

David Weiss

## Metaphysical Catscan: Jorie Graham's *The End of Beauty*

*The End of Beauty* tells the story of a relationship from its origin and growth amid strife into marriage and parenthood and the enduring difficulties of love. Yet it would be truer to say that this relationship is the lens through which the poems see. The traditional foreground/background of subject and theme is inverted—the daily cares of living aren't accorded much space here; the conditions and crises of being are. "No things but in ideas," to turn Williams's phrase, accurately characterizes Graham's poetics if we also add that her ideas construct a world dense with actuality. The story in these poems resembles the kind Rilke tells in the Duino Elegies.

Story is only one of the threads that runs through these poems making *The End of Beauty* not so much a collection as a single booklength poem. And the story, though roughly chronologic, proceeds mythologically, not narratively, coalescing its drama in archetypical conflicts. Numerous poems make use of and develop such structures as the temptation in the garden, the turning of Orpheus, Apollo's pursuit of Daphne, Christ's refusal of Mary Magdalene's touch, Penelope at the loom, Persephone in the underworld, Pietà, and Annunciation. Mythology permits Graham to invoke a story without telling it; her interest lies in exploring its crystallized instants. In doing so she is close in spirit to Renaissance painting in its depiction of stock classical and biblical scenes, dramatizing a central gestural moment. Because Graham's intention is non-narrative, her success in the best of these poems lies in having found a way to tell a story lyrically.

Other strategies also reinforce the sense that we are in the presence of a long poem. There is the recurrence of



poems titled "Self-Portrait as..." ("...as Hurry and Delay," "...as Persephone and Demeter," five in all) which punctuate the book. And some poems begin as if they were an extension of the previous poem. "To the Reader" opens, "I swear to you she wanted back into the shut, the slow," and comes after "Expulsion" which closes on a Rilkean note, "...whispering *take me/back in—?* // Isn't that what place had wanted/*them for?*" "On Difficulty" starts in media res, "It's that they want to know *whose* they are," and it's quickly clear that "they" are still Adam and Eve of the first poem now in the turbulent interregnum between bite and expulsion.

Like "Expulsion," some poems, instead of concluding, end by holding themselves open with a question. "On Difficulty" ends, "When you look away/*who* will they be dear god and what?"—a question which further poems will concern themselves with. Other poems end with a Dickinsonian dash as if to suspend the poem's end and obstruct closure. In a collection knit so carefully together it seems appropriate for Graham to conclude individual poems so inconclusively. Yet a number of poems, read independently, out of context, would seem less successful, perhaps unsatisfying. A strong ending asserts a confidence in the efficacy of art, the autonomy of the self, in finality, and in endings themselves. The endings of Graham's poems, as with Dickinson's, are often devoured by silence, by non-being, and, one feels, they are threatened by it along the way. Like light-hungry plants, these poems seem to reach up on an etiolated abstract stalk of thought, just on the edge of expressibility, at times tipping over into the incoherent and the incorporeal, though more often sustaining their careful balance.



The recurrence of certain words and ideas also weds these poems into a single enterprise. In this Graham reminds one of Merwin who with his keys and doors and ash and hands creates a private lexicon, a world of obsessive symbolic portent. Graham's nuclear language is not composed of things, however, but of abstractions which she works to draw into bodily existence, incarnating them. Gap, minutes, shape, hurry, delay, description, plot, wind, destination, "the shut, the slow"—each accrues special meaning and becomes a term in her argument, in her structure of meaning. The temperament to attempt a spiritual catscan of this kind feels Catholic, medieval.

Her structure-building, however, isn't schematic in the least. As an instance of how she develops conceptual richness, consider the word "gap," one of the most ubiquitous in the book which, to begin with, stands for separations of all kinds: the infinite distance between god and the human, between man and woman (even the word "between" gets used in italics to stand for this place), between spirit and flesh, world and self, "the rip in the fabric where the action begins." It is also that space between time and language, silence and speech, and it is language itself—

Reader,  
it is here, only here,  
in this gap  
  
between us,  
that the body of who we are  
to have been  
emerges

Language is the space between; it is the place of creation, of making, "the body composed/of the distance between them." Graham conceives of this between as a



nexus where "the done and the undone rush into each other's arms," a space that must continually be crossed into, but not through. The gap is the place of freedom, of fluidity, of transit, of possibility, of meeting, where antitheses unite yet remain themselves. Of Mary Magdalene (in one of the finest poems here, "Noli Me Tangere"), who alone witnesses Christ rising from the sepulcher, Graham writes:

The secret cannot be

kept.

It wants to cross over, it wants  
to be a lie.

Is that it then? Is that the law of freedom?

That she must see him yet not touch?

When he disappears and there is no longer any in-between to occupy (only belief), she turns into the landscape itself, an exile in form, a fate, for Graham, loaded with injustice.

The idea of gap is complex and dynamic; it contains its own poetics. For a poem, too, is a gap, that field where reader and writer, the articulated and inarticulate, shapelessness and chaos, matter and idea meet, and more importantly, contend. In a piece called "Some Notes on Silence," Graham indicates that she thinks of the act of writing poems in military terms: bravery, last-ditch efforts, silence as an opponent. And though a metaphor that suggests combat might include the possibility of a victory, it is, in fact, noble failure that Graham takes as her ideal. For all the self-dramatizing implied, Graham's martial metaphor indicates a dialectical mind, like the late Yeats of the Crazy Jane poems ("Fair and foul are near of kin, / and fair needs foul, I cried."). Antitheses are not opposites; each, silence



and speech for example, takes its identity from the other, is defined in terms of the other. But the relation is antagonistic and needs to be. For Graham it's a crucial necessity that a poem escape or forestall the tragic by refusing the condition of completion or as Graham names it, "destination." Resolution as a poetic strategy seems inimical to her purpose.

The poems in *The End of Beauty* can be likened to a solution whose contents are turbulently in suspension, continually precipitating and crystallizing in a dynamic steady-state. Graham is a poet not of being, but of becoming, of movement, of what remains unfinished. This elucidates the title and its paradox. Beauty belongs to the past; it is finished form; it requires a death. The traditional claim that art is eternal means also that it is already dead—a paradox which engenders a set of rich, ambiguous feelings. "The end of beauty" is "the present" as Graham states openly in "The Lovers." The present is imperfect, liquid, changing, shapeless, in time. It is the desired place, the place of possibility, and it is the place of desire, the essential gap which the poem attempts to mirror, "word for word, taking the place of the sky"; it is the place where beauty begins, as well. All of this helps us understand her unease and experiments with form.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the painter whose spirit is invoked most explicitly in this volume is Jackson Pollack; Pollack is a painter whose abstractions obliterate form, whose shapes merge with other shapes, whose patterns give way to other patterns, whose background and foreground depend on the viewing eye, whose frame contains the painted canvas without confining it. Graham likens Pollack suspended over and surveying his canvas to God pausing at the end of creation, and the canvas itself



to the "open sepulcher" before Christ's emergence from it. But, she contends, incarnation is no longer possible for us and "a finished thing" can no longer "sprout"; therefore, "What we want is to paint nothing," because once "a figure appears on the canvas, she said, /the story begins" (meaning that it will end), so "you must learn to feel shape as simply shape whispered the/wind, not as description not as reminiscence not as what//it will become." The ideal of the creative act, then, occurs in that instant between non-being and being, that moment, *in flagrante delicto*, of incarnation when spirit is being made flesh, before it has identity, a plot. It is given to wind to say these words because wind embodies the spirit of the present—alive, invisible, everywhere, in motion. The architecture that these poems aim for has the shape, not so much of experience, but of the conditions in which experiencing occurs.

Mythology, art, and the lives of saints provide Graham with archetypes of that architecture, an infrastructure on which to build her thinking. Poems that are conceptually and topically strong, like "Vertigo" and "What the End Is For," give her the same solid foundation. The poems that don't rely on such structures are in general less successful, and some, "Description," "Self-Portrait as both Parties," "To the Reader," and "Room Tone," verge on being unreadable—they lack dramatic contexts and consequently disintegrate. Drama permits Graham to transform narrative and lyric through an impassioned contemplative voice. The poems work free from the imperative of time and from the constraint of a single point of view and allow the speaker to arrest an event and identify with the totality of a conflict.



It's a truism to say that a poem's shape has the shape of a poet's thinking process, but with Graham this is explicitly the case. She is particularly good at rendering spatially and rhythmically the sensations of thought. Her use of widely varying line lengths and of line breaks that crackle with instability and unpredictability typify her skill. Consider "Eschatological Prayer" whose opening lines are roughly syllabic and possess the near-quantitative measure one feels in Marianne Moore, here creating a tone of narrative deliberateness:

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

In the third stanza of the poem, the rhythm fractures into birdsong, quickening with the pleasure both of bird ("a yellow birdsong in the yellow light") and listener:

And the things of this world were everywhere happy  
to be so grazed  
on only one side  
by the fierce clean light  
  
and by us  
sifting the minutes from the dust from those three  
almost repeatable  
notes  
on which the whole unhearable song  
depends.



The rhythm of anapest and of dactyl in the longest lines (one and six) gives us the threes which "fierce clean light," "almost/repeatable notes," and "whole unhearable song" reinforce and enrich in their variety as rhythmic units of three. The differing rhythms of narrative and lyric, or of historical and experiential elements, contend throughout the poem in the story of Santa Chiara in whom the biblical (Christ's carrying the cross) becomes the personal. She

swore to carry it  
    *forever in her heart.*  
They cut her open when she died . . .  
    . . . found in there,  
        in the human heart,  
this tiny crucifix, this eye-sized figure  
    of tissue and blood.

"Noli Me Tangere," too, powerfully exploits the specific properties of verse:

It is about to be  
Spring.  
The secret cannot be  
kept.  
It wants to cross over, it wants  
to be a lie.

We can feel the resistance to knowing, to the forward movement of time, to saying a thing, because saying makes it a fact. One senses in these line breaks the coercion and the struggle of something coming into being against the speaker's will, then going beyond being. "Spring" and "the secret" that can't be kept are, we understand by the lineation, lies, too, once they have crossed over, crossed over onto the page, through the boundary



of the line break. We can feel what's at stake, then, in the resistance to completing each of these three sentences. And we can feel the metaphysical conundrum of sentence-writing itself.

This is free verse at its expressive best. Elsewhere, where the lines are longer, less modulated, prosier, they aren't as mimetic. The delicate equilibrium, as of a Calder mobile, is off. In the following instance, for example, the dramatic gives way to the histrionic:

The rind of the thing,  
which happens to be a room here with day breaking  
in it,  
peeling away, releasing the young queen the under-  
neath, remorseless,  
like the thing in the forest which is not the forest.  
Jesus!—  
who's going to help me get up into this today,  
what's going to brighten so terribly in one corner I'll  
have to rise  
if only to extinguish it (what is she doing up so early?  
what is  
she waiting for, on the corner, in the corner)—Dear  
Doctor:

("Headlights")

Lines like these that don't pivot on their line breaks feel drained of energy, become strident instead, rhetorical. In another more successful stanza from "Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay," Penelope, at the loom, is weaving Odysseus into the tapestry:



until she knows he's here who wants to be trapped in  
     here,  
 her hands tacking his quickness down as if soothing it  
     to sleep,  
 the threads carrying the quickness in on their backs,  
 burying it back into there, into the pattern, the noble  
     design,  
 like a stain they carry past a sleeping giant,  
 the possible like kindling riding in on their backs,  
 the flames enlarging and gathering on the walls,  
 wanting to be narrowed, rescued, into a story again, a  
     transparence we  
 can't see through, a lover

The stanza takes the form of the shuttle of the loom going back and forth; all but the last two lines are end-stopped, though grammatically the stanza is as unending as a woven thread. The Whitmanic participial carries the momentum of the weaving, which represents the momentum of history that Penelope is figuring in—the Trojan war, Odysseus's adventures. Yet this passage is, I think, ineffective as a whole; only the first and the final two lines are strong ones in the way Graham's lines can be strong. "Until she knows he's here who wants to be trapped in here," is syntactically interesting, a grammatical image of the whole sense of the design that the next six lines elaborate. The last two lines, "wanting to be narrowed, rescued, into a story again, a transparence we/can't see through," turns the "transparence" (which is the past, the story) opaque (which is the future) by means of the line break. The final line, "can't see through, a lover," allies what's opaque (the future) with the lover, Odysseus, who is "approaching ever approaching" (like Stevens's Ulysses, "coming constantly so near"). One can feel Penelope's ambivalence, her preference for Odysseus's absence, for



the clarity of his absence. A further effect of these two lines and the break at the word "we" is to place the "we" and Penelope exactly between sight and blindness, past and future, order and uncertainty; this complicates the comfort implicit in story-making and works to undermine the stanza itself because the reading of these lines leads us in the direction of sightlessness and uncertainty. The middle six lines of the stanza lack this suppleness, however; the form of the stanza makes them less finely calibrated.

Helen Vendler, reviewing *The End of Beauty*, makes the claim that, as she has grown older and matured as a poet, and beauty is no longer a sufficient justification or consolation, "Graham's answer is...free and far-ranging thought." This seems like wishful thinking on Vendler's part. Poems are an expression, often disguised, of unrecconciled desire. In the economy of poetry there are no consolations. "Beauty" or "thought" may yield compensations, but that is a different matter. "Free and far-ranging thought" in these poems is a paradigm of form, a form of freedom, an instrument for illuminating the landscape of our enmeshed predicament.

*The End of Beauty* opens with the exhilarating instant of separation from God the father and ends with the threat of reincorporation into the body of an Eastern female deity. The final poem, "Imperialism," recalling a traumatic visit to the Ganges as a child, closes with an image of claustrophobic entanglement which at the same time is a vision of the speaker's mother as a manifestation of the Hindu goddess Shakti, "all arms, all arms extended in the/pulsing sticky heat," or perhaps Kali, the goddess whom Ramakrishna, in a vision, saw emerge from the Ganges to give birth to a child she then devoured, returning to the



river. The honesty of Graham's conflictedness is one of her virtues. She has been attempting to discount the body, her mother's ("no longer relevant"), and thus the body of the world as well,

it became nothing to me after that, or something less,  
because I saw what it was, her body, you see—a  
line  
brought round, all the way round, reader, a plot, a  
shape, one of the finished things, one of the  
*beauties* (hear it click shut?)...

when a transformation begins to take place that seems to fill all "finished things" with violent possibility,

*beauties* (hear it click shut?) a thing  
completely narrowed down to love—

which, because it is overwhelming and entrapping, fills the speaker with disgust, but a disgust full of suffering and desire, a saint's sensation kissing a leper on the lips,

completely narrowed down to love—all arms, all arms  
extended in the  
pulsing sticky heat, fan on, overhead on, all  
arms no face at all dear god, all arms—

The final dash spills over into the wordless place of the encounter. This encounter with a god is the only one in the book which occurs outside a mythic context. And it speaks back, redolently, to the difficulty of human relations which "Imperialism" and so much of the book is about.