same time, considering that Swift was the dean of the cathedral, it seems a flagrant gesture. A swipe at respectability. The "imitate me if you dare" aspect to Swift's character Yeats wrote that epitaph for. The subject of Swift, Stella, and Vanessa was mythic for my mother and many other Irish writers. I grew up on it. It was another Grimm's fairy tale. But real. So when I began writing this time, I was really trying to paint that part of the landscape of Dublin in words. I was trying to get the place, a foreign place that was home to my mother, on paper. I thought I could understand my mother that way—I might go back to my grandmother, who I am named after and who I loved though I never saw her that often, separated as we were by first war and always the ocean. It was interesting to find that Swift was constantly wrenched between England and Ireland when he was a small child. It helps to explain the fracturing of language in his writing. And many other things. It makes him more likable.

So I start in a place with fragments, lines and marks, stops and gaps, and then I have more ordered sections, and then things break up again. That's how I begin most of my books. I think it's what we were talking about in history as well, that the outsideness—these sounds, these pieces of words—comes into the chaos of life, and then you try to order them and to explain something, and the explanation breaks free of itself. I think a lot of my work is about breaking free: starting free and being captured and breaking free again and being captured again.

EF: The texts that you use seem . . .

SH: It just seems that I end up with this place that I wish I could belong to and wish I could describe. But I am outside looking in.

EF: So it begins in fragments and ends in prose, and prose is a kind of convention with an expected syntax and order and shape.

SH: I hope that my prose hasn't got an expected syntax. You are making it sound more planned than it is. The content is the process, and so it changes.

EF: Did you start by reading about Hope Atherton with the intention of writing the poems in *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*?

SH: I had already written some of the poems. It was during the time I was finishing the Dickinson book and I was so interested in captivity narratives. I wrote an essay on Mary Rowlandson, and, as I said, I found her through Dickinson. I think Rowlandson is the mother of us all. American writers, I mean. Already in 1681, the first narrative written by a white Anglo-American woman is alive with rage and contradiction. She is a prophet. She speaks for us now, in the same way that slave narratives do. She says our sin. I think she has been an unacknowledged undervoice in Thoreau, Melville, Dickinson, Hawthorne, though I can't prove it. I became totally obsessed with her, and that piece I wrote was so urgent; it is hard to explain the urgency I felt ["The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson," *Temblor* 2]. I was worried that I hadn't been writing poetry, and I was up in the stacks at Sterling Library searching for information on various Native American raids near Deerfield and Hadley during the French and Indian Wars. Sterling houses books that aren't used often, so it has an aura of death. These books have lost their interest. Only a few professors or library workers or the odd student on the track of something eccentric come up to the sixth floor, where American history books are. It's usually very, very quiet up there. The lights are off. In silence and semidarkness, it's mysterious. I was turning the pages of a history of Hadley, and Hope's name just caught me. It was the emblematic name. Here was this person. A man with a woman's name. He had this borderline, half-wilderness, half-Indian, insanity-sanity experience. He was a minister accompanying an army. The enemy thought he might have been God. Was he telling the truth? Had he been hiding or marching? I went home and quickly wrote the abstract pieces at the beginning. Usually I work very, very slowly, but this time the sections came fast. So then there was that section and Hope's name, and the whole thing took on a different form.

EF: Do you know Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence*?

SH: Oh yes. It's a crucial book for anyone interested in American literature. He's very good on Mary Rowlandson and wonderful on other early American frontier literature. Slotkin may have brought Native Americans and popular narratives into academic historical consciousness, as Perry

Miller did not, but basically (as with Miller) historical consciousness is still male. Anne Kibbey, Ann Douglas, Patricia Caldwell, Annette Kolodny, Amy Shrager Lang, Janice Knight, and other scholars are changing things, I hope. But I see this problem in American poetry, too, and I am beginning to realize that during my lifetime there will be no profound reordering of the situation.

When I read books about American poetry and even current discussions among poets, or at least among the poets whose work interests me, I generally read about men. Yes, Dickinson is in the canon. But she is treated as an isolated case, not as part of an ongoing influence. In poetry the line usually goes from Whitman through Stevens and Pound, on through Olson to Duncan to Creeley. Then there is the New York School—O'Hara and Ashbery, etc.,—then the Beats, Ginsberg, etc. The Objectivists narrowed down to Oppen, Reznikoff, Zukofsky. Niedecker is added to the Objectivists but always with the sense that without Zukofsky her writing would be inconceivable. Stein is brought into discussions on poetics but again as an isolated case, with influence, but somehow a break in the line. Marianne Moore, the same, an isolated phenomenon in her cocked hat at baseball stadiums. Oh, and of course, H.D. But with H.D. we must always hear of her romantic connection to Pound, Lawrence; even her friendship with W. C. Williams is presented not in terms of a shared poetics but in terms of a possible romance or rejection. And it's usually their influence on her, not her influence on them. So here, while I am trying to believe and think I do believe that genius transcends gender, sometimes I honestly wonder.

EF: There is Duncan with H.D., Ashbery with Stein.

SH: There are always exceptions. And H.D. scholarship has changed for the better due to women who are scholars and to some men as well. Robert Duncan certainly looks to H.D. as a master. But I haven't heard that much about Ashbery and Stein. I hear about Ashbery and Stevens, Ashbery and Emerson, Ashbery and O'Hara, seldom Ashbery and Stein. This is not Ashbery's fault. In fact, he is going to talk about Laura Riding in his lectures at Harvard this year. It's what critics do with him. What canonization does to everyone. Another exception is Charles Bernstein. He has always made it clear how important Stein is to his work and to his writing about writing. He is careful never to discuss what he might consider to be his history of American poetry without including Riding, Niedecker, Stein, Hejinian, Darragh, Ward, Drucker and others. But when articles are written about

Language Poetry or when fights between the various covens occur, it's usually men who do the writing and fighting.

EF: Why is that?

SH: We have been told all the reasons repeatedly now. Women have been taught for so long to be seen and not heard that you can't undo generations of conditioning in a matter of twenty years or so, etc. I wish I really knew. And the endless name dropping, the repetition of the same names over and over, is at some level anathema to what poetry taps or interprets anyway. Maybe there is in silence a far greater mystery. Maybe anger is a waste. First I wanted to fight, but now I think it's more important to just keep writing poems.

EF: There have been male poets who were obsessed with women poets. Poe, for example.

SH: What do you mean he was obsessed by women poets?

EF: When a contemporary woman poet interested him, which was often, he would do something, an official notice, a review. He would say something.

SH: And Poe is in the anthologies now, not these women. But of course, during the Victorian nineteenth century, a great deal of absolutely appalling poetry was written by women and was very popular. Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* has a lot about this problem. There is another seminal book in American Studies. I think Emily Dickinson's inability to get her work published during her lifetime had almost nothing to do with the fact that she was a woman and everything to do with her originality. And Whitman is simply in another league from Lydia Sigourney, Helen Hunt Jackson, or T. W. Higginson for that matter. It's no good for Women's Studies departments to pretend this isn't so. What will that solve?

EF: What are your feelings generally on feminist criticism?

SH: I am very conflicted. I am wary of separation. Women's Studies, African-American Studies, etc. It seems to me only a further way to isolate texts that should be known by everyone. But then it may be a temporary necessity. I am troubled by some feminist criticism because in its stridency

it is only another bias. And in a strange sense it's still a male bias. Instead of questioning the idea of power itself, many women want to assume power. "Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely." History certainly has shown us that. Luce Irigaray, in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, questions such issues in a truly revolutionary way. Then I think Alice Jardine's *Gynesis* should be read by every person who is interested in critical theory. And there are so many young women coming along now who take this kind of thinking as their ground, while for women of my generation there was no ground.

I think it's a pity that when it comes to work on Dickinson, almost no one is questioning the very basic problem of transcription. Editing of her poems and letters has been controlled by gentlemen of the old school and by Harvard University Press since the 1950s. Franklin's edition of *The Manuscript Books* and now *The Master Letters* should have radically changed all readings of her work [R. W. Franklin, ed. *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* and *The Master Letters*]. But they haven't. This is a feminist issue. It takes a woman to see clearly the condescending tone of these male editors when they talk about their work on the texts. But on this subject there is silence so far. And this is a revolutionary way for women to go in Dickinson criticism. Well, one of Dickinson's abilities is to escape everything. If you think you can explain a poem, she quickly shows you there is a way out of that interpretation. I think I have the best intentions when it comes to reading *The Manuscript Books*, but I often wake up in the night and think, No, I am wrong. She would not agree. She would be angry with me. It's something to do with her way of not publishing, of copying her work into packets she sewed together herself, with what she left out (numbers, titles), with what she left in (variant word listings, various marks). I think she may have chosen to enter the space of silence, a space where power is no longer an issue, gender is no longer an issue, voice is no longer an issue, where the idea of a printed book appears as a trap.

EF: Are there women whose work you feel should particularly be added to the canon?

SH: 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 may be. And besides, the more you go into something, the more you see that the canon is only the surface, only the ghost's hel-

met. Not the face underneath the helmet. So why have I been complaining? What is the answer? I wish I knew.

EF: Have you seen the recent American literature anthologies that try to reform the canon?

SH: Which ones?

EF: The conventional ones for college survey courses. There are many new women . . .

SH: What depresses and alarms me about the ones I've seen is that they eliminate the work of women who have used or are using language in an experimental way. This anthology business is not just a woman's problem. Not at all. There are plenty of men who are left out of the name-dropping network. It's a brutal thing, Erasure. It's a political issue that covers a wider range than gender. Nevertheless . . .

EF: Will poems ever be read as if they were not specifically written by women or specifically written by men?

SH: I don't know.

EF: It's possible?

SH: Anything is possible. I think the lyric poem is a most compressed and lovely thing. I guess it's the highest form. And in this form I hope that sexual differences are translated, transformed, and vanish.

EF: You say that in *My Emily Dickinson*, but I think a lot of people would argue the point.

SH: Oh yes, I know. They could be right.

EF: Some people seem to feel the lyric is always about gender.

SH: In what way? What do you mean?

EF: That a poem is always in some way a statement about the way it is to be a woman in the world or a man in the world. I have a feeling that a good many feminist critics . . .

SH: Well, I am not a critic. And that's where I disagree with a good many feminist critics. I think that when you write a poem you use sounds and words outside time. You use timeless articulations. I mean the ineluctable mystery of language is something . . . it's just . . . it's like earth from the astronauts' view—that little blue film, a line floating around space sheltering all of us. And in those terms, it really doesn't matter if you are a man or a woman. We are all both genders. There is nothing more boring than stridently male poetry and stridently female poetry.

EF: In the title of your Hope Atherton book you say, "sound forms in time." Can "sound forms" be otherwise? Can they be outside time?

SH: It's a mystery to me. The astronauts say in outer space it's perfectly quiet.

EF: Where does the title come from?

SH: I think it's a definition Schoenberg gives to music. I love his writing about music and Adorno's writing about him. But then I ran across the idea in a couple of other places. I can't remember where. I think there is a definition of language in the wonderful 1828 Webster's that is almost that. But I only found that last year. Poetry is a sort of music. And then I think that the first experience we probably have of the world, just as we enter, is sound. We are slapped and we cry. Before we know what meaning is. So to be born would be to hear sound you couldn't understand. And to die is to hear sound, then silence. So it's the articulation that represents life. And Hope has that sort of experience. And Hope is in me. In all of us. Once I was driving to Buffalo alone, moving up there for the winter to teach. It was me and my car and the mountains. I had a tape of *Articulation* from a reading I had done, and I thought I would turn it on as I was passing the place near where Hope had been wandering after the raid—and it was a wonderful feeling because the sounds seemed to be pieces still in the air there. I felt I was returning them home as I drove away from home. They don't belong to me. I didn't originate them. They go back.

EF: Is time just chronology?

SH: No, I wouldn't say so. I would say space-time. It's the thing that isn't chaos. Again, I've been trying to understand some of René Thom's writing [*Mathematical Models of Morphogenesis, Structural Stability and Morphogenesis*]. This isn't easy if you never were able to pass algebra! But he writes beautifully, and his diagrams are like poems. Algebraic formulas are also articulations of sound forms in time. Thom says mathematics is a universal language; numbers have sounds. So there are these forms in space and time and in apparent chaos—formulas, patterns—but at the end of *Mathematical Models*, he seems to be saying maybe it's all a game. All you can do is move the chips around pretending that there is some kind of order.

It was because of Thom that I named my Wesleyan book *Singularities*. I was having a terrible time trying to come up with a title for that group of works together (*Articulation, Thorow, and Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk*), and Thom came to Buffalo and gave a lecture called "Singularities." In algebra a singularity is the point where plus becomes minus. On a line, if you start at x point, there is $+1$, $+2$, etc. But at the other side of the point is -1 , -2 , etc. The singularity (I think Thom is saying) is the point where there is a sudden change to something completely else. It's a chaotic point. It's the point chaos enters cosmos, the instant articulation. Then there is a leap into something else. *Predation* and *capture* are terms he uses constantly. I thought this was both a metaphor for Europeans arriving on this continent, where a catastrophic change then had to happen—a new sense of things on the part of the original inhabitants and the emigrants, and to the land as well. And it seemed to be a way of describing these poems of mine. They are singular works on pages, and grouped together, they fracture language; they are charged. "Singularity" was a word dear to the Puritans for other reasons.

EF: Doesn't Gödel say that mathematics involves propositions that mathematical systems themselves can't prove?

SH: It's a dizzying thought. Catastrophe theory says that there is order in catastrophe. Here is a bit from *Mathematical Models*. All printed in italics!

In this chapter we shall consider a field of local dynamics defined as the gradient of a potential. The term elementary catastrophe is used to designate every

conflict situation between local regimes, minima of the potential which can occur in a stable manner in 4-dimensional space-time.

By an abuse of language, we shall sometimes use the name catastrophe for the morphology that makes it appear.

We distinguish two types of catastrophe: catastrophes of conflict and catastrophes of bifurcation.

Science! It's just the introduction to a chapter. Isn't that terrific? Emily Dickinson would have been enthralled.

EF: Your new book, or at least the parts I saw in *Temblor*, seems to be asking what an icon is [*The Bibliography of the King's Book; or, Eikon Basilike*].

SH: That poem for me is . . . When you see it together in a book, you'll see that it's a catastrophe of bifurcation. That's the perfect description. I had taught these captivity narratives at Buffalo. I thought I was going to write a book of essays in the manner of *In the American Grain*. This problem of an American voice was something I wanted to write about. I found myself with the Mathers, not the narratives. I worked on an essay called "Loss of First Love" about them. I was all caught up in it and thought it was wonderful. But it was weak. Weak because the ghosts of my father and Perry Miller just prevented me from having any confidence. To say nothing of the ghost of Increase Mather. George Butterick, who I was very close to, was very ill and in great pain with cancer. He had worked with such brilliance and devotion editing Olson's writing. His illness was very much on my mind. I really was shaken because he was so young. I came home with only the botch on the Mathers and a few other beginnings, and quite by chance, Mark gave me this book called *A Bibliography of the King's Book or, Eikon Basilike*. I was struck by the ironies implicit in the very idea of a bibliography, which is a search for origins on paper. Both George Butterick and my father worked themselves to the bone in the service of commanding and prolific figures. It was bibliographic scholarship. You must erase yourself to do such work. George's editing of Olson has to be one of the most generous gifts to poetry in my time. Priceless. I have learned, because my own writing is so concerned with gaps and spaces, words that run together, etc., that typesetters who pay any attention to such deviations from the norm are few and far between. This was the great thing about Lee Hickman's work on *Temblor*. Eric Gill said, "The mind is the arbiter of letter forms, not the tool or the material." It's easiest for

publishers and editors to let the machine rule the text. Even a poet like Stevens, who seems to use such regular form, has been normalized if you look at first editions of his poems. The first editor and typographers left in spaces that resonate with the letters, and by the time of the *Collected*, those spaces had been removed. The care and sensitivity George gave to editing Olson's *writing* was heroic—in the fine sense of heroic: unselfish and daring, uncompromising. Well, I won't forget it.

So I wanted to write something filled with gaps and words tossed, and words touching, words crowding each other, letters mixing and falling away from each other, commands and dreams, verticals and circles. If it was impossible to print, that didn't matter. Because it's about impossibility anyway. About the impossibility of putting in print what the mind really sees and the impossibility of finding the original in a bibliography. The coincidence of the name Charles (then I pulled Charles Dickens into it—) was one of those accidentals that make you feel the thing was planned in advance. But the Mather essay I couldn't write is there, too. I think that the execution of Charles was a primal sin in the eyes of the Puritans who killed him. They tried to bury their guilt. As in the wonderful Hawthorne story "Roger Malvin's Burial," the body would not stay buried. Regicide. I love that word. It's of the devil's party. Kings and crosses, blasphemy, and homicide are all packed into it. This was the killing of the king, and the king was holy. The Mathers were over here, so they didn't actually do the killing, but they were of the killing party. In Guilford there is a cellar where two of the regicides were hidden. Whalley Avenue in New Haven is named for a regicide. In America the regicides were heroes—in England, villains. In this English *Bibliography of the Eikon Basilike*, you have the printing record of a book that became a relic. It has such a mysterious name. And it's supposed to be by a king. It was used as propaganda for the royalist cause, yet the *Eikon* was read and cherished as a sort of sacred relic by the common people. And Milton, who is supposed to be part of the rising of the people, wrote *Eikonoklastes* in an attempt to destroy its credibility. Somehow, all my thinking about the misediting of Dickinson's texts, George's careful editing of Charles Olson's poems, all the forgotten little captivity narratives, the now-forgotten *Eikon*, the words *Eikon*, *Eikonoklastes*, and *regicide*—all sharp vertical sounds, all came together and then split open.

EF: The words split open. But then what does the word *icon* mean?

SH: That's the thing. It's not quite *icon* because it's *Eikon*. With *Basilika* added. So it's from another place—from the Greek. But an icon is an image that is worshipped. It's a sacred image.

EF: It is exactly what is worshipped. In the Greek church, the images in the *ikonstatis* are not just pictures of the saints but their actual presence.

SH: But then the Old Testament says, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image. . . . Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them."

EF: But to the believer, the icon is not image but presence.

SH: In this case the icon, Charles, the king, is murdered by those who bowed down to him. He was God's representation on earth. People still believed a king was holy. And this was a culmination of violent deaths on the scaffold in England during the sixteenth century. Raleigh was executed; before him, Sir Thomas More, Mary Queen of Scots, Lady Jane Grey, Essex, just a stream of women and men, powerful ones, religious heretics, biblical translators even, who ended their lives as sacrificial victims. These men and women in power had to be performers. They acted until the moment of death. So executions were staged, but they were real. During the seventeenth century, the masque developed as a sort of political theater where the performers, who were members of the power structure, played other parts. Charles Stuart enjoyed court masques. He performed brilliantly when he was called on to play the victim in his own tragedy. His Puritan accusers also acted brilliantly. Old accounts of the trial are still compelling reading.

Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* was a big influence on this poem. And I had in mind Marx's magisterial beginning of *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Marx saw the revolutionary situation as theatrical spectacle. And the idea of the dead generations weighing like a nightmare on the brain of the living—the idea of the ghost of the old revolution walking about is so right. The spectacle of the killing of the king accomplished the bourgeois transformation of English society, Marx wrote. It was real, and it was a theatrical event. The ghost is still walking around.

Everything I've been saying comes back to this.

Behind the facade of Harvard University is a scaffold and a regicide. Under the ivy and civility there is the instinct for murder, erasure, and

authoritarianism. Behind Milton's beautiful words borrowed from other traditions is a rage to destroy and tear down. He hoped *Eikonoklastes* would erase the *Eikon Basilike* or at least would show it to be a forgery. But *Comus* is a masque and a theatrical performance also. An elaborate facade, a forgery. A poem is an icon.

EF: And so that brings everything around once more to questions about the nature of words. If the icon is not presence—if, as you say in your introduction, "the absent center is the ghost of a king" (by which I understand authority and so the origin of meaning), then what is left in words themselves? What is in the word?

SH: That's it. It's the singularity. It's a catastrophe of bifurcation. There is a sudden leap into another situation. The ghost (the entrance point of a singularity) is the only thing we have. And a ghost represents death. There is death. I almost never put the word *death* in my poems. It would be too easy. I have always felt death to be the unspeakable other.

EF: Perfect absence.

SH: Perfect absence. It's like that part in *Moby-Dick*: "Strike through the mask." What is behind that mask? But you have to strike through it. The mask is the icon. The icon may be a mask. I hope there is something . . . I don't know . . . I mean that's why I am concerned that so much of my work carries violence in it. I don't want to be of Ahab's party. I want to find peace. Anyway, you balance on the edge in poetry. I did say in *My Emily Dickinson* that poetry is dangerous. And I believe this still. But as I go on and on thinking of Emily Dickinson, I think she at last reached a sense of peace—the later letters show it—although the deaths of people close to her probably contributed to her own death; nevertheless, she went to Him—she thought of death as masculine, and so do I—as to a bridegroom. In the end, she betrothed herself to Him.

I think that one reason there is so much ugly antipathy to writers who are breaking form in any way is because people know that language taps an unpredictable power source in all of us. It's not the same in the visual arts, where there are many abstract or form-breaking visual artists who enjoy wide popularity, are embraced by a critical establishment, and sell their work for a tremendous amount of money. You will see their work in museums and books about the work on large glass coffee tables. Try the

he had to go that way. Maybe it's just that you build elaborate metaphysical structures when you are young, and when you are older, those structures collapse into something simpler. Fewer words mean more. Ambiguities of history and chronology melt into light in the East. Light, just that.

A subject I would truly love to write on—but I know it's way too much and I never will—is the feminine in Melville. There has to be a reason why his writing speaks so directly to me.

EF: What about Hester Prynne and Hawthorne's . . .

SH: Well, Hawthorne is wonderful, but I think he is a far more sexist writer than Melville. Hawthorne was so crucial for Melville. Then the letters between them. Unfortunately, we only have Melville's side of the correspondence. The missed connections. And the fact that while Hawthorne was writing *The Blithedale Romance*, Melville was writing *Pierre*. Western Massachusetts again. It's the Connecticut River issue again. Emotionally, they were on opposite sides.

EF: Some people want Hawthorne out of the canon or at least on a lower rung since he's said to be sexist.

SH: *The Scarlet Letter* is one of those books I would bring to a desert island. But there is no canon on a desert island anyway.

EF: Well, what about those who say *Moby-Dick* will no longer be read because there are no women in it?

SH: I pity them. It makes me so sad to think that could be said. I feel guilty myself for an attack I made on Olson while I was in Buffalo. And I can see how in some way the feminist issue may do away with interest in Olson by the young. Because Olson is far more extreme than Melville on that subject. If there is Woman in Olson's writing (there aren't women there), she is either "Cunt," "Great Mother," "Cow," or "Whore." But the feminine is very much in his poems in another way, a way similar to Melville. It's voice . . . It has to do with the presence of absence. With articulation of sound forms. The fractured syntax, the gaps, the silences are equal to the sounds in *Maximus*. That's what Butterick saw so clearly. He printed Olson's Space.

I read somewhere that Olson once said that in *Billy Budd*, "the stutter

is the plot." There you have Charles Olson at his wisest. "The stutter is the plot." It's the stutter in American literature that interests me. I hear the stutter as a sounding of uncertainty. What is silenced or not quite silenced. All the broken dreams. Thomas Shepard writes them down as soon as 1637. And the rupture from Europe. Continents have entered into contact, creating a zone of catastrophe points. A capture morphology. All that eccentricity. All those cries of "My God, it is I." Mary Rowlandson is an early witness. Metacomet (King Philip) is Leviathan to the Mathers. Rowlandson knows he is human. *Moby-Dick* is a giant stutter in the manner of *Magnalia Christi Americana*. No one has been able to fathom Dickinson's radical representation of matter and radiation—such singularities of space, so many possibilities of choice. History has happened. The narrator is disobedient. A return is necessary, a way for women to go. Because we are in the stutter. We were expelled from the Garden of the Mythology of the American Frontier. The drama's done. We are the wilderness. We have come on to the stage stammering.