A PILGRIMAGE TO NOWHERE: THE SPIRALING MYSTICISM OF FANNY HOWE

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ABSTRACT

Fanny Howe is one of America’s most thought provoking poets, and her “experimental” style often draws comparisons to the avant-garde L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. This study hopes to dislodge this affiliation by illustrating Howe’s affinities to writings in the Christian mystical tradition. To do this, elements of Howe’s writing are laid next to Michel de Certeau’s Mystic Fable, as well as Jacques Derrida’s On the Name. Through close reading and critical analysis, I conclude that Fanny Howe is in fact a modern day mystic writer par excellence.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped along the way, with special thanks to Carolyn Forche and Fanny Howe.

Many thanks,
Steven L. Kanai
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INTRODUCTION:

Will I be happier if I call God Brahman?
Will I be happier if I call God Divine?
Will I be happier if I call God the Trinity?
...

I will only be happier if I write a poem. (Sun 170)
...

Why write if it is not to align yourself with time and space? (Sun 173)

Fanny Howe speaks to us softly, though her words bear elder heaviness and careful attention. In both poetry and prose she is a writer of serious intent and dazzling grit, who is engaged with ideas of justice, faith, language, and beauty. Her lucid and natural prose, notably her semi-autobiographical memoir and collection of artful essays -- The Winter Sun and The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Life and Word -- reveal an eclectic mind that is deeply entrenched in the pursuit of theological, philosophical, and ontological revelation. These inquiries lead her far afield and her way is guided by an incredibly diverse array of similar pilgrims. From Thomas Aquinas to Simone Weil, and Franz Fanon to Hafiz, the mystical Persian poet, Howe displays an endless desire and capacity to, sponge-like, absorb. Her essays, poems, and narratives sweep us up and away as we both bear witness to and commune with this modern Catholic convert picking her way amongst the ruins of theologies in disrepair and axioms half-buried under atomic soot. Writing under the face of a fearful and uncertain future where on the one hand she felt “disposable as pieces of tissue paper and could blow away like ashes” and on the other was taught the values of a humanist education, and learned “languages, poetry, sciences and
athletics,” (Sun 5) hers is a poetry that recedes from determination and is ever entangled within the conflicts of a complex and evolving subjectivity. Among the poet’s chief internal concerns is what to make of a language that does not fully live up to the demands of a life spent testing its boundaries -- “why was I chained to these language problems that I myself had created?” (6).

Language becomes both judge and defendant during this journey, and bears us uneasily along. we uneasy upon it. Playfully, she lulls us awake with rhythmic lyricism and dream-like mindscapes, then draws our attention to the shadow patterns of our prison bars, the limits of sign and signified. Always in pursuit of “a new way of reading,” (Dress 14) Howe presses against the walls of her linguistic prison, yet is careful enough, perhaps due to a true love of the words, to avoid a complete collapse of the structure. But we would be wrong to label her exclusively a “language” (L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E) poet and ignore the complexities that lurk within works that marry Howe’s keen intellect to a feast of intricate ideas uniformly impressed with deep seeded empathy, and a relentless search for Truth in a bracketed age. Howe is invested in humanity, an investment that is born out with pain and joy, fear and trembling fingers. We cannot avoid the social, as it is engrained within the divine, so that poverty and war become questions of faith that offer no easy answers and are central meditations in her “single liturgy.” Recalling Doctor King, Howe perceives the Messianic message very simply: “Everyone has to be safe for everyone to be safe” (Sun 169). “What would Jesus do?” is a question that Howe transforms into a defiant cry of self-effacement that echoes and re-approaches the Sermon on
the Mount from an elevation that bears witness to the technological atrocities of the twentieth century:

If I were Jesus would you wreck the house and terrify my family?  
If I was Jesus, would you bomb my trees, my place  
Of parables, the fig trees and the rivers of wheat?  
If I were Jesus --

Well I’m not. So please -- Go right ahead. (Lyrics 14)

Reversals, missteps, and bewilderment mark her poetry. Perhaps this is where we might begin to read her, bewildered ourselves. Howe’s lyrics defy conventional forms of meter and rhyme. The lines are often given as broken things resisting the surrounding void of white space, the vertigo of verse-libre. In her unique, “experimental” way, Howe has developed a poetics of dislocation and strangeness

she said I said why (Gone 4)

that we might trace via the men and women who have variously achieved their own bewilderment and appear as spectral sign-posts throughout her prose. She speaks of them, with them, as old friends or distant relatives; they are, it would seem, as important to her spiritual pilgrimage as her own transformational experience, and strangely resemble the spirits encountered by Dante in his circumambulatory journey though the furnace of his poetic conversion. With uncanny perception, Howe tells us of their fears, passions, genius, and in rigorous yet plainspoken prose, imaginatively reconstructs aspects of their transcendent lives. Aquinas, who, bumping his head on a tree, regards his life’s work as so much straw. Weil, who died world-weary in the nightmare of a globe on fire. Stein, who comforted others in the gas
chamber’s maw. Howe impresses us with their resilience, and her virtuoso treatment of their lives and work is a unique blend of personal memoir, rigorous scholarship, and captivating narrative, fluidly joined with a remarkably unremarkable prose style.

Yet, the guides cannot offer certainty for Howe, whom we suspect would avoid such comfort instinctively. For this pilgrim, doubt is the physical double of belief (Gone 25), like a foe one is (secretly) grateful for having. Her creative propulsion is fueled and sustained by a paradoxically felicitous doubt, and we must consider the peculiar nature of her ideas of doubt and faith that she engages on her quest for elusive yet unmistakable love -- love spoken of by John Freccero in his critical reading of Dante’s infernal pilgrimage as “a spiritual motion of the mind as it moves to God” (107). This movement, the “slow circular motion” of grace (Gone 27) is the inescapable figure within Howe’s imaginative space, the pattern “imprinted” on the work before it is articulated in sound or writing, and the spiraling that births the bewildered wanderer (Dress 9). The movement occurs at varying levels of Howe’s experience in the world which can’t help but influence each other (Dress 7).

The “strange” I that emerges within her poems, dreams, and fiction moves within varying fields of doubt and faith, towards the love of God, yet towards a God whose presence is often felt most forcefully in absentia, in lack. What is there to do after Easter, she asks, when the body of the Christ is powerfully, essentially, gone? For me this is the first cut that must be dressed when dueling with Howe’s doubt which I believe, and hope to demonstrate through the course of our inquiry into her poetry and poetics, approaches the doubt-faith relationship of Christian
mysticism. Of course, *mysticism* is a word wrought with an accumulation of meanings. Thus a brief venture into the historical depths of the Christian mystic tradition, if we might speak of it as such, will be necessary to establish a feel for the terrain in which I intend to (perhaps) locate our poet. During this segment of our inquiry I will draw heavily from Michel de Certeau, whose book *The Mystic Fable* is a trove of mystical hermeneutics. Plotinus, Pseudo Dionysius, Eckhart, and Silesius will also aid us in this effort, and Angelus Silesius offers something of a segue into another corpus which cannot be ignored.

While Fanny Howe writes mystical texts, I would simultaneously insist that she also draws near the aporetic difference of deconstruction, and with this in mind, what I will work to open are the connective tissues that join Derrida’s treatment of the negative theological tradition with Howe’s poetry and lyrical prose. In his notable so-called “religious turn,” Derrida addresses the question of God within the framework of the *vianegativa*, a strain of Christian mystical thought that draws from the Neoplatonic notion of the ineffable (Franke 62). What Derrida finds in the apophatic (empty) space of negative theology is a fertile discursive field for a hospitality to come. Derrida meditates on Silesius’ epigrammatic verses in his exploration of the *vianegativa*(and in so doing finds a trace of hope, perhaps even a foundation for new [justice]. It is my estimation that reading Howe next to Derrida during a time when the foundation and meaning of theistic Christianity has “trembled” will produce an understanding of our arrival to this point, and an arrow directing us to the next crossroads. Our passage towards a critical approach of Fanny Howe will be a necessarily circuitous route, with “no up and down, no inside or outside,” that
rather circles and remains open to -- like a dream -- “strange returns and recognitions and never a conclusion” (Dress 9). We will visit and revisit a number of staggering geographies, including the infernal trappings of Dante’s hell, the otherworldly garden of Bosch, and the marginal spaces in between. Sometimes on foot, at other moments seated at the window of a public omnibus, we will survey these vast literary geographies and observe how the poet twists their borders in her topsy-turvy poetics of bewilderment.

What I hope to avoid are rude exclamations of causality. For example, crafting arguments that serve to point and say “aha! here is how the poet arrived at such and such place in her work, by reading so and so.” While sometimes illuminating, these proclamations are not aligned with the spirit of this endeavor and are by nature concerned with histories. I am instead interested in futures, possibilities. Michel deCerteau asks, what can be done with Christianity after the twentieth century (Palmer 52)? In hesitant tones, Fanny Howe might be offering us an answer. But the response to Certeau’s call is an answer that never admits itself as such, as answer. Imbedded within the poet’s work is a profound uncertainty and threat of spontaneous collapse. There is a tranquil understanding of nominal “weakness,” which she embraces with the defiance of “tramps who travel light” (Dress 6). Howe never lays claim to a path out of the wilderness. That task is left to writers whose narratives assemble “around courage, discipline, conquest, and fame,” on the one hand, and pilgrims who follow after her and puzzle at the maze of images before them, on the other. This, then, is another goal in our exercise. Formulated as a question, we ask, “where does Howe lead us?” when discarded alongside the old verities is the notion of
verity itself. When we enter the text that Howe has crafted, it is not with a suspended disbelief but disbelief that circles, predatory and threatening, admitting a kind of ‘bend but don’t’ break tension in the narrative or lyric. Howe puts the relationship between narrative unity and uncertainty this way:

Sustaining a balance between the necessity associated with plot and the blindness associated with experience -- in both poetry and fiction -- is the trick for me. *Dreams* are constantly reassuring happenings that illuminate methods for pulling this off. (*Dress* 7, emphasis mine)

Dreams are the model that inform the text, and Howe has created what can only be described as a dream-text par excellence with her prose poem, *The Lives of a Spirit*. Howe “returns” to the dream (*Dress* 7) as an entrance into the text, and composes a unique narrative that eschews all “the usual stuff of initiation and success,” in favor of “weakness, fluidity, concealment, and solitude” that “assume their place in a kind of dream world” (*Dress* 6). Ultimately, it is a unique narrative structure that blends the elements of a dream (transience, uncertainty, fear) with features of traditional narrative (spatial and temporal unity). This experimental feature of the text (which is present throughout Howe’s corpus but is strongest here) makes *The Lives of a Spirit* an appealing work to explore in light of Richard Kearney’s recent book, “*Anatheism*.”

Kearney is devoted to exploring ideas that resound with striking familiarity to the close reader of Fanny Howe. The “Anatheistic wager,” as Kearney presents it, is caught up in a return to God after first faith and final doubt. So we have before us three major tasks. The first is to read Fanny Howe within the context of the Christian mystical tradition from Plotinus to Angelus Silesius. The imaginative reconstructions of mystical archetypes by Certeau will provide a framework in which to test the hypothesis that our poet is a *modern participant in this cannon*. 
The second task is a critical analysis of her work next to Derrida’s *Sauf le Nom*, or *On The Name*. The third and final task is reading Howe’s narrative structure through the hermeneutic framework of “anatheism”, established by Richard Kearney. In navigating these critical challenges my hope is that the reader will gain an enhanced understanding of Fanny Howe’s work and a new critical appreciation of its rigorous construction.

Before we embark I feel the urge to offer my sincerest thanks and gratitude to Fanny Howe, whose generosity cannot be overstated and whose gracious assistance throughout this project has been of invaluable worth.
Chapter 1: Getting Lost (Way Out There)

“If you could take my hand and lead me along the streets and paths with your free hand outstretched and finger pointing to a future place and say, That is where we are going. Then even if what I saw ahead was chaos and pain, I could think, There is no reason to fear at all.” (WS, 11)

I cannot think of a better way to begin a discussion of Fanny Howe than with these lines and this sentiment. Roiling within these lyric paths are ideas of logic and faith that dog her poetry and bleed into her prose. It speaks to a “backwards logic”\(^a\) that defies the plodding lineation of events and reaches beyond what is given, towards a vision or revelation that promises a real future, instead of the almost-present where “everything happens that can” (Sun 6). Expressed in this small stanza is a plea for existential certainty, and perhaps this urgent desire is the lowest common denominator in all of Howe’s recent poetry (On the Ground, The Lyrics, Gone, The Lives of a Spirit). It is an inauguration, a nod to the path and its trailhead, the first steps of a pilgrimage, conversion, future. A kind of sigh at the base that breaths out from doubt. If you could, possibly, take my hand, and in this gesture ward me from the thorns and dust of the road, then that would ease the passage. If you could take in your hand my share of fear, that would make the first step no harder than the last rest. This is the sigh of the spiritual pilgrim, whose trail both dizzies on the precipice and is yet safeguarded from the abyss by a steadying hand. I think of Boethius and Lady Philosophy, as well as Dante and Virgil whose relationship is one of pilgrim-guide par excellence. Dante’s “master and author” offers his hand to the lost poet

\(^a\)“A friend wrote down some words shortly before he died: ‘Poetry is backwards logic. You can’t write poetry unless you have knowledge of, or taste for, this backwards way of finding truth.” (Sun 6)
entrapped by the three beasts representing the most mortifying spiritual uncertainty (Dante 27). In this moment what Dante needs is a hand to keep him upright and remove his doubt, even as Virgil’s other hand points towards the gate of Hell (“even if what I saw ahead was chaos and pain...”). It is doubt of a tyrannical order, activated by the most strenuous honesty of religious conversion. The dungeon of despair in which Howe reminds us: “multitudes succumb to the sorrow induced by an inexact vocabulary” (Gone 23). Yet these lines are fit for this beginning, less because of what they represent in their trembling, more for the ultimate hope that they leave us with -- “There is no reason to fear at all.”

The stanza is almost mathematical in its simplicity; the equation has only a few important variables: beginning, pain, and end. Simplicity soaks them with the tenor of childhood, and reminds us that questions of faith have no age. Indeed this expression translated into religious language symbolizes the problem of faith and demonstrates what Howe has been both consciously and unconsciously engaged with since childhood. Early in The Winter Sun, she tells of her experience being put to bed early when the sun was still up, and how the star would transform into

“a living presence that I called (secretly) God. Whether it was cold, yellow, white, warm, orange, or a spread of violet, that light was my surrounding other... and from what I could tell, it would disappear with age.” (Sun 21)

Perhaps Howe has always been trying to retrieve this relationship with her Other that was lost with age and exposure. This movement from God, to later, G-d (and in our chapter focusing on Kearney’s anatheism, back to God), is the motion that we must be mindful of throughout this
discourse. It is the motion from security to fear, and its jarring experience has led Howe out onto the pilgrim’s path in exercise of “a vocation that has no name” (Sun 21). The nature of her path, and the necessary obstacles that she encounters will be our topic for this chapter, which will, as it were, get us lost in the wilderness of Christian mysticism. What is mysticism? Specifically, what is Christian mysticism? Are there certain qualifications that, when met, evince a literature that one might call “mystic literature”? What would be the heart of such a literature, and where might we find it? Defining mysticism is not an easy task, and serializing the particular tradition known as “negative theology,” which we will visit a little later, is perhaps even more difficult. Superficially, we can trace the origins of Western mystic thought to the Pre-Socratics and, subsequently, to Plato. From there we might identify strong ties between Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Philo to the dogma developed by the early fathers like Origen and the pseudo-Dionysius (Franke 65). Such basic conceptions as the Trinity and the Incarnation, taken for granted today as part of accepted theological tradition, were once “mystical doctrines formed dogmatically” (Louthe 1). Andrew Louth is puzzled as to “how dogmatic and mystical theology could ever have become separated,” but, quoting Thomas Merton, recognizes that ‘dogmatic and mystical theology, or theology and “spirituality” [have] been set apart in mutually exclusive categories, as if mysticism were for saintly women and theological study were for practical but, alas, unsaintly men’ (Origins 1). Perhaps there is no need for such a binary, but the result of historical vectors has left little doubt that such a divide does exist. A friend’s facebook profile advertises her as a “spiritual” person, but not necessarily a religious one and my unscientific observation of the young generation’s religious tendencies confirms that she is in large company.
Does her spiritual faith practiced beyond the church buildings and traditional Christian faith communities strive to attain “direct apprehensions of God who has revealed himself” (1)? Is this extra-theological directness essentially “mystical”? Where is mysticism to be found, then, in this strange land of the post-religious? Surveying a number of mystical expressions and tendencies will be the best way to begin engaging with the ultimate question that this chapter pursues: does Howe’s literature belong to that corpus we deem “mystic”?

Plato speaks of the ineffable, transcendent One (Franke 62). Philo insists that God is unknowable in his ousia (essence), and knowable only in his contact with man, who is prompted by this relationship to form a “mystic vocabulary” of initiation and mysteries. Plotinus would fertilize the minds of Augustine, Boethius, Dante, Meister Eckhart, Coleridge and T.S. Eliot, with his ideas of an “overflowing” emanation positioning the intelligence of man within the unknowable One. E.R. Dodds explains Plotinus’s emanation this way:

For the Outgoing his favorite image is that of an expanding circle, whose radii all take their rise in the pure simplicity of an unextended and indivisible point and carry outwards towards the circumference a trace of that potent simplicity, which fades gradually as the circle expands, but is never wholly lost. We may think of the continuously expanding and continuously weakening circle of ripples that you get when you throw a stone into still water -- save that here there is no stone-thrower, and no water either: reality is the ripples and there is nothing else. (Louthe, op. cit., 130)

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b.“Do not, then, hope ever to be able to apprehend Me or any of My powers in Our essence. But I readily and with right goodwill will admit you to a share of what is attainable.” (Louthe 20).
This analogy implies that ascension towards the One is actually a movement of withdrawal. As the soul approaches the One, it enters deeper and deeper into itself. To find the One is to find oneself. Plotinus rhapsodically meditates:

‘Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland’: this is the soundest counsel. But what is this flight? How are we to gain the open sea? For Odysseus is surely a parable to us when he commands the flight from the sorceries of Circe or Calypso -- not content to linger for all the pleasure offered to his eyes and all the delight of sense filling his days.

The Fatherland to us is There whence we have come, and There is the Father...But how are you to see into a virtuous soul and know its loveliness? Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work...When you know that you have become this perfect work, when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining can shatter that inner unity, nothing from without clinging to the authentic man, when you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature, wholly that only veritable Light which is not measured by space, not narrowed to any circumscribed form nor again diffused as a thing void of term, but ever unmeasurable as something greater than all measure and more than all quantity -- when you perceive that you have grown to this, you are now become very vision. Now call up your confidence, strike forward yet a step -- you need a guide no longer. Strain and see. (Louthe 40)

Where can we find this Fatherland, and how will we recognize our arrival? Is mystical experience a matter of purification, of sculpting oneself apart from those who would sculpt you? Must the mystic retreat from the world and renounce the senses? Must the mystic aspire to an experience that might be regarded as “super-natural,” an experience that defies (bewilders?) the senses? I think that the answer to these questions, when posed as absolute imperatives, is no, but it is worth pausing on the inquiries that gather around so-called mystical writing. In a sense, the
meaning of ‘mystic,’ in true mysterious fashion, assembles less around what we might say of it, and more around what we might ask about it. We might wager that the process of identifying a work of mystic writing is less concerned with specific qualities found in the text and more inclined to observe tone, tenor, texture. This position mirrors the bewildered bard’s experience in the world:

The whirling that is central to bewilderment is the natural way for the lyric poet. A dissolving of particularities into one solid braid of sound is her inspiration. (Dress 18)

This has a distancing effect on the dervish who spins and sees the from every angle at once.

The writing itself withdraws with the soul of its author, yet the mystic vocabulary leaves a distinct impression on the mind of a reader. I describe Plotinus as rhapsodic, which bears a moment of reflection. Rhapsody is a privilege of the initiate who crosses over and returns again to relate her vision, reminding everyone else what they are not capable of experiencing. Within poetic discourse dating again to the Greeks, the rhapsode looms large and strikes an ominous figure for the uninitiate. Such persons are dangerous in their ecstatic inebriation, and seem to derive a transcendent power from an intimate understanding of the spoken word.

That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.\textsuperscript{d}

For this reason, for daring to assault the tower of Custom she is pushed out towards the harshest terrain. She makes people uncomfortable, while Carlyle reminds us that “Custom doth make dotards of us all,” and in the middle of a book wryly written “about” clothes he flies towards the mystic sphere as well:

\begin{quote}
Were it not miraculous, could I stretch forth my hand, and clutch the Sun?
Yet thou seest me daily stretch forth my hand, and therewith clutch many a thing, and swing it hither and thither. Art thou a grown Baby, then, to fancy that the Miracle lies in miles of distance, or in pounds of avoirdupois of weight; and not see that the true inexplicable God-revealing Miracle lies in this, that I can stretch forth my hand at all...
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{(Sartor Resartus 199)}

This represents another feature on the hooded face of mysticism: a salvaging of the ordinary. On an endless search and rescue mission, mystic literature wants to reinscribe mundane signifieds. Strain and see, exhorts Plotinus. Miracles are in the palm of our hands! shouts Carlyle. Lifting veils, cleansing doors, the mystic is an otherworldly janitor. But Howe’s revelations prefer to arrive through the back door, and when they do, when her insights strike at the heart of our condition in the world, she does so obliquely with, say, a quote or exotic saying, rarely offering an absolute answer, preferring to revel in the mystery of the question:

The human heart, transforming on a seventy-two-hour basis (the Muslim measurement of a day in relation to conversion of faith and conduct) in a state of \textit{bewilderment}, doesn’t want to answer questions so much as lengthen the resonance of those questions. \textit{(Dress 20)}.

\textsuperscript{d}From Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem \textit{Kubla Khan}, ln. 45-54.
\textsuperscript{e} Just prior to this passage, the author dwells on the nature of time and place: “
She is writing here of spiritual progressions, and of questioning the decisions one makes over the course of a lifetime -- of “leaving and returning” and wondering if you made the right choice (Sun 20). Children, jobs, houses all amount to choices that “matter exactly as much as they don’t matter,” (Gone 27) and are effectual only insofar as the decisions surrounding them resound within the heart. In other words, how deeply do these questions amplify the urge to question in the first place -- to what degree do they cause one to doubt. In Howe’s state of bewilderment one is less concerned with a transcendent apprehension (aligned with the ‘eureka’ moment that Carlyle’s ejaculatory prose mimics) and more invested in a mode of thinking that threatens such moments with obsolescence. The work of a bewildered pilgrim avoids affirmations. Instead, “bewilderment circumnavigates, believing that at the center of errant or circular movement is the empty but ultimate referent” (Dress 20). Our expectations turned upside down, error is valued over precision and circular, indirect, processions are preferred to the crow’s flight path. After all, “doubt it what allows a single gesture to have a heart,”

But for the mystic who would also be a guide, the navigation is never complete [Sisyphus]. The language is never clean enough. Again, Plotinus:

We must be patient with language; we are forced for reasons of exposition to apply to the Supreme terms which strictly are ruled out; everywhere we must read ‘so to speak’. (Louth 37)

This is a wonderfully Deconstructive sentence. A tree is only a tree, so to speak -- in name only[différance]. At the same time we read soto (that we might) speak. Here Plotinus reveals the double bind of language from a certain mystical standpoint. Plagued by a nagging mistrust
of words, the mystic can never escape their utility, and is paradoxically bound to express this frustration with the very artificialities she would cast off! Or as Howe quips: “if a bird has a problem with its whistle, it has to whistle to fix it” (Dress 166). Is mystic language then a peculiar game of words? A circular vocabulary that is incapable of admitting Truth? Or is there a higher affirmation. This is the question posed to Zen masters accused of flouting the conventions of logic to embrace some diluted, “mystical” (in the pejorative) discourse. The master says:

Empty-handed I go, and behold the spade is in my hands;
I walk on foot, and yet on the back of an ox I am riding;
When I pass over the bridge,
Lo, the water floweth not, but the bridge doth flow. ¹

Suzuki wants the novitiate Zen practitioner to understand that Zen is both logical and illogical, but more importantly grasp that there really is no such thing as logic and illogic in the first place. In Zen this higher affirmation, which cannot be obtained with the intellect alone, is called satori, and sometimes arrives in a flashing instant, rupturing the fabric of dualism (spade/no spade, ox/no ox, etc). For many it is the result of hours spent in zazen (meditation) and working through koans (often translated imprecisely as “riddles”) (Zen 108). What is the sound of one hand clapping? The master was asked to explain the ultimate principle of Buddhism. He replied by pointing to the cypress tree in the courtyard. When the mind has ripened enough, it is like a heavy fruit that only requires a gentle shake to drop from its place on the bough. This shaking

¹This is the gatha of Fudaishi. Suzuki uses it to illustrate how Zen tends to deal with questions of logic
might be the result of a common event. I drink too fast and the milk runs down my chin. I am walking and bang my shin on a fallen branch. A simple occurrence that dislodges the mind, and suddenly the world is seen anew. We read this next to Howe writing on bewilderment and recognize an unmistakably similar tenor and tone:

Bewilderment is an enchantment that follows a complete collapse of reference and reconcilability. It breaks open the lock of dualism (it’s this or that) and peers out into space (not this, not that).

The achievement of satori and bewilderment is a matter of perception, but it is of a perception that and right perception is like a mirror wiped clean of dust. When the mirror (a favored Zen symbol for the mind) is clean and the dust is removed, what remains in the glass is only what has always been there, nothing more. Doors, dirty language, janitors.

Howe’s work revolves around this question of what language can do. But she is not content to be patient with the language as Plotinus recommends. Instead Howe bunkers down with Simone We recall Aquinas who bumped his head on a tree branch and looked on his life’s work as so much straw. Suzuki attests to similar experiences.

The final line of verse in Wedding Dress resounds nicely with this sentiment: “It was the sycamore nothing more.”

It is well to note that, although surpassing the scope of our discourse here, a comprehensive study of Fanny Howe would not be complete without exploring how extensively the various so-called “Eastern” religious traditions have influenced her thought and work. She scatters Hindu and Buddhist phrases throughout the text like gems she has accumulated over a lifetime of earnest mining. Tangentially, part of her unique genius lies in this ability to collect and judiciously synthesize fragments of conversations, often made in passing, with the subtle meditations of a day. Sometimes it is a conversation with herself -- an internal dialogue that might be recalled as a dream -- at other moments it is a befriended monk, an eager student, or family member that jogs her imagination. One such fragment inserted into a section that wrestles with her lexicographical decision (“Will I be happier if I call God Brahman?”), is quite essential to understanding her disposition towards inter-religious study: “A Benedictine friend said there are three levels of transreligious experience: “My religion is best.” The second level: “All religions are the same.” And a third level that changes the first two: “Through a deep reading of my own tradition, I find that all religious traditions converge.” (Sun 168)
Weil, who’s “super-human” efforts to transcend the language barrier seems to inspire and shake the poet, who quotes from Weil’s “Human Personality”:

> At the very best, a mind enclosed in language is in prison. It is limited to the number of relations which words can make simultaneously present to it; and it remains in ignorance of thoughts which involve the combination of a greater number.... The intelligent man who is proud of his intelligence is like a condemned man who is proud of his cell.

Weil makes pronouncements such as this one with a sledgehammer. She staked her life on these beliefs and Howe reconstructs the toll it took on her well-being -- “She saw herself as stuck in fact with a rational prose line for her surgery on modern thought” (Gone 24). Stuck in this way, both shackled by a language that proved the weakest link, and stuck in fact (logos, logic), “Weil died in a hospital in England -- of illness and depression -- determined to know what it is to know,” (23) the casualty of an inexact, ultimately insufficient vocabulary. Howe and Weil share a remarkable kinship. Such mysteriously formed relationships are well impossible to fathom. Yet RomanaHuk displays an artisan touch with an elegant glossing of Howe’s sojourn to Weil’s grave in England:

> She had begun as one might expect, or indeed as a scientist or phenomenologist would, by moving from thing to thing: by filming Weil's "house, front and back" (128), and moving toward her grave but finding it only by error, by getting lost, by "mak[ing] a huge blunder"— only then, unintentionally, "rounding a corner, [she] saw a big sign: SIMONE WEIL AVENUE" (131-32). In other words, she comes late upon a "sign" of her presumably well-known, deeply loved object—which ironically becomes the beginning (or title) of her "work"—only after her intentions break down, after becoming "bewildered," attending to what arises out of the "emptiness" of the unpredicted.
There is an element of grace in this tale. It emerges when Howe turns toward the grave after capturing, documenting, and examining the secondary (both in importance to Howe and in relation to Weil’s ultimate referent) objects of her desire, Weil’s things. In this turn Howe is disoriented, her “intentions break down” and she is “bewildered,” directionless even when her goal is so very close. Geographical bewilderment is an increasingly rare experience in a world of global positioning systems and pocket computers, but here we see how invaluable such a condition is, and how what it produces in the stomach --something similar to the pit that forms when you think a wallet is lost, or some other such object that is powerfully enmeshed with your secure identity -- can prime the bewildered subject for a moment of grace. In this helpless moment Howe receives a sign (Simone Weil Avenue). It is the trace that reorients her back onto the path, and is like starting over once more. The sign gives Howe a new life in the moment when her pilgrimage is threatened with termination, and this can surely be interpreted as an act of (mystical) grace.

We have surveyed the general topography but are still only tentatively toeing the borders of what will become a mystical landscape. The survey is meant to engage our minds in the mystic register in which I believe Howe writes. From here we might continue our exploration of the the mystic with the fragmentary works of Angelus Silesius, whose epigrammatic meditations on God parallel the Zen master’s meditations on non-duality. But we have been treading such a wide track and connecting fairly disparate dots in the constellation of mystic language.
Instead we will approach the figures that populate the mystic corpus and penetrate deeper into the mystic landscape.

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Chapter 2: The Garden, the City, and the Spiral

*Where, if I go far enough, will I find a sacred place? (Lyrics 6)*

I have a friend who is also a poet and Trappist monk. After telling him that I would be writing a paper on Fanny Howe, the advice he gave me was to “hug the text”. This is a very comforting image for the essayist. But one problem emerged as I tried to read Howe’s poems closely and move tightly along the lyric coastline. The poems *don’t want to be* hugged. They are oily and slick and shed determination like tramps shedding acquisitions (*Dress 7*). Frustration dogged this realization. It was the same frustration that crept into discussions of Howe’s poems in poetry seminar. “What does this *mean*?” was a common refrain. I soon realized that the problem was internal and stemmed from a flaw in my own training. I lacked the words at my command which would allow me to think of the poems naturally, with a vocabulary that matched the text. Because simply saying they are free verse get one further caught in the trap. And monolithically dissecting the line breaks will leave your efforts broken and grasping. When Barack Obama was elected president it demanded a new way of reading race in America. When Fanny Howe writes poems she demands a new way of reading lyric verse in academia. Merely
counting metric feet is a step in the wrong direction. This is the fundamental hypothesis that I have been driving toward. That the best, most rewarding, and most provocative way to read Howe is through a mystical framework that hinges on her notion of bewilderment. This chapter will help further contextualize Howe’s work within the mystical tradition and offer a vocabulary that fits the poetry.

When Michel de Certeau wrote *The Mystic Fable*, he recognized that “mystic literature corresponds, first of all, to a topography” (*Fable* 21). That is to say it can be located: “within regions, social categories, types of groups, forms of work; further, it favors concrete modes of relations to money (begging, communal property, commerce, etc), to sexuality (celibacy, widowhood, etc) and power” (21). Seizing upon the possibility of locating a mystic literature within these varying spheres (not necessarily via a history of the tradition but through an imaginative tour through sixteenth century France), Certeau undertakes a vast archeological dig throughout the *Fable* to recover a lost corpus and remap a forgotten cartography. Here we will parse through Certeau’s findings and revisit two exhibits that will prove vital to our investigation of Fanny Howe. The first is a garden. Specifically, Hieronymous Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*. The second is a figure whom we might expect to find hidden in that topsy-turvy tableau: the idiot woman, or salē. The connection between both artifacts and our poet will become obvious as we proceed, and will allow us to approach her poetry with a newly shared secret, a new vocabulary. Howe writes of Certeau in *The Winter Sun* with an intimate understanding. What initially attracts her to the *Fable* is a trace of madness that courses through
the book: a “God madness” where “holy fools” pass around the sacramental wafers like a “conscious-altering drug” (Sun 120). The poet stumbles upon the text during a time and place -- 1987 at the University of California, San Diego -- where “no one talked about God” (Sun 121) and where “skeptics, scholars, atheists, and artists” threatened her “childhood hope” (faith) with cold irony that poisons the heart like iodine. She could not speak a word of the Fable among them, not even a syllable (122) which meant that Howe could freely keep her thoughts on the Fable within the recesses of her heart. But this freedom to be silent could also be a burden and a source of isolation that cannot help but manifest in the external world as well as in the mind:

Outside my window were buildings being thrown together and a long view to sandy foothills and military bases. Dust and machinery banged away the days as Engineering encroached on the small space around Literature. (120)

The absence of God in conversation coupled with a feeling of physical impoverishment and intellectual marginalization seems to have united her with the Catholic convert from France and she becomes a companion on Certeau’s grand tour. Their relationship has the shrouded tenor of secrecy -- “And now I had found Michel de Certeau and the great thing was that I didn’t have to ask anyone any questions about him or voice an opinion; it was all between me and the written page” (123). One of master and initiate, but without the clear delineation of a power structure. He invites her into the cab where he has built a special vocabulary. She, once inside wants to rework this vocabulary, edit and translate the words “through a series of ruptures and revisions in order to compose a lyric version,” even as the vocabulary is busy trying to rework elements of her spirit:

I thought I might have taken some lines from Michel de Certeau’s notes on the
illustrations and turned them into a poem. (124)

This vocabulary, she writes, contained the trace of poetry and tempts her with its adoption in verse. She comments that “he wrote like someone looking through the cracked window of a moving train or through a delicate web of frost” (120) and what he saw beyond the pane, a land of “mystics and mad people” is what will inform our present reading of Howe who is always seeking to go farther in search of a “sacred place”.

What Certeau offers is an unorthodox “way of proceeding” with discourse that might otherwise resist a reading (Fable 14) and central to any movement forward is a walk through the garden, through “a paradise withdrawn” (49). Hieronymous Van Aken, called Bosch, created a work “unique in the history of art and religion” (52) when he envisioned the triptych (Appendix A). When we look at the wooden panels we are met with a field of spaces that converge and mingle with no obvious organization. The scene appears organic, natural. Cavities, grottos, tubes and subterranean haunts offer themselves entirely to the eye, appearing “entirely on the surface” (49, my emphasis). The artist hides nothing. As the eye freely travels it encounters the rose of a megalith, the silhouette of an orange picker, lovers in a flower-shaped retreat. And yet “the painting becomes progressively more opaque as the prolific epiphany of its forms and colors becomes more detailed” (49). As the images multiply, comprehension of their meaning individually and in relation to their surroundings, becomes harder and harder to maintain. In this way the painting “organizes, aesthetically, a loss of meaning” (49) and no language comes from

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1Howe includes the following lines to illustrate her point: “Hair-raising visions adorn both landscape and learned literature. / “The imaginary is part of history.” / “Like the architecture of Callot, the writing is haunted by the unstable vision...” (125)
without to fill in the vacuum. Of the artist we know very little and of the painting Bosch left no commentary; there is no guide for *The Garden*, and with de Certeau “[we] lose our way in it” (50). We are bewildered with it. In this way the garden’s troubling terrain resembles the landscape of a dream.

*One definition of the lyric is that it is searching for something that can’t be found* (Dress 21)

Readings of Howe have the same effect on our intellectual faculties. We are aware of the surfaces, the words on the page and the white that surrounds them. A line, “She said I said why” (*Gone* 4) is familiar and foreign in the same instant. The syllables are basic and the speech rhythm, the quality of the line when vocalized, is common. The surface of the verse

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She said I said why
fear there’s nothing to it
at any minute a stepping out of and into
no column no firmament
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is simple in its texture and the eye travels casually down the line-paths. The words are familiar as the bodies of the garden. But there are ellipses in the lines, recessions that cause the words to tremble and blur the image that wants to form in our mind’s eye. The first line, “she said I said why” flows musically, but evokes a pause and return. Who is speaking and to whom? Depending on inflection, the line’s ‘I’ might be a distinct subject, the so-called speaker who dictates the verse. When “She said I said why,” there are two bodies. There is a *she* who is saying “I said ‘why,’” and there is an *I* who says both the line and “why”. When “*She said* I said why,” there is only one body, the *she* who says “I said why,” the /being *she*. In this way one line
contains a polyphony of unstable voices, a ventriloquism. It prompts us to first ask, who? Who is there speaking to us? The number of voices of course then determines where we are located temporally within the lyric. While the first inflection distances and creates a past-space, a memory (She said, long ago, “I said why”), the second operates in the immediate now -- the narrator is omniscient and reveals that she said “I said why”. And so we must ask, when? Is this a remembered narrative or a drama presently unfolding? Finally, the line conceals whether a question is being posed or statement is being made. Without punctuation to clarify, the last word hangs on the edge of meaning and remains suspended through the line that follows -- “fear there’s nothing to it” -- which is again ruled by the unpredictability of inflection. Meaning is perilously yet intentionally suspended and continues its suspension through the stanza, where form and function are united in the image of a stepping out of and into” nothing, “no columns no firmament.” The very ground has shifted and disappeared with the meaning; the bottom falls out.

Here as elsewhere within Howe’s verse, the lines confound, and this for de Certeau is part of the mystic essence -- “The painting seems to both provoke and frustrate each one of the interpretive pathways. It not only establishes itself within a difference in relation to all meaning; it produces its difference in making us believe that it contains hidden meaning (Fable 51). Certeau observes that the Garden “turns on our meaning-producing mechanisms,” but that this endeavor cannot fail to result in ultimate exile from the painting (52). Because of this, Bosch has been called a “raving lunatic,” but on the contrary “he makes others rave” (52). This “secrecy effect” means
that the painting “does not cease withdrawing,” and its elusiveness preserves what the
“interpretive colonies” would destroy: the pleasure of seeing. This is precisely what Howe seeks
to maintain within the lyric poem:

Too clever a reading of a dream, too serious a closure given to its subject,
the more disappointing the dream becomes in retrospect. If the dream’s
curious activities are subjected to an excess of interpretation, they are better
forgotten. The same demystification can happen with the close reading of a
text; sometimes a surface reading seems to bring you closer to the interpretation
of the poem (*Dress 7*).

Bewildered poetry avoids “looking too hard at things” and seeing past the surface; this surface
reading keeps possibilities open. To go one step further, it *demands* a multitude of possibilities,
and only remains bewildered so long as the multitude is preserved. The reading of a line is never
this, never that. The reader cannot say “I have it” (21). Bewildered verse is in constant motion
because settling would mean immediate calcification and dead sound. With this in mind it
becomes clear why the spiral is the grand image of a bewildered poetics and why the poet herself
cannot stop moving. Each word is an opportunity to return and experience anew the possibilities
in sound. The spiral captures this invitation and reminds the reader that “I have been here
before, [and] I will return” (20) transformed with a revised understanding of the word and its
relation to the surrounding spaces. In the same way, our eye exploring the *Garden* is always
aware of the necessity to return and look once more, that “binding” meaning to the image is an
impossible task as the painting changes *as we change*. Bewilderment produces what Howe
describes as “one solid braid of sound” and each successive poem so inspired helps produce a
“new conversion” (18) as the pilgrim spins around the gyre. On a micro level, each word yields
an uncertainty that spirals, just as each braid of verse spirals around the ultimate referent that motivates Howe’s vision, revisions, and conversion:

Is knowing the same as owning?
Do I already have it
(Poetic Model)

aspiral thumb-print (Gone 39)

Remembering the spiral pattern of Dante’s descent into Hell (Dante 75) helps inform our understanding of this complex relationship between the poetic word and Howe’s bewilderment. John Freccero maps the pilgrim’s way through the inferno and notes first that “in the spiritual life, one must descend in humility before one can ascend to the truth” (74), and that for the medieval man this spiritual movement of descent mirrors a physical movement to the South as well as the mystical movements of the cosmos. Far from operating on a purely symbolic level, Dante’s readers would recognize that the poet’s spiraling motion through Hell (Appendex A) is literally analogous to the motion of the heavens, particularly the sun “which seemed to spiral in the sky” (80). So the movement of the universe is by analogy the archetype of all intellectual movement (76), and of these movements man, like the angelic intelligences, is capable of three variations: linear, when the mind is concentrated on external things; circular, when the mind enters into itself and contemplates the Supreme Being; and spiral, when illuminated by the knowledge of divine things (81). All of this inherited from early church fathers like Pseudo Dionysuis (81), and hailed by Freccero as a conversion symbol par-excellence -- “One could hardly find a better gloss than this for the meaning of the spiral path in the itinerary of the mind

Footnote:k Freccero notes that “to medieval men, far more accustomed to watching the heavens than we, the sun seemed to follow a spiral path, geometrically similar to the pilgrim in [The Inferno] pp. 75.
to God” (81). But more than just a grand image for the pilgrim moving towards God, the spiral assumes special importance for the bewildered poet as well, when we consider the disorienting, upside down nature of its path. How does one describe their way forward, or the next direction to take when the path traveled does not support relative directions, when before, after, left and right have limited meaning?

But Howe’s landscape is neither inferno nor garden, and the images that populate her place to get lost are tinged with metallic hughes, evocative of the twentieth century cityscape and “a planet / girdled by rust” (Lyrics 12) of “nature undermurtured” (24). The city with its criss-crossing streets (“the road away...spirals like DNA”), shadowy recesses, and an ever-changing sea of faces is her bewildering garden par excellence. Here the poet walks past a “bombed post office,” through “frozen graveyards,” and between “walls supported / by spirits”, always carrying “a jail inside of [her]” (Gone 36). How the pilgrim moves through this foreign land mimics the spiraled path found in Dante, and she is often found seated at the window of a public bus or train that moves along a spiraling route through the rusted city (On the Ground 62):

I had to take the bus
there was no future

while meditating on how the word reflects this path -- “I’ll never write a villanelle / but a chorus or spirals” (49). This is a path that involves repetition and seeing the same thing multiple times from multiple perspectives. Howe uses an interesting technique in The Lives of a Spirit to simulate this effect, where the title of each section is embedded within the text of a different chapter. For example, “White Plate Painted with More White,” the title of the first section, is
echoed in the second section as “Imperial Ming, this white plate painted with more white, snow, and cherry-red hairlike branches (8). The title of the second section, “Portions of the Poor,” returns in the eight -- “And stately raindrops will fall on the long lawns, beyond the portions of the poor, myself hatted and hatted, face up” (57). Each title has a corresponding echo in another section of the text. This produces a strange feeling of déjà vu, leading one to believe that they have passed this phrase, this scene, before. It is a disconcerting feeling, this simulated bewilderment vis repetition. Repetition scares people. It is a fear related to the fear of getting stuck, and manifests itself in everyday writing:

“People fear repeating one word word in the same sentence. They pause to avoid it every time, almost superstitiously” (Dress 14)

Howe has no such fear, and in fact embraces this spinning approach to experiencing the world. What this all amounts to is a poetic space, Howe’s Garden/city, that spirals, dizzies, and ultimately bewilders. From her isolated, god-less prison in San Diego, Howe enters the Garden searching for “a sacred place,” a place that is of course, actually a no place, a wilderness. She emerges with a vocabulary and a poetics that withdraws, as well as a spiritual humility that marks the pilgrim on her itinerary towards God. She also emerges impressed with a sense of madness, the mark of our next referent: salē. Certeau’s analysis of salē is the first instance within the Fable of madness for God embodied in a person. As with the Garden, reconstructing her significance will help us understand Howe’s poetry within a mystical framework, and locating her within the monastery will likewise aid our search for that mysterious “Q,” “the unknown one -- or I” (Dress 20) who speaks in the verse.
Marguerite Duras’ India Song is the original trace that prompts Certeau to travel back into the fringes of ancient Christian history. The beggar in Duras remains invisible, nameless, faceless—“she is a passerby who wanders through the texts...she does not speak. She makes others speak” (Fable 31). Through the stories of others—“through stories that are (almost) ageless”—Certeau begins to find her, the face that wants to hide. He seeks her in the orient and finds her in the Egyptian desert, passing through the town square and into the monastery. Her name is salē, and she stands at the beginning of the tradition that figures a form of madness for Christ, appearing in the Lausiac History as “she who simulated madness.”

In the monastery she is beaten, cursed, and called “the idiot”. She wears a dishrag around her hair instead of the traditional hood that covers a nun’s shaved head, and elicits such feelings of disgust that the women of the convent cannot stand to eat with her. For food she is left the crumbs and whatever might remain in the pots she scours after meals. Physically, socially, spiritually, she is out cast from the convent body. Yet, this is what she preferred (32). She was “happy” with the crumbs she received, and never spoke out when the blows and insults fell on her. When a holy man comes calling on her, prompted by a visiting angel to leave his sanctuary in search of one “better than [him],” the sisters of the convent are stunned:

When she was there, he saw the rag on her head and, falling at her feet, said to her: “Bless me Mother.” Like him, she also fell at his feet saying: You bless me, Lord. At this point, all the women were enraptured. They said to the saintly man: Father do not take this as an insult: she is an idiot.” Piteroum said to them all: “You are the ones who are idiots, for she is for me and for you
our mother[Ammas] and I pray that I may be found worthy of her on the day of judgement.” At these words they fell at the feet of the monk, confessing all manner of things: one had sprinkled her with dishwater, another had pummeled her...in a word, they all had abuses to confess... (33)

_Salē_ cannot stand the esteem and admiration cast upon her and hides herself before departing from the convent -- “how she ended her days, no one has found out” (33). What to make of this “idiot woman” who exists as leftovers, as the human face of refuse. Is her possession sincere, or her madness artificial (this suspicion is aroused in the first sentence of the narrative: “In this monastery there was a virgin who _pretended_ to be mad”)? What compels her to seek the abuses heaped upon her by the sisters? Where does she go? Her trail disappears and she is lost. Her memory is the only trace that remains, as well as the confessions that burst from the sisters in their rapture. Like Bosch who is silent, _salē_ makes others rave. She is the opposite of the Virgin Mother, the idealized pure body. As offal, the idiot “is totally within the unsymbolizable thing that resists meaning” (34) and loses herself in the unspeakable body that exists “below the level of language”. The more we know of her the closer we approach “nothing,” so that “to know her is to know nothing” (38). And yet she perfectly embodies what is written: if one intends to become wise among us in this life, let him become a fool to become wise (32).

Is this the voice that rises in Howe’s poetry? Might we read bewilderment as a type of madness? We have seen the way in which a bewildered poetics strives to turn the world upon its head, and are familiar with the whirling dervish landscape of Howe’s urban garden. There is evidence in the work to suggest that _salē_ is in fact a distant ancestor of our modern pilgrim, but instead of the

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1Certeau notes that this is how spiritual guides were referred to

2Certeau recognizes that the program in the narrative follows the directive of St. Paul: “to become mad in order to become wise” (36)
mute idiot, Howe speaks with the voice who says “I was a ghost before I was a tramp” (*Lyrics* 15). The discarded woman, the woman on the fringe is Howe’s modern day *salē*, and performs with a bewildered lyric voice par excellence. The tramp is always on her way out, always in the act of departure from “a landscape / where everything was finished” (15), just as *salē* must depart when she reaches a point of unbearable comfortable in the convent. The “unknown I” who traverses Howe’s work is nothing if not transient. Like *salē*, wherever she is she cannot stay for long, and submits willfully to purgation on the road. We read:

I know that the best thing for others might be happening because *I am not there*. (*Lyrics* 8, my emphasis)

It pains her, whomever she is, to live easily. The life of Simone Weil reflects this instinct as well. Material excess is anathema. Like *salē* she is marked by her clothes which distinguish her as an outsider, a woman of the road -- brands her with the “tramps who travel light” (*Dress* 7). Her possessions one cannot say are hers, and the only thing she asks for is no stability and the will to keep moving. We know this rugged face, as we have seen her from time to time, through the catalogue of things that surround it:

Give my my shawl, my corkscrew
And my cloth bag.
Give me my stick and my water.
One shoe for walking and one to dance.
No stability. Thirst.
The will to keep moving (*Lyrics* 14).

This is another way of praying for a new way of seeing, unbound vision, bewilderment -- “Lord increase my bewilderment” (*Dress* 6). For those who do not have this urge to depart, the will to
“seek belief or die” (122), it is easy to question the speaker’s authenticity, as salēis questioned. It is easy to dismiss the text on a number of levels -- where is the meter and the rhyme? why do the lines look like that? anyone can write this -- she cannot really mean what she says. Such attitudes stem from disbelief that “no stability” might be a good end in and of itself, that anyone could in good faith embrace such a trial. Cynicism is iodine in their milk. But there is joy in this prayer, a point that can only be made with subtly to avoid unwanted glare. Joy is there in the shoe worn “to dance.” What does the tramp dance to? In a state of bewilderment, anything, when all voices trend toward song. So she dances. She also does not stop being a woman, in the same way that salēcontinues, though ruled by her madness for God, to have a body and perform her corporeal duties within the monastery. Howe’s speaker still lives in the body and among children that depart from it (Lyrics 40):

Love was like a horse. Once I rose  
from the bed and left the earth  
and my nursing baby and flew  
into the likeness of heaven.  
But then I volunteered to come back.  
Yes, I was a brave soldier then.

We might even say that the physical body itself is a location for instability. It is the epicenter of identity, which for Howe is occupied with conceptions of gender, race, and parenthood. The body says many prayers in silence. Of having biracial children in a world obsessed with categories -- “Many times people stopped me with my children, to ask, “Are they yours” with an expression of disgust and disbelief on their faces” (Dress xix). Of moving freely through space as a man would, not giving a damn -- “Since early adolescence I have wanted to live the life of a
poet. What this meant was a life outside of the law; it would include disobedience and uprootedness. I would be at liberty to observe, drift, read, take notes, converse with friends and struggle with form” (*Sun* 1) Of watching her children grow up and leave her -- “her children have all grown up, like benchmarks by whose elevated states / she can judge her own diminishment” (*Lives* 9). A dance is a kind of prayer.

The prayer of bewilderment can be said in the comfort of home, but is uttered with more gravity on the restless road. *Forty Days* (Appendix B), the first poem of Howe’s *The Lyrics*, captures this restless (and the spiritual test that is implied in the title) will to struggle:

It’s the summer solstice  
The day the darkening begins  
If I keep walking west  
I can precede this time again

In a year. Not much stamina  
Foot-shoes sore  
Passing war after war  
Between ad-nauseum errors

Unsure of which was after  
And which is before

If I can just keep walking  
It will not be now  
But next

If I can stay with the gravity  
That troubles the sea you’ll see
The imagery, terse lines, and distinct musicality produce a feeling of perpetual motion that carries the eye. At the solstice, shortened days prompt an urgency to move with the hastening sun. For the traveler on the road, the time for wasted movement is over, a reality reflected in the efficiency of each pared down line. She encourages herself in the face of darkness rising -- “If I keep walking West / I can precede this time again” -- not to spur herself on to a final destination, but to the point where the journey might begin once more “in a year”. It is a journey with no end, spiraling ad infinatum. What she sees, the evil (war after war) and the errors (a lost chance here, a missed turn there), keep her feet moving but cause her to doubt -- “unsure of which was after / and which is before” -- the trajectory of her path and the temporal fabric that maintains a coherent subjectivity (in this way the doubt is felicitous and can increase bewilderment). But if she survives the trial, and “just keep[s] walking,” her ultimate reward will be the goodness of a day “without me” (my emphasis).

We read in this curious reward the hopes of a pilgrim on the path of super-human purification in the spirit of salē, who upon receiving the adulation and praise from the sisters, must hide herself and become a ghost (“I was a ghost before...”), must die; die in order to live. Words on the page reflect this gradual elimination of selfhood, and fall away as we near the end, finishing with the only thing left to be without -- me. Without an I that speaks “I,” without ego that says “this is
that.” This is the mystical goal born out in the text that is mad for bewilderment. It is not stoic tolerance of the world and its suffering. Howe’s tramp invites the suffering with a subjectivity that never admits a divide between the world and the self: In this way her speaker is the Messianic speaker par-excellence.

If I were Jesus, would you slap both sides of my face?
If I were Jesus, would you stamp on my hands?
If I was Jesus, would you lock me up?
...
Well, I’m not. So please -- Go right ahead. (Lyrics 14).

This is a kind of modification on the Messianic message that says, “everyone has to be safe for everyone to be safe” (Sun 169). Everyone has to be vulnerable for everyone to be safe. Everyone has to embrace weakness in order to be strong. But like salē, who disgusted her neighbors in convent, those who should be of one body, Howe’s speaker makes us mad. Her weakness and the way she embraces suffering flies in the face of “usual narrative movements” that revolve around “courage, discipline, conquest, and fame” (Dress 6). The speaker cannot even give a name (nor can she name her purpose, her vocation with no name); she remains unsaid, unsayable. In this way she “exists lower than the level of language.” This super-human weakness produces a confession like the confessions given at the moment of rapture in the convent when the sisters were compelled to share their abuses of salē. In the academy where poems are ordered and dissected with the closest thing possible to precision, Howe’s mysterious voice confronts the acolytes with their own weakness, manifested in an inability to make the text

\[\text{From the East the Buddha says “Life is suffering”}\]
conform. We confess our shortcomings. She makes us speak of ourselves, quarrel with ourselves:

In the messianic age, people will stop quarrelling with each other and only quarrel with themselves. (Dress 21)

Like the Garden and salē, the spirit in Howe’s poetry looks back but says nothing.

We have gotten lost in the Garden of Bosch and lingered with salē the idiot, two archetypal figures of Certeau’s mystic corpus. Then at what point in our understanding of Fanny Howe have we arrived? If Howe is in fact the inheritor of this land and descendent of that desert woman, can we even speak of understanding: when meaning withdraws at every turn, and the poetic voice, the voice calling in the wilderness, is Gone in an instant, where are we the readers left? If the aesthetics of bewilderment resemble, as I have wagered, the aesthetics of The Garden

But it is already too much to ascribe it the status of an enigma, a statement that tells “the truth” to the extent, and only to the extent, that it means what we make it say. The aesthetics of The Garden does not consist in generating new lights for intelligibility but in extinguishing it. (Fable 72).

and the voice of the speaker descends from the voice of salē, where does that leave we the readers? Lost? Way out there? If so, how might we return to intelligibility? Is it enough to say that Howe writes as a mystic par excellence and suspend further inquiry?

To those I would die for
please be patient
It’s summer somewhere
I hear good things (Lyrics 4)
Chapter 3: The Return

We groaned and sighed for days, keening like Hafiz -- but it was no use. Farewell, beloved! Long before we arrived, you were gone. (Hafiz 56)

The third beginning starts here. From the light of a winter sun, to the unmeaning of a garden, we have arrived at this point of nothingness where the body, the text, the meaning we have madly sought is Gone. The problems of conversion and language, of meaning frustrated and comfort scorned bring us here. Is this the future for a world of surfaces? No meaning, no ego, nothing but unanswered questions to parse alone? What is the way forward in this desert, or is this the “promised wilderness” (Lyrics 66) that is doomed to become a nihilist wasteland? This is a question being asked in academic and theologic circles. How is Christianity thinkable today (Palmer 53)? Simply put, the question amounts to, what now? After the horrors of Dachau, Aushwitz, Hiroshima, Nanking, among so many others, how can we say God the way Adam in Paradise Lost said God, to Him “placable and mild and bending his ear.” How can we say God and expect him to be there, caring enough to send an angel? Is it a wonder that the Beloved is absent? Is it a wonder that a poet who is determined to die in search of faith (Sun 122) still doubts, is seemingly obligated to doubt? How can we move beyond poems written in labor camps? Should we? To what do we owe the past as inheritors and witnesses, readers of poems like this one by HeniaKarmel, a Buchenwald survivor:

Nothing changes, everyday it’s the same.

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This poem appears in a collection of works written by the Karmel sisters Henia and Ilona. Commenting on her experience translating the poems Howe says she “understood the fear of God when [she] undertook the task of translating poems written in labor camps,” speaking to a seemingly impossible obstacle that has very little to do with language, and everything to do with the untranslatable nature of horror.
An unresponsive street, a prison gate.

Sometimes a dream stupidly hangs on
And searches for a smile in a cold face.
Sometimes I stop and hallucinate
And hear a voice calling my name.
Malevolent silence is all I get then
And so I move on, dragging my feet
With a “Let’s go. No one is calling.”

When dreams are too stupid to die, and a nameless girl can only hallucinate a welcoming other; when malevolent silence replaces the presence who sees in secret and hears our prayers; when the unresponsive street and prison gate have shredded faith with heart rending wires (*Lyrics* 12), how can we say God without that creeping cynicism?

To this point we have established a mystical framework for speaking of Fanny Howe’s poetics. Making this distinction is a fruitful enterprise because it allows us to properly contextualize without categorizing, and because it explores the various ways in which we can speak about an aesthetics of surfaces and unmeaning. Yet her hopes for the world (the “real” world) is still a conversation to be had, and there is a relationship between aesthetics and ethics that demands our attention. Is it possible that a poetics of bewilderment, conversion, and intractability might be engaged in a mystical aesthetics as well as a progressive code of ethics informed still by the Abrahamic tradition? In other words, where do art, faith and the world intersect (We might imagine the intersection of “way out there” and “way inside” and remember that there is, according to Howe, no real distinction, hence to real distinction between life and art)? It is clear
that Howe wrestles with the notion that poetry might be ineffectual in reality ("because poetry has little value in our society"), that art will always struggle to extricate itself from the isolated pursuit of abstracted beauty and transcendent truth in spaces removed from everyday life. Naturally this is a thought that makes her uncomfortable. She wonders again and again, "what have I been doing all these years." I will finish this study of Howe by arguing that what she has been doing all these years is writing a literature that makes way for a new ethics manifested in a radical conception of \textit{absolute hospitality to come}, concurrent with the writing of Emanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and most recently, Richard Kearney. These last pages will explore these questions of Christian futurity, and Howe’s engagement with issues of conflict and hospitality \textit{on the ground}.

In the mid-1990s Derrida published \textit{On the Name}, a small volume in which he directly addressed the question of God. Using the epigrammatic poems of Angelus Silesius

\begin{quote}
God is the purest naught, untouched by time and space
the more you reach for him the more he will escape
\end{quote}

as a literary anchor to grapple with the circularities and \textit{aporias} of negative theology, Derrida offers a new approach for saying (as well as saving -- he plays upon the double meaning in both French and English often) the name of God after the traumas suffered during the 20th century. Building on notions of alterity, heteronomy, and otherness developed by his close colleague Levinas, what Derrida creates is a space for God without God (is this what Howe writes as G-d?). It is a gesture at saving (preserving) the name of God by refusing to “determine its content” (63). Only by withholding the name, and thus sparing the violence visited upon the
named, is it possible to maintain an openness to the other, “the divine guest who brings life.”

Every other must appear as absolutely other -- tout autre est tout autre (Derrida 76) -- in order to remain receptive to (at all times) the incoming Other of whom any name must suffice (76):

A name of God in a tongue, a phrase, a prayer, becomes an example of the name and of the names of God, then of names in general.

From this move Derrida is able to offer a form of Messianic hospitality that is obliged to welcome the arrivant and stranger whenever he or she appears. When thinking about how Christianity might survive beyond the violence and despair of the 20th century, this is one possibility, assembled around the mystic fringe tradition of negative theology. The via negativa allows for, insists upon, the notion of God as absent, nameless, and meditates on this condition of alienation which earlier we touched upon briefly. We remember Plato’s ineffable nature of the Good, and again we hear Plotinus (VI.9.11):

This is the life of gods and of the godlike and blessed among men, liberation from the alien that besets us here, a life taking no pleasure in the things of earth, a flight of the alone to the Alone.

There have been many others to write in this fashion. Meister Eckhart is notable, and his prayer to God to rid him of God resounds within the text of On the Name, and with Silesius who performs as Derrida’s muse, and says

Man, if you love something, then you truly love nothing.
God is not this and that, leave then forever the something.

Keats also recognized the point where poetic language failed, and called it “negative capability.” The conviction that language cannot account seems to parallel the thoughts of Simone Weil as well, though it is not necessarily a failure to account and speak the divine. Howe is likewise well
aware of God’s withdrawal, his becoming alien -- “God became weak and subtle” (*Lyrics* 10), “why did God leave us, isn’t it obvious?” (*Gone* 120) -- as well as man’s inability to find him -- “who can go nowhere?,” to “a known nothing” (66). Like Derrida, Howe refuses to engage in a determinism that seeks to positively locate the divine in specific names, places, people:

Not the cat or the worm  
Not the feather-duster  
Not the slime  
Not the foul or the fish  
Not the birds of the air  
None of them has a name  
But amen  
Amen in the dark (*Gone* 111)

and declares that “the worst sinners are those who give God human attributes” (*Sun* 103). After examining Howe’s poetics of bewilderment it should not surprise us that her amen in the dark embraces the silence of Silesius (*Wanderer* 49) who would throw off the excess of language altogether:

God far exceeds all words that we can here express  
In silence He is heard, in silence worshipped best.

Nowhere in Howe’s work does the trace of negative theology -- “this wounded writing that bears the stigmata of its own proper inadequation” (Derrida 61) -- emerge more forcefully than in *The Passion*, a long poem appearing in *Gone*. Suggested in the title, *The Passion* follows the fourteen stations of the cross in a bewildered voice that we have grown accustomed to, but paradoxically, in the epoch most powerfully evocative of the corpus cristi, what the speaker feels
above all else is the absence of Christ who is already gone (here I quote fragments on the final movement):

On the day I prayed  
No one answered me  
On the day I called  
you didn’t answer me (112)  
...
He can’t get back in (114)  
...
wander, wander alone (115)  
...
He didn’t answer  
The market crashed, rebounded  
and the mourning doves cooed  
He couldn’t answer  
Between my brain and this silence  
time lifted and measured  
There was no more reason to die (116)

And so we have varying fields of doubt. Doubt that words can entertain any comprehension of the divine; doubt that words, even properly formed, can reach the divine; doubt that the divine even exists, or is capable of existing within the world. Combined, this three pronged doubt makes the Christian wager more than a little tenuous, and actually smacks of an atheism. Yet this is only the extreme end of one oscillation within the larger field of doubt and faith. After all, what would faith be without the real possibility of doubt? It would not be a faith deserving of the name, but rather a program (Derrida makes a similar argument regarding hospitality and the discourse of decision). If “doubt is what allows a single gesture to have a heart,” (Gone 25) it is also what allows faith to have a soul, as well as a future. And although she appears to embrace
the language of negative theology, Howe is not keen on remaining solely in the realm of the \textit{vianegativa}. While the idea of an absent corpus cristi appeals to sensibilities disposed to doubt God’s presence in the world -- she is, after all, a convert who has lived in the field of absolute doubt (atheism -- “the atheist is no less an inquirer than the believer”) -- she nonetheless returns to faith that admits a divinely inspired wonder \textit{in the world}. This is where she departs from Derrida and, I argue, completes the anatheist movement traced by Kearney.

There is a powerful relationship between the language of Otherness spoken by Derrida, and the theory of anatheism developed by Richard Kearney. Kearney embraces Derrida’s radical hospitality as a foundational element of \textit{Anatheism} -- a hermeneutics that I suggest has the potential to fully realize the richness of Howe’s literature -- but insists that the deconstructionist fails to provide a return to the Name, and offers what only amounts to “an endless waiting with no kind of sense of what kind of divine (or undivine) Other might appear” (Kearney 64).

Derrida’s post-holocaust reincarnation of the Abrahamic tradition offers no possibility, in other words, of reading the face beyond or through the name. Faith in messianicity, for Derrida, seems at times to mean a radical absence of any historical instantiation of the divine -- no epiphanies, songs, testimonies, no sacred embodiments or liturgies. In the name of universal openness to any other at all (\textit{tout autre est tout autre}), Derrida’s “religion without religion” seems to have no visage to speak of, no embodied presence in space and time.

Derrida’s abstentionist move towards what Kearney refers to as “mystical atheism,” (Derrida in fact avows that he “rightly passes for an atheist”), while a nod towards Levinas’s atheism as Judaism’s gift to humanity, does not return to anything that can be called “religion,” and is, at
best “an endless waiting in the desert. A waiting for Godot who never comes” (65). Kearney’s anatheistic wager requires this stage, a wandering in the desert, but insists upon a return to the name as present in the world.

_Ana_ -- after in Greek, simultaneously implies return (3). “Ana-theos, God after God.” Kearney harnesses the energy of this prefix into a hermeneutics of religion that he asserts will provide a future for Christianity. The anatheist movement consists of three phases. The first is an original relationship with the divine, characterized by overtly theistic ideals -- God as caring provider, hearer of prayers, etc. It is deterministic and highly anthropomorphic (positively identifying God and by extension removing God from the Other); the second, a loss of faith in this ideal, characterized by cynicism and overpowering doubt -- atheism; the third, a return to “faith without faith,” markedly transformed by both original theism and the furnace of atheism, the “returning to a God beyond or beneath the God we thought we possessed.” Importantly, Kearney is wary of binding the performance of his anatheistic wager in static dogmatism. While anatheism is distinctly comprised of the three movements of faith, the third space is “a wagering between belief and nonbelief that never comes to a full stop” (184). At any rate, the anatheist moment, having embraced elements of Derrida’s hospitality, leaves itself absolutely open to acceptance of the divine stranger. By recognizing something “more” in the stranger, we allow for the presence of God to return, who has himself become impossibly strange and infinitely new. Kearney thus welcomes back the face and the name of religion, with all of the epiphanies, miracles, and wonder that come with it. In these words we cannot help but hear the voice in
Howe that wavers between doubt and faith, but that ultimately recognizes with wonder the miraculous nature of being in the world, on the ground, in the quotidian moments that fill our lives. Howe’s poetry remains open to and embraces Others without reservation, both in narration and form, and engages in an “anatheistic aesthetic” where secular and sacred conjugate and cross” (130), creating a space where readers are “free to recommit to faith if we choose.”

My first example of Howe’s anatheist bona fides occurs in an instance of hospitality performed in the first pages of The Lives of a Spirit, when a baby is received on a treacherous shore. The scene is one of supreme vulnerability, as a woman races “aimlessly now, purposefully then away from the path she had tracked to the rocks” (1) across a seascape “fringed and furred with frost” where “violent crests shot brine into the air, as if shucking off excess emotion.” The water is cold and hard and unwelcoming to one wandering there alone. It is terrain not given to softness, where barnacles bite bare feet, and a “dream smell of salt and acid” sweep over the rocks and cold pools. This shore feels like a godless place, a place forgotten by God, now under the unremitting sovereignty of void. The hostility of this shore, caught between the frozen sea and a cemetery perched atop a “gnawed cliff,” heightens the surprise of discovering a baby there among the “greasy seaweed.” The baby, suggestive of the Christ child (“it lay with its ankles crossed and its arms spread wide”), represents the arrival of a perfectly absolute Other in a

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\(^{b}\)Kearney indicates that this aesthetic, which can be represented by atheist, or even anti-theist authors is multifaceted but has to do primarily with finding “the sacramental in profane existence” (130)

\(^{q}\)It is of note that Kearney’s three “textual” examples of artistic anatheism are each novels by Joyce, Proust, and Woolf (Kearney’s anatheist aesthetics focuses primarily on narrative movements within a text instead of stylistic choices), and that of Howe’s poetry, Lives is perhaps the most plot driven and has in fact been referenced as a prose poem.
moment of complete shock. For what could be more alien than a lost baby? She, “the least worthy of earth’s materials,” motherless and alone, unable to speak, unnamed, and, we learn as the narrative progresses, unnamable. Not having a face of her own, not having a name to distinguish her as a unique subjectivity, this baby is the archetype of every thing unnamed, every absolute Other. And she arrives as the divine stranger must arrive, completely unexpected; what could be more surprising than discovering this baby -- “lacking hardiness as she did” -- on a foreign shore? The arrival is miraculous, and people “surmise that she had floated from the stars in the navy blue sky,” accounting with the mechanisms of myth what cannot be explained by reason. A divine guest, then, prompting a Messianic moment, a return to divinity present in the world.

She will one day ponder the mysterious question, “Little word, who said me? Am I owned or free?” From the beginning we know that this blessed other will seek to understand the mystical qualities of the word, of naming and the politics of language (we remember Simone Weil and the prison motif). After all, everyone is a product of their environment, and the one wherein we discover her is soaked with the lost name:

a forgotten name moves in such fitful waves, engineered like tumbleweed across the mental floor.

Socrates believed that before birth the soul possesses all knowledge but in the violence of birth knowledge is ripped away and man must relearn all he has forgotten. What has been forgotten here as this baby arrives? Does she bring a forgotten faith with her from the heavens? It is

\[1\text{We might also read this as “sent”}\]
difficult to answers these questions. As Kearney notes, anatheism does not dictate monolithically, but creates a space in the text for readers to freely choose a return to faith. We can only do so while acknowledging the violence visited upon the text, similar to the violence of translation and naming. This makes it impossible to perform what we might call an anatheist “reading” of a text, just as it is impossible to apply deconstruction as a program. But revealing the potential for an anatheist space is within our authority, and The Lives of a Spirit offers many such narrative spaces marked by absolute hospitality and a sacramental vocabulary of wonderment. The next time we encounter the baby she is seated on a park bench, waiting for her mother. This is the first sign of change, a “transformation” that the years had wrought (7). She is distinct and has been socialized to say “mother” apart from herself (yet of her we still know nothing, not even a name). The years have also rendered a change in the way she perceives the world. She regards her portions of food, portions of the poor, as sacraments (8):

She opened her lunchbox and looked in: a hard lump of bread and jam smeared out of a sticky pot, where the red seeds were burned from the sun. Cheap jam. This amounted, nonetheless, to “bread from Heaven” as long as she had body to feed, or a dog.

This Heaven is differentiated from the “nowhere place” we find in Gone. It is a happy zone with power to sustain the weak. This idealized heaven indicates a faith that has yet to tremble, yet to be tested in the furnace of doubt. Perhaps it is inherited from a parent as? This suspicion is confirmed when she recalls her mother (9):

Faith keeps me young, and my attention, which is really hope, is preparing my soul for the feast of eternity. This I do by looking at everything and trying, in a sense, to eat it up.
The child, though we can only assume an age as it is never given, still moves in the first phase a determined theism. As we read further the anatheist pattern continues. The child grows into a woman who experiences love for the first time, and then a backbreaking separation that shakes her faith as she cries “The soul exceeds the body, I tell you, and will -- must! -- continue after, perhaps to be born many times...Genetics has to be a stupid field” (32), though we can see the foundations of her faith rocking. And we might continue reading the narrative closely in search of anatheist spaces, find where her doubts become overwhelming and when, after wandering in the desert she returns to find Christ there once more, but new. I would prefer, though, to change directions and ask how the poetics of bewilderment play within the anatheistic frame. There is a charitable amount of anatheist hospitality as well as language of the sacred within realms of the secular. This is unsurprising.

What makes Fanny Howe distinct, however, from Joyce, Proust, and Woolf is her adherence to a poetics of bewilderment which we have already investigated within the mystical tradition. Now I ask, how does bewilderment work anatheistically? Is it possible to write anatheistically from word to word? What would that look like? Each word would require a first recognition, succeeded by doubt, and then a return that trembles. They would be written and read as both sacrament and signifier. How might we prove this? In other words, can a text support anatheist spaces without distinct anatheist content, but rather with a yet to be resolved anatheist form? Kearney admits that his “main hermeneutic model...is a narrative one” (102) which may not be given to analyzing the subtleties of poetic diction, tone, etc. and explains why he does not
include examples of lyric poetry in his book. But I am curious to explore how the anatheistic wager might extend into the realm of lyric poetry, perhaps beyond or behind the poem.

Take for example this poem that happens to be the final poem printed in Gone (122):

He is felt as a feeling she feels him
She doesn’t know why he to him being
Battle-catching mother
Whom she caught at the circulation
Still remembers
In her rose-lipped perceptor

There is something between them
it climbs colorlike
The shades of pain
Describing their skins
Like a map’s edge of ocean
It laps from her to him
They do feel that third person!

Is there something in the words, just the surface of the words, that calls out to us, appealing to our sense of wonder? For Kearney, it is wonder that prompts a return from the horror, a return to the sacred. Does wonder live in this stanza among the spaces in between each word, phrase, line? Meaning, as we have seen in our tour of the Garden, is confounded. The first two lines, lacking in punctuation and phrased in such a way as to invite a host of meanings, recall the line we dissected earlier (“she said I said why”), but the slippage of meaning does not necessarily evoke a spirit of wonderment. The poem (and by virtue, the volume) ends with an epiphany -- “they do feel that third person!” -- broaching a return of the sacred there in “flesh and blood thisness,”(Kearney 10), a perfectly anatheist conclusion to a volume that meditates throughout on the absence of the divine. Yet this return still relies on the content of the line and not the line.
itself, the surface. The rhyme punctuating the final quatrain adds a musical gravitas to the
volume’s conclusion, a subtle crescendo to complete the performance. Perhaps this strikes closer
to the mark. In order to spark wonder beyond the content of the text, maybe the reader needs to
attend to the unique sound and shape of each word -- similar to the way in which the *Garden*
demands an attention to the surface appearance of each image -- in order for the word to become
strange and allow for the return for the lost divine Other who has escaped into the verities of
determined language. Of course this suspension will require, as surely as bewilderment does, a
“new way of reading,” even a “new human” (*Dress 7*).
Conclusion

What I have hoped to show in this study of one of America’s most thought provoking poets is the richness of her work that is informed by the historical mystic canon as well as the literary and cultural movements of the 20th century. In exploring the mystic resonances of Howe’s poetry, as well as investigating the ways in which Michel de Certeau’s archetypes find a home in the work, I have attempted to show that not only is Howe engaged in a writing we might call “mystic,” but that she is in fact a mystic par excellence, and has created an aesthetics and poetics of bewilderment outfitted for the modern day pilgrim.

But Howe is also, of course, a writer influenced by the 20th century’s horrors, and who strives to bear witness to the same. In an effort to make sure that there is never another holocaust, another atomic bomb, another arms race, Howe embraces the other as absolutely other. This is part of the anatheist wager that strives to attain a relationship with God after God, and is the final piece of my puzzle in this inquiry. While it is impossible to offer a hard and fast “reading,” so to speak, of an anatheistic text without regressing into a machinist program, understanding Howe’s work in light of this new development in Christian scholarship helps further comprehend the depth of her writing.

In these efforts I hope to have been successful.
Note

In a 2009 article, Romana Huk offers what is perhaps the most comprehensive critical reading of Fanny Howe to date, and begins with similarly spirited observations. Approaching the text from twentieth century philosophical and phenomenological traditions that Howe draws upon throughout The Wedding Dress (Huk considers Howe’s prose essays as a kind of “late career ars-poetica”), focusing “primarily on how the ideas of St. Edith Stein and Simone Weil (as well as, through deep time, St. Thomas Aquinas) contribute to Howe’s evolving thoughts on her conversion to Catholicism” (658), Huk covers a sweeping range of texts, and is very effective at fleshing out the connections between Howe’s unique poetic sensibilities and the work of her philosophical predecessors. Without rehashing the entire piece, it is worth discussing a number of relevant points that will be foundational for further investigation.

Huk’s study of Howe is an entry in her ongoing work on avant-garde, or “Language,” poetries. And while it is entirely possible that Huk is simply including “Language” poets under the general umbrella of avant-garde and postmodern poetics, she does not make a clear distinction between Howe’s poetry and the poetry of formal L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets such as Charles Bernstein. Huk rather implies -- in her effort to “disturb several assumptions that underwrite [the debate surrounding deconstructive poetry]” -- that Howe’s work is aligned with Bernstein’s, and exposes the conventional criticism of “Language” poetry (superficial, quotidian, discontinuous) as thinking that has fallen victim to unsound binaaries.
Works Cited


