JORIE GRAHAM: THE EXPERIENTIAL FRAMES OF KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract: Besides discursiveness, Jorie Graham's poetics is marked with another characteristic which I explore in this paper and refer to it as ex*periential quality.* I argue that meditations and speculations in Graham's poetry most often "happen" within concrete referential frames, or in concrete occasions. These experiential frames are often broken down into smaller scenes, "audible" and "visible" throughout the meditative process. Figuratively speaking, they function like "clasps" holding the digressive, meditative thoughts within the referential and experiential context of the poem, as will be illustrated. These experiential elements are often intertwined with the meditative ones, directing the focus of thought toward the particulars, and impelling the mind of the protagonist to firstly observe and describe and then analyze or make references to myths, religion, philosophy and other realms of thought. This poetry does not only conceptualize experience in a meditative and reflective process, it also shows how the conceptualizations are initiated. Even in poems with predominantly discursive elements, such as statements, abstraction, fragmented speech (or what Graham calls the "turn inward" (Ratzabi, "Nothing Mystical About It", interview), there are always some traces of an experiential, causal, and linear structure intended to contain the meditative thought, the "turn outward". These features situate the poems in the realm of experiential poetry. The voice (the protagonist) is imminent in the meditations and speculations, imbedded within the structure of concrete events or occasions. Even though Graham's poetry perpetuates the discursive style of the 1970s, it simultaneously remains within experiential trend of the 1950s and1960s, continuing the immanentist and the experiential mode of poetry into the 1980s and 1990s. Besides the purely discursive poems in which no concrete, particularized, experiential qualifications are made to situate the mediations (e.g. "Flooding", "One in the Hand", *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*), my contention is that experiential and immanentist poems prevail in her five books of this period, as the analyses of the poems will show.
Keywords: Jorie Graham, immanence, experience, frames of reference, knowledge.

Graham's empirical approach demonstrates a deep trust in sensory knowledge that is, in the visual, tactile and auditory sense-data "gathered" by the protagonist's observations and descriptions which is then subjected to the more cerebral process of reflection, as will be shown in the analyses. "We have no mind", she says, "in a world without objects" ("Strangers", *Hybrids* 12), or as a statement echoed in many interviews:

> . . . [A]s a culture we so distrust and fear the body and its knowledge that we actually think sense data, and imaginative data, have no inherent content unless we raise them to the surface via explanation, abstraction, or generalization. Abstraction of emotion is not a use of abstraction that is positive, it seems to me. Abstraction in which the body thinks in its unbodily reaches is truly powerful, necessary, and—another story—the crucial metaphysical extension of bodily knowledge. (Wunderlich, *"The Glorious Thing",* interview, online source)

That same faith and philosophy leads to her fifth book *Materialism* in which the main concept of materialism is "analyzed" from multiple perspectives in many poems in order to make it large enough to accommodate the whole world which is not created by men, including, but not limited to, nature, mind and body. Beyond this is the *uncreated world*, "the divine", the incomprehensible that remains beyond the reaches of human knowledge.

The majority of the poems in these five books usually begin with a description in a linear and causal language, thus setting the scene for a more meditative experience in a more discursive language. A good example is "Eschatological Prayer" (*The End of Beauty*), in which the physical scenes depicted not only contain and ground the meditation in a particular place and time, but instigate and tease out speculations upon the Christian eschatological idea:

> In Montefalco, Italy,
> late in the second millennium
> of a motion measured
> by its distance from the death
> of a single young man,
> we drove up a narrow road cut like a birthcry

into the hillside, winding and twisting
up to the top.
Snow gleamed in the margins, originless.
Snow gleamed in the miles of birdcry and birdsong,
yellow birdsong in the yellow light. (35)

The beginning of this poem "documents" the time and the place of the event, but unlike the straightforward reference to place, "Montefalco, Italy", the time is given in a complex sentence that resembles a winding path in which the "motion" and the "death of a single young man" are the "landmarks". In order to solve this syntactical puzzle, which effectively draws (critical) attention, and determine the "date", one has to put the relative clauses in a causal order. This task is made easier in the context of the title, the promise of Christ's second coming, his kingdom on earth and the resurrection of the righteous. "The motion" is the beginning of Christianity, the point from which we measure our time. This originating point in time, Christianity, is also measured as the distance from his death ("the death of a young man") and our time, "the late second millennium".

After the "facts" given in this stanza, the language becomes more figurative but it does not break into diffused, fragmented speculations. The descriptive stanza produces an extended synaesthesia in which the visual, "the narrow road" and "the snow", is described by means of the auditory: "the narrow road cut like a birthcry", "snow gleamed in the miles of birdcry and birdsong". The auditory sounds of the scene are then described by means of visual modifiers: "yellow birdsong in the yellow light". This image exudes sensory data and initiates the protagonist's meditation on the numinous, and the spiritual significance of the scene. She begins to see the snow as "originless", that is, as a phenomenon. Consequently, the already occurring meditation stops as the protagonist adds another element to the scene:

Below us, appearing and re-
appearing,
the airplane factory now closed and converted
into a temporary
slaughterhouse—
no sound from there just now,
the wind being against us, (36)

The meditation and speculation on eschatological ideas, the promises of a "quick young god" as the protagonist refers to Christ, are now happening on the road *up* to the monastery, a physical and the spiritual destination, leaving the "slaughterhouse" *below*. However, all these elements of the actual physical scene, the road, the accompanying wind, the snow, the birdsong, and the slaughterhouse acquire religious and spiritual significances as the poem tells the story of the thirteenth-century patron saint of the monastery, Santa Clara of Assisi. "This Claire", as the poem refers to her, wrote and spoke so fervently of the visions of Christ dropping down under the weight of the cross and her promises to carry it for him, that the sisters of her order dissected and searched her heart for the cross after her death:

They cut her open when she died, the sisters prying
between the curtains of light and the curtains
of light. They found in there,
in the human heart,
this tiny crucifix, this eye-sized figure
of tissue and blood.
Here are the penknife, the scissors. Here are the towels
they soaked the blood

up into, here the three kidney stones, the piece
of lung in the shape
of a bird, here the story the hurry like so and like (38)

Besides setting the physical scene of the poem, the experiential elements become ingrained in the poem's spiritual and philosophical reflection. The "slaughterhouse" and its associations with "body" and "cutting", then becomes part of the reflection on Santa Clara's body being cut; the "birds" are associated with the bird-like piece of her "lungs"; "the narrow road" which leads to the monastery also leads to the highest form of spiritual elevation of the "cloistered sisters" now and in the past. The physical context that provides the meditative foci gain symbolic meanings for the protagonist. This happens on the "way up", that is, in a process of being enveloped by sublime thoughts about and reflection on the power of the faith of the saint and the sisters, to the degree of the materialization of faith in the act of cutting her body to find the crucifix, or in the act of the spiritualization of the body as a temple, a home for Christ. Here, as in many other poems, if the duality "body-spirit" is not deconstructed as a logocentric oppositional pair[114], it is at least questioned as a purely human construct. The voice seems to imply that what we call the material and the spiritual becomes relative beyond our categories. This is how Vendler summarizes the same general idea of mind and body in Graham's poetry:

> [Graham] brings into postwar American poetry . . . a universe without philosophical coherence though bound by physical law, a universe unconscious of us but which constitutes, by its materiality, our consciousness. (Vendler, "The Nameless and the Material", on line source)

The meditative protagonist often "exits from" and "enters back" into the experiential frame, embedding past scenes into it. "What the end is for" (*The End of Beauty*) "happens" on a military airfield in "Grand Forks, North Dakota" as the subtitle of the poems indicates:

> A boy just like you took me out to see them,
> the five hundred B-52's on alert on the runway,
> fully loaded fully manned pointed in all the directions,
> running every minute
> of every day.
> They sound like a sickness of the inner ear, (26)

This experiential scene bears multiple connotations of violence, destruction and intensive noise on one side and friendship, sacrifice and love on the other. It creates in the protagonist a deep and painful sense of alienation from the "actual" scene, so that she consequently experiences it "like a sickness of the inner ear". She therefore withdraws into past scenes of another alienation between two people in a relationship. The following quotation captures a variety of remembered scenes, while at the same time demonstrating how their experiential and narrative discourses merge with the discourse of the meditation in the present, "actual" scene:

> *What is it the wind*
> *would have wanted to find and didn't*
> *leafing down through this endless admiration unbroken*
> *because we're too low for it*
> *to find us?*
> Are you still there for me now in that dark
> we stood in for hours
> letting it sweep as far as it could down over us
> unwilling to move, irreconcilable? *What he*
> *wants to tell me,*
> *his whisper more like a scream*
> *over this eternity of engines never not running,* (27-28, emphasis mine)

Her meditation on "the wind" as she and her young guide are lying down and watching the planes take off, is interrupted by a flash back scene. Her meditative discourse lacks the causal and linear connections between "the wind", "its admiration", and "us". This is because here the language catches a feeling, a sensation or just a thought in process about two humans beings ("us"), missing the grace of "wind", because they are too "low" in a meadow filled with the violent noise of warplanes, which "drop practice bombs called *shapes* over Nevada" as her companion informs her. It is followed by narrative discourse of a painful past scene of two people irreconcilably alienated and standing still in "darkness":

[114] See Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, especially Part I, Ch.3, p. 82.

of false signals. *The meadow, the meadow hums, love, with the planes,*
as if every last blade of grass were wholly possessed
by this practice, wholly prepared. The last time I saw you,
we stood facing each other as dusk came on.
I leaned against the refrigerator, you leaned against the door.
The picture window behind you was slowly extinguished,
the tree went out, the two birdfeeders, the metal braces on them.
The light itself took a long time,

bits in puddles stuck like the useless
splinters of memory, the chips
of history, hopes, laws handed down. *Here, hold these* he says, these
grasses these (28)

The (love) scene, described here in detailed linear and sequential language, captures the emotional burden of the people. It resembles a hyperrealist painting by fixating the language on the people and the objects, which disappear in shadow and darkness, so that the silence and the gap created between the couple becomes "loud". The mind of the narrator freezes and fixates on the visible, that is, the ocular disappearance of the other person, and the objects behind him in minute detail, powerfully suggestive of his disappearance from the relationship. As the last memory scene suggests, they both admit they are not able to "see" each other anymore:

. . . We stood there. Your face went out a long time
before the rest of it. Can't see you anymore I said. *Nor I,*
you, whatever you still were
replied.
When I asked you to hold me you refused.
When I asked you to cross the six feet of room to hold me
you refused. Until I (29)

Although in a realistic mode, the language of the three scenes plays with "darkness" as a metaphor of the alienation and estrangement between the two and their inability to "see" each other. This is a metaphor which is not contrived "outside" the realistic context of the described scene, but is engendered inside. In other words, the vehicle of the metaphor—"darkness"— belongs to or is contiguous with the same realistic context of the physical scene. Thus, two people literally and physically stand and remain in darkness, because their emotions are so stupefying that nobody reaches "to switch the light on".

The recurrent entering into and exiting from the structure of the actual experience, reminds us of the immanentist quality of Graham's poetry. The ability to be constantly present "here" and "now" and to *present* not *represent*, as she says:

> . . . [T]o transform the act of re-presentation into an act of presentation. It forces the poem closer to being an action, further from being the report of an action. It puts the poet in a position of greater accountability, unpredictability—of being the protagonist of the poem more than the narrator of it—"no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader", says Frost. (Ratzabi, "Nothing Mystical About It", interview, online source)

Even in the most elevated philosophical and religious speculations, she "steps down" to remind us how she (the protagonist) "climbed up" to these thoughts, as the poem "Eschatological Prayer" demonstrated. As we have seen, the poems either establish an experiential frame at the beginning or the experiential scenes are interspersed amongst the meditative thoughts. This causes their respective discourses to intertwine with the fragmented and the symbolic ones. The experiential quality is even more expressly manifested in what many critics refer to as Graham's process-poem. If this is a poetry of constant learning through meditative analysis of sensory-data, consequently, the learning and the discovering must be captured as a process which, as the poems often "decide", is never ending and not always "blessed" with results. The answer often lies in the absence of the answer, as many existentialists claim. Therefore, what remains important for the poem is to catch a thought and experience in progress as if it is happening while we are reading the poem. This is what Graham says about the importance of the poetic experience captured as process and the ethical and epistemological dimension it brings to the poem:

> A poem, to slightly mangle Stevens, as an act of mind in the process of finding what will suffice. Most actions born of genuine "process" turn, modulate, choose, swerve, arrive at momentary stays,

> temporary truths, in a manner that is surprising. Surprise allows for, or insists upon, new moral and emotional ways from point a to point b. New ways to survive. A break from rote to places where the soul finds its wellsprings—not originality so much as a recognition that origin is still accessible if one breaks what Beckett and Proust both refer to as "habit. (Ratzabi, "Nothing Mystical About it", online source)

The poem therefore remains for Graham an act of "slow" discovery, a process we are "allowed" to witness as readers. This process is often side tracked, comes to a dead end, or, as she implies, breaks through a new layer to come to the "origin" of things. Process in her poetics becomes a principle which makes her experience immanent, as if it is happening during the reader's encounter with the poem. This defines her poetry as experiential, since besides the discoveries, the process leading to them becomes equally important, the "delay" prior to arriving at them.

Chief amongst Graham's predecessors to whom she admits her indebtedness is Emily Dickinson. She shares with Dickinson a trust in the "raw material" of an experience, which resonates in a number of her poems, such as "I watched a Snake" (*Erosion*, 34). However, their language structures belong to opposite poles. On the one hand, Dickinson's condensed, single word utterances, interspersed amongst what Graham calls "silences" (Gardner, *"A Door Ajar*", interview, online source), are signs of intellectual and emotional meditation that have occurred and ceased before the poem even begins. On the other hand, Graham's entire thinking and the ensuing emotional process are depicted in the poem as a whole experience. In other words, Dickinson transcends the process of thinking and feeling and makes immanent only the "grains" of wisdom, the epigrammatic knowledge gained form that process, while Graham makes immanent the full process of attaining the "grains". Helen Vendler identifies the same polarity in their poetics, when she says:

> (Even shorter lyrics must, to succeed, convince us of their completeness; they do it by a sort of Dickinsonian implosion opposite of explosion, in which an implied prehistory of ignited totalization is condensed into charred post-hoc indices of itself). At this moment in her writing, Graham chooses to show us her expanding universe by means of a slice of it in conic section. The cosmological excess that Graham has been insisting on recently can be read as a corrective to the current lyric of personal circumscription. **(**Vendler**,** "The Moment of Excess", online source)

One of the poems which best illustrates how the interactive and immanent protagonist uses certain devices to implicate the reader and capture the ongoing process in the poem is "The Veil" (*The End of Beauty*). It begins with a multiple choice question and an empty space allocated for the reader's presence or absence:

> In the Tabernacle the veil hangs which is (choose one):
> the dress dividing us from _____; the sky; the real,
> through which the x ascends (His feet still showing through on
> this side)
> into the realm of uncreated things,
> up, swift as proof,
> leaving behind this *red* over our row of poplars now, (45)

In addition to being devices that involve the reader, the empty space and "x" can also stand for the Judean notion of god as one who cannot be seen or explained, thus he is an "x" or an empty line. Perhaps the protagonist is inviting the reader to insert a new name for god, one of many mankind has coined? The next lines signal remarkably swift transition as the poem moves from the uncreated realm and the place of his ascension ("His feet still showing through on this side into the realm of uncreated things up, swift as proof") back to the realm of the created[115] things, this world: "the red over our poplars now". The adverb of time "now" in the last quotation denotes the beginning of the ongoing process of meditation on the "veil", which is there and is not. Yet, the "rip in the veil, which is the storyline" is more important, as it is a familiar line from our religious stories and interpretations; they are only epistemological "rippings" of the same "veil" that separates us from the ultimate answers, from the "x" and the empty line.

As we have seen in these examples, the poem captures and implies process by devices and markers of the "actual" time and place of the events happening. At the same time, these devices mark the immanence of the voice (the protagonist) in the experiences arrested by the poems. These markers and devices are constitutive parts of the

[115] The world and nature created, but not by man, versus the uncreated, eternal, "divine", unknown origin of everything.

experiential quality of this poetry and range from narrations and descriptions of scenes and occasions, to spatial, temporal and personal deictics, and conative and phatic statements. They set the scene and initiate the meditative thought, helping the poem create an illusion of thought and action depicted during the "actual time" of their happening, which the protagonist wants to share with the reader. Ultimately, they mark the protagonist's full *presence*, her full *imminence* in the experiential structures of the poem.

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