talks from the convention

"That Book's Been *Read*": Surface and Depth, Reading with Susan Howe

AMY HOLLYWOOD

"THAT BOOK'S BEEN *READ*." THE POET SUSAN HOWE SAID THIS ABOUT A COPY—MY COPY—OF HER BOOK, *THAT THIS*. IT HAS BEEN MAULED, spine not quite broken but on the verge, phrases scored under and over, words circled, passages marked with vertical lines, gnarled questions to myself from myself in handwriting only I can read. Program leaflets scrawled with notes are tucked between the endpaper and the back cover and transparent sticky tabs peak up over the top and out from the sides. The only thing I won't do is turn down the corner of a page. Everything else is fair game and the more I care about a book, the more abuse it gets. Fortunately Howe understands.

At my best, I remember what I read as a physical object, citations coming literally to hand as I figure the right depth, knowing whether what I need is recto or verso and roughly how far down the page. Marking up the text, often in pen, is a physical gesture that engenders a bodily memory—or it can be. I'd likely remember even better if I copied the entire work or passages from it by hand, as was common in manuscript and early book culture. Howe herself often transcribes other people's manuscripts, like those of the Edwards family, early American intellectuals about whom she writes in *That This* and elsewhere. But she also photocopies printed documents, including these typescripts, then cuts them up and makes poem collages.

Although digital tools allow you to underline and take notes on a laptop, tablet, or other device, the virtual encounter with articles and poems and books doesn't feel tactile to me the way the physical encounter with paper, cardboard, and glue or, more rarely, vellum, thread, and leather does. I certainly can't feel how many pages into a book a particular reference might lie or remember the position of a passage on a(n ever-shifting) screen. I don't believe I could ever know an e-book the way I know printed material and I don't think anybody could. But those of us raised in book cultures never know them the way literate and semiliterate medieval Christians knew the Bible and other material transmitted through manuscripts and recitation. Oral cultures are yet another, complex story.

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There are other things you can do with screens, though, things impossible with books, and sometimes I relish them. The concordance has gone the way of the dodo, for any bit of written material, once digitized, can be searched for particular words or word groups. (The most literate of medieval readers and writers were walking biblical concordances.) With the Internet one can achieve a seemingly endless depth—or, perhaps more accurately, breadth—of reference, an ever-expanding surface of interwoven text. That said, I love it when I hit a wall, when I find the thing that is unsearchable. There is a quiet here in which I thrill, a stillness against the noise, and it is a place in which I often find great solace.

All of this raises a series of questions: first, about the status, value, and meaning of reference if it comes, not from an individual's or community's accumulated knowledge, but from the apt manipulation of a search engine and, second, about the limits of both depth and breadth of reference as sources of pleasure in a text. One can't deny that there is a new kind of reach provided by digital technologies, but we need to understand better what this reach does and doesn't do. The obvious question to ask is how breadth and depth of reference differ. We can use a variety of tools to track citations, allusions, or formal similarities otherwise unknown to us. This seems somehow different from recognizing, consciously or unconsciously, a rhythm or an image or a series of words because of our familiarity with the source material itself. (And the truth is, we don't always know which of these two things is happening as we read, a point to which I will return.) I am not arguing—yet—for the superiority of one set of practices over the other, but simply for their difference. Surface reading might turn out to be more fruitful an enterprise than I first imagined, not in its putative refusal of interpretation but in its suggestion that in a new technological age, much of what used to be available only to those who had the time to cultivate a richly embodied depth of learning is now accessible to those for whom that knowledge is, at least initially, superficial.[1]

Maybe superficiality has been underrated. What I want to explore here is the way in which the widely shared and deeply known allusion may stand alongside the chance conjunctions enabled by new technologies; both are moments in which meaning is made, affect engendered, wonder struck. Howe's work exemplifies this doubleness, for she brings the planned and the aleatory together in remarkable ways. Howe insists, simultaneously, that nothing is chance and that everything is. A poet known for her vast learning, she writes, "I have always been interested in folktales, magic, lost languages, riddles, coincidence, and missed connections" (*Debths* 11). Her work does not demand control of its allusions, and with that relinquishment of authority the often barely legible poem opens itself to readers and to their learned and chance connections—and to feeling, the feelings that come to us through things we know deeply and through chance associations.[2] Then there are the moments when the search engine and my own set of references fail; while I may not always know from whence the words on the page are derived, that silent confusion itself is affective. Sometimes the most superficial of readings, the one that attends to the conjunction of words, phrases, images, sounds, and phonemes within the text as itself the site of significance, might be, paradoxically, the one that matters most deeply, not because its meanings can be deciphered, but because they cannot.

The best way to get at the simultaneous depth, breadth, and limit of reference in Howe's work, and to think about the interplay between the three, is to show the different modes of reading they elicit. One could pick any poem and almost any page, but I will focus on *That This*, published in 2010, and not just because it is the book of Howe's I have mauled the most. In it, Howe grapples with

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the death of her husband (her third, the philosopher Peter H. Hare); with Sarah Pierpont Edwards's (1710–58) response to the death of her husband, the theologian and philosopher Jonathan Edwards (1703–58); and with the almost entirely lost legacy of Jonathan Edwards's deeply learned sisters, wife, and daughters. Howe wrestles with loss and presence and absence, then, and also with reading and writing and the endless interplay of surfaces that might be understood as themselves always already constituting depths—not the depths of a text in need of excavation and explication, but my depths as a reader, feeling.

> Starting from nothing with nothing when everything else has been said
>
> (Howe, *That This* 11)

This single, unpunctuated line is the second paragraph of *That This*, coming just after Howe's description of her discovery of her husband's dead body: "I knew when I saw him with the CPAP mask over his mouth and nose and heard the whooshing sound of air blowing air that he wasn't asleep. No." Howe juxtaposes her refusal—"No."—with Sarah Edwards's letter of 3 July 1758 announcing the death of her husband, Jonathan Edwards, to one of their daughters: "Oh that we may kiss the rod and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness, that we had him so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. . . . We are all given to God: and there I am, and love to be" (qtd. in Howe, *That This* 12–13). "I admire," Howe writes, "the way thought contradicts feeling in Sarah's furiously calm letter" (*That This* 13).

The furiously calm contradictions of Sarah Edwards's letter find their justifying source in the psalm to which her words allude. Depth and breadth become difficult to disentangle. I know the words are biblical, a psalm even, but not which one. I have to look it up online. (Or should I say, I am *able* to look it up online, replacing a lament over memory lapse and lack of knowledge with an affirmation of the possibilities offered—and the enormous amount of time saved—by new technologies?) Psalm 2 opens with a question: "Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?" ("Psalm 2"). The answer, in the King James version, which Edwards would have known, defies summation. Reading the psalm, I am not always sure who is speaking to whom, although a better-trained reader of the Bible easily is. But there is no doubt what is being promised:

> The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying,
> Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.
> He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the LORD shall have them in derision.
> Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure.
> Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.
> I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.
> Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.
> Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.
> Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth.
> Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.
> Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.

The violence of these lines seems directed against just about everything, and yet they lead Sarah Edwards to claim a different affect.

Sarah, like all of her family, would have known the Psalms intimately through daily

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reading and prayerful meditation. Following ancient practices of psalm recitation, she uses the words of the Psalms to hone and redirect her feelings (Hollywood, "Song"). According to early Christian theologians, the entire range of human emotion is given voice in the Psalms, here properly directed toward God. The role of the Christian in prayer is to bring one's feelings to conform to that of the psalmist, or that of other biblical speakers standing in relationship to God, so that one's fear and sorrow, love and joy, might be affirmed and redirected. By this time in her life, after years of prayerful reflection on the Psalms, Sarah Edwards immediately channels her experience of rage and sorrow through the biblical text—this is the language with which she feels. She understands the rage and the violence of which the Psalms speak as directed against her husband and herself and her daughter, but she also, with ease, identifies the rod, which will "dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel," with Christ the Son and so with the promise of blessedness. Sarah internalizes not only the words of the psalmist but also a specific, Christological reading of them.

For Sarah Edwards, God's terrifying justice is the site of God's grace; the God who destroys is also the one who saves. Howe understands Sarah:

> For Sarah all works of God are a kind of language or voice to instruct us in things pertaining to calling and confusion. I love to read her husband's analogies, metaphors, and similes.
>
> For Jonathan and Sarah all rivers run into the sea yet the sea is not full, so in general there is always progress as in the revolution of a wheel and each soul comes upon the call of God in his word. (*That This* 12)

Scripture calls and gives a calling to Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, drawing them to God, in whom, Sarah writes, "I love to be" (qtd. in Howe, *That This* 13). Howe knows that Jonathan and Sarah Edwards read in this way, but she doesn't experience the same thing in the words of Scripture: "I read words but don't hear God in them" (Howe, *That This* 12).

Howe instead loves Jonathan Edwards's analogies, metaphors, and similes, most of them biblically based. Instead of hearing God in these words, though, she hears "the unpresentable violence of a negative double" (13). And this is where I get gloriously stuck in Howe's book. What is this "unpresentable violence"?

That This goes on to perform it in often illegible textual collages, strips of words and fragments of words cut from the writings of the Edwards family and other, unspecified texts, placed seemingly at random on the page. Howe cuts up pages and, she tells us, tapes them over each other, then photocopies the collage (31). There is both depth and breadth here; Howe creates a layering that then appears flat to us in print. The Psalms appear again, in a more hopeful light, although one that remains tethered to Howe's framing question, itself derived from the journal of Jonathan's sister, Hannah Edwards Wetmore (1713–73). The fragment from Wetmore's journal that Howe incorporates into *That This* contains the phrase "where shall I find Real," but the words that precede and follow it have been cut away (fig. 1). I could take a trip to the Edwards archive in New Haven, search through Wetmore's journal to find the words that follow "Real," discover what it is that she seeks. (And at some point, this may

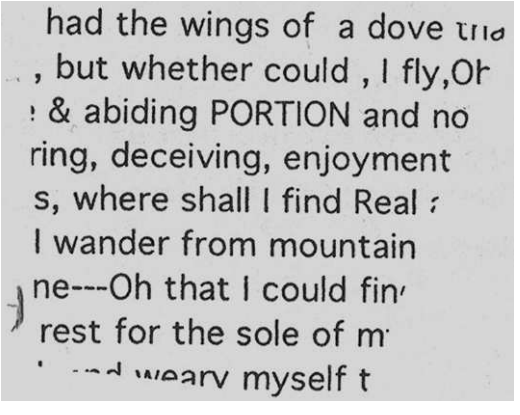


FIG. 1
A cut-out fragment from Hannah Edwards Wetmore's journal that appears in Susan Howe's *That This* (47).

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all be digitized. It may be now. I didn't look.) But that seems beside the point. Instead, I stay in my room while "I wander from mountain" and here, in the poem, find "rest for the sole" of my "weary" self.

"Maybe," Howe writes, "there is some not yet understood return to people we have loved and lost. I need to imagine the possibility even if I don't believe it" (*That This* 17). Her poems or her poem—I am never sure how best to describe the work—perform the impossible necessity of imagination. In them, or it, Howe returns to her husband—she returns to the Edwards family and others lost and absent—through these only partially legible textual collages. Her reading and her writing—of her husband's autopsy report, his e-mails, the common objects that catch her eye as she wrestles with the reality of his death, the paintings by Poussin and the art historian T. J. Clark's reflections on those paintings—all of this reading and writing and looking, and what she makes out of it, *is* the return:[3]

> This sixth sense of another reality even in simplest objects is what poets set out to show but cannot once and for all.
>
> If there is an afterlife, then we still might: if not, not. (34)

It's in these words that my restless imagination finds quiet, for in them I encounter "this sixth sense of another reality" even if it cannot be shown "once and for all." The "simplest objects" of my own losses surround me and in them I see flickers of those whom I yearn to see again; I feel them near me in Howe's poem.

Howe recognizes that the correlations running through her work might be illusory, like the philosopher's question about the quiddity, the whatness, of the color blue:

> Outside the field of empirically possible knowledge is there a property of blueness in itself that continues to exist when everything else is sold away? I keep going back in my mind to the tiny square remnant of Sarah Pierpont's wedding dress. This love relic has lasted over two hundred years in the form of a Prussian blue scrap. It says nothing at all to an outsider who can look at it without being seen. Could it be an illusory correlation that causes my brain to repetitively connect this single swatch with the early edition of *The New York Times* as it lay on our driveway the morning of January 3rd, and again with the bright cyan blue book jacket on the complimentary copy of *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* that arrived for Peter in the mail a month later? (32)

Is blueness real, shared, existent in the object regardless of the viewer? And if so, does the repetition of blue around her *mean* something? Are chance correlations, even of qualities that exist out there in the world, still illusory?

For Howe the answer lies in art. Thisbe's "cerulean toga" in a painting by Poussin and the blue fragment of Sarah Edwards's wedding dress "coexist in limit and in freedom where all things are transacted and spoken":

> I don't pretend to be saying God has promised any new grace concerning our scheme being brought to pass via parables of lost sheep. No, not the least shadow association even in the realm of wishes. Art is a mystery: artifice its form. Hannah has taken off her embroidered shoes.
>
> She is dipping her feet in varieties of light. (33)

Echoing William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Howe finds the promise of grace in the freedom of chance association engendered by art. Learning plays a role here; depth of reference enriches one's reading but does not exhaust it. The blues around me now, my blues and those I find by searching online and in books for Howe's blues and for new blues, create an ever-broadening field of reference.

I am reading, by chance, Michelle Detorie's *After-Cave*. These poems, this book-length poem—again, I find it hard to decide

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how best to characterize her writing—open(s) with a dedication:

> FOR THE GIRLS.
> FOR THE CREATURES.
> FOR EVERYBODY.

Animals, human and nonhuman, creatures, animate and inanimate, merge and mutate across Detorie's poems, as the "I" seeks shelter in the ruins of a world on the edge of the wild. The generosity of Detorie's opening, dedicatory gesture mirrors that of Howe's poems. In Detorie's closing page, I see blue:

> I've tethered the dogs to a rope belt that I wear around my waist. We go out looking for sticks, for meadows still blue with the asphalt glitter that rained down from the other side of the continent. Who can continue for us in our absence? Who?
>
> I hope it will be you. (81)

Just as Howe continues in her husband's absence, so we all continue in the absence of personal and historical—and, Detorie insists, environmental—losses; despite and in the midst of this wreckage, Detorie calls to her reader to continue to search for the blue.

And always, Howe reminds us, mystery remains. Alongside Howe's beloveds, known and unknown, presented and unpresentable, lies the almost buried violence or threat of violence that runs through *That This*. For Howe's phrase "unpresentable violence" appears in a sentence not about her own poem or about the psalm cited by Sarah Edwards. In the first part of *That This*, short paragraphs are separated by small horizontal lines. It seems important to type this all out myself, to make it visible to you:

> "Oh that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness, that we had him so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. . . . We are all given to God: and there I am, and love to be." I admire the way thought contradicts feeling in Sarah's furiously calm letter.
>
> We can't be limited to just this anxious life.
>
> ——
>
> Somewhere I read that relations between sounds and objects, feelings and thoughts, develop by association; language attaches to and envelopes its reference without destroying or changing it—the way a cobweb catches a fly.
>
> ——
>
> Now—putting bits of memory together, trying to pick out the good while doing away with the bad—I'm left with one overwhelming impression—the unpresentable violence of a negative double.
>
> ——
>
> He was lying with his head on his arm, the way I had often seen him lie asleep. I thought of Steerforth's drowned body in *David Copperfield*, also the brutality of sending young children away to boarding school to forge important ties for future life. Though Steerforth is a sadistic character his perfect name forms a second skin. Something has to remain to rest a soul against stone. (12–13)

What untold story lies here? What violence or sadism—and whose? Some things, perhaps, I don't (yet) want to know.

Still I continue to prod at the poem, reading across the text, in and through and behind it, to try and understand another layer of its pain:

> What treasures of knowledge we cluster around. Fear—reunited with other precommunicable penumbral associations. God is an epigraph inscribed on memory. Blown back among ghosts—our abstract Parent restores order with covering rituals. (17)

Howe's father, away during World War II while she and her mother live in Buffalo, the town she later comes to inhabit with Hare. Hare's first wife, Daphne; Daphne's family home in Buffalo; he welcomes Howe into the house, to save her—money, but not only that; Daphne's ancestors welcome her. And yet at

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the cemetery, she does not have his name. Peter Hare, like the rabbit.

> History intersects with unanswered questions while life possesses us, so we never realize to the full one loyal one—only an elegiac ideal. I remember needing to take off and turn off the fogged-up sleep apnea mask.
>
> Your head was heavy as marble against the liberty of life. (19)

Charles Dickens's Steerforth, a figure of beauty and betrayal and lost opportunities; marble as a headstone or the stone in a columbarium, the columbarium in which Howe places Hare's ashes; my dove in the cleft of the rock; Christ is the rock, Christ the dovecote, but not for Howe. (The columbarium, the crypt in which secrets lie.)

> An official at the faux-Gothic gatehouse at the Delaware Avenue entrance to Buffalo's Forest Lawn Cemetery, where urns containing "cremains" are officially approved and money for the internment changes hands, politely insisted he knew Mr. Hare had a wife, but I wasn't her.
>
> "We're together, we're together," I told myself. All I lack is your personal name on a tilted stone. (29)

There is something here that is not for me to know.

In a barely legible line, Howe writes—an unknown source declares—"Haughtiness is always little violence" (91). Then the final section of *That This*, "untitled," returns us to the altar:

> That a solitary person bears
> witness to law in the ark to
> an altar of snow and every
> age or century or day *is* (105)

I am occasionally—more often with each passing year—willing to sacrifice meaning on the altar of what *is*.

I no longer need to *know* everything, as if I ever could. That this *is*. Sometimes that is enough, more than enough—as much as feeling or thought can contain.

The sacrifice of easily deciphered meaning—perhaps of any clear and discernible meaning at all—is one that many experience as alienating, more than a little haughty, in its apparent disdain for the reader. But what if we take confusion and mystery and unknowing less as a challenge, as a door shut in one's face, than as an opening, an opportunity, an invitation to readers to bring themselves to the text? What if we allow ourselves to find ourselves in the book before us, to search out chance connections, to take an interest in the difficult and see where it leads? Howe's most recent book of poetry, *Debths*, draws its title from a passage in *Finnegans Wake* and follows the path of a single word. I can't pretend to provide a full Joycean context. Howe doesn't try, although the passage from *Finnegans Wake* resonates across *Debths*. Mostly, though, the *word* interests her, for *debths* contains debts and depths in a way only attention to surfaces shows. We have to see the *b* replacing the *p*—I didn't, for a while—to feel the weight of the punning elision. (It becomes, paradoxically, clearer in the context of the passage in *Finnegans Wake*, which serves as an epigraph to Howe's book. The difficulty of the language throughout the lines demands that we pay attention to every detail within them.)

Surface, depths, and debts are inseparable in Howe's work and they all, I think, invite the reader to participate in the ongoing palimpsestic work of making art, writing history, feeling absence and presence in the common things around us. In a series of collage poems, Howe and her sources—I haven't tried to track them down—insist:

> *A document*, the parasitic
> nvolve a structure of layer
> age placed on top of anoth
> m its other, as if to infinit
> (*Debths* 67)

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The "original source" is "history scattered" and regathered in the place of the poem (68). This gathering can never be complete; the fragments, in their refusal of completion, are occasions of feeling.

The poems in the final section of *Debths* are sparse, almost illegible. "RIDING WESTWARD," "Death the TREE OF KNOWL": the words are just barely visible (135, 137). Howe is moving toward the west, toward the setting sun, toward death; there "[u]pon the frontier of unimaged night" is where those of us who remain live, she tells us, with the absent and the traces of their presence, among common things: "A luminous aura surrounds all things noumenal" (139, 39). Like Howe, with Howe, I sit with what is, and I feel.

Notes

1. Despite an ostensibly shared agenda, critics seem to be doing many different things under the label of surface reading, and I am not sure that *superficiality* is the right word for what at least some of these critics are after. I am interested in it because I often find myself reading quickly across the work of a wide array of difficult contemporary poets, looking for places that arrest my attention or stop my heart, then going back and burrowing in, around, under certain words or images or sentences. For examples of surface reading, see the essays collected in Best and Marcus, and, for one of many salient critiques of surface reading, see Baumbach et al.

2. Howe's chance mostly is enacted in libraries and around their edges. My thinking about how to read with chance has been particularly enabled by Spahr.

3. What gets lost in this reading of *That This* is the centrality of touch to the book, a topic I explore briefly in "Thin Wings."

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