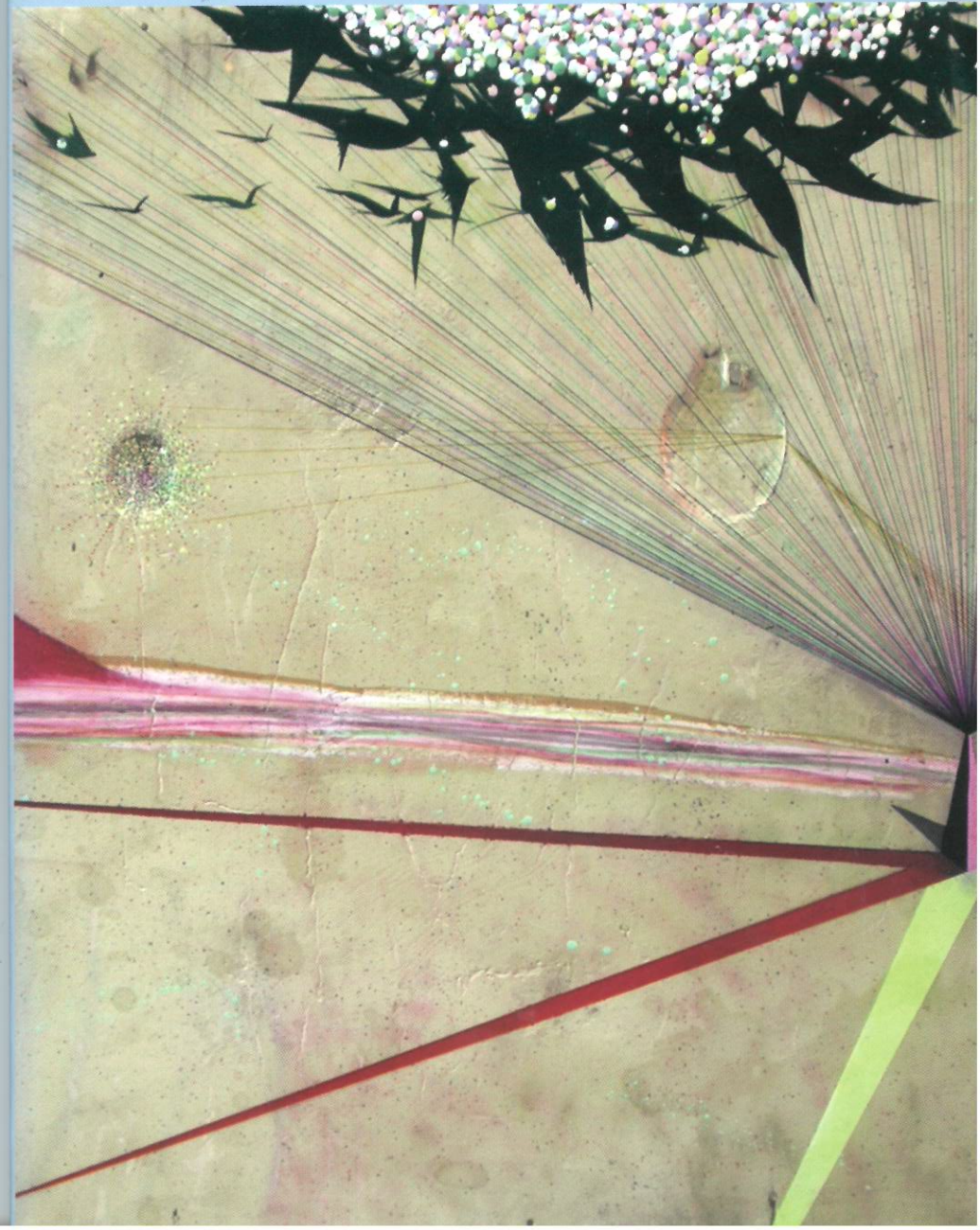


lyric

Number 7



taught herself to write again by carefully forcing her fingers to spell out the Gayatri over and over again, filling an entire notebook, the script more and more legible page by page. Perhaps she would have had the same results writing Britney Spears lyrics over and over again. Yet I cannot help but see a little miracle. The Gayatri transmogrified, her body made new. By filling up my own notebooks with so-called translations, I hope to facilitate other people's life-long dialogues with the Gayatri.

Six Translations of the Gayatri Mantra

1. Agony-ing Savitur help
Make a song of this dissonance.
Enter me now at this dark hour.
2. At this hour not even the dawn's
Rays penetrate the elements
Wait, our eyes will drink in the light
And with the light, the universe.
3. Om Glow Gleam Beam
Boom! the world did desire dream
At twilight just you try to see,
Be hold Her multiplicity.
4. Earth and Sky Born of Ardor
Glorious Animation
Light of Lights Pure and Divine
Healing Burn Deep Deeper Please
5. That my savior would now come
and hear my plea that she illumine
my dimwitted devotedness.
6. Night breadth of mind-sprung earth,
Echo heat risen and rising.
That which trembles inside the flame,
May you rest here in us at daybreak.

THEOLOGY AND POETRY: AN INTERVIEW WITH FANNY HOWE

Eve Grubin: You were raised in an unreligious protestant family, but as an adult you converted to Catholicism. How have you integrated your non-religious upbringing and current secular literary life with your religious observance and passion?

Fanny Howe: If you have grown up in a secular world you can't ever really leave that point of view behind. I always say that I am (instead of a Roman Catholic) an atheist Catholic. I am half an atheist; I am at home, so to speak, in a secular intellectual environment.

EG: Your first poem in your book, *Gone*, ends with the line: "my face shining up I lost faith but once." I have read that line so many times. It's like a mathematical equation.

FH: Yes, it is a mathematical equation.

EG: I lost faith but once equals once I had faith. The point is, if you have faith, even just once, that is very powerful.

FH: Exactly. I had this artist friend, Italo Scanga, who said that he was happy for five minutes once in his life on a train in Italy with his mother during the war. He remembered happiness down to a matter of specific moments. Happiness in this case can be equated with God.

EG: All it takes is once.

FH: It explodes the sequence in some astonishing way.

EG: And then you are always trying to get back to that.

FH: Each religion has methods that are supposed to help you live with the abandonment of that experience or to help you get back to that experience. So it's either a going towards or a returning; as in so much desire for good, there is no fixed direction.

EG: Didn't Simone Weil say that an atheist is more religious or is closer to God than most people who call themselves "religious"? Is it because doubt ironically intensifies religious feeling? In your poem, "They Are, They Must" (see pages 40-41) you write that, "Money has always / Been huge and out of sight like God / Who does not exist but is." Those lines seem to capture the simultaneous faith and non-belief you hold at the same time. And the money reference seems slightly playfully blasphemous.

FH: Weil meant that those who describe God with attributes and emotional responses to each person are transgressing against the unknowability of God. Atheists have enough sensitivity to leave God alone. In this sense, I know that I am half atheist, and if I didn't know it, I would be blind. Half of me every day wakes up and feels alien, alienated on a dangerous planet. As for money, it has developed many of the attributes of the named God. It has replaced God. Penance, purgatory, these can be metaphors for cash payments.

EG: What does this have to do with poetry? Is there a relationship between religion and poetry?

FH: The one thing that I have felt since I did the translations from Polish of the Karmel sisters—writers who wrote in the Nazi labor camps and survived—I do now really believe that poetry can save your life. I never would have said words like this a few years ago.

EG: How can poetry save your life?

FH: I think there is something built into our material bodies, which protects itself through an organizing principle. When you are thrown into the worst circumstance, if you turn in and draw on that principle you can save yourself. It's like unifying your soul, integrating your being in spite of everything that is being taken away from you. You are also saving your culture.

EG: You would not have said this a few years ago?

FH: Poetry often seems, when I am not really thinking

about it, like a luxury. I think: look at us all writing poetry as if we are making samplers in the 19th century and showing them off to each other as opposed to embarking on a truly deep practice that reflects how our brains are put together. It's not just poetry; it's music too. I think of the people who wrote music under terrible circumstances, like Messaien, the great composer who wrote *Quartet For The End Of Time* when he was a prisoner of war.

EG: The most profound and enduring art comes out of a sense of urgency or emergency, as if it's an absolute necessity, as opposed to sampler needlework. A poet can make a good poem, but is that what we want? Jean Valentine said to us in a workshop: "You all know how to write, the question is, what are you going to do with your talent? What will you make it into? That is what is most important."

FH: Yes, she is right. One of the things a few years ago that was on my mind a lot was that the poets of my generation, the ones I thought I would be writing with and for (the poets in the time of Valentine, Creeley, Quincy Troupe, etc.)—none of them made any money, no one had any intention of having a teaching career, there was no such thought in anybody's mind and so we all were sort of like street poets, you scratched around for a living and wrote poems. And then this whole thing began to happen, the career, this huge surprise. What has happened is that much poetry separated from the life of the poet; the life of the poet used to be a dangerous choice. This isn't to say there are no great poets around—there are!—and many are teachers. But much work (from poetry to sociology to science) has left the ground.

EG: And your last book of poems is called *On the Ground*. Did you have this idea in mind when you chose the title of that book?

FH: I do feel strongly about the dangers of the ontological inversion, as Joseph Milne calls it. That is, the narrative about the world has replaced the world itself. Theory is the fiction of the late 20th century but it is read as if it were

not, in the end, just an idea trying itself out. Being "on the ground" is great and powerful. But it is the next thing to being in the ground. Bombs over Baghdad, the destruction of Fallujah—these come out of ideas, not out of the dreams of women and children and watchful men.

EG: Do you think one must live in danger to be a strong poet? What about Emily Dickinson? She had the comforts of a family and money, but she wrote the most urgent poems ever.

FH: But she was lonely anyway and alienated. She was an erotic and passionate person, and she wasn't touched. Her brain raced on its own.

EG: You don't think she ever had any sexual relationship?

FH: I doubt it, but she had erotic powers. Sex per se doesn't really end loneliness. If you come home and sleep alone, you are lonely.

EG: Do you think there is a relationship between religious urgency and the urgency in poetry?

FH: Frank O'Hara had a religious urgency, an extreme sense of joy and excitement and wandering. Everything he saw, he saw really well. He was dazzled all the time, by friends, by the day, so everything had a living context for him.

EG: He had a sense of awe.

FH: Yes, astonishment. One thing I really believe is that God doesn't care who believes in God or not. I think it's our choice to seek God or not. It's been called a non-reciprocal relationship. All of the laws have nothing to do with what happens when you get folded away in that wave.

EG: And how does Catholicism handle these questions?

FH: The eucharist, the mass . . . I feel sorry for the Catholic church, which is so degraded now. I believe that it still holds the truth, I do believe that. I do think that the Catholic church has the right story, the right narrative about reality, but it has gotten twisted at both ends. The

suburban liturgy is a killer. Because I take the Church's description of reality as true doesn't mean that other religions don't tell the truth. Far from it. I do not ever think of myself as a "Christian," but you would have to be a Catholic to know why this is the case.

EG: What does it mean to be Catholic but not a Christian?

FH: Christendom is over. But as the word "Christian" has evolved, it has become associated with nationalism in that old crusading sense. It has become an ideological term that has, as far as I can tell, very little to do with the realism of the Gospels. On the other hand, Catholicism is queer. It is malleable and reaches extents of thought that really can't rest anywhere, in terms of nation or specific culture. When people call themselves Christians, I get scared. No matter how socially good they are, to others all over the world, as many of them are, it is a disturbing way to describe an ethical base that is common to almost everyone. We all know nonbelievers who have laid down their lives for others. Perhaps because of the Eucharist, Catholicism is a religion without borders. It is like eating beauty.

EG: How does one believe that one group holds the truth but then simultaneously believe that other groups also hold the truth, if that is what you are saying? It seems impossible. And fundamentalism has taken over, as we know, these days.

FH: The truth envelops facts. It comes before and after, rests above and underneath. When you say, I am telling you the truth, you are calling on truth to verify an action. The truth is static but motional too. Every culture refers to the truth and calls it down for help in terrifying moments, and pursues it in quiet moments. It's important to fork through the impulses of all believers and mentally eliminate much cultural matter in order to get to the common truth. Every culture owns itself. I think fundamentalism is a response from all cultures to relativity, to a leaderless world heading for disaster. Protestants, Jews, Muslims—all have their fundamentalists. The book *Fundamentalism* by

Malise Ruthven talks about this in the deepest ways.

EG: So you think it's possible to say that your religion is true and so are the religions of others?

FH: All religions, I would say, pursue the same truth. In Veritatus Splendor. If some people are waiting for the Messiah to arrive and others are waiting for the Messiah to come back, it isn't that much different. Both hold a posture of attention. We all have the same scripture, we all have the same text, the same stories. It's just stories about their history and people, each one has different stories. They all follow the laws, the tablets, the ten commandments. They are the laws that are inherent to being human. . . I think by now the Laws are engraved in our brains; I do think that they are so commonly real that they could almost be called natural laws. . . Every one of those laws says that if you go a certain way, you or someone will suffer. If you obey those laws, they help you avoid much chaos and suffering in your life. You find this is the case as you grow older.

EG: Do you believe that for some poets, poetry has replaced religion? Why are there so few religious (traditionally religious) poets these days?

FH: AA and AI Anon have also replaced religion, yoga and exercise have, too! Traditional religion has failed multitudes in the past century and before. It would be difficult after the 20th century to write traditional religious poetry. Woolf, Joyce, Beckett—they are all religious poets to me. Weil's *Notebooks* are poetic. But poetry to me is such an undefinable word—it belongs to all the arts and to certain events that have both a mystery and unity to them—that I could only return to the idea of it as a built-in organizing principle, one that, paradoxically, provides a way out of historical circumstances. Certainly poetry readings, per se, serve a very fine purpose of bringing people together to listen, rather than see. And the venue is protected by that attention. In this way it resembles a religious ceremony. You can say, "To hell with history!"

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