

## ARABESQUES AND PIROUETTES



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JORIE GRAHAM, *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems*. Carcanet,  
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Any comfortable notions the reader might hold about the lyric's status as a self-enclosed aesthetic are quickly unsettled in this volume. What interests Graham is the process of subjectivity, notably how the mind perceives itself in and without history. A flick through the titles in *The Dream of the Unified Field* reveals Graham's intention to interrogate her audience: "On Difficulty" and "To the Reader" are two examples. Early formulations set up patterns which the reader is advised to distrust. Observing how spiders have imitated the order of geese flying overhead, Graham tells us that the world, and hence poetry, should resist such narratives:

the spiders imitate the paths the geese won't stray from,  
imitate them endlessly to no avail:  
things will not remain connected,  
will not heal,

and the world thickens with texture instead of history,  
texture instead of place ("The Geese")

Tellingly it is only with her third collection, *The End of Beauty* (1987), that Graham finds the way to enact rather than describe the breakdown of schemes. The six-line iambic stanzas of *Erosion* (1983) give way to long, often end-stopped lines, interrupted by blanks where Keats's notion of truth as containable in the lyric collapses. The lyric breaks up in a series of self-portraits where each small shift in perception is isolated by a numeral. "Self Portrait as the Gesture between Them [Adam and Eve]" documents the moment when Eve extends the apple to Adam, wishing to give her freedom to him, so that in the loss of grace she may come to define the grace she had possessed. It is in such moments of metaphysical complexity that Graham's language reaches "the rapture of the contemplative mind" that Helen Vendler has noted in *Soul Says*:

## II.

Meanwhile the heights of things were true. Meanwhile the distance of  
the fields was true. Meanwhile the fretting of the light against the  
backs of them  
as they walked through the fields naming things, true,  
the touch of the light along the back of their bodies...

Despite her earlier resistance to narrative, it is when Graham begins to tell stories in *Region of Unlikeness* (1991), connecting events by simile across personal and historical divides, that the humanity of her vision shines through. The story of "Fission" runs as follows: Graham, as a girl, watches Kubrick's *Lolita* at a cinema. A man announces J. F. Kennedy has been shot:

Tick. It is 1963. The idea of history is being  
outmaneuvered.  
So that as the houselights come on—midscene—  
not quite killing the picture which keeps flowing beneath,  
a man comes running down the aisle  
asking for our attention—  
Ladies and Gentlemen.  
I watched the houselights lap against the other light—the tunnel  
of image-making dots licking the white sheet awake—  
a man, a girl, her desperate mother—daisies growing in the corner—

History is here outmaneuvered on three fronts. The first is the superimposing of JFK's assassination upon the defining film of the Kennedy years, the second the poem's concentration on the medium of narrative, revealing the image to be no more than particles of light and dark, and thirdly, *Lolita*'s adolescent desires are superimposed on the young girl watching. What concerns Graham is the reifying of the moment, that "where the three lights merged... there the immobilism sets in, / the being-in-place more alive than the being." The beauty of the poem resides in finding parallax. Once any image has to be foregrounded, the beauty, and arguably the truth of the experience is lost. The poem ends at the moment of choice (which story do I tell first?), ironically asking the reader to remain poised, immobile, in the fluctuating moment: "Don't move, don't wreck the shroud, don't move—"

It is worth siting this resistance to history within Showalter's *écriture féminine*. "Fission" can then be read in another way. The poem plays on the two senses of the word, the biological term referring to basic asexual reproduction and nuclear fission, where the splitting of an atomic nucleus generates a release of energy. Kennedy, the all-American male, philan-

derer and potentate, and Lolita, the child vamp of the male imagination, are part of the same power nucleus. Poised on the edge of womanhood, Graham captures the energy generated by the disintegration of these images. What female image is produced by this fission? Which way self-definition? The closing command can be read as the ambivalence of a girl in the act of surrendering her virginity.

Graham explicitly names her philosophical tradition in "Reading Plato" (from *Erosion*). The soul makes a brief appearance in the afterword to *Region of Unlikeness*, here as "the flash of a voice" addressing the poet who sings of matter. But in *Materialism* (the last collection represented here) Plato's hierarchies are disrupted by chance in "Relativity: A Quartet" and the title poem, "The Dream of the Unified Field". The titles may sound forbiddingly metaphysical but it is the intrusion of chaos into moments of domestic intimacy that make these lyrics so effective.

The tension between wishing for identity and resenting such self-definition is revisited in Graham's poems about marriage and family. In "The Dream of the Unified Field" the scrunched-up leotard that Graham delivers to her daughter unfurls into arabesques and pirouettes till the camera swivels round to see in the same sweep a flock of starlings settling on a wet black tree in the storm. The echo of Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" is quickly dislodged by elaborate simile and a technique which reflects each object in the next, not unlike Braque's late bird paintings. As the mother stands watching her daughter through a window, she recollects her own dance classes and the fear she felt when watching her ballet teacher dance with her own reflection. Graham superimposes the mirror her ballet teacher used onto the windowpane through which she watches her daughter. The ensuing plea, "Child, / what should I know / to save you that I do not know, hands on this windowpane?"— leads her to realise that each generation always moves to possess the next. In turn, this thought links her tale of two disparate childhoods, one European, the next American, to the European conquest of native America. The dexterity with which she attaches personal history to the conquest puts Walcott and Rich's attempts to shame.

Cora Kaplan has identified the problems that poetry by women may still encounter: "the insertion of female-centred subject matter into a male literary tradition, the attendant problems of expressing this matter in a formal symbolic language, the contradictions between the romantic notion of the poet as the transcendent speaker of a unified culture and the dependent and the oppressed place of women within that culture." By making subjectivity itself the centre of drama, Graham puts these issues to flight. *The Dream of a Unified Field* defies closure, offering a new annunciation of the lyric.