

ESSAY

Intimate Editing: The Textual Poetics of Susan Howe's Collage Poems

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What do you get when you cross avant-garde poetry with textual criticism? Well, figure 1, for instance. In this specimen, the dusty jargon of scholarly editing—"editorial emendations in the copy-text"—ends up spliced next to the word "plasmodiophoromycetes," fragmented lists from a Milton concordance, and a bit of obscure Coleridge: "And Inquisition of that scanning eye.—. . . ." (*Concordance* 62). Inquiring into any of Susan Howe's recent collage poems must start with seeing: the eye scans over a singular shape, surrounded by white that licks the edges of letters and swallows halves of words. Shattered by shards of text, the blankness of the page throws letterforms into relief (literal relief, in the letterpress edition). Looking does give way to reading and rereading, turning the page sideways and upside down, noticing the patterns of letters or numbers bordering barely legible phrases. You might then turn to *Google*, which will tell you that "plasmodiophoromycetes" is a plant parasite and that the Coleridge comes from an appendix to volume 2 of *The Complete Poetical Works*, published in 1912 by Oxford University Press. With subtle and characteristically self-deprecating humor, Howe anticipates your move: "Google again for the source of my quotation and I'll fetch you another governess-related origin in grandmother glossolalia" (*Concordance* 24).

Reveling in "grandmother glossolalia," Howe coaxes fusty sources into speaking in tongues. For the last decade or so, she has been honing a sui generis form she calls a collage poem (more for ease of reference than from generic certainty). The first versions appear in a brief section at the end of *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007), followed by more developed and extensive sequences in *That This* (2010) and

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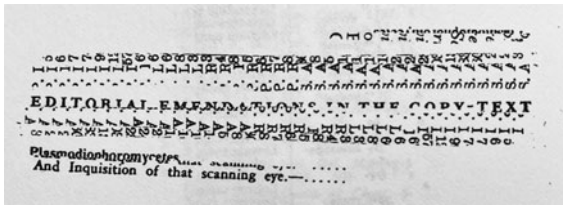


Fig. 1. A collage poem from Susan Howe's *Concordance* (62).

Debths (2017). *Concordance* (2020) contains the most intricate ones so far. To make the collages, Howe works from photocopied pages of books or typed-up texts, hand-cutting pieces out of the copied page (which retain, then, their unique fonts, sizing, spacing, and other features). Her process literalizes *poesis*—or “making”—as she then tapes the hand-cut pieces together with Scotch tape onto a blank sheet of regular white printer paper, trying different configurations until she senses it is right (Howe, Personal interview). Howe typically culls and cuts not from literary works themselves but from their paratextual materials—indexes, concordances, dedications, and editorial apparatuses. Quotations from poems or other works are often taken from scholarly, documentary editions, which provide transcriptions of handwritten manuscripts that represent cross-outs and revisions. The resulting collage poems, then, are “echolalic slivers” made up of everything typically discarded or diminished in the making of an edition: “eccentric punctuation, blots, dashes, smudged letters, gaps, interruptions, aborted sketches, ‘textually irrelevant’ numbers, uncanceled or canceled alternatives” (*Birth-mark* 83, 8).

While throughout her career Howe has seriously and extensively engaged with the field of textual criticism, that aspect of her work is often sidelined in the scholarship on her poetry because it does not fit into standard accounts of the avant-garde or experimental.¹ But *my* Susan Howe is not the one often mentioned as an example of Language poetry's theories, as in the introduction to *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*: “A poem, in Susan Howe's view, is not a seamless discursive unity but a collage-like assemblage, and its sutures should be left frayed and exposed. For her as for other Language poets, the linear or narrative

flow of language needs to be interrupted, even garbled, to reveal its multiple vectors, its hidden multiplicity, fractures, and instability” (Ramazani lxii). Language in the collage poems is indeed frayed and exposed, but not toward a garbled goal. Instead, Howe's collage poems are “wild / trills of magic and symbolic / logic” that reach toward telepathic connection (*Debths* 126).

The collage poems are the flowering of Howe's editorial ethos, primarily as it is described in *The Birth-mark* (1993), a collection of creative-critical essays that probes the motivations of textual criticism, both as it has been typically performed (mainly by white, male, institutionally authorized editors) and as it is alternatively, and more intimately, practiced by marginal figures, especially women. Intimate editing values closeness over correctness, encounter over authority, immediacy over idealism. Challenging the values of traditional editorial principles and calling attention to women's roles in editorial work, Howe contributes to ongoing and growing discussions about what a feminist book history or textual criticism might look like.² Moreover, as manifestations of intimate editing, the collage poems suggest a powerful and reciprocal relationship between avant-garde poetry and textual criticism: poems can model reparative, editorial gestures, while editorial debates can expand the reach and resonance of innovative poetry.

The Beauty of the Book

The collage poems are arresting, and potentially off-putting. Does adding one obscurity (so-called difficult, avant-garde techniques) to another (seemingly pedantic, bibliographic topics) equal a poem at once difficult *and* pedantic? You might think so, and approach them braced for a stereotypically “hard” reading experience, whatever that might mean—bewildering, uncomfortable, conceptual. But the collage poems have been striking a softer note.³ Though she has been writing poetry since the 1970s, Howe's more widespread fame has only arrived with the popularity of her collage poem collections, which won the Bollingen Prize for Poetry

in 2011 and the Griffin Poetry Prize in 2018. There is something about the collage poems that is evocative on an emotional and embodied level. This makes sense, since Howe's first set of them—"Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards"—takes its subject and inspiration from her own striking encounter with scraps and papers and, as Howe explains, "had been a way to translate into print my reaction to the thrill of seeing the collection of Jonathan Edwards's manuscripts" ("Open Field"). The collage poems, then, as printed renditions of a thrill, are Howe's attempt to share it, to shock her readers into seeing the potency, fragility, and even beauty of the textual condition, which, like the human one, is inescapable and mysterious.

The established binaries of poetry criticism are not conducive to understanding what Howe is doing. While she is perhaps most known for *My Emily Dickinson* (1985) and her provocative role in the editorial debates about her predecessor, that aspect of her career has hardly influenced how we treat her poetry, which has typically been read within the orbit of the Language movement (e.g., Hartley; Reinfeld). But the collage poems should prompt a revision of Howe's entrenched reputation as a Language or antilyric poet—a label that has always been ill-fitting and that she herself explicitly rejects: "I am unembarrassed. I am actually a *romantic modernist!*" ("Concordance").⁴ For Howe, "the Spirit of Romance" and "beauty," though admittedly "taboo," are still to be found—just not in the self but in the library (*Spontaneous Particulars* 17). In fact, Elisa New makes the provocative claim that "what makes us still consider Susan Howe an 'experimental' or 'avant-garde' poet is our preference for the beauty of authors over the beauty of books," noting that "physical aspects of the poetic volume are still meant, in contemporary habits of reading, to evanesce" (284).⁵

Because we have so few ways of discussing what Jerome McGann calls the "bibliographical codes" of contemporary poetry (56), they are too quickly interpreted as "visual" elements in a narrow, avant-garde lineage—one that carries connotations and assumptions that, as New suggests, do not always fit our objects of study. For example, one

assumption about unconventional visual form is that it is inherently oppositional or subversive. As Mandy Bloomfield notes, major poetry scholars such as Craig Dworkin, Alan Golding, Brian Reed, and Michael Davidson "make connections between [Howe's] poems' visual effects and historical themes," often assuming "an essentially mimetic relation"—which Bloomfield finds reductive—between the two (45). For instance, in Dworkin's chapter "The Politics of Noise" in his *Reading the Illegible*, a book on "unreadable" or "noisy" poetry, Dworkin claims that Howe's page layouts in *Eikon Basilike* "graphically enact the destructive and deconstructive elements of her project" (37). Dworkin is not necessarily *wrong*: Howe's earlier poems do lend themselves more easily to this interpretation, since they are often responding nonconformingly to various historical subjects, and in the past Howe has acknowledged a kind of violence in her process, as Dworkin mentions in his account (37). But the illegibility of the collage poems is much less about noise and disruption than about harmony and connection. These poems do not function by illogic but by "concordance logic" (Howe, *Concordance* 25).⁶ As we will see, for Howe, it is all about the connections: "bringing things together" (21).

Some scholars are beginning to trace alternative narratives and describe additional influences at the root of poetic techniques like collage. Instead of reading Marianne Moore's poetry as an "exclusive and unproblematic extension of the masculinized visual *avant-garde*," for instance, Bartholomew Brinkman argues that she is "largely indebted to the scrapbook as a popular and 'feminized' alternative to this formulation" (107). Several feminist scholars of Mina Loy are proposing a new term—the *en dehors garde*—"to better accommodate artists who have been relegated to the margins of the *avant-garde*" (Churchill et al.). Drawn from classical ballet instead of from the military, the term *en dehors*, which means "toward the outside," theorizes marginalized practices, such as women's "handiwork," as alternative foundations for experimentation (Churchill et al.). Similarly, in their work on scrapbooks and albums, scholars like Mike Chasar, Ellen

Gruber Garvey, and Deidre Lynch describe “embodied practices or gestures of cutting, arranging, and pasting materials” that many ordinary people commonly engaged in (Garvey 20). Instead of Pablo Picasso or Juan Gris, they highlight people like the curator Isabella Stewart Gardner and the collagist Mary Delany—both of whom, coincidentally, are central figures in *Debths* and *Concordance*, where Howe explicitly places herself in their lineage. Together, these scholars shift our focus to practices that have been used in various centuries for varied purposes, opening up for consideration the diverse motivations of poets who engage in them.

Even so, the “beauty of the book” hailed by New—and even some aspects of textual criticism itself—is suspect. Very few scholars recognize Howe’s investment in textual criticism as the deepest source of her poetic priorities, though it has clearly become her dominant inspiration.⁷ Even when Howe herself says her fascination with bibliographic problems is at the root of *Eikon Basilike* (*Birth-mark* 175), Dworkin consigns this interest to a footnote: “Howe’s obsessive engagement with the essentially conservative medium of the book, like her fetishization of the historical text and the ‘presence’ that she identifies with original manuscripts and editions, is a point from which a less positive account of her visual prosody might well proceed” (*Reading* 170n). I will quarrel momentarily with this description of Howe’s interests, but for now I want to grapple with the notion, implicit in Dworkin’s critique, that the potentially radical politics of avant-garde form is threatened by textual studies (stereotypically conservative, old, white, canonical, male, and boring).

The Birth-mark is, I believe, the first of Howe’s works to get called out for “fetishizing” books and documents. A 1997 review by Mutlu Konuk Blasing in *The Emily Dickinson Journal* accuses Howe of giving a “sentimental reading” of Dickinson’s manuscripts and suggests that “there are ways of reading Dickinson’s graphic practice without fetishizing handcrafted books” (111). Blasing agrees that how to read the manuscripts “raises issues for textual scholarship and theory” (111), but she discounts any contribution Howe, a

poet who admits to having “trespassed” into those disciplines (Howe, *Birth-mark* 2), can make to the discussion. More recent accusations relate to the Christine Burgin series of New Directions books, which contain full-color facsimiles of archival materials and are, according to the website blurb, “for reading, looking, and touching in equal measure” (“Christine Burgin”). Howe is involved in two of them: her own *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives* (2014), a manifesto for archival engagement, and *The Gorgeous Nothings* (2012), a facsimile edition of Emily Dickinson’s envelope poems, for which Howe writes the foreword. J. T. Welsch singles out these books, as well as the fine press editions of Howe’s collage poems (published by the Grenfell Press), in a section of his recent monograph entitled “The Accessible Aura” (99–102). His main point—besides noting the prohibitive prices—is that “the fetishisation of print books tends to disregard the benefits of digital technologies for readers with different needs” in exchange for bookish nostalgia (Welsch 99).

On one side, then, Howe’s approach to books and documents is seen as a regressive fetish and, on the other, as a commitment to meaningless trash. William Logan writes a breathtakingly harsh review of *The Gorgeous Nothings*: “gorgeously photographed debris—a kind of bibliophile’s soft porn” (31). For Logan, this edition “takes whimsy too far. The attempt to find meaning where none exists has resulted in meaning where none is meant” (26). Walter Benn Michaels, in a similar diatribe about *The Birth-mark*, insists that Howe’s attention to the details of a material document ultimately leads to “a commitment to the meaningless,” in which “skepticism about meaning is turned into an opportunity for experience” (8). His critique can be (and has been by many scholars) easily deflated if one has actually read Howe’s essays or has a rudimentary understanding of the questions of textual editing, but both he and Logan begin from such a constricted definition of “meaning” that they cannot imagine a broader, let alone *poetic*, definition of what may be meaningful about such material objects.

Howe does straightforwardly assert that “we need to see and touch archives and documents,” but the question is, *What for?* (*Spontaneous Particulars* 9). Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, in *Production of Presence*, defends “the desire for presence and thingness” from accusations of fetishism by distinguishing it from a desire that wants “to ‘possess’ or only to ‘hold onto’ these things” (144). He wonders whether the cry of “fetish!” is a knee-jerk reaction that may in fact “imply a—problematic—fixation on intellectual (and even on spatial) ‘distance’ as an absolute value” (145). A review of *Concordance* by a fellow poet, Tess Taylor, registers “the desire for presence and thingness” that Howe’s work evokes for her: “Howe imbues her investigations of fragment and snippet with such longing that it is hard not to yearn, from one’s own desk, for deep encounter.” She situates these potentialities in the recent, socially distant situation of the pandemic: “In this precarious moment, such communions feel newly poignant. When do we risk happiness? When do we risk encounter? How can reading offer those things now? Howe’s books may accompany you in these questions.” For Taylor, *Concordance* leads not toward possession but toward relation. The distinction is crucial.

Howe has mused about whether textual criticism might be for her an attempt to overcome distance and solitude: “I wonder if my interest in manuscripts and the politics of the archive isn’t simply a search for a precursive relation always beyond us, no more than that” (“Interview” [2005]). She is not into manuscripts for manuscripts’ sake, as both camps of her critics assume, but for something beyond:

I enjoy facsimile editions . . . of poets whose manuscripts have a strong visual component. What interests me most isn’t the photographed handwritten original on the even numbered side but the facing typographical transcription on the odd. These doggedly Quixotic efforts at conversion are a declaration of faith. The textual scholar hopes, through successive processes of revision, to draw out something that resists articulated shuffling. Secret connections among artifacts are audible and visible and yet

hidden until you take a leap—overwriting signified by a vertical brace—superimposed letters with others underneath—sometimes empty brackets signify a tear or a worn place. It’s the mystery of strong music in the soul. Our eyes see what is outside in the landscape in the form of words on paper but *inside*, a slash or mark wells up from a deeper place where music before counting hails from.

(*Debths* 22)

This is editing through a poet’s eyes. Howe sees the *process* of the textual scholar as a poetic act. It is a “Quixotic effort” both because it is impossible to recover or convey the original scene of writing and because the transmission of human communication is always fragile, partial, and prone to error. But what matters most is the textual scholar’s attention—a mode of being ready to catch secret connections and perceive silent music. It is not that the original material is not important; it is, but precisely *because* it puts one in relation. A manuscript is a function of memory, an occasion for participating in the messiness and mystery—across time and through paper—of “enduring relations and connections between what was and what is” (*Spontaneous Particulars* 43).

If being-in-relation is what matters, the book as a physical object becomes the occasion for that, as it is for Lynch’s album keepers: “In their hands . . . *book* signifies a collection point for those slips and scraps, and a way-station that those paper-objects occupied previous to their further detachment and transportation elsewhere” (Lynch 91). For them, as for Howe, the materiality of the text is dynamic and provocative, not static and autonomous; “the archive” can be engaged (by anyone!) as an intransitive process—“a performance of archivalness” or “*rogue archiving*” (Lynch 90).⁸ Howe’s rogue editing is already serving as a model for poets and scholars interested in bridging “creative and critical relations to archival materials.” In their introduction, the editors of *The Contemporary Poetry Archive* describe the way Howe’s “‘mysterious leap of love’ turns the archive into a subject and method for poetry itself” (Anderson et al. 21). They ask, “How can the archived word—as statement, as work in progress, or as the fluid process displaced by the publishable

object—exist not as mere artefact but as a *mediation of experience*; not, that is, as the trace of a historical process that might help one interpret the finished poetic product, but as *an event* at once both *alive and profoundly lyrical in itself?*” (emphasis mine). Howe’s conception of intimate editing provides one answer.

Intimate Editing in *The Birth-mark*

Editing is a practical activity—granular, subtle, but foundational. Its significance is often overlooked or minimized, even by literary scholars who must rely on its fruits. Also referred to as textual criticism—“the theory and practice of editing a text”—editing is responsible for preserving, passing along, printing, and re-presenting the texts of documents (Karian). Early on in *The Birth-mark*, Howe quotes Noah Webster, who “defines *edit* this way: ‘I. *Properly*, to publish; *more usually*, to superintend a publication; to prepare a book or paper for the public eye, by writing, correcting, or selecting the matter” (7). The questions of editing, then, are often questions of value (in all senses of that word, including monetary).⁹ What aspects of a text are substantive or accidental? What should be selected for or left out of an edition? What is significant enough to copy and re-present for readers? Answering those questions is always an act of interpretation, and different conclusions lead to different editions.¹⁰ Who decides what matters? Editors do, depending on their personal priorities, assumptions, and goals.¹¹

The main thrust of *The Birth-mark* is to question the traditional assumptions that editors make about what in a document is significant or valuable. The title is taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story of the same name, and one of the epigraphs of Howe’s book is a passage from this story, in which a scientist becomes obsessed with removing a “singular mark” from the cheek of his wife, Georgiana, medically rooting out what he deems an imperfection. When he succeeds in removing the mark, which is “deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face,” Georgiana dies (qtd. in Howe, *Birth-mark*). With a second epigraph,

from Herman Melville’s *Billy-Budd*, Howe juxtaposes the visible blemish of the birthmark in Hawthorne’s story with a “vocal defect” in the “Handsome Sailor,” who “was apt to develop an organic hesitancy, in fact more or less of a stutter or even worse” (qtd. in Howe, *Birth-mark*). In Howe’s typological imagination, the birthmark corresponds to the stutter, which in turn signifies antinomian, unheard voices in American literary history. Most critics are with her thus far, often citing her intent, as she puts it, to “tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate” (*Quarry* 181). But, failing to explore the next step of the analogy, few have realized to what extent such lifting is a literal, physical, textual matter. Curiously, even though scholars will acknowledge *The Birth-mark* in passing, often quoting a line or two to elucidate Howe’s interest in certain subjects—early Puritan preachers, captivity narratives, and antinomian figures—no one has examined what she has to say about editing.¹² But for Howe, the birthmark is the blot on a document that even some editorial scholars view as a meaningless imperfection. It is the marginal comment that remains marginal, the letter that is left out of an author’s biography, the manuscript that is burned or drowned or judged inconsequential, the curatorial labor of a wife or sister that goes unappreciated and unacknowledged. Often, as Howe points out, these instances of so-called lawlessness are “feminized and then restricted or banished” (*Birth-mark* 1). All these examples, and others, are the kinds of textual problems that Howe investigates in *The Birth-mark*.

It would seem unexpected for the publication of a new scholarly edition to provoke a poet into prolific creative-critical activity, but that was what prompted Howe to write *The Birth-mark*, the work she has said she is most proud of writing (Gardner 164). As she explains on the first page of the introduction, these essays “are the direct and indirect results of my encounter with *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, edited by R. W. Franklin for the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press in 1981, and with *The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson*, also edited by R. W. Franklin, this time for the Amherst College Press in 1986” (1).

Franklin's edition made, for the first time, Dickinson's unique manuscripts widely accessible to scholars and readers, sparking ongoing debates and dynamic discussions in Dickinson studies, in which Howe is often cited as a standard-bearer. But the Franklin editions opened up a new path for Howe's own work as well.¹³ Howe quite explicitly emphasizes that "these essays were written after *My Emily Dickinson*," the book for which Howe is perhaps most known but that does not substantially confront the problem of Dickinson's manuscripts (1). In the eight years after *My Emily Dickinson* was published, in 1985, Howe began teaching at the State University of New York, Buffalo, and spent a great deal of time trying to precisely transcribe the spacing of Dickinson's handwriting and poring over the slides she made for class ("Personal interview"). *The Birth-mark*—and the ensuing poetry—results from and reflects on what Howe discovered by this intimate, tactile textual engagement.

What about Franklin's new edition caused a revolution for Howe? Imagine the psychological shock of thinking you know a poet's work and then finding out that what she actually wrote down looks vastly different from what you thought you knew. If Howe grapples with a distrust of editors, she has good reason for it. Dickinson's case is extreme, to be sure, but that is also why it is valuable. The editorial questions her work raises are no less relevant for other authors, only less apparent. Questions that editors always have to address—but that readers often don't think about—became, for Howe, both personally important and poetically crucial: "As a poet, I cannot assert that Dickinson composed in stanzas and was careless about line breaks. In the precinct of Poetry, a word, the space around a word, each letter, every mark, silence, or sound volatizes an inner law of form" (*Birth-mark* 245). Howe's grievance against even Franklin's edition is that editors have an idea of what poetry is—certain genres, verse structures, and lineation patterns—and not only impose such external limitations onto Dickinson's manuscripts but presume to know that her compositions *intended* to fit within them. "Editors picking and choosing for a general reader reading" is deeply problematic to Howe,

who speaks in uncertainties, as in negative theology, about what she cannot claim to know—"I cannot assert," "what if . . .," "maybe . . ." (*Birth-mark* 145, 141, 144). Her approach to editing is one of humble openness and awe before the fact that "we know nothing / with absolute certainty / of existent things not even / the single 'word' the" (*Pierce-Arrow* 6). (*The* happens to be a crucial word for tracing the development of Dickinson's handwriting and, thus, dating her poems.)

The reason Howe "trespassed into the disciplines of American Studies and Textual Criticism," she says in *The Birth-mark*, was "to fathom what wildness and absolute freedom is the nature of expression" (2), to understand "writing as a physical event of immediate revelation" (1). Of course, in between us and the scribbling hand that performs "writing as a physical event" there are multiple layers of mediation, which Howe acknowledges:

Words are slippery. Questions of audience, signature, self and other will be answered later by historians, genealogists, graphologists, handwriting experts, who need to produce a certain rationalism for this unstable I-witnessing, uncovering relation. Can all of the professional intermediaries ever since reimagine this finite-infinite commingling communion?

(*Birth-mark* 66)

Where professional editors and other kinds of scholars "need to produce a certain rationalism," or explanation, Howe wants to "reimagine" the mystery of writing itself. Throughout *The Birth-mark*, her imagination is taken by scenes of writing, and she looks for what a document—as the moment of captured expression—witnesses about the circumstances of its composition. She calls for a method of editing that at least tries to show a document's "layerings and fragile immediacies" (*Birth-mark* 19).¹⁴

Howe's reflections set up a gendered distinction between editors who use documents for their own profit, either monetary or intellectual, and editors who love them for what they are. To many editors, "editing is the art of discipline; the mastery of detail. Eccentric punctuation, blots, dashes, smudged letters, gaps, interruptions, aborted sketches, 'textually

irrelevant' numbers, uncanceled or canceled alternatives in the manuscript are a profitless counteraction" (Howe, *Birth-mark* 8). Therefore, "editors too often remove these original marks of 'imperfect' or muffle them in appendixes and prefaces" (9). Instead, for Howe, a poet-editor, "assurances, citations, expressions, dams, figments, errors, echo-lalic slivers, are emblazoned ciphers of Inspiration" (83). Seeking intellectual profit, as well, can result in a utilitarian—and authoritarian, patriarchal—relation to documents, as Howe's wry personification of them reveals:

What is it about documents that seems to require their relegation to the bedroom (a private place) as if they were bourgeois Victorian women? Honored, looked to for advice, shielded from the rabble by guardians of "tradition"/"aesthetic taste," available only to particular researchers (husbands or bachelor machines) and caretakers (librarians cataloguers secretaries) so long as they are desirable (readable not too tattered) capable of bearing children (articles chapters books) rearing them (aiding research), they remain sheltered at home (museum collections libraries). (Frame Structures 18)

These approaches to editing and scholarship are reductive, philistine, and condescending. More seriously, Howe remarks, "I know records are compiled by winners, and scholarship is in collusion with Civil Government. I know this and go on searching for some trace of love's infolding through all the paper in all the libraries I come to" (*Birth-mark* 4).

Finding "love's infolding" requires personal closeness, not a quasi-scientific mastery, as Howe's examples demonstrate. Sara Coleridge, who edited her father's marginalia, wrote of how close she felt to her father by way of them, as if he were "speaking not personally to me, and yet in a way so natural to my feelings, that *finds* me so fully, and awakens such a strong echo in my mind and heart, that I seem more intimate with him now than ever I was in life" (qtd. in Howe, *Birth-mark* 36). But the editor of the Princeton edition of the marginalia dismisses Sara's editorial work as "not very useful to the modern editor" (qtd. in Howe, *Birth-mark* 36). Similarly, Elizabeth Melville said of her deceased husband,

"The being in the midst of his books he has been accustomed to read, and which contain his *marks* and *notes*, will still give him *a sort of existence with me*" (qtd. in Howe, *Birth-mark* 36). Howe adds that editors "refer to Mrs. Melville's editorial notations on the original manuscript as marks made by an 'alien hand'" (*Birth-mark* 36). These women represent personal textual relations, rather than intellectual ones, which often miss the heart of the matter: "In spite of the zealous searching of editors, authors, and publishers for the print-perfect proof of intellectual labor, the heart may be sheltering in some random mark of communication" (9). What Howe means by "the heart" is not easily definable. It may be nonverbal, unable to be represented by the alphabet, if "a wild heart at the word shatters scriptural figuration" (69). It may look like a mark to be removed, but if it is carved out, the document becomes a dead letter. In any case, intimate editors look for the heart with an attitude of affection and even devotion.¹⁵

"Concordance Logic"; or, "Is There a Text in This Poem?"

If, in *The Birth-mark*, Howe describes overlooked labors, "so-called insignificant visual and verbal textualities" and imperfect marks, in the collage poems she shows them (*Spontaneous Particulars* 21). The collage poems are composed from copies of texts that expose the inner workings of words as well as the ways that people work with them: the pages of dictionaries and concordances, transcriptions from documentary editions of poetry, a linguist's scansion. Howe's poetic process cannot be called writing so much as a kind of imaginative reediting. But if traditional editing is "the mastery of detail," Howe sets details wild. The collage poems are one manifestation of what it might look like when poetry takes its inspiration and ethos from intimate editing. My close reading focuses primarily on *Concordance*, Howe's latest collection (though I will glance at *That This* and *Debths* as well), because *Concordance* is most self-consciously an *ars poetica* for Howe's intimate editorial poetics—a dance of hearts coming together, as the etymology of its title suggests.¹⁶

And, since Howe has been honing the form over the last decade, it contains the most developed and intricate collage poems. They demonstrate Howe’s own care, attention, and enthusiasm as she turns texts inside out to get at “the threshold heart of words” (*Concordance* 26).

Though the collage poems are stunning visual shapes, “even monumental (one sees pillars, altars, columns),” as Mark Scroggins points out, it is important to see their movement. We are looking not just at static objects but also at the behind the scenes of word processing and at the bits and scraps of its fallout. That is why Howe is not collaging manuscript facsimiles (though these do show up in some of her other work—*Pierce-Arrow*, *The Midnight*, *Spontaneous Particulars*), and it is why she is interested not just in editing but also in other ways of intimately interacting with words, such as lexicography and linguistics. One of Howe’s source texts for both *Debths* and *Concordance* is *The Secret Languages of Ireland*, “by the archaeologist R. A. Stewart Macalister,” whose book “is based on a random collection of loose sheets, letters, manuscript notebooks, scraps of paper, dictionary slips” (Howe, *Debths* 21). Howe finds the book “wonderfully littered with etymological particulars, diacritical characters, hieroglyphs, wordlists, oblique slashes” (21). One collage poem quotes Macalister as he examines a medieval scribe’s deciphering of the ancient Irish Ogham alphabet in *The Book of Ballymote* (fig. 2). From the collage poem, the partial phrases are evocative of Howe’s interests: “traceable, ‘tick’, over the letters,” “important,” “original writer or by some other.” A *Google* search of the phrase “traceable tick over the letters” brings you to a *Google Books* page that shows the whole passage and tells us that these “ticks” are “marks” made by the scribe checking his work (Macalister 56 [fig. 3]). The collage poem, as you can see, cuts a portion of the paragraph out, preserving the spacing and font of the passage. The horizontal line of seemingly random letters and numbers suspended off the bottom left of the collage turns out to be from the next page of Macalister’s book, where he lists his count of letter frequencies in the Ogham inscriptions (Macalister 57 [fig. 4]). The mediation accumulates: the

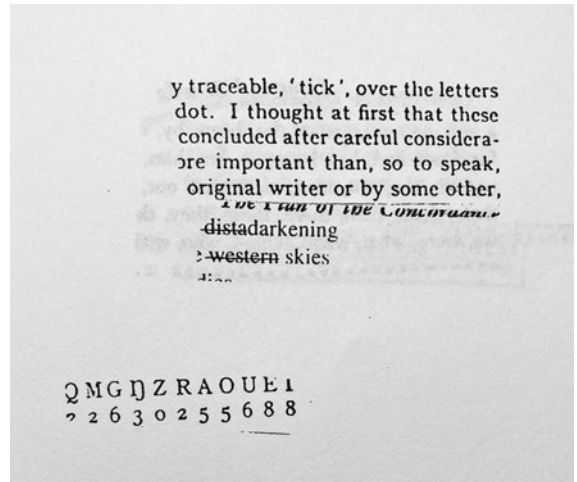


Fig. 2. A collage poem from Susan Howe’s *Concordance* (35).

There is a tiny, sometimes barely traceable, ‘tick’, over the letters here printed with a superposed dot. I thought at first that these might be word-separators: but I concluded after careful consideration that they were nothing more important than, so to speak, marks of approval, made by the original writer or by some other, after checking over the cypher with the text on which it is based, and finding it satisfactorily correct.

Fig. 3. A passage from R. A. Stewart Macalister’s *The Secret Languages of Ireland* (56).

B L F S N H D T C Q M G J Z R A O U E I
4 5 I I 3 6 I 3 3 3 2 2 6 3 0 2 5 5 6 8 8

Fig. 4. A chart from R. A. Stewart Macalister’s *The Secret Languages of Ireland* (57).

original Ogham writing, the scribe’s key to it, Macalister’s representation of the scribe’s work, Howe’s copying of Macalister’s book. Howe’s goal is not to get back to the ancient inscription but to draw attention to the processes by which words ride the flow of time.

The collage poems also serve as provocations to the generic (in both senses of the word) assumptions of textual critics. In fact, they directly respond to one of the editorial oversteps Howe describes in *The Birth-mark*:

Some of Emily Dickinson’s surviving manuscripts and letters have been cut apart with scissors.

Sometimes pages have been torn to shreds, leaving a single or double strand of words on the brink of the central blank. In the 1958 edition of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, her editor, Thomas H. Johnson, pieced torn unities together. Sometimes he lengthened and recombined strands of “unrelated thoughts” or “fragment scraps” and placed them in a category called “Prose Fragments,” as if these threaded filaments of letters were too disorderly to qualify as poetry. (28)

Howe comes, with her “scissor self” and her “cut paper salvage clutter,” to challenge him (*Concordance* 22, 23). “As if these threaded filaments of letters were too disorderly to qualify as poetry”! She takes it as a dare (*Debths* 48–49 [fig. 5]).

Howe not only showcases details, she makes them. (*Detail* comes from the French *détailler*—“to cut in pieces” [“Detail”].) Howe writes, “I have composed a careful and on one level truly meant narrative and on another level the Narrative of a Scissor” (*Concordance* 15). *Concordance* is in part inspired by another woman uncommonly skilled with scissors: Mary Delany, a widow who in 1772, at the age of seventy-two, began making botanically accurate flowers out of tiny bits of cut, colored paper (“Late Bloomer”).¹⁷ (Howe was about that age when she began cutting and collaging sources into poems.) One of Delany’s collaged flowers—a sea daffodil, which has long, white petals that curl dramatically across a black paper background—occasions this striking passage:

Sea Daffodil. Six stamens and one style have been cut with such dexterity that even the anther at the end of

each stamen and the stigma in the style are shown. One must cross the threshold heart of words all intricacies every particular in its minutest limit playing fast and loose encrypted for the purpose of reconciling influence the way a name spells itself and how personification leads to widow whistling at three headstones, the moths fluttering among heath and harebells. Such soothing sounds all the *hs* and other rhythms whispering to each other on paper wondering will they ever reach seventy times seven divided into *four hundred and ninety parts* in italics.

(Howe, *Concordance* 26)

While I will not attempt to explain these sentences, I can note that they borrow from the last paragraph of *Wuthering Heights* and that “harebells” echoes, in the poignant and personal way Howe appreciates, her late husband Peter Hare’s last name. I can also point to two collage poems that whisper on paper to this passage (figs. 6 and 7). “Heart” and “thre” run across the bottom of figure 6, and figure 7 sits on the threshold of the page’s edge as “threshold” repeats down a vertical strip.

This harmonizing through words across pages is how the collage poem collections work. A “prose” piece at the beginning of the collection establishes the notes of the main melody; it sounds a tone, evokes a mood. Then, the collage poems resonate with it in various ways: images, figures, words, and even digraphs echo throughout, as Howe calls attention to tiny things. (At least, that is how the reader experiences it; Howe actually writes the introduction or foreword last, hinting at the connections that she has already discovered [Howe, “Personal interview”].) In *Debths*, the “th” links key words: “debths,” “Thek,” “things,” “chthonic,” “thread,”

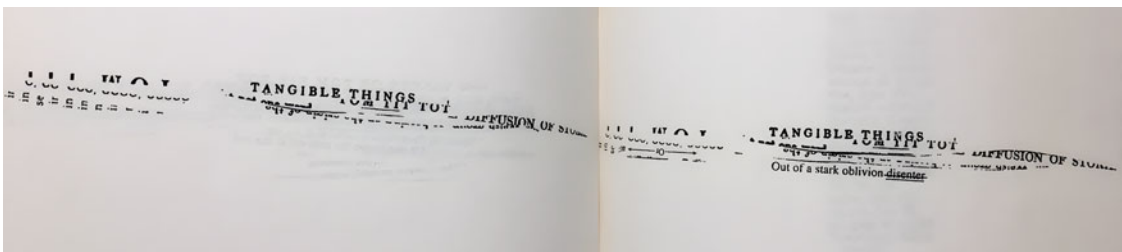


Fig. 5. A collage poem from Susan Howe’s *Debths* (48–49).

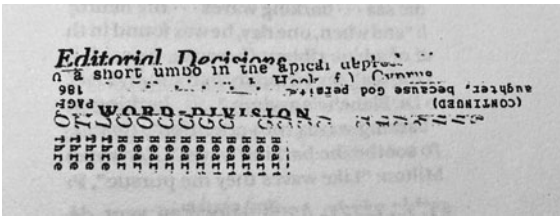


Fig. 6. A collage poem from Susan Howe's *Concordance* (57).

“breath,” “theft,” “thumb,” “fathom.” One of the collages is made of what seems to be the “th” section of a dictionary: down the left side of the text fragment we read “thinge, tho, tholed, thought, threw, thronge, throw” (51). And just the “t” makes even more dramatic appearances, scattered across the page as a line of “T”s (56). Howe has a special

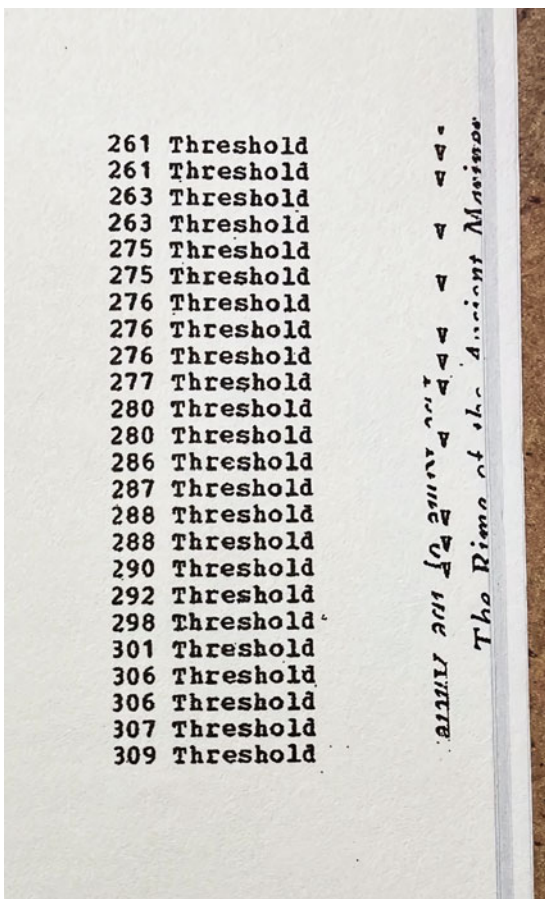


Fig. 7. A collage poem from Susan Howe's *Concordance* (89).

fascination (elaborated on in *Spontaneous Particulars*) with “the spectral grapheme *h*” (*Spontaneous Particulars* 55). She is inspired in part by Daniel Heller-Roazen’s lovely *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Human Language*, in which Heller-Roazen tells the story of *h*, “the breathy letter” (35). Quoting the Latin grammarian Priscian and paraphrasing the poet Paul Celan, Heller-Roazen explains how *h* has been defined as “not a letter, but merely the sign of breathing” and as “the trace that our breathing leaves in language” (qtd. in Heller-Roazen 37, Heller-Roazen 44). *H* holds an important place, then, in the reflections of a poet who remembers “writing as a physical event,” since it is a gratuitous reminder of language’s origin in the body, not just the mind.¹⁸ Repeatedly looking at and sounding “letter-spirits” like “th” (Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars* 56) is another way for Howe to ask, and try to answer, one of her questions from *The Birth-mark*: “If experience forges conception, can quick particularities of calligraphic expression ever be converted to type? Are words children? What is the exchange value? Where does the spirit go?” (*Birth-mark* 4). In the transference of breath from voice to page to type, some things are communicated and others are lost. Howe attempts not to recover the origin but to indicate the traces, and even revoice them, as she does in her breathy recordings of the collage poems made in collaboration with the musician David Grubbs (Howe and Grubbs).

The concordance is a rich analogy for Howe’s collage poems because it exemplifies the kinds of connections I have just discussed, in the multiple resonances of its name as well as in its construction as a material object. Howe thinks of Concord, the place, with all its associated literary figures: Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Alcott family, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller (“Concordance”). Charles Ives’s “Concord Sonata” puts this American literary landscape to music by way of musical quoting, or sampling—another term, perhaps, for cutting (Howe, “Concordance”). “Concordance can also mean a state of harmony between persons,” Howe writes. “Or a musical chord with satisfying musical effect” (*Concordance* 12). These harmonies are

Delany's cutting, Lucy Wetmore Whittlesey's transcribing, Gardner's collecting, and Logan's concordancing, Howe points to this unseen labor, or learning. She remarks of the women of Jonathan Edwards' family that "almost all that remains from this 18th-century family's impressive tradition of female learning are a bedsheet probably woven by Jonathan's mother, a tiny blue fragment of his wife Sarah Pierrepont Edwards' wedding dress, a journal kept by Esther Edwards Burr (their oldest daughter) and several raggedy scraps from his younger sister Hannah's private writings—" (*Spontaneous Particulars* 45). The collage poems in *That This* recycle those remains. When there are no remains to be found, Howe points to their absence, as in the tragic drowning of Margaret Fuller, the subject of the final section of *Concordance*, "Space Permitting." Fuller's book manuscript was never recovered. "She would like to live on / What has happened who / has done this I am sorry" (107).

Concordances are now obsolete, because of the digital Find function (though, as Howe's poems imply, their value exceeds the utilitarian), and Howe's recent work—including *Concordance*—situates itself self-consciously in our moment of rapid technological change. The collage poems could not exist without the ability to scan them into digital PDF files, which are then used to make polymer plates for the relief printing of a fine press edition from Grenfell Press and to lay out the New Directions's trade edition in *InDesign*. While Howe appreciates "faster better technologies—deep space, non-real reality—'O brave new world that has [no paper] in it,'" the ethos and origin of the collage poems are rooted firmly and gratefully in the paper one (Howe, *Concordance* 15). Howe imagines intimate relations between people and paper, like Jonathan Edwards pinning notes to his clothes while out on the preaching circuit, a "gaunt and solitary traveler covered in scraps," or Wallace Stevens composing poems on "the backs of envelopes and old laundry bills cut into two-by-four-inch scraps he carried in his pocket" (*Souls* 9, 73). Howe also recounts a whimsical dream about "a dancer resembling Suzanne Farrell": she "was Dulcinea but she

could also be America," wearing a dress. Howe says, "I borrowed [the dress] and felt such happiness even if I knew I wasn't original." She goes on, "It seemed to me then that the dress represented poetry or what you write on paper to cover yourself but you can only wear it briefly. . . . [Y]our arms spread freely out like a dancer and you are young and wearing paper shoes. . ." (*Concordance* 22).

Howe's unoriginal paper borrowing suggests we read her as part of the "iterative" or "uncreative" turn, which we can do. As Jacob Edmond explains, "the rise of new media and intensified globalization have in recent decades led copying to overwhelm innovation as the main driver of literary change," and it seems evident that Howe participates to some degree in that movement (15). Marjorie Perloff includes Howe in her *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, in which she thoroughly tracks down Howe's citations but treats their documentary character according to categories of information and fact, rather than actual documents (101). In another piece, Perloff argues that what makes the collages "so oddly arresting" is that they mimic the way we now receive multimedia information in the chaos of daily life: "We read or hear snatches of conversation or the tail end of a radio program, we catch sight of a sign or placard as we drive through traffic, we come across familiar stories retold on websites or the social media, and find items in the blogosphere that trigger childhood memories" ("Spectral Telepathy" 11). This explanation for collage and quotation sounds much like that of Kenneth Goldsmith, who locates the origins of appropriative writing in our "text-based world," in which "the computer encourages us to mimic its workings" of Cut, Copy, and Paste (xvii, xviii). But his idea of language or text, like Perloff's, is independent of any particular form. To Perloff and Goldsmith, "text" is an intangible discourse (what textual critics call the "work"), rather than the words of a specific document (as "text" is defined in textual studies). Howe, by contrast, depends on the specificity of editions and the particularity of physical objects. She re-presents the actual text (in facsimile) of the Coleridge concordance that was printed in 1940 at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods on thin, soft pages. In

Howe's collage poems, it is not the "flax of our daily sightings and readings" that is turned "into . . . poetic gold," as Perloff writes of one collage sequence ("Spectral Telepathy" 11), but the flax of things we normally *never* encounter—the diplomatic transcriptions of William Butler Yeats poems, passages from obscure philological books, and lists of numbers and letters. That is why we need to turn to textual criticism to understand how and, more importantly, *why* Howe engages in borrowing, repetition, and iteration.

Rather than as bombardments of media, we might productively think of the collage poems as "mini-editions." G. Thomas Tanselle floats the rather adorable concept that "quotations are mini-editions" in a lengthy essay called "Textual Criticism and Deconstruction," in which he takes down prominent deconstructionists for their confusion about what a text is. According to Tanselle, "whatever 'quoting' means is what 'preparing an edition' or 'determining a text' means," because it raises "all the questions about 'establishing' texts that are raised by editions of the texts of whole works" (24). In other words, quoting is always already editing. Literally copying a specific book is just an exaggerated version of any act of quotation. Being aware of this, for Howe, helps to mitigate the modernizing and morphing of the text of a document into abstract "text," as she explains in *The Birth-mark*:

In these essays I have followed the spelling and punctuation of each quoted source. Revisions, deletions, footnotes, spelling, stray marks, and punctuation are usually edited to conform to the requirements of whatever period they are published in. In the flow of time original versions are modernized and again modernized in the flow of time these copies are copies of copies. (39)

Howe's sense of language is deeply philological—"love of the word" and its diachronic accumulation of meaning. She wants to remember past particularities. Reflecting on an "obsolete past participle"—"shapen"—in one of Stevens's poems, Howe admires how "this wild word relic softly and serenely concerns no one. Its pastness echoes in the sound of wind soughing through pitch pines.

Certain affections persist in the soul under sleep, only to meet in print, where they can, at last, be felt" ("Concordance").

Our brave new "text-based world," filled with flitting and tweeting language, is at risk of forgetting that language is also thick, tangible, and traceable. The collage poems are one way to get people's attention. Howe suggests that when we leave the transmission of human communication to so-called professionals, we abdicate our responsibility to look closely at the materials we have received from the past. We thus overlook instances of erasure and marginalization, but also of connection and creativity: "The essential part of any invention is distance and connectedness. We pass each other pieces of paper" (*Frame Structures* 28).²⁰ In this sense, intimate editing *is* conservative, according to Stephen Ratcliffe's definition: "Writing that echoes writing is radically conservative in the sense that words, having been used elsewhere, are literally conserved, recycled, used again; to bring prior texts forward (out of the past) reenacts those texts, extends the life of works (words) that might otherwise (if not read) disappear" (48). Howe's collage poems come from this impulse. "When all is passing scurry and watershine changing," Howe writes, "nothing remains but the beauty of this sheet of paper waving like a sail scudding between phonemes and syllables" (*Concordance* 24).

NOTES

1. In his monograph on Howe, Montgomery makes a similar observation, pointing out elements in Howe's writing that are "not always compatible with the elements of Marxian, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist thought that provide the intellectual context for those who write on her" (xii–xiii). Johnston corroborates, "Critical discourse has in some sense domesticated the wildness of Howe's texts by attributing to them an academic or liberal agenda" (146).

2. I was struck at one recent discussion, "Building Better Book Feminisms," by how literature itself may provide some creative answers to the call for new structures of bibliographic knowledge (Ozment et al.). Ozment and Werner are key voices in this growing conversation.

3. Wiman, Hollywood, and Richardson all write about their poignant, personal, affective responses to Howe's recent work.

4. For an exchange about Howe's place among the Language poets, see Howe, "Interview" (1995).

5. In her introduction to the PMLA special topic *The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature*, Price notes the "commonsense Cartesianism" that "teaches us to filter out the look, the feel, the smell of the printed page. Hence critics' discomfort with purely bibliographic units" (12). Though there has been an "archival turn" in literary criticism, it has had more to do with critical methodology than with literature that is self-consciously archival, material, or bookish in form. Alternatively, see Pressman and Hayles, who have begun to grapple with what, in Hayles's words, "reading requires in the age of the aesthetic of bookishness" (231).

6. Interestingly, Dworkin's new monograph, *Dictionary Poetics*, ventures into the discovery of the "hidden logics" of avant-garde poetry that uses the dictionary as a "generative, structuring device," similar to Howe's use of the concordance (31, 27). In it Dworkin is also much more sensitive to "the bibliographic precision of language fixed in print" (9).

7. Gardner, Barbour, and Jennings are exceptions.

8. This concept is crucial for reconciling the immaterial form the collage poems take in Howe's collaborations with the musician David Grubbs with their material instantiations in published books. I would argue that both the recordings and the publications are, in fact, performances.

9. Howe is very conscious of the "social and economic networks of distribution" that "a printed book enters" (*Birth-mark* 46).

10. A genetic edition presents the transformation of a text over various stages of drafting; a documentary edition wants to preserve one version of a document by transcribing it as closely as possible into type; scholarly editions often aim to convey an author's final intentions.

11. As Tanselle, a dominant figure in the field, explains, the choices of a textual critic "will reflect, whether consciously or not, some point of view toward literature in general, some assumptions about the nature of poetic production, and some interpretation of the work in question and its constituent passages" ("Textual Criticism" [2012] 1426).

12. Howe is in fact taught in textual criticism classes as an editorial theorist. See Bornstein's "Teaching Editorial Theory to Non-Editors" for one syllabus that includes Howe (148, 159), and Kirschenbaum for a more recent example. Clark, Schultz, and West have written the only articles on Howe's *The Birth-mark* itself, interpreting it in relation to pragmatic philosophy, feminist historiography, and Bakhtinian heteroglossia, respectively.

13. In a helpfully descriptive article, Jennings traces the development of what she calls Howe's "facsimile aesthetic" and also points to the Franklin editions (and *The Birth-mark*) as an important turning point.

14. Howe points to the editors of a Friedrich Hölderlin edition who take the right approach, presenting the texts, in their words, "as events rather than objects, as processes rather than products" (qtd. in *Birth-mark* 19). She laments the fact that great male poets like Hölderlin and Percy Bysshe Shelley receive this editorial treatment, but not Dickinson (19).

15. In *Book Traces*, Andrew Stauffer develops a similar "affective biblio-critical method" he calls "intimate or micro-reading," which is "invested in the detailed, pathos-driven anecdote as the primary mode of engagement with the past" (13, 3, 11). The textual scholar Marta Werner, Howe's former student, just published a new edition of Dickinson's "Master" documents that she calls "an experiment in . . . intimate editorial investigation. It reconceives the editorial enterprise as a critical meditation and devotional exercise" (11).

16. Thanks go to Jerome McGann for pointing this out to me.

17. In *Debths*, Howe uses straw, spinning, and thread as an analogy for the collage poems. In *Concordance*, botanical references pervade the poems, from bits of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to lists of plant names. I cannot imagine Howe is not thinking about Dickinson's herbarium as well as playing on the literal meaning of *anthology*—a gathering of flowers.

18. Some *Concordance* collage poems are cut from a monograph of one of the foremost scholars of cognitive poetics, Reuven Tsur, who investigates "pre-categorical information"—the pre-semantic, psychosomatic something that inheres in words and gives poetry its effect.

19. Reflecting on Charles Olson's editor George Butterick and her own father's editorial work, Howe says, "You must erase yourself to do such work. . . . The care and sensitivity George gave to editing Olson's writing was heroic—in the fine sense of heroic: unselfish and daring, uncompromising" (*Birth-mark* 175).

20. Howe's project rhymes with Susan Stewart's *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* and *The Ruins Lesson*. For both Howe and Stewart, form is not a well-wrought urn but a site of sensory exchange, as Stewart argues: "It is precisely in *material* ways that poetry is a force against effacement—not merely for individuals but for communities through time as well" (2).

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Abstract: Susan Howe's recent collage poems—an intricate, sui generis form—are the flowering of her editorial theory, which I describe as "intimate editing." I challenge scholarly assumptions that sideline Howe's engagement with the field of textual criticism from accounts of her poetry by showing how her unique approach to texts puts avant-garde poetry and textual editing into conversation, introducing reciprocal possibilities for both. Poems can model new forms of editing, and editorial debates can expand the reach and resonance of innovative poetry. Drawing on *The Birth-mark*, Howe's collection of creative-critical essays that probe the motivations and ethos of textual criticism, I show how intimate editing expands the typical, often rigid, values of traditional editing and contributes to growing discussions about what a feminist textual criticism might look like. Then I discuss the collage poems, particularly those in *Concordance*, as whimsical manifestations of Howe's textual approach.