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The War Cemetery and the City Park – “Saturated Landscapes” in Fanny Howe’s *The Lives of A Spirit*

Bénédicte Chorier-Fryd

- ¹ *The Lives of a Spirit*¹, a long prose poem by Fanny Howe published in 1987—at a time when this American poet was still writing prose narratives and poetry as well as essays—² is no wartime narrative poem, nor a lyrical exploration of the traumatic memories left by war in those who lived through it. Though it does not directly address war or its aftermath, it is discreetly haunted by the ghastly memories of World War II. Instead of lending themselves to a full-fledged narrative re-composition, these memories infiltrate the prose poem with the fleeting presence of wartime, or they surge up in mundane places—in particular the ordinary city park. In an unspecified urban American environment, the daily routine of an unnamed ageing female subject—the “spirit” in the title—takes her from her now empty home to a familiar park, while memories of her early years spent in wartime are interwoven with those of her more recent past. The dead are more actual to her than the living—her own dead, mother and father, as well as the anonymous residents of war graves. Far from being intrusive, the lingering presence of war is an essential part of the experience of the living spirit. This paper will first define the nature of the spirit and its relationship to her own history and story. It will then examine how wartime phantoms come to haunt what may be called the non-space of the city park she likes to escape to, saturating them with the co-presence of past and present.

A living spirit

- ² *The Lives of a Spirit* offers a meditation on a female subject’s life, conducted from the dual point of view of a first person and an unidentified third-person narrator. It is divided into nine four- to ten-page long sections composed of brief, non-sequential paragraphs. It evokes moments and places in the life of this ‘spirit’ with total disregard for logical connections yet following an over-arching timeline. The “spirit” is followed from her

birth, or first incarnation as a baby girl, through her leaps in and out of various anonymous female bodies, to a final hovering between here and there, one body and another—or the same, enclosed within the walls of her “little cell” and sitting out on her “bench” in a park (LoS, 74).

- 3 What is most characteristic of this poem is its voice, lyrical and narrative at once, hovering between first and third person. This uncomfortable—at times disturbing—discursive stance is related to a theological position: Fanny Howe’s personal path took her from an initial militant form of atheism (as an activist in the Civil Rights movement) through conversion, to an unorthodox and possibly heretical form of Catholicism. In calling herself an “atheist Catholic” she foregrounds the human side of religious experience together with its inherent contradictions. In a talk with poet Leonard Schwartz she says:

In the end I depend on the relationship with another person who is wise and kind to come to an understanding of the emptiness in which we live. The other voice coming out of the other person and being heard by oneself — well, it’s shocking in many ways that we take it for granted. What is created in relationship with another person finally is a third presence. In Catholicism that would be the Holy Spirit rather than, you know, the father and the son. But it is a third presence that’s created out of this relationship between two. It can of course be hellish too.³

- 4 This “third presence” is neither “I” nor “you” and it is spiritual. It arises from the relationship with the other and binds one to this other (“I depend on the relationship”), in keeping with the Augustinian definition of the religious as “that which binds” (from *religare*, ‘to bind up, bind together’⁴). This spirit takes shape in the first pages of *The Lives of A Spirit*, first manifesting herself in the third person as an unnamed female subject “racing aimlessly” (LoS, 9) on a wind-swept beach. In the next two paragraphs the same subject is given a voice (though no typographic markers signal the shift from third to first person), which falls silent again as the following paragraphs narrate the sudden arrival on the beach of a baby—the female form, the female voice, and the baby being three avatars of the “spirit” whose “lives” are to be recounted here.
- 5 In the initial moment of her incarnation, she shows up out of the blue (literally: “They surmised that she had floated from the stars in the navy blue sky”) on a wind-swept beach:

The baby might have been the least worthy of earth’s materials, lacking hardiness as she did. It lay with its ankles crossed and its arms spread wide, like one who lives by her feelings. Nostrils are always placed in front of the mouth, but this baby’s lips, at the service of gum, tooth, and voice, protruded pink and soft. The application of her small fist to her lips made her, in all cases, the object of maternal desire. (LoS, 9-10)

- 6 The baby’s position mirrors that of Christ on the cross; birth and death are confused, which was heralded two paragraphs above by the evocation of a “funeral wreath” with “yellows and pinks, birthday colors” (LoS, 9). She is all mouth, “pink and soft” (LoS, 10); her gesture of yearning for the mother’s breast meets maternal desire: relationship is primeval.
- 7 This physical evocation is followed with a meditation on the effects of this baby’s presence among the living:

No one could doubt that this was a model something. Every part of her seemed extra, more than intention could handle, and raised the question: Is the body made to fit the needs of the soul, or vice-versa? Since her heart was a seething fountain of

blood, people longed to lean their ears to her chest to hear those sinews at work. Her damp skin, soft as a rose petal, was sweet to the cheek. And when she smiled, the world was all confection and air. (LoS, 10)

- 8 This is the beginning of a metaphysical inquiry into the issues of dualism. The baby seems the perfect embodiment of the Thomist model: a spirit indivisible from the flesh. She is a Christ-like figure, her heart both emblematic and vital with its “seething fountain of blood” and perceptible “sinews at work.” The imagery is sensual: “Her damp skin, soft as a rose petal, was sweet to the cheek”—an evocation reminiscent of the *Song of Salomon*); “confection” suggests both sweetness and creation while “air” is the breath of the spirit, its literal *anima*.
- 9 Soon the other third person in this opening, the female figure that had appeared “racing aimlessly now, purposefully then” on the same rocky shore, is no longer distinct from this baby who by the next section has grown into a girl and even, on the same page, a mother whose “children have all grown up” (LoS, 14). Her ages will henceforth continue to vary from one paragraph to the next. Point of view constantly oscillates between the first and third person, bringing about syntactic and temporal confusion, as in this passage from section 2:

Once, close on the earth, she lay down, making wings with her arms moving up and down. She scattered her books, bag and strap on the pavement, while I wondered: Why does she love where she was, but didn’t? And why am I where I am today? On my stroll around the park’s pond, I asked questions like that. Confusing it was—the way the world ran back from every step I took. [...]
The dog barked ahead of her. There were sled tracks, next to the orderly print of birdclaws, dog-paws and garbage lids. (LoS, 14)

- 10 The girl laying down and moving her arms like a bird or an angel replicates the baby’s initial position on the beach, and the wondering subject’s questions emphasize her confusion, not just as to the “why” of her past and present, but also as to the where.

The park or the cemetery: a “non-space”

- 11 After the initial scene, when the spirit runs by a military graveyard on an “icy shore,” passing “rusty war crosses [that] tipped northeast” on “the top of a gnawed cliff,” the setting turns predominantly urban. She moves between indoor spaces (be they a boarding-school, a prison, a workplace or a home) and the outdoors, a vague urban space with streets and seldom-mentioned buildings. Her constant impulse, at all stages in her life, is to get out and run the streets to eventually reach a park—not any specific park, but a generic one, complete with lawns, trees, paths and benches. She is seldom at rest, yet neither is she driven by any purpose nor aiming at any specific resting spot. She “stroll[s] around the park’s pond” in a state of confusion as the “world [runs] back from every step [she takes].”
- 12 It is a shifting, unstable space she roams, a space of unstable definition where past and present constantly collide. It has been so from the beginning—of her life and of the text. The second section introduces the motif of the park while echoing that of the war cemetery, linking the two to the figure of the father:
- Your father’s gone down from the park and into the forest. No smoking, now, where he’s at, and no dogs too. Papa wanted you always to be in training for that longest of sleeps. For him that training was the purpose of this life. (LoS, 15)

- 13 The death of the father is a departure into the wilderness, and the park serves as a tamed version of the forest, life being a preparation for death. The following paragraph reintroduces the motif of the graveyard, repeating the image of the “tipped” war crosses in the opening scene and allowing a shift back to the initial setting while not excluding the reference to another, urban graveyard, that of her father and of “other fathers”:

The grave markers of other fathers, by the way, tipped and grayed like a mouthful of rotten teeth. If the snow was trying to clean them, it couldn’t. But gale winds, blown down from the Arctic Circle, moved the stuff around, so it shifted its skirts around like that many loaves of flour [...]. (LoS, 15-16)

- 14 The park and the cemetery become confused in numerous instances, as in this observation which discreetly echoes the former:

You don’t often, by the way, come upon a perfect park. Mine is in November, late afternoon, and the elms are like stones. (LoS, 68)

- 15 Here repetition is also variation: “by the way” can no longer be understood literally, while in the first instance it could either be discursive or mean “by the path.” The “perfect park” shows stone-like trees evoking headstones in a graveyard, an image found above in “that garden of stones” (LoS, 67). Elsewhere, “[c]rosses and branches [catch] the attention of her quick bleak eye” (LoS, 22).

- 16 The meditation on the “perfect park” leads to a description of another graveyard:

[...] there’s another park I love, and this one is a boneyard, for real, designed and settled in the 18th century. A very great effort has gone into making the area pacific. A mist like incense dreams the hillocks, hummocks, topes, and holes. Especially at daybreak, but also late at night, when you come to make out on the heaving grave beds. (LoS, 69)

- 17 Shapes lose their definition as their names rhythmically resonate in an alliterative foursome (“hillocks, hummocks, topes, and holes”), as “mist” spreads over them like “incense” and the churchyard feels like the inside of a church. This familiar “boneyard” is a place of peace (“pacific”) and aesthetic harmony (“designed and settled”); it harbors the most vital instincts: the snow is like “loaves of flour,” the grave is “the least domestic bed on earth” (LoS, 36) on which couples “come to make out.” The park and the graveyard together condense time—times in the life of the spirit, and the times of birth, love, and death— into one place. This is a constant in the poem, and in one of the descriptions of these landscapes, the mention of the “field and furrow” of the park (LoS, 64) calls forth these few lines from Longfellow’s 1842 poem “God’s Acre”:

Comfort to those, who in the grave have sown
The seed that they had garnered in their hearts,
Their bread of life, alas! no more their own.
Into its furrows shall we all be cast

- 18 Howe’s “loaves of flour” echo Longfellow’s “bread of life”, and the poem resonates through *The Lives of a Spirit*.⁵

- 19 The war cemetery glimpsed in the initial scene expands into a leitmotiv and merges with other graveyards, themselves confused with city parks. The vision of war crosses does not give way to an evocation of those whose bodies rest in these graves by the ocean, and the soldiers become “other fathers” whose haunting presence is marked by the “rotten teeth” of a gaping, but silent mouth. The war is not given a narrative, and the cemetery is no memorial, but could be defined as a “non-topos”, a notion crafted by Michel de Certeau in his elaboration on Freud’s concept of the return of the repressed. De Certeau’s *Heterologies*

were translated into English at the time Fanny Howe was writing her *Lives of a Spirit*, and there are strong connections between her poetry and his theoretical and historical work, which Howe explicitly explores in her essays.⁶ De Certeau’s conception of the relationship between literature and history provides a framework for the present exploration of the presence of war memories in Fanny Howe’s poetic meditation:

“[...] literature is the theoretic discourse of the historical process. It creates the non-topos where the effective operations of a society attain a formalization. Far from envisioning literature as the expression of a referential, it would be necessary to recognize here the analogue of that which for a long time mathematics has been for the exact sciences: a ‘logical’ discourse of history, the ‘fiction’ which allows it to be thought.” (*Heterologies*, 18)

- 20 Fanny Howe’s poetic treatment of the permanence of traumatic war memories manifests the return of the repressed in post-war collective or individual psyches. It is a kind of permanence that can only be manifested obliquely, which is figured in the second paragraph of the first section, immediately following the initial mention of the “rusty war crosses”: “A forgotten name moves in such fitful waves, engineered like tumbleweed across the mental floor.” (*LoS*, 9).
- 21 The “tumbleweed” is a vegetal ghost: as a diaspora it is both dead and alive, since its dead structure carries its seeds. In this long poem, a number of “forgotten name[s]” show up haphazardly—the tumbleweed is the ghost of all the nameless soldiers in the war cemetery, and it also manifests the absence of any name for this “spirit,” who remains “she” or “I” throughout. The “forgotten name” is also that of God, and this bears specific implications in Fanny Howe’s theology, poised in-between belief and doubt. The divine can only manifest itself negatively as a gap in the Father’s name, which is consistently written here in ancient scriptural fashion, with consonants only: “G-d.” Seeking the divine while knowing it is impossible to approach, defining it as what it is not—an apophatic theology⁷ that finds forceful expressions in Fanny Howe’s work, as in her 2000 novel *Indivisible*: “God’s inexistence is so deep, black and big, there is no way to see or name it. God is inert. Why bother with it then.” (*Radical Love*, 609)
- 22 God’s “forgotten name” haunts the spirit who instead of “bother[ing] with it” explores other gaps, lets other escaped names pull her into the depths of her memories. She roams in a non-space—the space of her visions she turns into language in this rambling account⁸. The presence-absence of the dead in a non-space opens up an initial gap that attracts the spirit in all her subsequent explorations.

The phantoms of the past

- 23 Fanny Howe’s texts are scrupulous explorations of spiritual issues, yet she is uncomfortable with the transcendental, and the Logos may not be what she is searching for. At the end of the first section, the spirit asks: “Little word, who said me?” (*LoS*, 10). Is “little word” a pet-name for the Logos, is it gently debunking? What about the weakly performative “said” in place of a biblical “spake?” What she seeks to understand may be what Fanny Howe refers to in an essay on Beckett as “the contemporary logos,” no longer the absolute, distant, alien, indifferent God of the ancient Gnostic⁹ but the word incarnated in language, in a human mouth. “We may not know if there is a God, but we do know that there is a word.” (*The Wedding Dress*, “The Contemporary Logos,” 75). This logos

is manifested through the rambling words of the “spirit”, this ghostly third presence born of a relationship.

- 24 What the spirit in *Lives...* does know is that the “female body [...] is a carrier of past and future” (*LoS*, 16) and that as such, she is the vehicle of memories that make the bulk of her meditations. Like the narrator in *Indivisible*, she has witnessed much:

I have seen terrible things that a living and powerful God, who was like a parent, would simply not allow to happen. I hate it when they give God attributes. God is not love or memory. / God is as plain as its meaningless name” (*Radical Love*, 606-607).

- 25 The “terrible things” that preclude the possibility of a “powerful God” never clearly surface in the spirit’s discourse, and the erratic path of the tumbleweed lays a pattern for the way the narrative progresses through space and time—here and there, back and forth, unpredictably. Yet the names one has forgotten, the scenes one has had to repress, the memory of the “terrible things” that should not have been allowed to happen—all will return “across the mental floor” like the ghost the tumbleweed is. In *The Lives of A Spirit*, the memories of traumatic experiences, including those of the war, are blown more or less violently across the disjointed pavement of the narrative (its disconnected paragraphs), colliding or merging with the sweeter memories of carefree youth or friendly encounters.

- 26 The female spirit’s repeated excursions out of her home, her school, her workplace, and her endless return to her favorite haunts—the city park and the cemetery—are constantly associated with her attempted liberation from the shackles of her life (“If I weren’t a slave walking in shackles...” 70), which come in various forms, notably as recurrent figures of male authority: the father, the forefathers, and the husband. Ironically, these escapes are also returns to an ever-present past; as she contemplates the park she loves to take refuge in, she muses:

[...] Each path was designed as if the next, at last, would represent progress; and each step was, paradoxically, drenched in the tangle and nostalgia of the old days. [...] the pleasure of reliving old flaws may be irresistible. (*LoS*, 64)
Seven o’clock in the morning and it’s just impossible just now to understand the presence of the sky, of trees. It’s like discovering that the void will not come in search of me one night; but more things of the past. (*LoS*, 67)

- 27 In her random exploration of her personal history as a baby, a child, a teenager, a young woman, a mother—approaching the present with death looming—disconnected fragments point to the central traumatic moment of World War II. Only three passages specifically evoke the war, and there is one allusion to operations in the Pacific towards the end (“a submarine foundered in a Pacific storm” 72). The first explicit reference emphasizes the sounds of war, or rather the way its aftermaths still resonate in the early days of peace, with “a shot split[ting] the air” and the voices of soldiers turning into “whispers”:

One night near the apartment a shot split the air and signals boomed from north to south. The hunched figure of a shabby private stood by the table sipping a cordial. It was the purple zone, time for evening prayers where those who say them say them, the war was ended and the witty sally between the men quickly turned into whispers. (*LoS*, 48)

- 28 In the second, the actual sounds of war are heard, and the violence of bombs is likened to that of the preemptory potentialities of conceptual language:

The horizon lifted a skydrop: buildings out of dimension, cornered lights and the sound of bombs like “isms” and “ologies.” (*LoS*, 57)

- 29 In the third explicit reference to the spirit’s experience of wartime, she takes refuge into blissful sleep/oblivion, again surrounded by the sound of explosions:

During naps, even as bombs are falling on the city limits, I often drop into G-d’s arms, because I am fatigued. (LoS, 73)

- 30 The lingering memory of the war also surfaces unexpectedly in domestic scenes, disconnected from wartime since they belong in the spirit’s adult life:

[...] one of her interiors had a cheerful fire burning in a woodstove with an iron door and flying sparks. [...]. Lightbulbs flickered at her footfall here, as if the sky were raining bombs. (LoS, 54)

- 31 This is followed with another simile, one that challenges the Heraclitean principle of mutability as expressed in the notion that “you could not step twice into the same river”¹⁰:

Beside us, the water was soundless and still, as if it were a river that you could step in twice. [...] The body is to its shadow what a war is to storms. All technology. That’s the comfort of it. (54)

- 32 The river stops flowing—time stops and the flowing water turns into the still pond in the middle of the park/cemetery; this water can be stepped into twice or more, as “more things of the past” keep surfacing. The weather metaphor of the sky “raining bombs” has a counterpart in the logical proposition positing that “a war is to storms” what “the body is to its shadow.” A comforting continuum? Comfort in the “technology” of the body and of war? This logical continuum is allowed by the absence of a hiatus between past and present, war and peace, the dead and the living. The parks or graveyards that so attract the spirit are the stage where these opposites meet and merge. She pays close attention to their design and the landscapes they offer to her wandering eye. There is always a path, a pond, and a bridge; this generic landscape appears at the onset of the poem in the title to the first section: “*white plate painted with more white*”. This title is proleptic of a fragment from section two in which a complete landscape is delineated:

She munched the bread and envisioned a plate from her mother’s house: Imperial Ming, this white plate was painted with more white, snow, and cherry-red, hair-like branches. There was a bridge from blank to blank, floating.” (LoS, 13)

- 33 The white paint upon the white porcelain both obliterates and carries the memory of a landscape, the spectral presence of a floating bridge—a vision neatly contained in the metrical perfection of the final sentence in the paragraph. This vision provides a template for the subsequent evocations of the park or cemetery, a non-space saturated by the presence-absence of the dead.

- 34 In her essay on Thomas Hardy entitled “Incubus of the Forlorn”, Fanny Howe praises the novelist’s attention to landscapes and his descriptive capabilities. She writes: “A saturated landscape contains figures like phantoms made of paint that trail across canvasses” (WD, 97). Her parks and cemeteries offer such “saturated landscapes” to her “spirit”, who is both haunted by the memories of a ghastly past and alive with wonder at the natural world; in her in-between states the spirit experiences and manifests the contradictions of life, the ineffable experience of what Fanny Howe calls “wonder-horror”¹¹ and reads in Beckett, another major figure in her intellectual pantheon:

I think of Beckett as not being religious in the usual sense but at least being alive, being truly alive, and horror-struck by it. Out of that threshold, the threshold of both horror and wonder, there is life, and life is everything.¹²

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INTERVIEW:

‘*The Wedding Dress: Meditations On Word and Life*’: Fanny Howe in conversation with Leonard Schwartz (*Jacket Magazine* 28, October 2005).

APPENDIXES

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “God's Acre” (1842)

I like that ancient Saxon phrase, which calls
 The burial-ground God's-Acre! It is just;
 It consecrates each grave within its walls,
 And breathes a benison o'er the sleeping dust.
 God's-Acre! Yes, that blessed name imparts
 Comfort to those, who in the grave have sown
 The seed that they had garnered in their hearts,
 Their bread of life, alas! no more their own.
 Into its furrows shall we all be cast,
 In the sure faith, that we shall rise again
 At the great harvest, when the archangel's blast
 Shall winnow, like a fan, the chaff and grain.
 Then shall the good stand in immortal bloom,

In the fair gardens of that second birth;
 And each bright blossom mingle its perfume
 With that of flowers, which never bloomed on earth.
 With thy rude ploughshare, Death, turn up the sod,
 And spread the furrow for the seed we sow;
 This is the field and Acre of our God,
 This is the place where human harvests grow!

NOTES

1. This paper draws partly from another paper, presented at the 2013 AFEA (French American Studies Association) conference in Angers. I am indebted to Richard Anker for his comments and suggestions.
2. Fanny Howe has since focused on poetry, essay writing and video, to the exclusion of narrative fiction.
3. <http://jacketmagazine.com/28/schwartz-iv-howe.html> (2005)
4. Ernest Klein: *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, Elsevier, 1967.
5. See the whole poem annexed below.
6. De Certeau’s work on the case of collective possession at Loudun had a profound influence on Fanny Howe, which she evokes in her essay “Wonder-Horror”. She makes specific reference to de Certeau’s study of “Surin’s Melancholy” in *Heterologies* (101-115).
7. “[Ockham’s] central formulation, the *potentia absoluta*, combines two propositions that are in themselves incompatible: 1) meaning exists; 2) it is unthinkable. [...] God has ceased to be a signified, becoming purely a signifier, the mark of a truth henceforth absent from discourse [...]” (M. de Certeau, *Heterologies*, 108)
 “The unnameable origin does in fact make its appearance as a perpetual slippage of words toward that which deprives them of a stable meaning and frame of reference. But it does not give rise to a true designation. The words never finish leaving. [...] An operation is substituted for the Name.” (M. de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 150)
8. This “non-space” may be read in light of Antoine Cazé’s work on poetry as a “non-space” for language. See CAZÉ, Antoine. « Vers une archéologie du collage : The Tablets d’Armand Schwerner », *Revue française d’études américaines* [special issue : *Poètes américains : architectes du langage*], vol. n° 103, no. 1, 2005, pp. 50-63).
9. Marcion
10. See Stanford’s online *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/#Flu>
11. In her essay *Wonder-Horror* in *Religion and the Arts*, Volume 14, Number 5, 2010, pp. 606-615.
12. Interview with Leonard Schwartz.

ABSTRACTS

Fanny Howe’s 1987 long prose poem offers a meditation on a female subject’s life, conducted from the dual point of view of a first person – the ‘spirit’ in the title – and an unidentified third-

person narrator. It is composed of brief, non-sequential paragraphs evoking moments and places in the life of the ‘spirit’ with total disregard for chronology or logical connections, yet overall following an over-arching timeline from her birth by the sea to the close of her life in some unnamed city park. As she muses over her various situations, confusion reigns regarding both time and space, which are not given as stable references but instead function as leitmotifs in a time that is neither then nor now, and a space that is neither here nor there – or both. The two places that provide landmarks in the urban landscape she roams – the cemetery and the city park – are non-spaces haunted by the phantoms of her wartime youth.

Le long poème en prose publié par Fanny Howe en 1987 offre une méditation sur la vie d’un sujet féminin, du double point de vue d’une première personne (l’« esprit » du titre) et d’une narratrice non identifiée qui s’exprime à la troisième personne. Le poème, un récit non-séquentiel, est composé de brefs paragraphes et fait fi de toute linéarité chronologique ou logique, tout en s’inscrivant largement dans un mouvement qui suit la vie de ce sujet depuis sa naissance au bord de la mer jusqu’à ses derniers jours quelque part dans une grande ville, dans un parc. Dans les évocations de divers moments de sa vie, temps et espace sont extrêmement confus et ne fournissent pas de repères stables mais fonctionnent comme leitmotifs dans un temps qui n’est ni présent, ni passé, et un espace qui n’est ni ici, ni ailleurs... mais tout à la fois. Les deux lieux récurrents dans l’espace urbain qu’elle arpente : le cimetière et le parc ; deux non-lieux hantés par les fantômes de son enfance en temps de guerre.

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Quoted persons: Samuel Beckett, Michel de Certeau, Thomas Hardy, Fanny Howe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Leonard Schwartz

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