

## Broken Slivers: Susan Howe's *Concordance*

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<https://dulibraries.wordpress.com/2020/07/13/broken-slivers-susan-howes-concordance/>



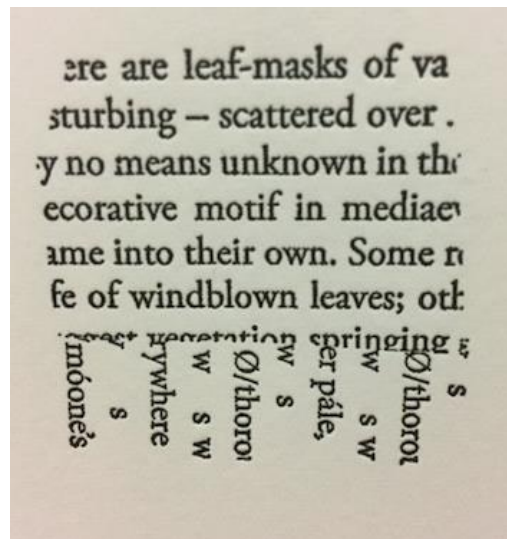
Susan Howe's *Concordance* was first published in 2019 as a limited-edition artist's book by [The Grenfell Press](#), and subsequently adapted & elaborated for a trade edition from [New Directions](#), released in May of 2020. Together, they represent Howe's characteristic multimodal poetics in collaboration with letterpress book artists and commercial publishers at the charged figure-ground intersections of texts and textiles, gallery installations, limi-

nal sound sculptures, and abstract minimalist limnings of "leaf-masks / scattered over / into their own / windblown leaves" (NDP, 47).

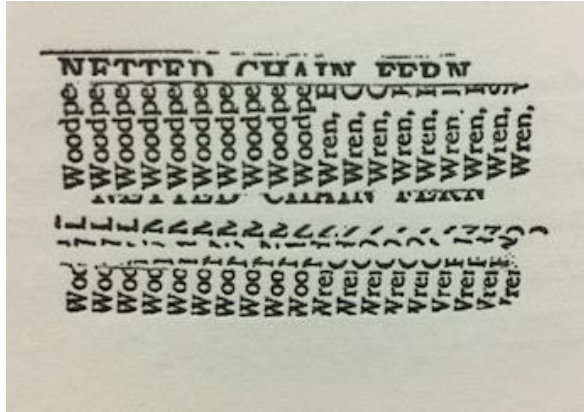
*Concordance* is a canopy of broken sonic slivers spliced from Howe's "mid-word [...] whispered [...] Marginalia" (52, 69, 77) of allusions to and quotations from works by Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Keats, Coleridge, Emerson, R. Browning, Dickinson, H. James, Yeats, and Stevens among so many others (too numerous to say in this short essay) including field guides (to birds, rocks, and trees), R. A. Stewart Macalister's *The Secret Languages of Ireland*, and the writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., which shape Howe's keen moments of telepathic contact—"Ghostly step pre-articulate hop" (9)—with her father, Mark DeWolfe Howe (who clerked for Holmes Jr., working tirelessly on a two-volume biography and other collections of his papers, including Holmes's writings on Common Law).

"Whnaholm. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. in posthumous

life is the Auto-Icon at home. A Howe is not a Holmes. // Shhh, the stone hasn't been rolled from the sepulcher yet" (9). Howe's invocations also summon other kindred spirits, including Margaret Fuller, Mary Temple, Fanny Dixwell, and Marian Hooper. Her deft gestures in *Concordance* are sometimes trembling—"Library canary hopping on twig caged peeps scratches"—and at other times trenchant: "I have composed a careful and on one level truly meant narrative and on another level the Narrative of a Scissor" (18, 15). Howe's incisive splicings echo her audio editing days with WBAI-Pacifica (c. 1977-1981) when she produced numerous poetry programs that may be heard via [PennSound](#).



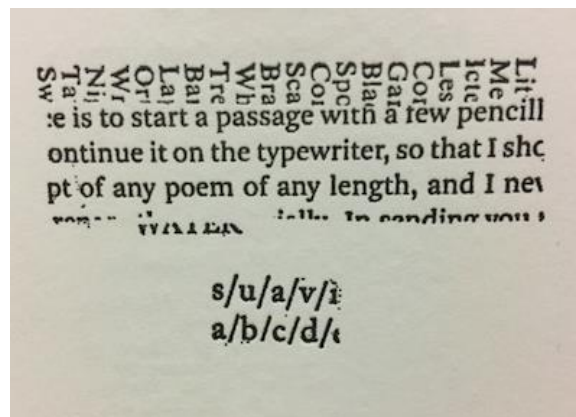
Each page in *Concordance* emerges from Howe’s DIY cut & paste collaging of telepathic transcriptions, “Recovering the lost [...] descending from the symbolic relation in cipher” (9, 17). Readers familiar with Howe’s collage poems will recall similar craftivist wordwhorls (which emulate nested manuscripts ‘after’ birds in flight) in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007), *THAT THIS* (2010), *Spontaneous Particulars* (2014), and *Debths* (2017). Such inter-/intra-textual assemblages may also be found in Howe’s earlier works collected in *Singularities* (1990) and *The Non-conformist’s Memorial* (1993); however, her



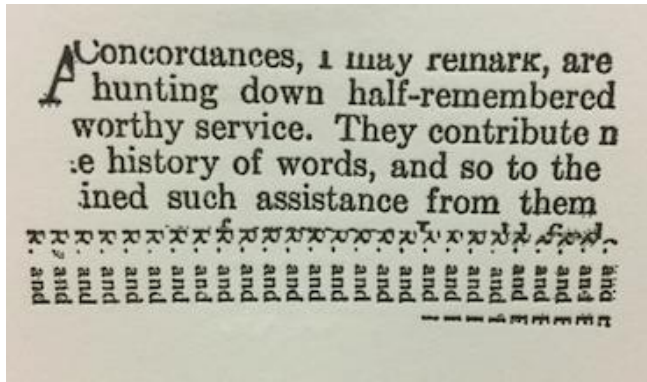
word squares have changed over the years—becoming more imbricate—most significantly following Howe’s encounter (c. 2005) with the “visual and acoustic shock” of the *Diary of Hannah Edwards Wetmore* (as transcribed by her daughter, Lucy Wetmore Whittelsey) at the Beinecke Library (*Spontaneous*, 52). Whereas *TOM TIT TOT* (2014) “[opened a new path to follow](#) that began with the poems in *Frolic Architecture*” (2010), Howe describes her more recent books as “transmitting chthonic echo-signals” (*Debths*, 11) and “tiptoeing on a philosophical

threshold of separation and mourning for an irrevocable past holding to memory, the death of memory condensed through concordance logic lit by a hidden terrain where deepest homonyms lie” (*Concordance*, 25). Howe’s origami-esque “Hannah doves” in *Frolic Architecture* have since morphed into a “Flutter about peacock feather on wire,” a typographical skein of “Clefts, chirps, upward glides, falling whistles,” and a netted chain fern of “alarm calls” from woodpeckers and wrens, among many others “skimming Flight” (13, 19, 28, 80).

In her essay of ecstatic prose that accompanies *Concordance*, Howe gives us clues about her methods: “Hereinafter microscopic reduplications of desire are pieced together through grid logic. In order to facilitate phonetic interpretation I will make up my mouth as if it’s a telegram” (9). As the story goes, after graduating from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1961, Howe moved to New York and began making notebooks of collaged lists, drawings, illustrations, found text, photographs, quotations, and lines of verse. “By the time her friend, the poet Ted Greenwald visited her studio, she was arranging only words on walls. At his insistence—‘You have a book on a wall, why don’t you just put it into a book?’—Howe dismantled and sequenced her pages as *Hinge Picture*, her first book of poems” ([Curators, Yale Union](#)). All of Howe’s written and performed work embodies her training as a visual artist (among other formative influences, including sculpture and theatre). In a recent interview, she reflects that her “poems are like grids. The breathing spaces are so important” because the grid shapes a balance between chance and



discipline. “Something flies out of the grid” (Howard, 233). Howe’s early word drawings, notebooks, collaged broadsides, and bird drawings may be found in the [Susan Howe Papers Collection](#) at the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

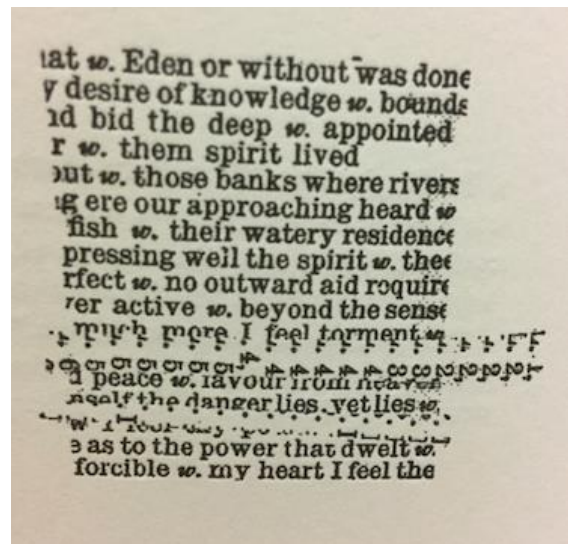


*Concordance* is Howe’s fourth artist book published by The Grenfell Press, each of which has also subsequently appeared in a trade edition from New Directions. The University of Denver’s [Fine Press and Artists’ Books Collection](#) includes all of Susan Howe’s limited editions from The Grenfell Press: [The Nonconformist’s Memorial](#) (with six woodcuts by Robert Mangold, 1992); [Frolic Architecture](#) (with ten photograms by James Welling, 2010); and [TOM TIT TOT](#) (which was hand-printed at The Grenfell

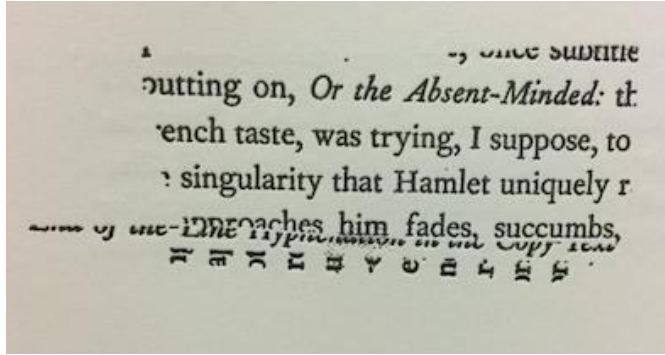
Press by Brad Ewing and Leslie Miller and published by MoMA in 2014). *TOM TIT TOT* is among Howe’s most collaborative letterpress volumes, and features artwork by R. H. Quaytman, the poet’s daughter. In comparison with those previous Grenfell editions that place Howe’s poetry in dialogue with visual art, *Concordance* gives us sixty pages of Howe’s linguistic prisms rotating in literal / littoral habitats plus a separate hand-sewn five-page letterpress chapbook of her poetic prose, “Envoi.” Forty-six copies of *Concordance* were printed on Whatman, Somerset, and Japanese Tea Chest at The Grenfell Press, and were bound by Claudia Cohen. The University of Denver’s copy is number 18.

The Grenfell and NDP editions of *Concordance* echo, emulate, and escape each other; their relationship is one of radical contingency and contiguity. Howe is a poet of reconfiguration; each of her volumes incorporates materials from earlier projects adapted anew. Her work is always changing, following converging and diverging lines of flight, asymptotes. The NDP text offers an introductory prose poem, “Since,” that elaborates upon and rearranges the letterpress chapbook that accompanies the Grenfell edition.

(“Envoi” includes passages that are not to be found in the NDP edition, such as: “Are the planets visible? How blind are we to the solution of dreaming and other psychological phenomena. You are where you are steadfast tin word fortress” (np).) The NDP text then reproduces the sequence of Howe’s phanopoetic telegrams from the Grenfell volume, and concludes with a new poem, “Space Permitting,” which collages “drafts and notes Thoreau sent to Emerson and Margaret Fuller’s friends and family in Concord, while on a mission to recover Fuller’s remains from a shipwreck off Fire Island” (NDP, back cover). Although the trade editions (published by New Directions) of Howe’s collaborative, multimodal limited editions provide



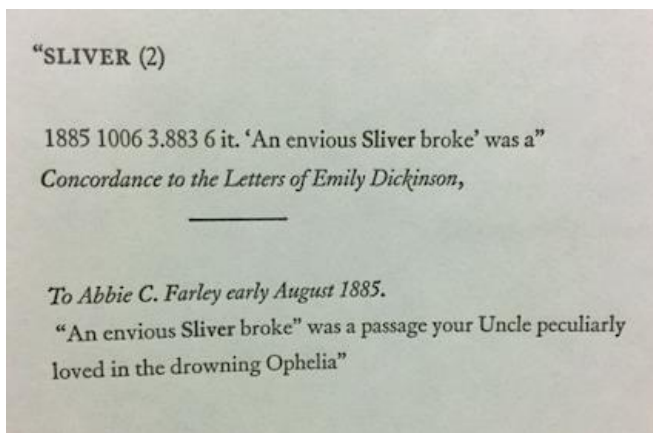
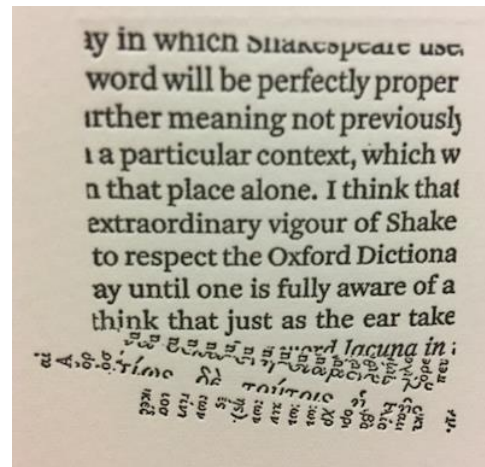




*Concordance* documents Howe’s tenaciously adjacent pursuit of “EDITORIAL EMENDATIONS IN THE COPY-TEXT[S]” of the multifarious sources from which she pulls “phonological spirits from another world to scatter visible shadow-mortality over the presence of the violent unknown-no-matter-what” (62, 16). Her volume is a vital fabric of haptic and happenstance encounters among archives and artifacts, gifts and ghosts—one

of which concerns Howe’s father, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Otis P. Lord, Emily Dickinson, a concordance to Shakespeare’s plays, and *Hamlet*.

Howe’s father, as noted above, clerked for Holmes Jr., who (for the office of Associate Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court) was preceded by Judge Lord, who, in 1880, gave to Dickinson a copy of Mrs. Mary Cowden Clarke’s *Complete Concordance to Shakespeare* (1844-1845), which is among Howe’s many source texts along with Cynthia MacKenzie’s *Concordance to the Letters of Emily Dickinson* (2000). Through MacKenzie’s concordance, Howe’s *Concordance* documents this telling passage from Dickinson’s August, 1885 letter to Judge Lord’s niece, Abbie C. Farley: “‘An envious Sliver broke’ was a passage your Uncle particularly loved in the drowning Ophelia” (vi).



In The Grenfell Press edition, this page appears last, in the position of a pastedown endpaper preceded by a semi-opaque flyleaf, which intimates a ludic disclosure of one of the book’s animating secrets. The NDP edition places this page (without flyleaf) in the text’s front matter, which effectively translates one of the artist book’s shaping esoteric mysteries into the paperback’s exoteric homage to Dickinson’s relationship with Lord, highlighting their shared enthusiasm for Shakespeare’s plays.

Following the death of Lord’s wife, Elizabeth Farley, in 1877, Lord and Dickinson became close friends. Dickinson astutely circumvented his proposal of marriage (as her [extant letters from November and December of 1882](#) imply). Fifteen manuscripts in Dickinson’s hand survive (between 1878 and 1882) from her correspondence with Lord; those letters include incisive (sometimes coded) references to *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *King Lear*, and *Hamlet*—several of

