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JORIE GRAHAM TALKING

Review

Overlord. By Jorie Graham. New York: HarperCollins, 2005. 93 pp. $22.95.

In "Posterity," the last of the twenty-five poems in her new book, Jorie Graham says, twice, "I have talked too much" (86-88). I am sure that even some of her sympathetic readers have been thinking the same thing, impatiently, for much of the past decade, perhaps longer. Has redundancy set in? Not only does Graham repeat herself here but she also continues her habit of repeating titles. Six are called "Praying," about which more later. Three at the center are called "Spoken from the Hedgerows." Her love of words—lots of them—bespeaks a swirling spirit, sometimes out of control. It was not always thus. Nor did she used to worry about repetition. The poet whose first two volumes, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* and *Erosion*, consisted of short lyrics, in short lines and short stanzas, has moved for the past two decades into larger, more free-ranging, indeed chaotic forms. Expansion has replaced concision; metaphysical speculation has gone wild, as have Graham's sentences, some of which are not really sentences, replete with their frustrating parentheses, brackets, and lacunae. Breaking out, breaking away, she has

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seemed simultaneously and paradoxically airy in her bodiless abstractions and heavy in the sheer weight of her utterances. She has been talking a lot. The question of whether the talk makes sense, or sounds instead like pretentious palaver; whether the talk rises to the level of music, and whether what she has been writing can be legitimately called "poems" has been on the minds of her friends as well as her foes, for a long time. When the late Howard Nemerov wittily observed (in "Strange Metamorphosis of Poets") that "From epigram to epic is the course / For riders of the American winged horse" and that most poets "start out Emily and wind up Walt," he was thinking of his male contemporaries. Graham may be the only female poet—aside from the late Amy Clampitt—to have assumed the mantle of Whitmanian largeness after having made a more modest start.

Her skeptical readers, like Whitman's, would accuse the poet of mere bloviation. The writers of the volume's dust jacket copy play right into the hands of Graham's doubters. They (or the poet herself) tell us that "the work meditates on our new world, ghosted by, and threatened by, competing descriptions of the past, the future, and what it means to be, as individuals, and as a people, 'free.'" Well, yes, I suppose it does, but whether it does so convincingly, whether it has found the proper poetic form for the articulating of Graham's philosophical, social, and political questions, remains open. The comparison to Whitman remains instructive. Whitman's genius allowed him to produce a new kind of poem with a new subject, to forge a heterogeneous style out of the heterogeneity of the United States themselves. Whitman's line, his robustness, and his addresses to his readers all bespeak a radical confidence. Likewise, his language encompasses a range unduplicated by any poet since, except John Ashbery. Graham has something of Whitman's braggadocio but lacks his vigorous buoyancy, optimism, his humor (no other contemporary poet aside from Adrienne Rich has so little lightness), and even his delicacy. She does not loaf and invite her soul, although she thinks a lot about "soul" and other spiritual matters. Unlike Whitman's, Graham's spontaneity often seems forced. For all her sensuousness, Graham is a remarkably alienated poet. Pleasure does not fit into her scheme of things, at least as she places herself in the universe of the twenty-first century. The world's riches and beauties give her apparently little consolation,

although she registers them capaciously. Once again, it's Whitman without joy. For a person so alert to the senses she seems remarkably puritanical, resistant to ordinary happiness.

Like Whitman, however, Jorie Graham has been able to put her finger on the pulse of the zeitgeist, and regardless of whether her vision and her announcements will last longer than their historical moment, no other poet has tried to come to grips with the larger world so much as she has. By "larger" I mean both public (political) and philosophical (metaphysical). More than any of her volumes from *Materialism* through *Never*, burdened with somewhat recondite references to the turmoil in her life (divorce, relocation, remarriage, more relocation), *Overlord* takes on the problem of public themes—history, ecology, and economics—in tones of anxiety, fear, contemplation, remembrance, and prayer. Especially prayer. All of a sudden Graham has got, if not that old time religion, then at least the urge to speak to some higher force. (It does not answer.) Four poems from her previous volume, *Never* (2002), have "prayer" in their title. Aubades and annunciations appear in other volumes. The subjects at the heart of *Overlord*, which is in many ways her most focused of the past decade, and the one with the clearest sense of organization, are twinned. First of all, the poet's thoughts about the war that took place sixty years ago on the beaches at Normandy, where she now spends part of her time and, as a response to 9/11, her thoughts on the growth of anti-Americanism, global warming, and political upheavals. Second, a series of addresses to a *deus absconditus* who shows no signs of returning, or even of hearing her. Although these poems will not appeal to all tastes, some of them contain sections of urgency as well as topical relevance. Graham's honest religious questioning comes as a welcome alternative to the increasing religious certainty now prevalent in much American life. Better, one thinks, an excessive, verbose indecision than a narrow, straightened, exclusive fidelity, or a self-righteous, smug sense of one's own salvation and the damnation of all unbelievers. I take it as a deliberate re-imagining on her part that Graham now calls her poems "Praying" instead of (as earlier) "Prayer"; by relying on the gerund she calls attention to the effort of making an address rather than the accomplishment of it. In contrast to "praying," "prayer" retains an almost material solidity. As always in her poems, Graham prefers processes to things.

The volume opens with a Proustian lyric ("Other"), which prepares the way for the following speculative poems. This recollection from early childhood (the poet, sick at home and absent from school) focuses on the child's first awareness of presence, in time and space, of what "now" means, and of how one can be "absent" and not absent at the same time. It is a picture of the little Jorie Graham in the first flowering of her abstract speculations: "We can be in and out of here, now, / at once, and not die" (2). And from this conjecture the rest of the volume extends. Graham has deliberately mingled two halves of her poetic temperament—the modestly autobiographical, and the heroically ambitious: Proust (or Wordsworth) and Whitman.

One poem especially stands out as an example of the modest and the ambitious together, or of old Graham and new. "Impressionism" (53-57), in seven numbered sections, begins with clear, careful attention to an external scene. (The fact that Graham can write plainly when she wants to makes one wonder what makes her *not* want to, much of the time, preferring instead her looping, loping, fragmented utterances.) The poet is watching a "silent little girl" near St. Laurent sur Mer whose "frock" (the very word is sufficiently archaic to put us in mind of a Renoir painting) "is jagged in its / private wind / of starch and straightenings and cleanliness." In her "incandescent pinafore" the girl leans over a bridge railing and fishes for crabs. Immediately the poet thinks of direction, of the bottom of things, and by the mid-point she is off, à la mode de Graham, thinking in images and abstractions, of trees with swollen fruit retreating to barrenness, and of questions about surfaces, depths, materiality, and its opposite. Here is Section 4, the poem's exact middle:

> As if a tree could siphon all its swollen fruit
> back in, down into its limbs, dry up the
>   tiny opening
> where manifestation slipped out—
> taking it all back in—until it disappears—until
> that's it: the empty tree with all inside it still—
> versus this branching-out before me of *difference*, all
>   brilliantly lit, out-
>   reaching, variegating,
> feeding a massive hunger.
> The heron is full of hunger.

> The miles of one-thought-driven grasses full of
> hunger.
> Although not in this register.

This sounds like no one else but Graham, in both of her modes, the observant and the speculative, or what I previously termed the modest and the ambitious. It begins with a deliberate anti-Keatsian strategy. Where he looked at the stubble fields (in "To Autumn") and performed an act of imaginative reparation, thinking back to spring and summer, Graham observes fullness and imagines emptiness. She, too, is going backward in time, but from actual ripeness to empty possibility. From life she travels back to the womb, from outside to inside. In one long non-sentence (followed by three short lines—one sentence and two fragments), she thinks of visible life as "manifestation" and "*difference*" feeding a hunger that belongs equally to the tree and to herself. Hunger (as she explains in the next section) moves through "the *through*" covered by the "shine" of manifestation. Once again, movement, direction, and process take precedence over stasis and permanence; or, rather, by making a noun out of a preposition ("*through*") she gives action its own place.

Like Wordsworth talking to any of the children or old people he encounters in his country walks, Graham engages the child in conversation and registers at the end an almost Darwinian picture of nature's hunters and prey. A "bleached-out jumbo turkey-leg" on the girl's string pulls up eleven crabs, "all feeding / wildly" and then crushed with the child's hammer on the dock, one by one, and "picked up claw-end by many / hands that seem to suddenly materialize / out of the nowhere to which I am / now sent." The poem ends with the poet herself, somewhat ominously:

> There's no way back believe me.
> I'm writing you from there.

Trolling for poetic material, out picking up impressions, Graham goes for a walk and comes upon what starts out as a *fête champêtre* and ends as a vision of nature red in tooth and claw. All lines—of fishing pole or poem—move in one direction only, a stark termination.

We might take the Darwinian scheme of "Impressionism" as a microcosm for the entire volume, in which Graham mingles personal

details (in her praying to an overlord) with historical ones. Operation Overlord was the code name for the Allied invasion of Europe that began at Normandy on D-Day. At the eerie dead center of the book, the trio of poems entitled "Spoken from the Hedgerows" borrows from letters and other written sources the voices of American soldiers, who speak to us not only from the hedgerows but also from beyond the grave. Their laconic, matter-of-fact account of the events before, during, and after D-Day plays off against the lacy spiderwebs of Graham's own propria persona speculations. Leonidas and his Spartan soldiers have come alive once more. Is Graham great? Does she contain, Whitman-like, multitudes? As she did in earlier volumes (notably *Materialism*), the poet incorporates the words of others within her own. Quotation becomes part of a poet's arsenal, and the fact that in some cases she dispenses altogether with quotation marks makes the voices of several soldiers blend together in a chorus and yet remain separate at the same time. The words of the noble dead belong as well to Jorie Graham, their poetic incorporator. She has become them through an act of absorption.

And like Whitman himself, Graham calls into question the entire issue of poetic address: who is speaking, and to whom, throughout these pages? In "Dawn Day One" she remembers having looked at herself in a mirror (Latin: *speculum*, as she well knows) and spins a riff on self-and-other, the "you" and the "not you" whom "you" (or "one," or she herself) might see. As markers of identity, pronouns identify and also deceive. The poem ends with a Grahamian speculation on the nature of identity that sounds as well the erotic note of Whitman talking to his readers through the ages:

> Here. You are at the beginning of something. At the exact
> beginning. Ok. This is awakening
> number two in here, in this poem. Then there are
> these: me: you: you *there*. I'm actually staring up at
> you, you know, right here, right from the pool of this page.
> Don't worry where else I am, I am here. Don't
> worry if I'm still alive, you are. (6-7)

"Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, / Missing me one place search another, / I stop somewhere waiting for you": thus Whitman at the famous end of "Song of Myself." The erotic, the political, the epistemological all

come together in both poets, as does the possibility of multiple identities. In "Praying (*Attempt of June 8 '03*)" Graham mixes her own awaking with scenes from D-Day, once more addressing God, or a lover, or some combination, and says—in a figure of speech that verges on the literal—"I am beside myself, I am beside these words." Some strange meiosis sets in as the poet recalls counting the stars in childhood and losing her place and beginning again. The poem ends with an enumeration, a Whitmanian list, which returns the poet to origins, the place of starting out, with a combined sense of accumulation and loss:

> . . . oh lord it is a
> small thing, no?, to have to
> begin the count
> again—the stars, the butterflies, the flies, the scars,
> the dead, the rooms, the sand, the words, the wounded, the roads, the missing limbs
> the *whose*
> of the missing limbs, the missing, the starlings, the prayers, the individual secrets, the bullets, the days, from the beginning again, the
> days. Start counting. Too much blood. Under the bridge.
> Start. Start putting things back. To still us. Start. (11)

The hallucinated commands seem directed equally outward and inward, to God and to the self. She is beside herself, and she is beside her words, but of course she is also their source. They emanate from within her.

But who is she, and how does she wish us to think of her? Whitman distinguishes the "Me myself" from everything around him, however important lovers and other people may be. Standing "apart from the pulling and hauling" is "what I am," but at the same time he asks "Who need be afraid of the merge?" He asserts himself in part through acts of withdrawal, in part through acts of absorption. And his most important, primeval question is also Graham's: "To be in any form, what is that?" Like Whitman, Graham asserts her "self" at the same time that she reduces it: "I cannot make out what borders are" she announces in "Praying (*Attempt of June 6 '03*)" (18). This is what a pop psychologist today would call "boundary issues." For a poet so attuned to the world's body, its lush physicality, Graham also seems paradoxically unsure of her own corporeal status. One sometimes has the feeling that, like the young Wordsworth on his way home from school, Graham must grab onto a wall

or a tree to recall herself from the "abyss of idealism." Her Romantic precursor, describing the motivation behind the Intimations Ode, famously wrote: "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, that I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature." Both Wordsworth and Graham deal constantly with physical reality and they both question its permanence, its reliability, and their own ambiguous place within it.

At the beginning of the following poem, "Upon Emergence," she asks a question with a complicated sense of her own identity: "Have I that to which to devote my / self?" (20). Not only does she wonder about an appropriate object for her questions, her addresses, her devotional aspirations, but she also thinks of her "self" as something separate from herself. The line break tells all. Her "self" is different from "herself." She has a proud humility, saying that she "can *make* / *myself* very small" (26), emphasizing both her power and her pettiness. She tries for Zen-like emptiness and erasure but ego keeps getting in the way, via her volubility. In a poem about illness ("Physician") she separates her body from her self: "My person is sick. It trembles" (58). But like Whitman and Allen Ginsberg (in his jovial, mock-paranoid "America") she also identifies with her nation: "My person, ah, America, sinks into its bed." Is the country in apposition to her self? (Her body is like Donne's newfound land, her own America.) Or is it the object of her address? The line can be read in two distinct but complementary ways. She thinks of her body as different from herself. Like Rimbaud, she might say "*je est un autre*," having externalized her body-in-pain from the Real Me: "How do I tell my person it is not my body that is ill. / Not my body, not me, that is right. To be sure, there *is* / terminal illness, but this is not personal, there is no longer / *personal illness*" (60). By interiorizing and exteriorizing illness at the same time, the poet both bears and rejects the possibilities of termination. Or, rather, she accepts her mortal self and simultaneously transcends it. Similarly, in the following poem ("Disenchantment"), she continues her effort to identify a self. The poem begins:

> I shift my self. It's me I shout to the tree out the window
> don't you know it's me, *a* me—I really don't care what we call it,
> this personhood—a hood isn't a bad thing, a place to live, a self-blinding. (61)

So the self-as-hood merely covers, indeed suppresses, the real "me." Whatever we call it, individual identity hides as much as it reveals. Graham contains multitudes, many possible *me*'s. She manages to live within them just as smoothly, casually, as they exist within her. "Hood": both a piece of protective clothing and, colloquially, a neighborhood in which to live with other people.

This review began with the opening sentence from "Posterity." Like many of Graham's poems this one surrounds an anecdotal base, in this case the handing over of the poet's dinner, a store-prepared chicken in foil, to a homeless beggar. A specific experience involving another person often sets the poet and her poem going. The whole poem recalls in principle the best of some of Graham's earlier work, like "What the End Is For" and "Imperialism" (*The End of Beauty*), "Fission" and "The Phase After History" (*Region of Unlikeness*), and "The Dream of the Unified Field" (*Materialism*). All of these mingle narrative, lyric, and conjecture, and it is in this kind of mixing that Graham is most memorable, authentic, and original. But mere speculation, or thinking, like mere "talk," is not enough to make a poem. A poet must work her language into shapely utterance, her talk into music. She must do more than mix the separate ingredients. Without music, we have prose musings. The poet must also refine thought into artifact; otherwise it remains fluffy abstractions. Graham has achieved such refinement somewhere in most of her volumes. (*Swarm* continues to baffle or elude me, however.) "Posterity" combines the best as well as some of the most annoying of Graham's poetic habits. Its "idea" (as Wallace Stevens might have it), that is its concept, its form and shape, is serious, weighty, important. Its particulars ("the poem of the words" in Stevens's formulation) veer between the elegantly simple, the banal, and the pretentious. Where is the real Jorie Graham?

The poem opens with something like a confession of—if not exactly sins—weaknesses, flaws, and a meditation on the historical, mythical, properties of the Holy Grail, that instrument of salvation. Then the introduction of the street person encountered in Harvard Square follows, and the gift of the store-bought chicken, which I take as the poem's experiential beginning. The poem ends with the poet's reflections on the efficacy of her poetry, and really of anything that smacks of too much talking. Sometimes the language seems merely banal: "It was in a paper

bag with aluminum / lining. Even so it was extremely hot." Sometimes the strained simplicity of her diction courts pretension: "I gave it him in both hands." This is British rather than American usage. We might remember that Coleridge criticized Wordsworth for bombastic diction, images too great for the thoughts they carry, and also for metaphysical heaviness. Is Graham's chicken the grail of the twenty-first century? Like the Leech-Gatherer, or the Discharged Soldier in *The Prelude*, or the old men in "The Old Cumberland Beggar" and "Animal Tranquility and Decay," Graham's Harvard Square beggar is meant to be both a representative (of the poor we shall have always with us) and a corrective to the poet's own condescending act of presumptive charity.

"Posterity" comes last in this book at least in part because it deals with the noble idea of bequests, charitable and otherwise. It gives an adequate sense of closure. It also, however, contains gestures and moments that seem at once too ordinary (as above) and too grandiose. The homeless man apparently never gets to eat the chicken; he doesn't even speak. The poet walks on, frustrated if not actually defeated in her charitable aims. She turns her attention upon herself, on the nature of "the subject" (both personhood and poetic tropes). And she acknowledges that the whole event was all an occasion for poetry: "Forgive me I am perhaps not speaking to you individually." The individual has become a trope; the poet has used the beggar, absorbing him to her own need to offer charity. He becomes the reason for a poem, and Graham feels inspired and also chastened:

> To praise to recall to memorialize to summon to mind
> the thing itself—forgive me—*the given thing*—that you might have persuaded yourself is
> invisible,
> unknowable, creature of context—it is there, it is there, it needs to be there. I awaken
> again. The
> man, last night, his hands
> no longer operational. (88)

When she finds herself exasperated by the noncompatibility of ways and means, morality and aesthetics, giving and acknowledgment, Graham summons a desperate tone right out of Wallace Stevens: "it is there, it is there, it is there" certainly sounds a lot like "It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible" ("Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"). Perhaps

there is no Thing-In-Itself (Kant's "*Ding-an-Sich*"); there is merely what one confronts, what one is given, provisionally or by accident. Poetry's traditional justification—to praise, to recall, to memorialize—is invoked only, it seems, to be shunted away. The beggar, his hands "no longer operational," stands for everything weak, impoverished, unfunctional, and also ungrateful.

The poet awakens the next day if not sadder but wiser then at least modestly chastised as well as "operational," and she wonders, in two senses of that word:

> I wake up operational
> over what country now.
> The rain has ceased,
> I stare at the gleaming garden. (88)

In a book that has explored public themes, Graham asks about (one sense of wondering) "what country" she now occupies, or rather what kind of polis makes possible the kind of encounter she had the day before. But she looks inward as well as outward: in her private life, in her own person, she marvels (the other sense of wondering), speaking with utter clarity and simplicity of the new day and the natural beauty to which she awakens. Has she decided, Candide-like, to cultivate her own garden? Adrienne Rich, another poet given to public themes, has seemed in her poetry of the past ten years to have made a comparable retreat from the public to the private life. The poet-critic James Longenbach has already described "Jorie Graham's Big Hunger," and Graham herself uses hunger as a motif for both her characters and herself throughout many of her books.[1] The big question is what Graham will need next. What will she be hungry for? Where will her hunger lead her? Into larger swirls of metaphysical and political anxiety, or to the smaller pleasures of the self and its privileged enclosed domain, signaled by a gleaming garden, about to continue growing?

Note

[1]James Longenbach, "Jorie Graham's Big Hunger" in Thomas Gardner, ed., *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 82-101. This valuable new volume contains both previously published reviews and essays and also new ones, which treat the whole of Graham's career thus far.