SPEAKING THE UNSPOKEN:

SILENCE, LANGUAGE, AND FORM IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY

by

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Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to Him through God the Father. Colossians 3:17

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Chapter 1
"How You Shape the Words Around the Silence": An Introduction to Silence, Language, and Form in Contemporary Poetry

> *Poetry -- reading it, that is -- demands the kind of attention which today very few people are prepared to devote to any activity. With the exception of sex, perhaps.*
>
> M. Nourbese Philip "The Habit Of: Poetry, Rats, and Cats"

> *Each poem has its own silence. Technique but the discerning of that silence. And composition – how you shape the words around the silence. To understand one's own silence is, therefore, to understand one's words.*
>
> M. Nourbese Philip "Dis Place The Space Between"

In her 1994 essay "The Habit Of: Poetry, Rats, and Cats," Canadian/Afra-Caribbean poet Marlene Nourbese Philip chastises readers for their failure to attend to poetry – to read it with the patience necessary to engage its complexities and subtleties. This dissertation responds to that charge by carefully reading the work of four prominent contemporary poets, setting them in conversation with one another to deepen our understanding of their work, and particularly of the ways in which form functions as a critical tool in their larger poetic projects. The poets considered here – Louise Glück, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Jorie Graham, and Michael Palmer – are all writers of significant stature and achievement (two have won Pulitzers, all appear in a number of recent anthologies[1]) who have received, at best, limited critical attention to date. One major goal of this project is to address that critical gap and provide close, careful readings that further develop our understanding of their work. At the same time, I have chosen these particular writers for this conversation because despite their differences, they each write in order to grapple with something termed "silence" and to foreground for their readers both the silence and the struggle. Though the meaning of silence shifts from poet to poet, the goal remains remarkably similar: to craft

poetry that locates the unsaid. They compel us, in both what they say and how they say it, to listen to the silences. As a result, the second major goal of this project is to examine the position of silence in contemporary poetry, not merely as a thematic concern but as a theoretical center with significant implications for poetic form – or as Philip says in the phrase that forms the title of this chapter, for "how you shape the words around the silence."

In its efforts to offer close readings and craft a dialogue among poets, this project stands apart from a number of recent books on contemporary poetry that seek primarily to map the territory,[2] exploring the cultural production and function of one or more poetic trends,[3] prescribing directions for the field,[4] or defining the dominant aesthetic.[5] My concern for the relationships between silence, language, and poetic forms leads me into dialogue with a number of these critics and into a reassessment of our current ways of conceptualizing formal development and experimentation. My goal, however, is not to create a paradigm in which the work of these writers serves merely to exemplify or illustrate a larger theory; such paradigms often mistakenly (to my mind) subordinate the richness and complexity of individual poets and volumes to the demands of literary history or critical theory.[6] In contrast, I hope that by carefully attending to the projects of individual poets in ways that illuminate both their differences and their commonalties, I have begun a fruitful, open-ended dialogue that draws together writers not typically read together[7] under our current methods of division and categorization in order to explore the complex interplay between silence and language in contemporary culture.

I have chosen silence, slippery and complex though the term is, as the nexus of this dialogue for a number of reasons – most notably, because the poets themselves highlight it

as a central concern. The epigraph by Philip, above, positions silence at the heart of poetry: one understands the words when one understands the silences they operate against. Jorie Graham makes similar claims in her introduction to *Best American Poetry 1990* when she writes:

> Ultimately, how one extends outward into the silence – narratively, metrically, in fragments, in prose – involves the nature of how that silence is perceived. For it is the desire to engage the silence, and the resistance of that silence, that tugs at speech; silence [is] the field into which the voice, the mind, the heart play out their drama. (xxiv)

For both Graham and Philip, as well as for the other two poets in this dissertation, silence forms the center from which the poem emerges. That is not to say that silence, or perhaps more precisely the relationship between silence and language, is *the* driving force of contemporary poetry; rather, I argue that silence forms a significant impetus for many contemporary writers, and their efforts to call it to our attention merit its exploration. That exploration is further warranted, I believe, because silence marks the obverse dimension of the contemporary focus on language itself.

As I explain in the next section, language has always been a poetic concern, but recent trends in poststructural and postmodern theory have certainly focused attention more acutely on this concern by interrogating the status of language as a representational medium. And underneath every discussion of the relationship between signifier and signified that highlights language's inability to represent lies the question of the referent – that which escapes representation and hence remains silent. Finally, the centrality of this issue for

poets as diverse as Graham, a professor at the University of Iowa whose work is immersed in the philosophy of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and Philip, an Afra-Caribbean writer concerned with feminist and postcolonial issues in political as well as semiotic terms, offers us a useful way to read *across* poetic trends and schools and illuminate issues that may otherwise be understood too narrowly.

As these four poets explore both material and theoretical issues raised by the idea of silence, they do so in more than thematic terms, and this project is more than simply another attempt to locate "common themes" in contemporary poetry. Although silence is a central theme for each of these poets, I argue that it also "forms" the center of their poetry literally as formal characteristics are drawn into the struggle and deployed strategically. It is at this point, in particular, that this dissertation enters the current critical dialogue surrounding contemporary poetry. In the midst of efforts to read formal innovation (or, in the case of the New Formalists, formal revival) as either a political act or a corollary of postmodern culture,[8] I read the formal developments of the writers considered here specifically as part of their efforts to locate silence and make it palpable to readers. Both Graham and Philip, in the quotations cited above, explicitly note the role form plays in the attempt to engage silence: Philip writes of "*how* you shape the words around the silence" and Graham refers to "*how* one extends outward into the silence." Form becomes a tool of engagement as these writers create poetry marked by resistance to closure, rejection of linearity, disruption of syntax, attention to the visual space of the page, and juxtaposition of multiple voices. Even Glück, whose work remains the most conventional of the four, develops an increasingly multivocal form as she grapples more openly with personal and transcendent silences.

Notably absent from this list of strategies is silence itself as a formal element[9], and the omission is intentional. These strategies do not necessarily mark a poetry of negativity embodied in the formal silence of the poem[10]; rather, they create a poetry more like cartography, in which the techniques at work serve, like symbols on a map, to help us locate the places where silence exists behind the words.

Fields of Silence: Poetry and the Place of the Unsaid

> The technology of silence
> The rituals, etiquette
>
> the blurring of terms
> silence not absence
>
> of words or music or even
> raw sounds
>
> Silence can be a plan
> rigorously executed
>
> the blueprint to a life
>
> It is a presence
> it has a history a form
>
> Do not confuse it
> with any kind of absence (Rich, *Dream* 17)

Adrienne Rich's poem "Cartographies of Silence" begins with the silence that makes conversation into a "lie" – the presence of the unsaid creates a gap that an exchange of words, despite the illusion of intimacy it creates, can never cross. Every conversation, the poem explains, "[i]nscribes with its unreturning stylus / the isolation it denies" (16) because the presence of the incommunicable reinforces the solitude of each speaker even as the

words pretend to bring them together through language. As the lines above, taken from the third section of the poem, suggest, this silence between two speakers is tangible – something more than emptiness or absence – and it has its own history, its own rules, its own technology. And because of this presence, silence makes itself felt despite attempts to mask its presence or drown it out with "the classical music station / playing hour upon hour." Mere sound does not eliminate it; silence is relentless and inescapable.

The poets gathered here confront various forms of silence, and in doing so seek neither to mask it nor to break it. Rather, in treating silence as "a presence / [that] has a history a form," their work seeks to render that presence palpable in the poem, locating and exposing it for the reader. Jorie Graham, in describing a public reading of both fiction and poetry, illustrates this palpability as she contrasts her experiences listening to the two writers. This particular fiction reading was safe, homey even, because a smoothly crafted plot took up all the space and left the silence unexposed:

> [The fiction writer] stood up and read wonderful, funny stories. I laughed out loud; listened to the sentences flowing by – their aggressive overtaking of the space. There was no silence, there was the *run run* of story over it all. It sprayed forward over the unsaid until it was all plot. People changed or didn't. You felt at home. ("Introduction" xv)

In Graham's experience, the plot eliminated the silence[11] in the same way that the classical music in Rich's poem attempts to: by filling the emptiness. In Rich's poem, of course, the musical tactics are unsuccessful, largely because the poem begins with an awareness of silence and the poem's speaker recognizes the music as an effort to mask the dis-ease

created by the unspoken word. The short story presented no such initial awareness, and the unfolding plot, moving smoothly from one point to the next, did nothing to create or induce it. The silence remained masked.

The poet, however, offered Graham no such sanctuary:

> A poem began. Not a little story told in musical rhythms, but a poem. Oh, it had story. And it was music. But it seemed to begin out of nowhere. And it moved irrationally – by the standards the fiction had set. It leapt. It went too suddenly to the heart of the matter. Why was I feeling so uneasy? . . . I wasn't feeling lifted or entertained. My hands felt heavy. My body felt heavy. The air into which language had been pouring for almost an hour felt heavy. (xv)

The "problem" with the poetry, for Graham, was that it somehow exposed the silence. Not because nothing was said, but because

> the words [were] chipping into the silence. It felt loud. Every word stood out. No longer the rush of sentences free and unresisted into the air. Now it was words cutting into an element that was crushing in its power and weight. . . His words cut into the unsaid and made me hear it: its depth and scope; its indifference, beauty, intractability. (xv-xvi)

How they cut into the unsaid is, in large part, the subject of the subsequent chapters of this dissertation. What remains essential here is not a blanket distinction between prose and poetry[12] but rather Graham's experience of words used to expose silence rather than

displace it. That experience, I will argue, is the same one the poets collected here attempt to achieve.

Trying to define the silence exposed by such uses of language – even a silence as specific as that conversational unsaid described in the opening section of Rich's poem – is, of course, to enter into the struggle. "Silence," after all, resists language. And attempting such a definition, for each poet and for the entire project, has in many ways been the most difficult aspect of this work. Even now I am conscious of only being able to talk *around* silence, to obliquely suggest the field in which it lies rather than meticulously craft a clear, straightforward definition. To further complicate the problem, even that field shifts markedly across individuals and circumstances; the sources of silence are as varied as the poets who attempt to engage it.

Despite these difficulties, the need for definition, or at least context, remains. At its most basic, silence is perhaps best understood as what results from the gap between experience and the representation of that experience in language. We sense something missing from the word used to render the moment, and we describe the missing piece as "silent." The gap itself may, of course, represent a conscious choice. Individuals, and even whole cultures can refuse to represent their experiences in acts of domination, defiance, or protection. Foucault explores the power of silence as a means of control in *The History of Sexuality*, and ethnographers and anthropologists examine such structures in a variety of cultures. For example, Susan Gal, in her essay "Between Silence and Speech: The Problematics of Research on Language and Gender," cites research on Western Apaches, English Quakers, and recent studies of male/female patterns of conversation that locate the

ways in which individuals use silence to manipulate the dynamics of communication in their favor. Such is the case in much of Louise Glück's poetry as well, in which speaker after speaker refuses to expose herself and uses silence as a means of manipulation and retribution.

More often, however, particularly in canonical Western poetry, the gap hinges on a sense of language's inadequacy; as Rich writes in "Cartographies of Silence," "It was an old theme even for me — / Language cannot do everything." A number of critics testify to this longevity; the "old theme" reaches back far beyond the poststructural disjunctions between signifier, signified, and referent. Robert Pinsky, in his incisive discussion of "Ode to A Nightingale" in *The Situation of Poetry*, traces the concern at least back to the Romantics. Situating Keats's poem in a broader context, he notes that "the effort to make the gap [between language and experience] seem less than absolute has produced some of the most remarkable and moving poetry in the language" (59). Shira Wolosky, in *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan*, takes the claim even further when she declares, "The inexpressibility topos, which declares that words can never adequately express ultimate meanings, is among the most pervasive and least examined motifs in Western letters" (1). Recent developments in postmodern and poststructural theory have, of course, complicated that topos by questioning the idea of "ultimate meaning" itself and exploring what language *does* within the play of signification as much as what it *doesn't* do. Nevertheless, those theories, and the poetries that intersect them, remain concerned with the relationship between language and meaning, and with the persistent sense of elusiveness, whether real or illusory, that accompanies that relationship.

Wolosky focuses her discussion on twentieth-century writers, but Gerald L. Bruns, in *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language: A Critical and Historical Study*, offers a more sweeping history that corroborates Wolosky's claim. In tracing philosophies of language from the Greeks forward, he notes that "For Plato . . . knowledge belongs to the world of silence: it is an unmediated vision, with which language can finally have nothing to do" (16). Bruns defines this perspective as the Hermetic view, in which language stands as a barrier between humans and the world they experience, and he traces the manifestations of that view from Plato forward to writers such as Georg Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Paul Valéry, Jean Paul Sartre, and others.[13]

As I suggested above, the nature of the experiences language cannot render is remarkably varied. We can, however, trace a number of broad categories in which the failures of language emerge repeatedly.[14] As in Rich's poem, silence may be personal and largely emotional; something exists that "you" cannot or will not express to "me," be it pain or love or a past history or an immediate experience. These are the silences of our most familiar love poetry, particularly in the sonnet traditions. But silence may mark a more metaphysical experience, something linked to God , transcendence, or the sublime – an experience too holy or too profound for language. The language of the medieval mystics, the poetry of George Herbert and John Donne as well as more recent writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke, T. S. Eliot, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov and others, all draw on some variant of transcendent or metaphysical inexpressibility. Silence may also mark the reverse – an experience too agonizing, too horrifying, for language to ever render its full force, as in the work of Celan and other poets who confront the Holocaust.[15] And beyond discussions

of the holy and the horrific, the inexpressible (or unexpressed) encompasses experiences marginalized because of social or cultural positionality.[16] These constitute what I would call cultural silences, and they emerge in the writing of women such as Amelia Lanier, Lady Mary Wroth, and Emily Dickinson, in African-Americans such as Paul Dunbar and Langston Hughes, and others.

Though each of these experiences belongs in part to "the old theme," as it emerges in the work of contemporary writers the old theme is inflected anew as it enters into dialogue with postmodern theories that address both material and semiotic concerns. First, postmodernism has brought with it an explosion of attention to cultural silences. Recent critics in women's studies, African-American studies, postcolonialism, and parallel fields have examined the ways in which entire groups of people have literally been denied the right or the power to speak of their own experiences. Histories have been erased; patterns of communication that deviated from the logical rationale of Western patriarchal traditions have been excluded from the public sphere; discourses, and even whole languages, that challenged existing power structures have been forcibly silenced. For instance, though individual women writers as far back as Lanier and Wroth have acknowledged the limitations on women's speech, the extent and nature of that limitation have certainly been explored and theorized more fully than ever before in recent years. Tillie Olsen's landmark work, "One Out of Twelve: Writers Who Are Women in Our Century,"[17] opened up the territory of gender and explored the silence of women writers in a way that acted as a catalyst, both directly and indirectly, for a number of subsequent critics and theorists. The work of Alicia Ostriker, Margaret Homans, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, among the

critics, as well as the writings of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Alice Jardine, and others represent only a fraction of the work done on women's silences in the last twenty years.[18] Similar formulations surround the discussions of postcolonial writers, writers of color, and lesbian and gay writers. Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, Amy Ling, bell hooks, Eve Sedgwick, and a host of other scholars explore the ways in which marginalized writers confront cultural prohibitions that do not permit or enable them to give voice to the experiences of their own lives.

This increased concern for cultural silences coincides with (and in the work of many scholars, directly engages) an equally large increase in theoretical examinations of language itself. Developments in semiotics and philosophy over the course of this century have redefined the theoretical framework surrounding the gap between language and experience that exposes or produces[19] silence. Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and other, building on the work of earlier semioticians such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Ferdinand de Saussure, have popularized a new set of terms for understanding both language itself and the relationship between word and world; they speak of signifier, signified, and referent creating an endless semiotic loop in which the referent itself remains out of reach – silent. These developments have led to an increasing awareness of language as arbitrary and referential rather than representational; postmodern critics following such theories view language as a socially constructed, self-referential system inherently isolated from the world it seeks to represent so that every word points not to a "real" outside language, but to another word inside the system. Within this framework, silence forms the ground, or background, against which the discussions of language emerge. As Derrida explains in

Writing and Difference, "silence plays the irreducible role of that which bears and haunts language, outside and *against* which alone language can emerge . . . like nonmeaning, silence is the work's limit and profound resource" (54). The place of silence within postmodern language theory becomes evident not only in the work of individual writers such as Barthes and Derrida, but in collections such as Budick and Iser's *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (1987), which brings together critics and theorists such as Jonathan Culler, Gerald Bruns, Stanley Cavell, and others to examine the position of the unsayable.

In the field of contemporary poetry, this increase in theoretical attention to silence and language makes itself felt perhaps most prominently in the emergence of Wittgenstein as a key figure in the conversation of both poets and critics.[20] Two quotations from the *Tractatus* – "The limits of my language are the limits of my world" and "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" – surface repeatedly in discussions of recent poetry, particularly in the work of Language writers. And a number of recent critics treat the conscious attention to language as a new poetic center. In "Toward a Wittgensteinian Poetics," her assessment of the poetry of the eighties, Marjorie Perloff writes, "[T]he Wittgensteinian equation of philosophy (and especially ethics) and *dichten* [poetic creation], with its corollary that both depend on beginning again and again, provisionality, and especially on the testing of language limits, has had a startling impact on contemporary poetics" (193). Similarly, in attempting to build bridges between contemporary poetry and contemporary critical theory, Hank Lazer positions language at the center of recent poetic developments and cites essays and interviews with practitioners of each genre to

demonstrate that "one shared area of concern [between poets and philosophers] is the nature of representation; that is, the relationship between word and thing, or, if you prefer, between signifier and signified" ("Critical" 261). And Vernon Shetley, in examining the relationship between poets and language, notes that while the concern for language has long been a poetic subject, "only in the last hundred years or so have poets begun to experience a radical disaffection from language itself, to feel that the social realm is so thoroughly inauthentic that a socially mediated tool such as language must be all but irredeemably compromised" (8), a disaffection that parallels developments in postmodern theory.

Thus, although silence represents an ongoing concern in poetry historically, the poets examined here wrestle with silences that are shaped by postmodern culture and its conscious concern with the structures and functions of language in both semiotic and cultural terms. For Louise Glück, silence is most often personal as she focuses on women's silences in erotic, marital, and familial relationships. Yet the specific experiences in her poetry that give rise to such silences parallel concerns about male/female relationships raised by feminist critics, and Glück herself draws on anorexia as a physical image of much larger verbal and emotional silences in her work. In drawing these connections between Glück's work and contemporary culture, I am not necessarily suggesting that Glück reads feminist theory and writes her work in direct response; in her essays, Glück actually distances her work from "feminism" per se. Rather, the ongoing dialogues that have emerged out of both grassroots and academic feminism have created the cultural context from which Glück's work arises. In M. Nourbese Philip's work, the influence of contemporary theoretical and political debates is more overt because of the explicitly

politicized nature of her project. The silences in Philip's work are clearly cultural and historical; her work grapples directly with the silencing of Afra-Caribbean women under colonial and patriarchal systems. In doing so, it enters into dialogue with a number of key issues raised by feminist and postcolonial theorists; in particular, for this project I examine Philip's struggle with the question of "mother tongue" for women whose native language derives from the language imposed by colonizers on their slaves and with the question of women's access to public space – written and physical.

Where Glück and Philip grapple with silences foregrounded by contemporary cultural concerns, Jorie Graham and Michael Palmer both enter into direct dialogue with the theorists of that culture. Graham's poetry has expanded from earlier work, which focuses on metaphysical silences, to more recent volumes that, though they continue to address metaphysical questions, also examine historical moments, such as Tienenmen Square and the Civil War, in which the violence is unspeakable. In probing both the philosophical and the cultural, Graham's poetry quotes Lyotard, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, among others, reflecting the explicit connections between her work and developments in twentieth-century philosophy. Like Graham's, Michael Palmer's poetry includes references to numerous twentieth-century philosophers including Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and Roland Barthes. Palmer, whose work is often associated with Language writing (though Palmer actually distances himself from that movement), uses these writers to attend to the process of signification itself. His poetry explores the silences created by the discourses of politics and commidification that dominate contemporary culture. He argues that such discourses, which rely on the univocal transmission of information, degrade language, reducing its

richness and transforming into simply another item to be consumed. In his work, the unsaid resides within words themselves, and it emerges precisely because the linguistic play he creates allows conventional meanings to yield to an array of more elliptical possibilities.

By bringing the work of these writers together here, I hope to illuminate multiple ways in which the "inexpressibility topos," as Wolosky calls it, manifests itself in the late twentieth century and, in Palmer's case in particular, is altered and interrogated by postmodern theories of language. At the same time, I hope to provide a fuller sense of that topos by locating both thematic and formal parallels among writers not typically read together. Most often, critical discussion of silence and language focus on one particular arena or category. For instance, *Silence, the Word, and the Sacred* edited by Blodgett and Coward (1989), examines sacred silences and explores the way writers attempt to bear witness to the holy. *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime*, by Neil Hertz, also focuses on moments of transcendence and sublimity, but, as the title suggests, from a strictly psychoanalytic perspective. Budick and Iser's *Languages of the Unsayable*, examines the issue primarily from the position of postmodern semiotic theories, focusing on the role of negativity. Still other texts, such as Ostriker's *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* or Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" address questions of writing and silence for particular groups of oppressed or marginalized people.

Yet for these poets, the boundaries between different silences are less distinct: Glück's sixth volume, *The Wild Iris* is in large part an extended meditation on the silence of God, though it continues to address the presence of the unspoken in interpersonal

relationships; Philip's discussions of silence and gender take her into Foucault's theoretical work; Graham, as noted, examines both material and metaphysical silences, as well as intimate moments between a mother and daughter that evoke speechlessness; and Palmer also blends the personal and the philosophical as he grapples with theories of language that challenge the representational ability of the sign. And the issues cross poets as well – Philip and Glück both explore the cultural positionality of women's silences, Graham and Palmer both investigate Wittgenstein's philosophical discussions of language and silence, Philip and Graham both attend to unrepresentable historical experiences, and so on. Reading across the more familiar boundaries, as the poets themselves do, thus reveals that while each poet's struggle remains distinct,[21] the problem – exposing the tangible silence created by the gap between experience and representation – persists across those boundaries.

That persistence suggests that while Perloff, Lazer, and other critics may be correct in positioning language as a central concern among contemporary poets, in order to understand that concern we need to look not only at postmodern semiotic theory, but also, as I do here, at the particular silences that give rise to this concern with language. In that respect, the poets chosen for this project represent a spectrum on the relationship between silence and language. At one end stands Glück's poetry, where the silences remain primary and rarely, if ever, lead to overt examinations of the problems of language. At the other extreme is Palmer's work, in which the concern for language itself forms the dominant issue and silence results explicitly from the places where language slips. In the center are Graham and Philip; the *impetus* for their work remains the confrontation with silence, but

that confrontation forces each of them to acknowledge language's limitations and grapple with the medium as well as what the medium cannot represent. Together these poets deepen and complicate our understanding of the place of language in contemporary poetry by exploring the silences that push against it.

"Technique But the Discerning of That Silence": The Place of Form Within the Field

As I suggested earlier, the poets gathered here do not necessarily seek to "break" the silences they confront and give voice to something heretofore unspoken. Instead, they use poetry as a means of encountering, exposing, exploring, and/or exhibiting those silences; like the poet at Graham's reading, they seek words that can "cut into the unsaid and [make us] hear it: its depth and scope; its indifference, beauty, intractability." In that sense, each participates in the artistic aesthetic Lyotard outlines in *Heidegger and "the jews."* Exploring the position of the unrepresentable Other in culture and language, Lyotard writes, "What art can do is bear witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it" (47). The chapters that follow explore poetry that attempts to "say that it cannot say it," linking these attempts specifically to poetic form and to consider the ways form participates in the effort to bear witness – even in Palmer's case when what he bears witness to is less an unsayable "something" outside language and more the experience of the aporia itself. These writers construct markedly different poetries, but as I examine their uses of syntax, diction, lineation, multivocality, and what I will refer to as "structure" (that is, how the poem moves from one idea to another along narrative, nonnarrative, associative, disjunctive, or other paths), certain tactics recur in

their efforts to construct cartographies of silence. I argue that in the work of these poets, these tactics function as critical tools in the struggle. Form is inescapably part of the conversation.

This position stands, if not in direct opposition, at least at an oblique angle, to current critical debates over poetic form that often read formal developments as expressions of broad-based political or aesthetic agendas, divorced from individual poetic projects. One such paradigm particularly prominent in the early 1990s positions New Formalists on one side and Language writers on the other, treating both as rebellions against something loosely (and often derogatorily) termed "workshop poetry." This model characterizes Language writers as leftist, and their fragmented, asyntactic, non-rational forms are read (by its poets – many of whom align themselves with Marxist ideologies – as well as by scholars) as efforts to undermine current representational conceptions of language. In doing so, critics such as Perloff and Lazer argue, they also seek to challenge dominant American cultural ideology of the self that asserts a stable, coherent, independent identity able to use language as a transparent conduit of meaning. New Formalists, in contrast, are typically characterized as conservatives whose desire to return to more clearly prescribed, orderly forms represents a political nostalgia for a more ordered cultural space. Critics who consider these two schools the dominant formal movements in American poetry treat virtually all other writers as "workshop poets," taking the label from Creative Writing and MFA programs at universities across the country that rely on workshops as a primary teaching tool.[22]

Such characterizations are, no doubt, useful in developing literary histories, locating affinities among poets, and grappling with the incredible breadth of the field,[23] but they are

necessarily reductive. New Formalism and Language writing do not begin to adequately address the scope of formal innovation found in contemporary poetry, and the practice of dismissing all other work as "workshop poetry" both elides crucial differences among a vast array of poets[24] and fails to recognize the complexity and significance of work being done inside and outside poetry workshops.[25] Even more importantly, such an approach divorces form from content in all but the most general sense,[26] and reduces individual poets to instances of dominant formal practices. For instance, according to the paradigm cited above, New Formalists purportedly reinvigorate narrative poetry primarily because as a whole they reject the self-absorbed dominance of the lyric self, whereas Language writers disrupt logical and syntactic coherence because they uniformly reject a representational understanding of language. These generalizations then circumscribe critical readings of poets in both categories.[27] Finally, by continually expounding on the death of the lyric and framing newer formal developments primarily as rejections of institutionalized norms, we potentially lose sight of equally large positive forces – such as the struggle with silence – that supplement, and perhaps even outweigh the negative impulse.

By anchoring my own discussions of form in the concept of silence and focusing on individual poetic projects rather than paradigms that define larger movements, I am seeking to move beyond the attempt to divide writers into such movements and locate instead certain common threads that underlie the formal developments of a broad range contemporary poets, regardless of their "category." Rather than adopting a broad-based perspective that treats formal innovation as either an expression of a particular school of thought or a reaction to prior forms, the readings developed in these chapters explore the

function of formal elements in terms of the particular issues and concerns raised by specific poems and volumes.[28] In that respect, I am not attempting to construct a paradigm of silence that treats it as a *frame* around a particular group or movement; instead, I am using it as a thread that persists across movements and thus offers a useful lens for seeing into, rather than circling around, the concerns that shape contemporary poetry. Each of these poets deploys form as a key element within her or his efforts to locate and expose silence. Louise Glück's tightly controlled language and terse verse forms mirror the silence experienced by her speakers at the same time they erect an emotional wall around the poem that forces the reader to experience the weight of that silence. That weight begins to break only when Glück turns to a multivocal form and creates a dialogue among speakers intent on breaking down the defiant, invulnerable wall. The multivocality and broken syntax of M. Nourbese Philip's work serve specifically to locate the broken voices of Afra-Caribbean women and to demonstrate the ways in which those voices have been written, and written over, by patriarchal and colonial institutions. Graham also deploys syntactic disruptions and multivocality, but in her poetry these strategies, along with repeated dashes and ellipses and the juxtaposition of linear narrative and non-linear meditation, continually point to the silences imposed by every effort to "tell the story" – be it the story of the soul or the story of the Civil War. Finally, Michael Palmer investigates the signifying process itself, disrupting both narrative and linear referentiality. He crafts poetry out of a complex interplay linguistic mirrors and echoes in order to open up layers of lanuage and meaning silenced by political rhetoric and a culture of instant consumption. In each case, the formal devices serve to locate the silences of the poem and make the reader more fully, perhaps even more

physically, aware of the thematic struggle. The chapters that follow will, by offering close readings and attending to the larger project of each poet, preserve the specificity of each poet's work, but also illuminate key parallels among these poets – parallels such as the persistence of syntactic disruption and multivocality – that attest to the ways in which formal developments rise out of attempts to bear witness to the unsayable.

I want to add two qualifications to this discussion of the role of form in the exploration of silence. First, in examining the disruptions of syntax, voice, line, and narrative that occur in these poets, I am not arguing that the strategies used by these poets represent something *new*. Incorporating multiple texts and voices, fragmenting syntax, breaking linear narratives, exerting an extreme degree of poetic control – all are techniques visible in earlier poets: Dickinson, Stein, Pound, Eliot, Williams, H. D., and so on. I am arguing that the ways in which these formal choices are deployed stem from particular struggles with silence influenced by postmodern culture, and hence though the choices may not be new in and of themselves, they are *inflected* in ways that mark them as belonging to these poets in this time and place. Cary Nelson, in *Our Last First Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry*, articulates the temporal specificity of form in this way:

> [T]he most durable poetic form will still be altered by the pressures applied to it in each recurrence. . . . Forms wait, outside history, to be used, but to use them is a political act. We may fairly limit criticism to a description of form's hermetic texture, for even a single metaphor can verbally contain its own resonance. Forms are obtained and bounded by internal structures, and that self-sufficiency is part of their attraction for us. Yet formal choice is

> also a response to historically imposed necessities . . . a formal boundary is maintained by both internal and external forces. (23)

Nelson argues that form is shaped both internally, by the rules of the form itself, and externally, by the historical and cultural milieu in which it operates. I want to build on the latter constraint here, suggesting that just as the silences these poets grapple with are inflected by poststructuralism, feminist, post-colonial, and other contemporary forces, the forms they employ in that struggle, though they may exist "outside history," are similarly inflected; they are integral to the struggle.

Second, although I want to draw a clear and detailed clear link between form and content, I am also not arguing for "organic" form as traditionally understood – that idea typically associated with the Black Mountain poets and characterized by Robert Creeley's oft-quoted dictum "Form is never more than an extension of content." Loosely, the organic view[29] proscribes an essentialist relationship between form and content, suggesting that content somehow inherently determines its own uniquely suited form. In treating the formal developments of the four poets collected here as key elements in their struggle with silence, I am articulating more of a "tactical" relationship; form, in conjunction with content, becomes a tool for cutting into the silence. For instance, when Jorie Graham constructs a poem full of dashes and ellipses and shattered syntax in order to grapple with all that a museum exhibit of the Civil War cannot render, those structural elements work in tandem with her verbal description to make the experience palpable for her readers. Similarly, when M. Nourbese Philip orchestrates an array of voices in order to grapple with the silence imposed on Afra-Caribbeans under colonial rule, the physical relationship of those voices

on the page, literally speaking side by side, plays a key role in locating the gaps in the imperialistic discourse. The formal elements become, as Graham says in one essay "tools for storming the walls" of silence.

Conclusion

The poets examined in this project, as explained in the previous sections, offer a spectrum of both formal and thematic approaches; what unites them is their awareness of palpable silence and their desire to locate it on the page – to become "cartographers of silence." Their formal innovations, I argue, emerge in conjunction with that desire. I begin with Glück, whose work lies closest to the "mainstream" of the contemporary poetry, and end with Palmer, whose work is the most experimental. Philip and Graham occupy a middle ground, employing both experimental and more familiar forms; Philip appears first primarily because her concerns with Afra-Caribbean women parallel issues at work in Glück's poetry, while Graham's more philosophical, meditative poetry has more in common thematically with Palmer's work. I have chosen these four writers because their differences and their commonalties together provide a means of reaching across the prevailing boundaries of poetic schools and movements. I have not, however, attempted to choose "representative" poets such that each one offers a characteristic example of a particular movement or school, nor have I attempted to create a comprehensive overview of contemporary poetry; silence emerges in a number of other contexts, and these poets do not represent the entire spectrum of poetic forms practiced today.[30] Instead I have attempted to craft a dialogue among poets normally treated separately in order to deepen and complicate

our understandings of both these individual writers and the relationships between form, language, and most importantly silence as those relationships emerge in and in turn shape contemporary poetry.

In order to meet both ends, the chapters that follow provide detailed close readings of one or more volumes for each poet, framed by theoretical explorations of the poet's dominant concerns. Because I am particularly interested in exploring the relationships between form and content in the context of these writers' larger projects, I pay significant attention to their prose as well as their poetry, using essays and interviews to illuminate those projects. These poets have all written eloquently about the place of silence in their work, both with respect to their poetry and in more general terms, and their essays prove invaluable in understanding the ways in which silence informs and motivates their developments. These poets do not simply attempt to "break" silence, nor do they disavow language or establish a poetics of negativity; they use form as a means to locate the unsayable and so "bear witness to the aporia of art." As a result, understanding the silences that form that aporia enables us, as the epigraph by Philip reminds us, to understand their words.

Endnotes

[1] Glück won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 for *The Wild Iris* and Graham won in 1996 for *Dream of the Unified Field*, her volume of selected poetry. According to Rasula's tabulations in *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, Glück appears in 20 anthologies, Graham in 11, and Palmer in 8. Moreover, Rasula's appendices also show Glück and Graham in particular as recipients of various prizes awarded by the "poetry industry" in its various guises: all three American poets have been awarded Guggenheim Fellowships, Graham received a MacArthur Fellowship, Glück has won the William Carlos Williams Award and the Harriet Monroe Lyric Prize, and so on. And despite Rasula's indictment of that industry, the attention it focuses on these poets certainly marks them as significant figures on the contemporary scene. Philip, though less well known in the US, has been a prominent figure in the Canadian arts scene, both as a writer and as a political activist. Her 1989 volume, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, won the prestigious Casa del las Americas prize, and her essays have appeared in several different anthologies, including the recent volume *Feminist Measures: Soundings in Poetry and Theory*.

[2] Vernon Shetley notes this same tendency toward critical mapping in *After the Death of Poetry* (1993) when he explains, "[T]he terms of approach to poetry are determined by prevailing theoretical models. Those models tend to value a skeptical treatment of the myth-making propensities of poets and poetry and seek an extrinsic purchase upon poems, trying not so much to articulate the poem's implicit self-understanding as to understand the external determinations that operate upon it" (18). And Hank Lazer's survey of criticism in the 1980s, "Criticism and the Crisis in American Poetry" (*Opposing Poetries*) suggests much the same trend, though Lazer's concern, as his title indicates, is the state of poetry rather than the state of criticism per se.

[3] See, for instance, Jed Rasula's *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, Alan Golding's *From Outlaw to Classic*, Marjorie Perloff's *Radical Artifice*, Alicia Ostriker's *Stealing the Language*, or Bob Perelman's *The Marginalization of Poetry*.

[4] See, for instance, Jonathan Holden's *The Fate of American Poetry*, Dana Goia's *Does Poetry Matter?*, and Vernon Shetley's *After the Death of Poetry*

[5] For instance, Alan Williamson's *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, Joseph Conte's *Unending Design: Forms of Postmodern Poetry*, Timothy Steele's *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter*, and J. Edward Chamberlin's *Come Back To Me My Language: Poetry and the West Indies*, as well as earlier works such as Charles Altieri's *Self and Sensibility* and *Enlarging the Temple*, or James E. Breslin's *From Modern to Contemporary*.

[6] There are, of course, exceptions to this more general critical tendency to objectify poetry and privilege analysis of its cultural positionality over analysis of individual poets' projects. Among the most notable is work of Helen Vendler (see, for instance, *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham* or *The Given and the Made: Strategies of Poetic Redefinition*).

And Hank Lazer, in the second volume of *Opposing Poetries*, also attempts to attend carefully to the work of the poets he discusses. Nevertheless, the general trend is to subordinate the poetry to the scholarly theory.

[7] For this dimension of my study in particular I am deeply indebted to my advisor, Professor Lynn Keller, whose work consistently seeks to bridge poetic boundaries. Her most recent work, *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women* (1997), for example, brings together writers as diverse as Rita Dove, Judy Grahn, Marilyn Hacker, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis in order to develop a broader understanding of the place of the long poem in contemporary women's poetry. Such work is, I believe, essential to the work of current poetic scholarship.

[8] See, for instance, Marjorie Perloff's *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* or Roger Gilbert's "Textured Information: Politics, Pleasure, and Poetry in the Eighties."

[9] I.e. the use of ellipses, dashes, gaps in the text, or similar devices.

[10] Though a discussion of this particular element in poetry is outside the scope of this essay, I would refer readers to Shira Wolosky's *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan* for a particularly insightful discussion of the poetics of negativity in twentieth-century writers.

[11] This is not, of course, to suggest that all fiction produces such comfort; my interest here is in Graham's articulation of one specific experience, not in any attempt to generalize either fiction or poetry.

[12] Similar evocations of silence are, after all, present in a variety of genres; Graham's description of the poetry reading brings to mind prose writers such as Samuel Beckett and Virginia Woolf, to name only two of a long list.

[13] The alternative, according to Bruns, is the Orphic view in which "the world is brought into being and upheld and defined by words" (3). Neither view, of course, remains entirely static over its history, and Bruns' text provides an excellent historical discussion of the complex relationships between language, world, and meaning as he traces both views through key thinkers and movements across the centuries, linking them not only to language use in general but to poetry in particular.

[14] In laying out these categories, I do not mean to suggest a definitive list. The ones noted here all have substantial poetic traditions behind them, and they are the ones most relevant to the poets whose work I explore, but they are certainly not the only experiences that give rise to silence.

[15] Any number of studies have been done on the nature of Holocaust writing, from Lyotard's theoretical approach in *Heidegger and "the jews"* to texts such as David Patterson's *The Shriek of Silence: A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel*, and Shoshana

Felman's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. In addition, the recent anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, edited by Carolyn Forché, documents both the need and the difficulty of bearing witness across a broad range of experiences of war and devastation in this century.

[16] Most often, of course, discussed in terms of the race/class/gender triumvirate, and more recently sexual orientation.

[17] First given at MLA in 1971, later published in *College English* in October 1972, and then expanded and republished in *Silences*.

[18] And even this list ranges from scholar like Ostriker, who attend to more material silences, to those who, like Irigaray, explore the workings of language in more theoretical terms.

[19] My use of the double terminology here is intentional; some critics perceive the gap as inherent and essential (for instance, the stance taken by Nathan Scott in *Visions of Presence in Modern American Poetry* or George Steiner in *Real Presences*), and hence "exposes" a very real silence, while others view it as a product of language itself, such that the suggestion of something beyond language (and consequently, silence itself) becomes more like an effect produced by language (the work of Derrida and Barthes, for instance, leans in this direction).

[20] At the forefront of this attention, among critics at least, is Marjorie Perloff. In *Contemporary Literature's* special issue, *American Poetry of the 1980's*, Perloff offers an introductory examination of Wittgenstein's significance for contemporary poets, and her most recent book, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, develops that claim more fully. In the same issue of *CL*, Charles Altieri also draws on Wittgenstein for his overview, and the philosopher's work appears in interviews, essays, and poems by both Jorie Graham and Michael Palmer, as well as a number of Language writers.

[21] That is, this is not an effort to say that all silences are the same, or to in any way essentialize the struggle with silence.

[22] Where it appears, the phrase "workshop poetry" is primarily derisive and ill-defined, though it loosely refers to characteristics such as free verse, a single lyric speaker, and a reliance on personal experience and private epiphanies. And most often it is the "personal" aspect of such poetry that falls under attack as critics and poets alike reject the lyrical expression of a sincere poetic self. For instance, in *After the Death of Poetry*, Vernon Shetley writes, "Both [New Formalists and Language writers], in their very different ways, see their prescriptions as a way for American poetry to break free of a debilitatingly narrow focus on the private self, and so engage readers on a broader and more stable ground than that provided by spontaneous and immediate expression of individual states of consciousness" (26). Similarly, critics such as Alan Golding ("'Openness,' 'Closure,' and Recent American Poetry") and Lynn Emanuel ("Language Poets, New Formalists, and the Techniquization of Poetry") have observed that although the New Formalists and the

Language writers have developed radically different styles, they are united by their conviction that workshop poetry has reached the proverbial dead end and new forms are needed to free poetry from narcissism. Even critics such as Wendell Berry (*Standing By Words*) who seek to chart new directions tend to locate "self-absorption" as one of the key "crimes" of contemporary poetry. See Marjorie Perloff's "Postmodernism and the Impasse of the Lyric" (in *Dance of the Intellect*), Lee Bartlett's "What Is Language Poetry," or Roger Gilbert's "Textured Information: Politics, Pleasure, and Poetry in the Eighties," for similar accounts.

[23] To get a sense of that breadth in this country alone, one needs only to look at recent literary magazines, or even to consider the three most recent volumes of the *Best American Poetry* series – both 1995 editor Richard Howard and 1996 editor Adrienne Rich sought specifically to include poets who had not appeared in previous volumes, and each volumes contain work from over 75 different poets – these culled from all the poetry published that year. Trying to assess the field is, to quote the old cliché, like trying to drink from a fire hose, and efforts at categorization are not only useful but necessary as one attempts to swallow.

[24] Jed Rasula, in *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects 1940-1990*, offers a slightly more complex paradigm by dividing the map into four zone: Associated Writing Programs, New Formalism, Language Writing, and "various coalitions of interest-oriented or community-based poets" (440). Though it offers more diversity, Rasula's paradigm still recognizes only three primary formal movements and thus still succumbs to the same limitations.

[25] A more detailed justification of the value of creative writing programs and the kinds of poetry they produce is, obviously, beyond the scope of this project, though I do address the issue again briefly in Chapter 5 in light of Michael Palmer's critique of the personal lyric.

[26] See, for instance, Joseph Conte's *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry*. Though Conte provides an extremely useful "topology" (his term) of recent formal developments in more experimental poetic schools or movements, that topology is anchored primarily in the forms themselves. Form intersects content only at the most basic level of the poet's own understanding of the nature of language. Similarly, Donald Wesling's earlier study, *The New Poetries: Poetic Form Since Coleridge and Wordsworth* (1985) focuses his historical examination of formal developments on poets' attitudes toward poetic devices in and of themselves; thus he argues that "Innovation, regarded from close up, is in essence the restructuring of the hierarchy of forms, the filling of blank spaces on the table of forms" (92) and offers little attention to the ways in which form may be related to specific thematic concerns.

[27] This tendency toward generalized world views rather than explorations of individual poems has been particularly true for essays on Language writing, where formal developments provide the ground for theoretical discussions of subjectivity as well as for the referential versus representational qualities of language. Part of this tendency, of course,

may emerge from the general focus of Language writing itself, which professes to divert attention from the thematics of the poem and the representational aspects of language to the poem's process and the ways in which its use of language serves primarily to highlight multiplied subjectivity and referential (rather than representational) language. As a result, it is often easier to read Language poetry as somehow always only about itself –about the nature of poetry. But such a generalized approach potentially ignores other prominent philosophical or intellectual concerns present in their work.

[28] In doing so, I do not necessarily wish to discount more generalized relationships between form and something like "world view" or the postmodern oeuvre; but while those relationships are useful, I don't think they take us far enough into the work of individual poets or provide a deep enough sense of the connections between poets.

[29] Particularly as delimited in poetic manifestos such as Olson's "Projectivist Verse."

[30] Notably absent, of course, are poets from the New Formalist or New Narrative schools. That is not to suggest that poets in those schools do not share these concerns; in this project, however, I have chosen to work with poets whose forms are more closely allied with experimental traditions, and the poets gathered here seem to me the ones whose work yields the richest rewards. Though poets working in more formal tradition are outside the scope of this project, I hope that in the future I will be able to expand the scope of this discussion to include poets in those schools or to at least address the ways in which those schools do or do not enter into this dialogue.

Chapter 2
"Long Ago I Was Wounded":
The Defense of Silence in the Poetry of Louise Glück

> *I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence. The unsaid, for me, exerts greater power: often I wish an entire poem could be made in this vocabulary.*
>
> Louise Glück, "Disruption, Hesitation, Silence"

Of the four poets considered here, Louise Glück is the one who belongs most firmly to the mainstream of American lyric poetry. Her work appears in publications such as *The New Yorker*, *Antaeus*, *Ironwood*, and *American Poetry Review*, and her sixth volume, *The Wild Iris* (1992) won the Pulitzer Prize. Despite her affinities with workshop poetry, however, Glück's style remains distinct. Though her poems often appear quite personal, they retain a reticent invulnerability that creates a sharp distance between poem and reader. Against the tendency of a number of contemporary poets toward longer poems composed of extended sentences, longer lines, and intricate details, she continues to offer poems stripped bare, as even her most recent volume, *Meadowlands* (1996), attests. As the epigraph above suggests, Glück prefers poetry built on silences. And even though she is not "experimental" in the ways that Graham, Palmer, and Philip are, she shares with them an attention to silence that manifests itself both formally and thematically in her work.

But where Graham, Philip, and Palmer seek to wrap silence in language, using form to locate, if not give full voice to, the unsaid and the unsayable, Glück wraps language in silence, sealing the poems off from excessive display.[1] As a cartographer, then, she is concerned primarily with locating the borders; her poetic silences often function as boundary lines that we are not permitted to cross. Her speakers often withdraw into their own silences, and Glück herself prefers stark, unemotional nouns and verbs – often of only

one or two syllables – and relies on short sentences, simple syntax, terse phrases, brief strophes and short lines, creating a kind of formal silence in her work. Hers is a style that Lynn Keller calls "the language of renunciation" and Elizabeth Dodd terms "personal classicism," both critics emphasizing its reticence and austerity.

More than any of the other poets examined here, then, Glück *uses* silence, crafting poetry that works through what it leaves unsaid. Though she shares their attraction to silence, she engages with it on entirely different terms, and as a result her voice is an important counterpoint in this project. In her work, silence belongs to individuals, not to culture or history or language as in the work of Philip, Graham, and Palmer. When gaps occur in Glück's poems, they result from human, not linguistic, fallibility. And this individual silence is primarily an internal state that can be manipulated – "I" will not speak – rather than an external entity to locate or to negotiate with – "something" is unsayable. In much of her work, the "inexpressibility topos" delineated in Chapter 1 might be more aptly called the "unexpressed topos," and Rich's claim that "language cannot do everything" becomes the dictum that language *should not* do everything. Her work exposes the aporia of art by foregrounding what she will not say.

As I shall argue, this refusal to speak functions in Glück's poetry as the principal line of defense against the wounds of human relationships. Her poetry delineates a world in which relationships are indelibly marked by loss: we are made to love, and everything we love will eventually reject us or die. "Why love what you will lose?" the poet asks in "From the Japanese"[2] (*First* 207). And her answer, immediately following: "There is nothing else to love."[3] In response to the wound opened by that inevitable loss, Glück's poetry offers

silence – the thematized silence of a speaker embodied in the formal silence of a poem, both of which serve to reject empathy or sympathy and so disdain any hint of vulnerability. At the same time, however, these defensive silences command attention; they carry a biting starkness that compels the listener to pay attention and recognize the rejection at every turn. We cannot touch Glück's speakers, but we cannot ignore them either. Silence becomes an act of compelling power. [4]

At the same time, Glück's poetry, like that of the other writers discussed here, does grapple with external silences, or with silences externally imposed, that can potentially represent a loss of power. When silence belongs to the other rather than to the self, or when it is imposed on the self by an other, it become the source of the wound Glück's speakers endure. For instance, within the family, a daughter seeks approval from her father, but instead meets the silence of his emotional distance, which itself leaves no room for her to speak, and so she experiences his rejection of her. Similarly, the silent presence of a dead infant exerts power over the sister who survives, drawing her into an unwinnable competition with the dead sibling in which the more silent child wins. In adult relationships, Glück's poetry repeatedly reveals women silenced by husbands or lovers – sometimes violently, sometimes tenderly, but the result is always the same. Many of these speakers, though, rather than attempting to break the silences that surround them, or even explore them more deeply, learn instead to transform them into something they can manipulate to advantage. Even when initially imposed from outside, silence again becomes a way to regain control and wield power. Faced with these wounds, Glück's speakers respond with yet more silence – the only viable way, these poems suggest, to survive.

In adopting this brooding, even vindictive, response, Glück creates a poetry characterized by tight, and tight-lipped, control. This poetics of silence *chronicles* grief and pain, but never *enacts* those emotions on the page. In barricading emotional struggle behind a wall of silence, the poetry preserves the distance not only between the poem's speaker and the one who wounds her, but also between the poet and her reader.[5] However, in *The Wild Iris*, Glück's sixth volume, this brooding stance comes under attack, and she begins to move from manipulation toward exploration, evidenced perhaps most notably in the dialogue of struggle created by an interplay of voices. The vulnerability that in earlier volumes lay buried behind the protective silence begins to emerge on the page. *The Wild Iris* is an extended sequence, but unlike the short sequences appearing in earlier works, it permits an array of speakers to grapple with one another, staging dramas that in her earlier work always occur before the poem begins. In that drama, Glück directly confronts silence – figured as the silence of God – and critiques her own response to its pain. And it is here, if anywhere, that the "unexpressed" brushes up against the "inexpressible"; though God's silence remains primarily the result of his refusal to speak, these poems also grapple with silence not as violence enacted by one human being against another but as an inherent limitation of the human condition, and silence becomes something to enter rather than manipulate. The volume challenges the stance of Glück's earlier speakers – rigid, defiant, unbending, and above all silent and distant – and emerges with a potentially more open posture. The voices of God and of the flowers in the poet's garden question and undermine the self-centered distance of this poet-gardener who demands that the world speak on her terms and chooses to withdraw when it doesn't. Though the poems themselves retain Glück's characteristic

reticence formally, that reticence becomes less defensive; silence no longer stands solely as threat or weapon.

This chapter first explores the ways silence functions as both a source of pain and a poetic response to it across Glück's first five books,[6] and then examines the ways in which Glück's direct confrontation with silence and her ensuing self-critique in *The Wild Iris* begin to transform the nature and function of silence, both formally and thematically, across the poetry. Diction, syntax, and stanza structure all begin to relax as Glück allows her speakers more emotional range and invites contact rather than simply demands attention. And interestingly, although Glück may not be an experimental poet in the same sense Language writers are, when she does choose to negotiate rather than battle with silences, her negotiations, like those of Graham, Philip, and Palmer, seem to require not one voice, but many voices speaking in concert and that multivocality represents a means of expanding the boundaries of her formal practice.

"Long Ago I Was Wounded": Silence as the Response to Pain

In her essays, Glück acknowledges and explains her preference for silence in poetry. As she writes on T. S. Eliot, George Oppen, Hugh Seidman, Robinson Jeffers, and others, an attraction to the unsaid surfaces again and again. In discussing Oppen, she notes that "What moves in [his] poems is silence" (*Proofs* 79), and she finds herself drawn to his poems because she "love[s] what is implicit or present in outline, that which summons (as opposed to imposes) thought. [She loves] white space. . . the telling omission. . . lacunae" (29), all of which characterize Oppen's work for her. In contrast, in an essay titled

"Disruption, Hesitation, Silence" (*Proofs* 73-86) she expresses her distrust of expansive, discursive poetry, arguing that it says too much: "the expansive poet is prone to premature linguistic satiation, by which I mean that the sense of something's having been made comes into existence too readily. The ratio of words to meaning favors words. The poem exists in its adornments" (82). She argues that "the cult of exhaustive detail" that she sees permeating contemporary poetry "needs scrutiny. News stories are detailed. But they don't seem, at least to me, at all real. Their thoroughness is a reprimand to imagination; and yet they don't say this is what it was to be here" (74). Extensive detail or discursiveness, for Glück, suppresses rather than enhances meaning. She prefers a language in which the words mean more than they say and evoke something beyond themselves.

In part, this attraction to silences results from Glück's sense of the knowable world. For her, "[a]ll earthly experience is partial. Not simply because it is subjective, but because that which we do not know, of the universe, of mortality, is so much more vast than that which we do know" (74). To write in silences and "harness the power of the unfinished" (74) more truly represents (or evokes) the world we experience. In her words, a poetry of silences

> is analogous to the unseen; for example, to the power of ruins, to works of art either damaged or incomplete. Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied: another time, a world in which they were whole, or were to have been whole, is implied. (73)

These and similar assertions suggest that Glück, like the other poets in this study, is explicitly conscious of the tension between language and silence, and that she writes in order to engage whatever exists in the gaps left by our words. Her work's spareness, in that case, could parallel the fragmentation and multivocality of theirs as an inverse means of locating these larger wholes.

Yet the poetry that Glück actually writes locates, or more precisely, *enforces* an entirely different kind of silence, one that closes rather than opens her poems. Her silences, at least until *The Wild Iris*, offer no implication of an inarticulate unseen wholeness, nor do they function iconically to lead the reader toward the world beyond language, though as noted earlier they still demand attention even as they refuse to reveal themselves. In her 1984 essay "Death and Absence" (*Proofs* 125-28), Glück acknowledges these limitations of her work:

> I thought once that poems were like words inscribed in rock or caught in amber. I thought in these terms so long, so fervently, with such investment in images of preservation and fixity, that the inaccuracies of the metaphor as description of my own experience did not occur to me until very recently. What is left out of these images is the idea of contact, and contact, of the most intimate sort, is what poetry can accomplish. (*Proofs* 128)

That contact is the very gesture that invites readers into the larger context Glück's essays describe. Yet the poems in Glück's first five volumes (including *Ararat*, published after this essay) appear precisely as "words inscribed in rock" that categorically refuse contact. The poems virtually dare the reader to step across the line drawn by their silences; the unsaid

forms an unbridgeable barrier to the emotional world of the poem. We are called to attention and forced to watch, but never invited in.[7]

The opening poem of *Ararat* (1990) both explains and enacts this defense of silence, linking it explicitly to the poet's vocation, and thus provides a useful starting point for examining the poetics at work across Glück's first five books:

Parodos

Long ago, I was wounded.
I learned
to exist, in reaction,
out of touch
with the world: I'll tell you
what I meant to be –
a device that listened.
Not inert: still.
A piece of wood. A stone.

Why should I tire myself, debating, arguing?
Those people breathing in the other beds
could hardly follow, being
uncontrollable
like any dream –
Through the blinds, I watch
the moon in the night sky, shrinking and swelling –

I was born to a vocation:
to bear witness to the great mysteries.
Now that I've seen both
birth and death, I know
to the dark nature these
are proofs, not
mysteries – (*Ararat* 15)

Birth and death are signs here not of mystery but of loss; they are proof of all the wounds of separation we experience – the first and last exiles that mar(k) human existence. And it is this exile to which the poet-speaker bears witness. Her witness, though, is not celebratory,

or even communal. The desire to be "a device that listens" rather than speaks marks her determined withdrawal from the pain that scars every experience of intimacy; she withdraws, essentially, from human contact. The wood and the stone the speaker adopts as her emblems are insensible entities, "devices" whose very stillness negates the capacity to be wounded.

The wound itself emerges in the second strophe, after the speaker has presented her silent, hardened face. As is typical of Glück's work, we never learn precise details; what the poem offers us is failed communication. The speaker refuses to engage "[t]hose people breathing in the other beds" because they have failed her. No matter how intimate, these others are "uncontrollable" and distant – they (and perhaps we, as Glück's readers) cannot "follow" the speaker's language, and so leave her isolated. In response to their inability to listen, she retreats into her own self-imposed silence. Her attempt to make contact "long ago" failed, and now, though she will continue to bear witness to the proofs of our exile from one another, she will not enter into debates, arguments, or, the poem implies, any other form of potentially intimate contact.

For this speaker, herself a poet who "bears witness," silence serves to erect an impenetrable emotional barrier. She uses it as a weapon against the wounds of long ago: in refusing to speak to those who will not understand, she actively rejects them (her withdrawal, after all, is a "determined" one) and turns her back on the intimacy and vulnerability associated with trying to make herself understood. As a result, her witness becomes a brooding, almost sullen defiance that rejects human contact; she says as little as possible, using the unsaid itself as her language. Silent as stone, she will not risk herself for

this vocation. But her silence is not a humble self-effacement; the language of "vocation," suggesting a near-transcendent power, along with the sense of disdain that underlies her question ("why should I tire myself?") mark a fierce pride and implicit command over her audience. The speaker gazes at the sterile moon, but still demands that those others, whom she pointedly ignores, gaze at her.

The poet, like her speaker, also refuses contact, using silence as a way to move "out of touch" – physically, emotionally, and poetically – but still witness. Like a stone, this poem presents only a hardened exterior, with no way inside. The absence of any specific context contributes to the exteriority; we have no way of identifying or sympathizing with the speaker's pain because the poet doesn't make that pain available. The diction reinforces this distance with language that is itself "out of touch." From its opening line, the poem eschews emotional contact. We are given only the condition in one brief, harsh declaration: "Long ago, I was wounded." Its very spareness prohibits any question that might illuminate the situation or establish any intimacy between speaker and reader. The speaker's intention to become like stone stands similarly barren, broken into terse phrases of three or four words each. Nowhere does this speaker feel; she tells us only, "I learned," "I watched," "I was born," "I've seen," "I know." Each phrase describes an impassive, distanced action performed by a solitary individual in the absence of human interaction. The only motion occurs in "the moon in the night sky, shrinking and swelling." The speaker turns from the nameless others who fail her to this lifeless rock hundreds of thousands of miles away, whose motion speaks its sterility; the moon is "shrinking and swelling" not with human life but only with the light it passively receives and reflects.[8] The poem's structure reinforces

these stark images: the lines themselves are all short and predominantly end-stopped, so that their abrupt edges still language just as the images still emotion. The clipped lines prohibit any thought from revealing too much or developing beyond the poet's control. The phrases are like the facets of a diamond – hard and beautiful, but always turned outward to prevent any glimpse of the interior of the stone or the poem.

Critical response to Glück's poetry bears out this assessment, attesting to a silence that is hardened, perhaps even embattled, rather than suggestive. In examining this minimalist poetics, critics invariably turn to the metaphor Glück herself offers – anorexia, which itself suggests desperation and control. The metaphor surfaces most notably in the oft-quoted sequence "Dedication to Hunger," where the speaker of "The Deviation" (the fourth poem in the sequence) expresses the desire to free her body "of blossom and subterfuge" (*First* 133) – that is, as Keller, Dodd, and others note, from the woman's flesh that makes her body into a "grave." The poem's speaker links that desire to "what I feel now, aligning these words – / it is the same need to perfect." Perfection, for the anorexic girl as well as for the driven poet, comes by stripping the body, and the body of the text, from all extraneous ornament and from all desire. Keller and Dodd, along with Lynne McMahon, accurately argue that this textual austerity reflects Glück's sense of the fundamental incompatibility of a female eroticism and the demands of art. In part, that incompatibility results from the subjection heterosexual relations impose on women. "Grandmother," the second poem in "Dedication to Hunger," bitterly delineates that subjection as the eager young husband dominates, and so silences, his wife with his passion. That silence in part forms the impetus for the anorexia that emerges as the sequence

progresses. Glück's textual silence functions as a disavowal of the female body and a means of transcending its material powerlessness. [9]

In linking a woman's body and a poet's text and persistently exploring women's silences in family and erotic relationship, Glück undeniably links her own poetic silences to the politics of gender. Her need to strip fullness from her poetry manifests, in one reading, the vulnerability and subjection historically associated with the female body in a patriarchal culture.[10] Yet silence does not always signify powerlessness or the desire to escape, as critics and researchers in a variety of fields have pointed out. In different cultural contexts, silence can function as an indicator of wisdom, a measure of disapproval, a command for attention, and so on. Susan Gal, in her essay "Between Silence and Speech: The Problematics of Research on Language and Gender," reviews research on a variety of situations that points to silence's ability to function as a form of relational power in its own right, directed outward toward the enemy rather than solely inward toward the self. Gal cites research on Western Apaches, English Quakers, and recent studies of male/female patterns of conversation that locate the ways in which individuals use silence to manipulate the dynamics of communication in their favor.[11] As a result, to read only anorexic disavowal in Glück's reticence may be to read her silences too narrowly. Such disavowal is certainly present, and I will examine the issue of gender in relation to Glück's silences, but I want to suggest that the silences in her texts do not mark only the desire to transcend the female body. I argue that both Glück and her speakers also wield silence as a shield and a weapon, turned outward to reject intimacy and punish those who threaten them.

"One Controlled Act of Revenge": Silence as Defense and Retribution

As I suggested above, silence operates in Glück's poetry as a means of dealing with the pain of intimacy and loss. In her first five books, Glück repeatedly locates that pain in two particular contexts: the silence of women in male/female relationships and the silence of children in family relationships.[12] Though the dynamic differs slightly in each, both concern human relationships in which "I" cannot or will not speak. And as in "Parodos," the silence wielded by the speaker, even if initially imposed by someone else, becomes a response that functions defensively, to allow the speaker to control a potentially dangerous or threatening experience, and offensively, to inflict retribution on those who betray her. But a broader reading of her work reveals that this manipulation of silence responds not only to singular moments of individual pain or particular relationships, but that it in fact forms a protective response to the inevitable, diffuse loss and emptiness that mark the human condition – vengeful silence becomes, in Glück's early work, a way of being. The specific wounds of erotic and familial relationships stand as concrete manifestations of a much broader condition, and it is that condition that Glück begins to challenge in *The Wild Iris* as she moves from manipulation to exploration.

'His Hand Over Her Mouth': The Silence of Love

The threat of silence appears directly in Glück's poems most often in female speakers who find themselves silenced in relationships with men. Repeatedly we encounter women who find their words cut off. In her essay "The Education of the Poet," Glück traces her concerns with being forcibly silenced to her family's communication patterns:

> I was born into an environment in which the right of any family member to complete the sentence of another was assumed. Like most people in that family, I had a strong desire to speak, but that desire was regularly frustrated: my sentences were, in being cut off, radically changed – transformed, not paraphrased. (*Proofs* 5)

The danger lies in the constant threat of losing control over one's own speech.[13] Glück fiercely wants to control her words, and in that same essay she confesses that part of her desire to write poetry came out of the need "to finish [her] own sentences" (7). In one sense, by constructing poetry out of brief, spare phrases, Glück denies her readers the power her family held; one cannot finish sentences for her because she finishes them first.

Within her poetry the threatened loss of control in her poems resides most often in the male/female, rather than the parent/child relationship. Instead of a whole family, her poetry describes again and again a husband or a lover dominating a woman's speech. In *Descending Figure*, that domination surfaces subtly, forming a dark undercurrent within an apparently smooth relationship.. "Grandmother" (131) for instance, begins with a woman's memory of the early days of her marriage. The poem's speaker, the granddaughter listening to this memory, imagines the way her grandfather would have "rushe[d] in / with his young man's hunger" to kiss his wife eagerly, albeit tenderly, while she "wait[ed], in the early evening." And the granddaughter acknowledges the joy this scene holds for the older woman; "I do not question / their happiness," she tells us. In framing her response in the negative, however, the speaker implies the possibility of such questioning. The poem's

final strophe bears out that possibility as this granddaughter's assessment swiftly darkens the tender image:

> his kiss would have been
> clearly tender –
>
> Of course, of course. Except
> it might as well have been
> his hand over her mouth.

To the young woman, her grandfather's love and tenderness and pride serve only to mask the violent truth of this, or any marriage relationship. "That is what marriage is," she declares; the woman is always the one waiting, the submissive recipient of a man's desires at the expense of her own voice.

"Happiness" (135) echoes the same theme as it describes two lovers waking together. The scene is framed by the delicate image of "a vase / of lilies" on the table, softened by the "sunlight / pool[ing] in their throats." But this light pooling in the lilies' throats becomes an act of suffocation as the lovers wake:

> I watch him turn to her
> as though to speak her name
> but silently, deep in her mouth –
> . . .
> And then she stirs; her body
> fills with his breath.

Now he "pools" in her throat, first by speaking her name there and then by filling her with his own breath. Though tender, the image nonetheless implies his silencing of her speech. Filled with his voice, she has none of her own.[14]

This sense of loss and silence becomes more powerful and more threatening in *The Triumph of Achilles*. In that volume, the aura of tenderness that often frames the marriage

poems in *Descending Figure* gives way to a sharpened hatred of the silences imposed by love. *The Triumph of Achilles* opens, in fact, with the brutality of "Mock Orange" (155). In the poem's second strophe, after naming "these flowers / lighting the yard" as the accused because of their cloying scent, the speaker declares with deadly cold:

> I hate them.
> I hate them as I hate sex,
> the man's mouth
> sealing my mouth, the man's
> paralyzing body –

The gentle image of a man's breath "filling" a woman's body is replaced by more brutal acts of "sealing" and "paralyzing." Sex, with the "union" it imposes, seals a woman's voice and replaces her words with only "the cry that always escapes / the low, humiliating / premise of union" that marks both her debasement and her loss of control over her language. Formally, the lines echo that dissolution and paralysis as they repeat the same words over and over. The repetition of "I hate" and "the man's" creates emphasis, but it also marks a reduction of the speaker's language. Within the poem as well as within the bed she can only utter abbreviated cries, though here of vengeance rather than union.[15] Human intimacy, these poems suggest, diminishes access to language, particularly for women.

The form Glück adopts in her poetry functions in part to manifest that diminishing: sentences reduced to simple phrases, diction reduced to monosyllabic nouns and verbs, lines reduced to three or four or five words, all mirror the reduction a woman's voice undergoes when she enters erotic intimacy. But the silence in these poems is not entirely imposed from outside; Glück's speakers choose (or at least choose to accept) the same silence forced on them, and in that choice gain a kind of power. The refusal to speak (even if the silence

itself is initially an imposed condition) becomes a powerful form of emotional manipulation in these poems. It allows those who are wounded to re-exert control not only over themselves (as the anorexic does) but also over those who wound them.

"Aphrodite" (also from *Descending Figure*) provides a powerful example of the ways in which a woman's silence can function not only as a self-imposed act of negation, but also as a weapon both to protect the self from further pain[16] and to punish the one who inflicted the wound.[17] The poem parallels a woman in marriage to a statue of Aphrodite that guards a harbor:

Aphrodite

A woman exposed as rock
has this advantage:
she controls the harbor.
Ultimately, men appear,
weary of the open.
So terminates, they feel,
a story. In the beginning,
longing. At the end, joy.
In the middle, tedium.

In time, the young wife
naturally hardens. Drifting
from her side, in imagination,
the man returns not to a drudge
but to the goddess he projects.

On a hill, the armless figure
welcomes the delinquent boat,
her thighs cemented shut, barring
the fault in the rock. (141)

Formally, Glück's characteristic reticence is clearly at work. The poem itself has only four adjectives; most of its work is done with the nouns and verbs of one, two, and occasionally three syllables. Each word is sharp and precise: woman, rock, terminates, controls, hardens,

cemented, barring. And as in "Parodos," the syntax reinforces the linguistic hardness; almost every line contains a comma or a period, breaking the poem into abrupt phrases. No single thought meanders far unchecked. Absent, too, is a specific context or narrative frame. All the poem offers are the images – a woman like a statue and a statue like a woman, both with thighs cemented shut, both made of immovable, unspeaking rock that bars entry. Even the comparison itself works implicitly, relying on the parallels of language rather than on explicit simile. The connection emerges as the wife "naturally hardens" and the husband "returns . . . to the goddess," joining this couple to the statue and her sailors.[18] Through those parallels, the armless figure in the last strophe becomes at once woman and statue as the poet refuses to distinguish between the literal and the figurative.[19]

In describing this woman/statue, though, Glück frames her silence not as submission but as power. The transformation begins in the opening lines, which balance vulnerability and strength: the woman is "exposed," echoing the vulnerability young women with throats and mouths exposed to domination, but at the same time she appears as a rock and a goddess who has "control." And she exercises that control against the men who threaten her. The threat comes from continual unfaithfulness, whether literal or imagined. The wife suffers repeated loss as her husband continually yields to his "longing" and leaves her (if only in his mind) the way the sailors leave the harbor. Both return only when "weary" and bored with the "tedium" that marks the journey into "the open" – that space free of the constraints of marriage. In response, the wife "hardens." Her stony silence, like the goddess's, creates the impression that she "welcomes" her husband, but that stance is an illusion: the husband "projects" the goddess waiting for him just as the sailors "feel" that

this is how the story goes. Instead, what awaits is hardness. She may seem joyful, but her "armless" embrace, though potentially a sign of vulnerability,[20] marks her refusal to enter into intimacy with this "delinquent" husband who will only leave again in an endless cycle of longing, tedium, and joy. With "her thighs cemented shut," suggesting both sexual and emotional coldness, she prevents him from entering into the deepest places of both body and mind. Even if she cannot break the cycle, she controls the emotional and the physical terms of this relationship, and silence becomes a means of both self-defense and quietly controlled vengeance.

The same sense of control permeates the poem itself. The language is cemented shut so that the woman's rage and hurt remain both palpably present to, yet also sealed off from, the reader. Glück does not give voice to the woman who repeatedly loses her husband to his illusions; the only ones who feel in this poem are the men, who experience longing, joy, and weariness. We locate the wife's rage and pain primarily in the image of "thighs cemented shut, barring / the fault in the rock," suggesting both a deep wound and a deep reaction. Yet despite the absence of any emotional language, that image, because of its erotic charge and the very starkness of the diction, becomes a powerful expression of the intensity behind it. That power draws us as readers toward the poem, but also erects a barrier around that "fault" or crack that prohibits us from sharing the pain. The poem presents us with the same hard but beautiful surface the goddess presents to the sailors.

"One Is Always the Watcher": The Silence of Family

The second context in which silence functions as a threat and a weapon in Glück's poetry is the family, with children rather than women at the center of the conflict. Glück returns again and again to sibling rivalries in which one daughter is silenced by another in the desperate struggle for parental love and recognition. "Of two sisters / one is always the watcher, / one the dancer" (*First* 125), she writes in "Tango" (*Descending Figure*), implying that when one sister claims the center, the other can only watch in silence. The dance functions metonymically as an image of all the ways in which children perform upon the family stage. And that stage, at least as Glück envisions it, has no room for two children speaking at once; the parents, "merged into the one / totemic creature," become an audience able to watch only one actress at a time.[21] "Tango" focuses on the torturous relationship between the two sisters that results from this competition for parental attention as the speaker, the watcher, examines her own sense of displacement. The fair-haired younger sister becomes "the gold sun on the horizon" while the dark older sister, pushed into the shadow, remains behind, mute with desire. Silence becomes her only means of survival in this unwinnable competition.[22]

The sense of displacement, and of the loss experienced by the older daughter at the birth of her sister, surfaces most fully in *Ararat*. The volume focuses on a complex family dynamic in which the speaker –the older of two girls[23] – again and again seals herself off emotionally. A number of its poems chart the desperate antagonism between siblings.[24] In "Paradise" (54-55) for example, the speaker describes her younger sister, now grown, returning to their parents' house in the country to tend the garden. Like so many city-dwellers, this sister comes "wanting / something simple, something / better for the

children." And the garden she creates "looks like country – / the clipped lawns, strips of colored flowers." Hers is a neatly ordered world, tended and cared for. But for the speaker, who remembers the country before the urbanites transformed it into suburbia, this garden is an illusion: it *looks* like the romantic image of the country city-dwellers project.

At the heart of the poem, though, is not a battle between true country and its clichéd portrait; instead, the final strophe dwells on the dynamic between the two sisters, foregrounding the way in which the younger sister, in creating her neatly ordered world to please their mother, displaces the older one. The speaker explains with controlled anger:

> She doesn't know what it once was.
>
> But I know. Like Adam,
> I was the firstborn.
> Believe me, you never heal,
> you never forget the ache in your side,
> the place where something was taken away
> to make another person.

Ostensibly "it" is the country itself. But the poem links this place to the family dynamic: the living mother is the one who allows her younger daughter to take over the garden, while the father, now dead is "close, too; [they] call / a stone by his name" and his silence seems to haunt the scene. The subtle presence of both parents transforms "it" from merely the country into the family "as it was" without a second daughter. *That* was Paradise. What was "taken away" was the speaker's place in that dynamic as the family center shifted. When "another person" came along, the speaker lost both her parents and part of herself. And as in "Parodos" and "Aphrodite," this speaker withdraws, as expressed in her resemblance to her stony father: "They always said / I was like my father, the way he showed / contempt for emotion," she explains. And this contempt makes itself felt, as in

most of Glück's poems, again by the absence of emotional language. The "ache" in the side ("your" side, not "mine") is the only hint of pain, but it is a flat pain whose intensity is implied in its endurance rather than in any directly charged language.

This sibling rivalry, with its attendant silences, rages not only among the living, but between the living and the dead. The family portrait Glück creates across her poetry includes not only the dark, silent older daughter and her golden younger sister, but also a third sister, the true firstborn, who died at birth. And in many ways, the dead child, in the silence of her grave, proves a more powerful rival than the living dancer. "[I]t seemed to me my sister's body / was a magnet. I could feel it draw / my mother's heart into the earth," the speaker of "Lost Love" (27) explains. With her mother's heart "a tiny pendant of iron" hardened by that loss, the living daughter who followed finds herself emotionally abandoned and consequently silences herself in an effort to make up for the loss.

This response, both defiant and pleading, becomes most apparent in "Appearances" (31-33). The poem begins and ends with a matching pair of portraits, one of each living sister, done when they were children. Unlike the blond sister, who reacted angrily to sitting silently for the painter and then hanging silently over the mantle, the older sister, who is the speaker, declares, "It never bothered me, not talking. / That hasn't changed much" (31). Yet that laissez-faire attitude, with its implicit contentment, grows more complex as her aptitude for stillness betrays an underlying desperation:

> It was something I was good at: sitting still, not moving.
> I did it to be good, to please my mother, to distract her from
> the child that died.
> I wanted to be child enough. I'm still the same,
> like a toy that can stop and go, but not change direction.

The daughter's silence here, unlike that of the wife who "hardens," echoes the negation of anorexia explored by Dodd, Keller, and others. In a desperate bid for her mother's love, this daughter attempts to turn herself into the perfect image of her mother's desire so that she will be "enough" and so ease her mother's pain. The birth of yet another daughter, this one fair-haired and vibrant, suggests that her efforts failed, and in the poem's closing, it is the painter (and only the painter, since he alone turns his full attention to her) who sees the veiled desperation behind the silence:

> . . . a face already so
> controlled, so withdrawn,
> and too obedient, the clear eyes saying
> *If you want me to be a nun, I'll be a nun*.

Such self-effacing silence becomes a way of deferring or denying one's own desires in order to gain approval and affection, much the way anorexia is a denial of one's physical hunger. To reinforce this suggestion, the ideal image this daughter projects is of a woman stripped of bodily fullness and of sexuality whose life is a vow of dedicated silence.

Other poems in the volume, however, frame a child's silence as far less acquiescent and desperate. In "Children Coming Home From School" (44-46), in particular, it becomes a brutal weapon designed more to punish the offending party and command attention than to please. The first section concerns the speaker's niece walking home from school and demanding some measure of independence from her mother – wanting to walk home alone, but settling for "the option to walk without holding hands" in a gesture of aggressive independence. From that mother/daughter contest, the speaker turns to her own son, who attacks not with physical aggression but with the same weapon of silence she herself wields:

> 2.

My son accuses me
of his unhappiness, not
in words, but in the way
he stares at the ground, inching
slowly up the driveway: he knows
I'm watching. That's why
he greets the cat,
to show he's capable
of open affection.
My father used
the dog in the same way.
My son and I, we're the living
experts in silence.

For both mother, who apparently learned from her own father, and son[25] silence becomes a weapon one can use to inflict pain and express rage. Unlike the niece, who relies on more direct tactics to get her way, mother and son choose a more passive violence. Their silence commands attention because they display it dramatically; the son positions himself at the center of the scene and pointedly refuses intimacy with his mother.

The poem's final section builds on this image of silence as a weapon turned against those one wants to hurt. It returns to the relationship between the two sisters, unveiling it as one built on this manipulative form of silence:

3.

One thing you learn, growing up with my sister:
you learn that rules don't mean anything.
Sooner or later, whatever you're waiting to hear will get itself
said.
It doesn't matter what it is: *I love you* or *I'll never speak to you*
again.
It all gets said, often in the same night.

Then you slip in, you take advantage. There are ways
to hold a person to what's been said; for example, by using
the word *promise*.

> But you have to have patience; you have to be able to wait, to
> listen.

As in "Aphrodite" and "Parodos," silence creates the advantage. Listening with the silence of wood or stone becomes not only an act of withdrawal but a path to power. In the context of family, then, silence becomes the primary means of manipulating others, a way of drawing attention to oneself that can be at once demanding and desperate, brutal and pleading.

In her essay "Education of a Poet," Glück speaks bluntly of such manipulative use of silences in her own childhood. When she found her voice overridden by the ongoing family dialogue, she explains, "My response was silence. Sulky silence, since I never stopped wanting deferential attention." This "sulky silence" punishes by simultaneously displaying and withholding affection; "greeting the cat" reminds her that he *can* love, so that his averted glance and accompanying silence specifically reject her. Glück's formal silences, I would argue, serve similar purposes. They suggest intense turmoil or struggle at work in the poem's subject or speaker at the same time that they create a sharp distance between the poem and the reader that renders the turmoil inaccessible. Even in *Ararat*, where the volume as a whole provides more context in its exploration of family relationships and its autobiographical base, the poems themselves retain the spare, unemotional diction and terse sentences that characterize Glück's style. Her language consistently refuses emotion even as the images it presents seethe with emotional intensity. Such is the case in poems like Aphrodite, where the woman's rage is never expressed directly but emerges in the bitterness of her shut thighs. Similarly, the older sister's rage against her fair-haired sibling remains displaced; in "Paradise" it is "you," not "I" who never heal. Even "Mock Orange," in which

the speaker expresses hatred, the barrenness of the phrasing creates a tone of *controlled* hatred rather than wild rage. These poems are, as Glück herself said, "caught in amber" – beautiful to look at, impossible to touch. Like the son of "Children Coming Home From School," the poems imply their capability for emotion, but offer the onlooker only hardened silences that demand "deferential attention" yet refuse contact.

"Its Form / Is Forced Accommodation": The Brooding Silence of the Poet

In the two contexts described above, silence functions as a defensive weapon against individuals – lovers, siblings, parents, and, for the poet, readers. But across Glück's poetry, "sulky silence," the silence of a stone, stands as the response not only to these specific wounds, but to every wound that occurs between the ominous "proofs" of birth and death that define human existence as itself a scar. Her silence *is* her means of bearing witness and fulfilling the vocation "Parodos" speaks of. In that respect, perhaps the most emblematic of Glück's poems, and the one that best serves as a poetic self-portrait, is "Brooding Likeness" from *The Triumph of Achilles* (159):

Brooding Likeness

I was born in the month of the bull,
the month of heaviness,
or of the lowered, the destructive head,
or of purposeful blindness. So I know, beyond the shadowed
patch of grass, the stubborn one, the one who doesn't look up,
still senses the rejected world. It is
a stadium, a well of dust. And you who watch him
looking down in the face of death, what do you know
of commitment? If the bull lives
one controlled act of revenge, be satisfied
that in the sky, like you, he is always moving,
not of his own accord but through the black field

like grit caught on a wheel, like shining freight.

In many ways, the poem captures most of Glück's speakers, each of whom is a "stubborn one" who rejects the world, lowers her head, and uses that silence as a means of controlled revenge. What drives the revenge is the death – the large death that waits at the end of each life, but also the smaller "deaths" that occur in every relationship as lovers leave, parents fail to love, siblings bury each other in brutal competition. As noted earlier, birth and death are only the larger proofs of the experiences of loss that wound each of us daily. The only way this figure knows how to respond to these deaths, large and small, is to look down with a vengeance, refusing the human contact that inevitably leads to more loss. And like "Parodos," "Brooding Likeness" presents the poet as a dark prophet of this loss whose weighty silence holds cosmic significance. This figure moving "through the black field" of the night sky moves at the hand of a larger force, and in doing so bears witness to that inescapable death.

If "Brooding Likeness" offers an emblem of this poet, then "Autumnal," in *Descending Figure* (139), offers an emblem of the poetry, delineating the formal character of this darkly brooding, even vengeful, response to loss in all its forms. The poem's sole character is a mother bending over her child's grave. But this woman appears only in the final lines; before we see her, we see the condition of loss and death indelibly etched on the world. The poem begins with the "public sorrow" of the cemetery in autumn, with fallen gold leaves scattered everywhere. The scene stands as "the prefigured burning of the yield," emphasizing again the inevitability of this ordained death. In the brilliance of this burning, of course, "waste is elevated / into beauty." Yet despite this beauty, and the "one

consuming vision of order" that the leaves in their "metal pails . . . of fire," present, the poem reminds us sharply that

> In the end, everything is bare.
> Above the cold, receptive earth
> the trees bend.

No matter how beautiful this death is, the trees end with nothing and can only bow down in resignation.

From the bareness of these trees, the poem then turns to human death, and finally to the woman at the child's grave, so that her human loss, which the poem calls "automatic" to further reinforce its inevitability, is only one instance of the death permeating this winter landscape:

> The word
> is *bear*: you give and give, you empty yourself
> into a child. And you survive
> the automatic loss. Against inhuman landscape
> the tree remains a figure for grief; its form
> is forced accommodation. At the grave,
> it is the woman, isn't it, who bends,
> the spear useless beside her.

The critical issue, at least for this discussion, however, is not simply the loss itself, but the formal response it produces in the tree and the mother, and, I would argue, in the poet. The slippage in the bear/bare combination ("In the end, everything is bare" / . . . The word / is *bear*") foregrounds the link between the emotional condition and the physical (formal) reaction: the way one "bears" these deaths, human and inhuman alike, is to "bare" oneself formally. The tree becomes "a figure for grief" not only as an image, but as a model of poetic form; it accepts the starkness of the world, accepts the loss that has stripped it of

ornament, and it bends downward, seeing only the earth at its feet, and, like the bull, refusing contact with the world above. The woman mirrors this figure as she bends grimly over the grave; the spear, signifying, perhaps, a more active response to the threat of loss, lies "useless beside her." The only thing to do, this poem suggests, is accept the barrenness, bend into it, and wear it like a scar.

In terms of these images, then, the formal silences of Glück's poetry are her "forced accommodation" to the harsh reality of the world itself. By employing "bare" diction and syntax that excludes emotion and intimacy, these poems attempt to bear the proofs of birth and death, with all the smaller wounds that fall in between. Formal silences defend both the poet and her speakers against raw emotion and refuse any intimacy with the world outside that could cause further wounds. The spare diction, short lines, and chopped syntax all enact the pointed silence of the child/bull who stares defiantly at the ground, rejecting the world at the same time he commands its attention. These poems, like the statue of Aphrodite, stand with their thighs cemented shut, merely pretending to welcome the reader home.

"*Are You Saying I Can Flourish, Having No Hope of Enduring?*": Confronting Silence *in* The Wild Iris

Against this poetry of hardened, vengeful silences, however, stand Glück's essays, written over a period of more than ten years and collected in *Proofs and Theories* (1994), which delineate a very different aesthetic. In those essays, she repeatedly emphasizes her attraction to poems that develop or desire connection – the very thing the lowered head of

the bull refuses: "My preference, from the beginning, has been the poetry that requests or craves a listener. . . . I read to feel addressed . . ." (9), she explains. Nowhere is her attraction to this poetry of address as evident as in her writings on Eliot, whom she redeems again and again from those who criticize his work. What draws her to Eliot so powerfully is the desperate plea for response that she sees permeating his poetry:

> The goal, in Eliot's monologues, is communion. The problem is that an other cannot be found, or attention secured. Almost all the poems are beset by caution. Sentences falter; major ideas are regularly subordinated, delayed, qualified – Eliot's speakers either can't speak or can't be heard; their persistence makes the poems urgent. . . . What has driven these poems from the first is terror and need of the understandable other. (21-22)

And it is precisely this "terror and need" that appeal to Glück as a reader. The urgent plea for communion, manifested for her in the stammers and hesitations, makes these poems of "invitation" for Glück. In laying their doubt and struggle bare on the page, these are poems that are "spoken in low tones, in whispers, to a companion or confessor. . . . The *cri du coeur* craves a listener." (114)

The alternative to Eliot is Stevens – a poet who writes what she calls poetry of "exclusion":

> Stevens' meditative poems are not addressed outward; they are allowed to be overheard. . . . But to overhear is to experience exclusion; reading Stevens, I felt myself superfluous, part of some marginal throng. . . . The difficulty to

> the reader is a function of the poem's mode, its privacy: to be allowed to follow is not to be asked along. (115)

Where Eliot's faltering hesitations invite readers in as they plead for a moment of contact or understanding, Stevens' poems "exclud[e] all mistaken turnings" (115), and in that perfection is both their magnificence and their inhumanity. The reader, Glück's essays suggest, has no active or necessary role in such controlled, perfected poetry.

But Glück's description of what attracts her to poetry contrasts sharply with her own work. Like Eliot's, Glück's speakers often "can't speak or can't be heard," but rather than faltering or pleading, they reassert control in the form of a cold rejection of the world that fails them – a rejection mirrored formally in the poems themselves as they refuse to plead for or invite communion, prohibiting emotional intimacy between poet and reader even as they grapple with deeply personal experiences. Where Eliot exposes his own frailties and depends on the grace and sympathy of his readers, Glück, like Stevens, "excludes all wrong turnings." Her poems, as described in the previous section, are beset by control and a reticence that refuse to falter, beg, or display urgency or desperation. They may *describe* such desperation, but they refuse to enact it in the ways Eliot's work does.[26] And in actively rejecting the listener, they exclude more violently than Stevens' supremely self-possessed, self-sufficient meditations. They resemble more closely Glück's description of Plath's poetry: "If exclusion, in Stevens, is tacit, in the later work of Sylvia Plath it is most violently active. Plath's poems renounce human aid, human analogy. . ." (119). Like Plath, Glück's speakers resist being known or comforted, though without Plath's raw emotional energy, and so create an "unbridgeable distance between artist and audience" (120-21).

As I noted earlier in this chapter, Glück acknowledges these limitations in her work when she recounts her image of poems as "words caught in amber." In probing this (subsequently discarded) idea of a poetry carved in stone, she writes, "What is left out of these images is the idea of contact, and contact, of the most intimate sort, is what poetry can accomplish" (128). And it is "the idea of contact" that is left out not only of the images, but also of her own poetry, as the previous section demonstrates. Even *Ararat*, published after she unearths the flaw in her metaphor, still retains the stony silence of the first four volumes; Calvin Bedient, in his review of that volume, describes the poems as coldly distant, "full of a snow-maiden's dry-ice kisses" ("Man is. . ." 214). Not until *The Wild Iris* does Glück's work begin to turn on itself, re-examining its exclusionary silence and moving toward the voice of a human rather than a stone. In that volume, she literally enacts communion[27] by staging a dialogue among multiple voices; in doing so she allows her speakers to question themselves and one another, to falter emotionally and verbally, and to take "wrong turnings" that open her poetry and create a different kind of witness.

Taking as their backdrop the garden, undeniably linked to Eden after the fall, the poems in *The Wild Iris* progress chronologically from spring to fall and from morning to evening (and implicitly from birth to death as the flowers bloom and fade). Within this framework, Glück has crafted an intricately woven drama in which the protagonist[28] – a woman who is both a gardener and a poet – wrestles with the silence of God as manifested in his refusal to speak directly to her and also in his refusal to intervene in her garden's inexorable journey toward death – the same death that bends the trees of "Autumnal" and lowers the head of the bull in "Brooding Likeness." The poems in the poet-gardener's voice

take the form of prayers addressed to this God who will not speak to her (these prayers are all titled "Matins" in the first half of the volume and "Vespers" in the second half, reinforcing the morning-to-evening movement). However, the belligerent withdrawal practiced by Glück's earlier speakers in response to similarly painful relationships comes under sharp criticism in this volume; both God himself and the flowers in the garden also speak, and in doing so challenge, encourage, and join with the poet-gardener as she grapples with this wound.[29] Under their reprimands and exhortations, the woman who longs for God's voice must learn to respond with something other than her own defensive silence.

In one respect, then, by focusing on the struggles of a poet confronting death and loss, this volume functions metapoetically as an examination and critique of the volumes that precede it. God's silence – his refusal to communicate as well as to intervene – in some sense embodies or undergirds all the other wounds that permeate Glück's work.[30] It is God, after all, who is responsible for the "prefigured burning of the yield" that frames "Autumnal" and for the proofs of "birth and death" that turn the speaker of "Parodos" to stone.[31] His distance is the original wound, though Glück uses a Judeo-Christian image of God here more metaphorically than literally. That is, the volume is not concerned with God as an actual being, but rather with the idea of God as a necessary device for this drama. Again her comments on Eliot prove illuminating. In examining the arc of Eliot's work, from pre- to post-conversion, Glück explains the emergence of God as an inevitable development resulting from the need for communion: "What has driven [his] poems from the first [i.e. prior to his conversion] is terror and need of the understandable other. When the terror becomes unbearable, the other becomes god" (*Proofs* 22). Her explanation of

Eliot's turning (regardless of its accuracy for Eliot) suggests that perhaps she herself turns to the figure of God in *The Wild Iris* because it provides a safe means to confront the terror that underlies her work – terror at the inescapable prospect of loss – and to re-examine what has driven *her* poems from the first. The dialogue between the poet-gardener and her God in fact glosses, in some form, nearly all of the issues raised in the first half of this chapter concerning the wounds of loss and death. Perhaps by displacing the wounds from human relationships onto the relationship with an imagined divine, the poet can evaluate and critique her own responses with less emotional or interpersonal risk; the struggle is played out on the page, but still played at a distance.[32]

The result is a volume in which the belligerent silence of cold stone yields to more vulnerable speech for both protagonist and poet. In *The Wild Iris*, Glück incorporates multivocality, along with shifts in syntax, diction, line length, and even stanza length, in order to break her own silence. She announces this transformation immediately in the volume's first poem (also the title poem), providing both a retrospective of her earlier work and a preview of this volume. "The Wild Iris" opens with a declaration: "At the end of my suffering / there was a door" (1), says the newly blossomed flower, signaling the shift. Its suffering encompasses the "terrible" period when the iris "survive[d] / as consciousness / buried in the dark earth." Literally the time the bulb spent buried under winter's frozen ground, this image suggests a kind of living death in which one is divorced from life yet still aware of it. In many ways it characterizes Glück's earlier poetry; the buried consciousness parallels the still, silent stone and the woman turned statue and the bull with his lowered

head. Out of this realm of the living dead, the iris emerges into a new life – marked, significantly, by the recovery of voice:

> I tell you I could speak again: whatever
> returns from oblivion returns
> to find a voice:
>
> from the center of my life came
> a great fountain, deep blue
> shadows on azure seawater.

This new voice is one of triumphant beauty and abundance, as suggested by the rich colors[33] and the "great fountain" that pours forth. The iris, in the rebirth of spring, has broken its long silence.[34]

Using this move from silence to voice as one of its central metaphors, the volume charts a similar journey for the poet-gardener, though as her prayers attest, her transformation is fraught with far more struggle than the iris'. One of the earliest prayer poems, "Matins: Forgive me if I say I love you,"[35] clarifies the root of her conflict:

> Matins
>
> Forgive me if I say I love you: the powerful
> are always lied to since the weak are always
> driven by panic. I cannot love
> what I can't conceive, and you disclose
> virtually nothing: are you like the hawthorn tree,
> always the same thing in the same place,
> or are you more the foxglove, inconsistent, first springing up
> a pink spike on the slope behind the daisies,
> and the next year, purple in the rose garden? You must see
> it is useless to us, this silence that promotes belief
> you must be all things, the foxglove and the hawthorn tree,
> the vulnerable rose and tough daisy – we are left to think
> you couldn't possibly exist. Is this what you mean us to think, does this explain
> the silence of the morning,
> the crickets not yet rubbing their wings, the cats

not fighting in the yard? (12)

The source of the wound in this case is God's silence; he "disclose[s] / virtually nothing" and so the speaker has no way to identify him, no way to be certain even that he exists. Silence, at least for most of Glück's speakers, signifies rejection or manipulation; this speaker reads the silence of God in the same terms; he has closed himself off to her, leaving her with no invitation to touch him. In this respect, God here resembles the father of "Paradise," embodied in the cold stone of his grave, who "showed contempt for emotion." Against the emptiness, she craves some sign to substantiate her belief in this being and enable her to love him honestly – to enter communion.

But instead of confirmation, she finds only "the silence of the morning" that stands as a scar marking the distance between herself and God. And the garden itself, the place she turns for a sign, becomes a mark of that distance as God's silence manifests itself not only in his refusal to speak directly to her, but also in his failure to redeem her garden from its impending death. "[W]hy would you wound me, why would you want me / desolate in the end. . . ," she asks desperately in one of her evening prayers as she sees that this God who controls life "mean[s] to take it away, each flower, each connection with the earth" that she has sought to foster ("Vespers: I know what you planned" 52). Her Vermont garden becomes a source of terror because every attempt to foster life in there ends in failure. Her fig tree's inability to survive the short summers ("Vespers: Once I believed in you") and the bleak tomato harvest caused by the rains and the cold weather ("Vespers: In your extended absence") both reinforce for her the withdrawal of God. Instead of this endless cycle of defeat, the petitioner wants "to stay as I was, / still as the world is never still" (33) in the

time *before* things bud and begin their journey toward death.[36] God ought to break his silence, proving his existence by breaking death's hold on her garden.

The emptiness this woman confronts, however, reaches beyond the barrenness of the garden to the barrenness of human relationships, which she also lays at God's feet in "Matins: What is my heart to you" (26). In that prayer, she accuses God of placing her in a double bind, asking,

> . . . how can I live
> in colonies, as you prefer, if you impose
> a quarantine of affliction, dividing me
> from healthy members of my own tribe . . . .

This prayer implies that it is God who has lowered the head of the bull and bent the mother over the grave, cutting them off from the world. He treats her as far less than the flowers of the garden, whom he allows to be together even in sickness so that "the sick rose" is able to "wave its sociable / [aphid-]infested leaves in / the faces of the other roses" and somehow share its wounds. In contrast, he confines her to a life of alienation, forces her to bear her wounds by stripping herself of all connection, all companionship. The speaker's response to the isolation she believes God has inflicted on her is, as in earlier poems, further withdrawal; she asks God not to alleviate her solitude but to "alleviate / at least my guilt; lift / the stigma of isolation" so that she can escape the brokenness if not the barrenness. She longs to retreat back into the world before birth where she can become "first / being that would never die" and so never confront the wounds being human forces her to bear.

Unable to either retreat or mold this intransigent God to her demands, the poet-gardener attempts, in "Matins: I see it is with you" (13), to practice the same belligerent silence that characterizes many of Glück's earlier poems. In the face of God's refusal to

speak "in the personal way" that she longs for and offer some indication that he has "the least concern" for her struggle, the speaker resigns herself and turns away:

> . . . . I am
> at fault, at fault, I asked you
> to be human – I am no needier
> than other people. But the absence
> of all feeling, of the least
> concern for me – I might as well go on
> addressing the birches,
> as in my former life: let them
> bury me with the Romantics,
> their pointed yellow leaves
> falling and covering me.

Despite the speaker's apparent acceptance of blame ("I am at fault"), the tone here is one of accusation and retribution. She begins by coldly declaring "I see it is with you as with the birches," and implying that it was in fact *not* too much to ask this God to "be human" and enter into relationship with her. In the absence of his response, she turns her back, much the way the child turns his face away from the mother in "Children Coming Home From School," projecting a self-sufficient disavowal of her need for communion.

But unlike Glück's earlier poems, these prayers do not sustain that disavowal, thematically, rhetorically, or formally. At the same time that she attempts to protect herself and punish God for his absence, the poet-gardener speaks in *prayers*, addressing him over and over and pleading for communion. Moreover, the structure and language of these prayers offer Glück's readers more access to the woman who utters them. For instance, "Matins: Forgive me," quoted in full earlier, begins with an accusation – God is at fault here for not disclosing himself. But instead of retreating into a punishing, protective silence, the speaker moves out into language that is both more emotional and more tentative than

anything seen in her earlier work. As in most of the prayers, the terse phrasing that typically seals off Glück's speakers gives way to extended sentences that open up doubt, hesitation, and possibility. In a sentence that continues for seven lines and tests multiple possibilities, this woman who cannot conceive of God attempts to locate an image of him. He may be foxglove or hawthorn, rose or daisy, and we as readers are permitted to observe, and even join in her confusion.

Reinforcing the communicative nature of these extended sentences, the prayers themselves often occur in one long strophe, as this one does, as if the speaker takes a deep breath and lets everything out at once. This openness becomes apparent in Glück's language, as well – language that speaks clearly of uncertainty and struggle. The bare, unemotional diction that conceals the internal conflicts of earlier speakers behind graven images gives way; we encounter speakers (both the woman and the flowers) who openly admit their "panic," "torment," "grief," "suffering," "need," "desire," "cries," "guilt," "terror," and even occasionally "joy." Such language renders the poems far more emotionally vulnerable than a piece of wood or stone; their speakers openly desire, even beg for, communion. God may be silent, but this woman speaks with what for Glück is almost an abundance of words joined together in a fluid whole rather than broken off at every turn.

At the same time, in their longing for communion, these prayers actively search for a different response to the wounds that plague them – a response that would allow the bull to raise his head and cease practicing that controlled revenge. Most of the prayers contain questions that the speaker cannot seem to answer. Though questions do occasionally appear in Glück's earlier work, they are largely rhetorical there, neither asking for nor accepting an

answer. For example, "Mock Orange," discussed earlier, ends with two questions: "How can I rest? / How can I be content / when there is still / that odor in the world?" The answer, obviously, is that the speaker *can't* be content; the questions close down rather than invite speculation. Similarly, the question of "From the Japanese" which begins this chapter is answered immediately in the poem itself: "Why love what you will lose? / There is nothing else to love." The questions asked by the poet-gardener in *The Wild Iris*, however, represent a genuine search, at least on the part of the speaker. When the poet-gardener looks for a meaning to "the silence of the morning," she does so out of conflict and uncertainty; she does not in fact know whether the silence signals God's rejection of her and desire to torment her into submission.

Across the volume, these questions ultimately become the means of exploring an alternative response to loss and pain. The poet-gardener, leaving behind her belligerent silence, tests other possibilities much the way she tests images of God in "Matins: Forgive me if I lied," offering them up to this distant father in the hope of some affirmation that this new, more vulnerable path is the right one. And the act of open questioning here is itself part of that vulnerability. "Matins: You want to know how I spend my time," which describes the poet-gardener looking for a four-leaf clover, again as a sign of hope, ends with such a searching question. Though her search proves fruitless, so that at the end of the prayer her hands are still empty, she transforms that emptiness into a question and asks, "[W]as the point always / to continue without a sign?" (25). In doing so, she voices the possibility, unavailable to Glück's earlier speakers, of moving beyond the hardened stoicism that stares pointedly at the ground.

That possibility becomes clearest, perhaps, in "Vespers: End of August" (56). As her garden dies, she finds herself lost in despair at God's withdrawal from the world manifested in the coming fall. She has become "like / an old woman wearing / sweaters in summer," looking at the late-blooming plants and asking, "why / start anything / so close to the end?" Again death and loss stand as the inescapable circumstances of life, and the poet-gardener's automatic response is to look down and reject the world that is doomed to fail her. But as she sees "tomatoes that will never ripen, lilies /winter will kill, that won't / come back in spring," she finds herself confronting another way of being, one that does not retreat into stone or lower its destructive head. This continued effort at life in the midst of certain death raises the critical question:

> are you saying I can
> flourish, having
> no hope
> of enduring? Blaze of the red cheek, glory
> of the open throat, white,
> spotted with crimson.

Against the desire to "become like stone" and bare herself in order to bear the world's grief, this question, and the garden that provokes it, offers the possibility of living in a kind of open communion that recognizes loss and grief but still chooses to live. One can, these tomatoes and lilies seem to suggest, actually flourish rather than merely survive in vengeful resistance. The prayer's final image of the bleeding, open flower reinforces the paradoxical coexistence of joy and grief and becomes the alternative to the statue with her "thighs cemented shut."

The presence of God's voice answering the poet-gardener's prayers further mediates her attempt at accusation and withdrawal as he alternately encourages and forces her into

that alternate stance and increases the communion between them. Where earlier poems keep the wounding party – lover, father, sister – firmly silenced outside the bounds of the poem, *The Wild Iris* gives voice not only to the victim but to the accused; God responds *to* his petitioner. As he speaks, he belies the poet-gardener's accusations and undermines her position, revealing her solipsism as well as the role she plays in her own pain. At times tender and loving, at times impatient, at times bored or angered, this God-father consistently refuses to allow the poet-gardener to lower her head and remain buried in her wounds. And in chastising her for her selfishness, her refusal to listen, and her *self*-imposed isolation, the voice of God critiques not only this particular woman, but humanity in general (he often refers to "yourselves" to indicate the plurality of his address), and implicitly to many of Glück's earlier speakers. This God often condemns gestures or positions that closely parallel those described in the previous section.

In "Clear Morning" (7-8), the first poem in his voice, God explains his own position in the face of the poet's renewed despair over the absence of any concrete sign of his presence:

> I've watched you long enough,
> I can speak to you any way I like –
>
> I've submitted to your preferences, observing patiently
> the things you love, speaking
>
> through vehicles only, in
> details of earth, as you prefer,
>
> tendrils
> of blue clematis, light
>
> of early evening –
> you would never accept

> a voice like mine, indifferent
> to all the objects you busily name. . . .

The fault, God explains, lies not in his refusal to speak, as the poet-gardener claims, but in her (and in *our*)[37] refusal to accept his voice. God presents himself as one who has attempted repeatedly to communicate, even altering his own voice to fit her desires and, as he says later in the poem, "indulg[ing] [her] limitations." He has attempted to use the tangible world to make his silences speak, but that attempt has failed. He spoke through those objects "thinking matter could not absorb [her] gaze forever," and that she could be weaned away from the outward sign and learn his voice. But instead she stubbornly clings to the signs, searching for four-leaf clovers and reading the death of her garden as proof of his indifference. Despite the impatience of the opening line ("I can speak to you any way I like"), God's words carry the tone of a tender but frustrated parent who has sought again and again to reach out to this child who refuses to accept him on his own terms. And like "The Wild Iris," "Clear Morning" ends with an image of transformation – this father will no longer suffer his petitioner's deafness. Instead, he tells her, "I am prepared now to force / clarity upon you"; she must learn to accept his voice – to live out the possibilities her questions, described earlier, suggest.

The clarity God wants for her begins with a truer understanding of the problem itself. According to God, the wound that separates him from the petitioner does not result from his judgment on her, as her prayers imply. It results from her own desires, as God makes clear in poems such as "End of Winter" and "Early Darkness." In "End of Winter"

(10) he emphasizes that *she* chose the separation that has engendered the silence between them:

> You wanted to be born; I let you be born. . . .
>
> . . . wanting
> to express yourselves
>
> all brilliance, all vivacity
>
> never thinking
> this [birth] would cost you anything,
> never imagining the sound of my voice
> as anything but part of you –
>
> you won't hear it in the other world,
> not clearly again. . . .

He forces the speaker to re-evaluate her insistence that birth is a sentence of condemnation imposed by God to mark the beginning of a life of loss and separation. According to his version, the exile she experiences is the consequence of a chosen independence, not a punishment or an act of revenge. Birth becomes the manifestation of our desire for self-expression – the need Glück herself describes to "finish our own sentences."

In "Early Darkness" (45), he makes the same point about our isolation from one another, relocating the source of the wound. Where many of Glück's earlier speakers withdrew from others out of a sense that the intimacy itself wrought the wound, God explains, "You are not suffering because you touched each other / but because you were born, / because you *required* life / separate from me" (emphasis mine). The wall of silence Glück's speakers erect to protect and punish is misguided; they blame one another for wounds that belong to the humanity they chose. The poems represent, in effect, another version of Shakespeare's: "The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars but in our selves."[38]

At the same time, God acknowledges, in "End of Winter" and elsewhere, that the sense of separation itself is real. In the poem's final lines he explains that once we made our choice to live apart from him, his voice was replaced by the "persistent echoing / in all sound that means good-bye, good-bye – // the one continuous line / that binds us to each other." Our relationships, as many of Glück's earlier poems attest, are marked by pain, loss, and emptiness. And that separation surfaces structurally in these poems as they formally enact the broken communication between human and divine. Unlike the poet-gardener, God speaks in short strophes (even for Glück), often uttering only two or three lines, or even just one line, at a time so that there is literally more silence in his voice. But the silences in God's speech, I would argue, are more often suggestive rather than vindictive as in Glück's earlier poems. In contrast to those poems, and even to the poet-gardener's prayers, in which the white space *surrounds* the speaker's words, almost as a protective barrier, the extremely short strophes here allow that silent space to *permeate* the poems, effectively opening them up and inviting one to "read between the lines," so to speak.

Glück's use of punctuation increases this sense of suggestiveness. God's strophes are rarely end-stopped, and when punctuation does appear at the end of a line it is more often a comma or a dash rather than a period, inviting the reader to continue rather than cutting her off abruptly. The dashes in particular create the impression of pregnant incompleteness, drawing on "the power of ruins" that Glück finds so powerful because they "inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied" (*PT* 73).[39] One senses, hearing God speak, not only that there is

always more to each thought, but also that we are invited to probe it and listen for it. It is the voice of wisdom.

That wisdom leads, once the poet-gardener begins to see her wounds more honestly, to a response beyond controlled revenge. God's forced clarity encompasses not only her perception of the wounds, but also her own childish responses to them. His indictment of the vindictive silence that marks this petitioner, as well as many of Glück's other speakers, is sharpest in "April" (20). In that poem, he begins by mimicking the poet-gardener's cry: "*No one's despair is like my despair*."[40] That self-pitying, self-centered proclamation marks human beings as unfit for creation because in their "despair" they willfully cut themselves off from one another:

> You have no place in this garden
> thinking such things, producing
> tiresome outward signs; the man
> pointedly weeding an entire forest,
> the woman limping, refusing to change clothes
> or wash her hair.

Wallowing in their grief, the man and woman (the poet-gardener and her husband or, alternately, Adam and Eve in post-lapsarian Eden[41]) retreat into pointed solitude and implicitly blame each other for the pain.

To God, such attitudes are not only wrong, they are "tiresome," and as in "Clear Morning" he is impatient with this human blindness. Instead of laying blame and drawing apart, we should recognize that the wounds we experience bind us together, identifying us for one another as well as for God:

> . . . I mean you to know
> I expected better of two creatures
> who were given minds: if not

> that you would actually care for each other
> at least that you would understand
> grief is distributed
> between you, among all your kind, for me
> to know you, as deep blue
> marks the wild scilla, white
> the wood violet.

The need to meet pain with anger and become like stone, evident throughout Glück's poetry, appears, through God's eyes, not as a necessary means of bearing grief but as a petulant waste of time, akin to withdrawing from one another because of the color of one's hair or eyes.

God turns, in the final lines of this poem, to the flowers as an alternative to the poet-gardener's persistent rebellion, and it is the flowers who form the third voice, or set of voices, in the drama this volume plays out. The scilla God alludes to, who are able to accept themselves as they are born, also mock human selfishness – even more bluntly – in "Scilla" (14):

> Not I, you idiot, not self, but we, we – waves
> of sky blue like
> a critique of heaven: why
> do you treasure your voice
> when to be one thing
> is to be next to nothing?
> Why do you look up? To hear
> an echo like the voice
> of a god? You are all the same to us,
> solitary, standing above us, planning
> your silly lives. . . .

The flowers that themselves form a natural community mock the self-centeredness of this individual woman who is loathe to surrender her own solitary voice and rejects communion with her own kind in order to demand some "higher" vocation that allows her to speak with,

and for, God. In asking "why do you treasure your own voice?" these flowers challenge the very premise Glück sets up for her poetry – the need to finish her own sentences. The scilla, in their communal wisdom, can only mock such fierce insistence on "I," and the constant search for communion with the divine that seems to accompany it.

In "Witchgrass" (22-23), the mockery turns into sharp, bitter condemnation that exposes the very source of the wound that drives Glück's speakers. As an apparent garden weed, the witchgrass too has been subjected to the gardener's controlled revenge, but it recognizes that that revenge is directed not against itself but against "Something / [that] comes into the world unwelcome / calling disorder, disorder – " (22) – that is, against the uncontrollable. Again, the problem is not, as God says, that "you touched each other." The more fundamental problem is that we live in a world of chaos we cannot control – chaos that manifests itself often through broken relationships. The near-obsessive control that many of Glück's speakers fight for through their silent retributions are, according to the witchgrass, merely displaced attempts to keep that larger chaos at bay. The hated weed explains to this poet-gardener:

> I'm not the enemy.
> Only a ruse to ignore
> what you see happening
> right here in this bed,
> a little paradigm
> of failure. One of your precious flowers
> dies here almost every day
> and you can't rest until
> you attack the cause, meaning
> whatever is left, whatever
> happens to be sturdier than your personal passion –
>
> It was not meant
> to last forever in the real world.

> But why admit that, when you can go on
> doing what you always do,
> mourning and laying blame,
> always the two together.

Like God, the witchgrass rebukes this woman for her inability to accept the human condition. Unable to escape the temporality of life and the inevitability of loss, she chooses to rail against it and take out her pain on "whatever is left," whether it be weeds in the garden or a sister who survives death or a lover who lies by her side and covers her mouth with his. This poem exposes the gestures of "mourning and laying blame" that underlie many of the poems discussed earlier, including "Parodos" and "Brooding Likeness," as acts of selfish hypocrisy.

But not all of the flowers stand as accusers. A number of them experience longings similar to those expressed in the poet-gardener's prayers and so become her companions in this struggle. The white rose that grows next to her house, for example, makes the same demands of the woman that she makes of God: "Explain my life to me, you who make no sign, / though I call out to you in the night" (47). Similarly, the gold lily, who speaks near the end of the volume, as fall – and its own death – approaches, pleads for a sign of salvation:

> . . . I call you,
> father and master: all around,
> my companions are failing, thinking
> you do not see. How
> can they know you see
> unless you save us?
> In the summer twilight, are you
> close enough to hear
> your child's terror? (62)

Unlike most of the other flowers, who speak either to the poet-gardener herself or to humanity in a more general way, this flower cries out, like the woman, to its father, and its longings parallel hers – the hope, in the face of inevitable loss and grief, for some chance to transcend this cycle of birth and death.

Most importantly, however, these flowers provide the poet-gardener with an alternative – a way to accept the terms of her life and respond not with manipulative silence but with a joy that "flourishes with no hope of enduring." In such a life, both speech and silence can function as forms of communion rather than isolation. God himself suggests as much in "Lullaby," also spoken near the end of the volume, when he sings softly and comfortingly to his child and explains, "You must be taught to love me. Human beings must be / taught to love / silence and darkness" (58). We must not, that is, fear loss and allow it to drive us to revenge. Such a relationship, in which one can love the absence as much as the presence and accept the inevitable temporality of life, reflects a vastly different aesthetic than the woman and the trees of "Autumnal" who bare themselves and bend inward toward the earth.

That aesthetic is revealed poignantly in the voice of the red poppy, who worships in the midst of its own brokenness, knowing that having "open[ed] once, [it] would never / open again" ("The Red Poppy" 29). Lacking "mind" (perhaps the very thing that drives the poet-gardener into her withdrawal or causes her to search endlessly for signs), the poppy relies on emotions. Its feelings lead it to "open / for [the sun], showing him / the fire of my own heart." Where the poet-gardener has God, this flower sees the sun as its "lord in heaven" and lives to meet the "fire" of its presence with "the fire of [its] own heart." In its

act of worship, the poppy compares itself to the poet-gardener above it, explaining, "[I]n truth / I am speaking now / the way you do. I speak / because I am shattered." Brokenness, the flower suggests, can be a prelude to communion rather than revenge, and one can rejoice even without permanence.

The volume's final poem, "The White Lilies" (63), manifests this communion most clearly, and in doing so completes the transformation from dark silence to jubilant life begun by the wild iris. Where the gold lily, described earlier, reflects the poet-gardener's own anguish, the white lilies, in their common voice, reflect the joyful communion her questions reach toward. Watching a couple – the poet-gardener and her husband or, conversely, Adam and Eve – plant their garden together, the lilies see the way "the evening turns / cold with their terror: it / could all end, it is capable of devastation." For this couple, this paradise that God has given them is "like / a bed of starts" in its beauty, but it is also a source of grief because it contains the seeds (literally) of its own destruction. Paradise, it also exists in time and is so subject to loss and death.

But despite the fact that "all / can be lost," the white lilies do not wrap themselves in despair, harden themselves against the world, or desperately entreat God to save them from that loss. Instead, they freely open themselves to the moment and rejoice:

> Hush, beloved. It doesn't matter to me
> how many summers I live to return:
> this one summer we have entered eternity.
> I felt your two hands
> bury me to release its splendor.

In addressing the poet-gardener, with all her fears, as "beloved," the lilies enact a soothing communion with her, directing her gaze away from the future, with its uncertainty and all

too certain loss, and toward this moment in which they are able to share "splendor." In linking this splendor to the act of burial that necessarily precedes it, this final poem emphasizes the same cycle of death and resurrection introduced in "The Wild Iris" in which the flower returns from darkness to find a voice. Loss and uncertainty, these lilies suggest, are certainly part of life – the poet-gardener cannot escape their inevitability. But she need not live "like an old woman wearing sweaters in summer," always anticipating the loss and hardening herself against it. The white lilies thus offer a new emblem for Glück's poetry, displacing the lowered head of the bull with the uplifted blossoms. One can speak, *The Wild Iris* declares, with joy in the moment and rest in a silence that invites communion rather than excludes contact.

As this discussion has suggested, the impact of this new emblem emerges formally in these poems in their expanded emotional range (particularly in the diction of the praying woman who struggles against the inevitable), as well as in the dialogue among speakers, the questions that attempt to explore rather than deride, and the silences that permeate them suggestively rather than defensively. Structurally, the volume seems to reach for the kind of celebratory splendor the white lilies speak of. Nevertheless, despite these gestures, the text is still marked by the presence of a poet who retains firm control. Although the poet-gardener struggles desperately in these poems, pleading for a sign from God, groping for the kind of calm she sees in the flowers, we see no evidence of difficulty for the poet chronicling that desperation. The simple fact that Glück writes in the voice of God, as well as in the voices of flowers who also judge and reprove, implies that while the poet-gardener may ask genuine questions, the poet already knows the answers, and she is able to speak in

God's voice to declare them. Those answers may have come via her own past struggles, but if so, they remain hidden from the reader.

Because of the level of formal polish and control evident across the volume, then, these remain in many respects poems of "exclusion" rather than "invitation." As the essays cited earlier suggest, Glück locates the invitation in Eliot's poetry in his protagonists' need to be understood, to express themselves in language that forges communion. That need effectively engages the reader as one who might ultimately understand; the reader becomes the listener the poem "craves," to use Glück's term. One might say, then, that as Glück reads it, the relationship between Prufrock and the women who come and go parallels the relationship between the poet and his readers. In *The Wild Iris*, however, the protagonist craves not so much to be understood as to understand. She does not want God to listen to what she is agonizingly trying to express; she wants him to bow to her demands. Her struggles are always with *his* voice, never with her own, and the relationship between the poet-gardener and God never parallels Glück's own efforts to communicate with her readers (though they may reflect her desire to command us). The poet-gardener wants contact, and we are permitted to watch her, perhaps even see ourselves in her place, but since she does not need contact with us, we remain a distant audience. The result is poetry that, despite its emotional vulnerability, does not need readers in the ways Glück suggests poetry of invitation does because it does not struggle to speak to us.

Glück's engagement with silence, then, never takes her into a struggle with language itself. There is no sense, even in the dashes and breaks in God's speech, that the poet has had to wrestle with language in order to wrap words around a troubling silence, nor is there

any indication that she needs to make her readers hear or draw us into understanding. No mistaken turnings, faltering sentences, or delayed ideas suggest any hesitation on Glück's part; *The Wild Iris* may represent a self-reflective critique of her earlier poetry, but the process that lead to that critique remains firmly outside this drama. The language and structure of these poems replace the hardened silences of earlier volumes with more access to the speakers themselves, but something still remains out of reach, guarded by the careful control of the poet who will not allow the tension between language and silence to play out on the page. Ultimately the volume chronicles, rather than enacts, a struggle, and though it does so in ways that are far less vindictive and brooding than earlier poems, a wall of silence remains.

Conclusion

The absence of any explicit engagement with language itself is perhaps the most forceful issue separating Glück from the other three poets in this study. The "aporia of art" in her case arises from refusal, and perhaps aesthetic preference, rather from any inherent limitation of language itself. Throughout her career, Glück has crafted poetry out of deliberate silence – primarily on an exclusionary silence that renders her poems, in her own words, "words inscribed in rack or caught in amber." For both the speakers and the poet behind them, silence forms the first line of defense against human intimacy, and the loss that inevitably accompanies such intimacy. Yet despite their controlled surfaces, these are poems that in their very silence demand attention and so reach out for contact even as they deny its approach. In her more recent work, Glück attempts to move past that denial,

transforming their belligerent exclusions into more emotionally open invitations. *The Wild Iris*, a complex and beautiful volume in its own right, also represents a profound re-examination of the premises underlying Glück's earlier work. As she confronts both her own silences and the silences that emerge from the presence of death and loss in the world, she seeks to alter the tone of her poetry and to "love silence" in a way that creates communion rather than distance.

At the same time, however, that communion remains circumscribed because the formal polish of these poems precludes the explicit need for a listener despite their intimate vulnerability. Though the edges of the poems soften and, as in each of these poets, an array of voices speak, the formal structures remain largely intact. Because silence still occurs when "I" does not speak, rather than when words fail, Glück remains a master of language and, unlike the poets described in subsequent chapters, does not attempt to teach us to hear differently – to hear the silences *within* language. She does not seem to need new poetic structures in the same ways they do; the formal developments suggested by *The Wild Iris* imply only a need to soften or open the structures she has. Like the bull with its lowered head, she wants our attention, not our responsive transformation, and she uses silence to command it.

Endnotes

[1] I am indebted to poet Douglas Van Gundy for the phrasing here; it was he who first suggested, as I explained this project to him, the image of wrapping silence in language versus wrapping language in silence.

[2] Quotations from *Firstborn*, *The House on the Marshland*, *Descending Figure*, and *The Triumph of Achilles* are all taken from *The First Four Books of Poems* (abbreviated *First*) unless otherwise noted.

[3] This acknowledgment of inescapable loss, of course, is nothing new, and one can readily look at poetry across the centuries to find similar sentiments – from the sonnet tradition and its awareness of the fragility of love to Robert Frost's persistent concern with the presence of death. What concerns me in examining Glück's poetry in light of this issue is not the newness of the topic, but rather the ways in which her responses to this threat are wrapped in silence, and the ways in which those responses impinge on the formal as well as the thematic character of her work.

[4] Jeanne Kammer, in her essay "The Art of Silence and the Forms of Women's Poetry," examines the ways in which women's poetry is frequently built on silence, much the way Glück's is. In that essay, she argues that those silences function to evoke indirectly what women are not allowed or encouraged to speak of. The silences she examines invite readers in to explore the poetry more deeply because they suggest a vast territory under the surface of the poem. She reads the indirection in Dickinson, H. D., and Moore in terms of its subversive qualities, and in that sense marks silence as a "survival mechanism" in women's poetry. But, as I argue, Glück's silences seem to me much less subtle; instead, they are almost violently decisive and exclusive, functioning more as a wall than as an invitation. Hence, though she may share techniques with the poets Kammer examines, those silences do not necessarily function in the ways Kammer delineates.

[5] Interestingly, Glück herself rather indirectly makes the same point in her essay "The Idea of Courage." The essay critiques the notion that poets, in writing about 'personal experiences,' are somehow courageous; for Glück such 'courage' is an illusion because of the distance between the poet and the ideas she is writing about, and between the poet and the reader. It is the essay's final statement, however, that is most relevant here. In closing, Glück declares, "For poets, speech and fluency seem less an act of courage than a state of grace. The intervals of silence, however, require a stoicism very like courage; of these no reader is aware" (*Proofs* 27). Whether or not readers are aware of the struggles with silence in other poets, the stony hardness and control Glück has developed certainly work to prevent such struggle from surfacing in her own work.

[6] Certainly, Glück's style changes in notable ways across these first five volumes as her encounters with silence shift and her poetry matures, as both Glück and her critics have noted. The abrasive tone of *Firstborn* yields to the "infamous calm" (Dodd 159) of *The House on the Marshland*, and shifts again in later volumes. Line breaks and syntax shift

from volume to volume, the poems move in and out of a reliance on myth, and more and more extended sequences emerge as her poetry develops. Glück herself notes a number of conscious stylistic shifts in "The Education of a Poet": "Each book I've written has culminated in a conscious diagnostic act, a swearing off. After *Firstborn*, the task was to make latinate suspended sentences, and to figure out a way to end a poem without sealing it shut. Since the last poems of *The House on the Marshland* were written concurrently with the earliest poems of *Descending Figure*, the latter seems more difficult to speak of independently. I wanted to learn a longer breath. And to write without the nouns central to that second book; I had done about as much as I could with moon and pond. What I wanted, after *Descending Figure*, was a poem less perfect, less stately; I wanted a present tense that referred to something more fluent than the archetypal present. And then, obviously, the task was to write something less overtly heroic, something devoid of mythic reference" (*Proofs* 17-18) However, I argue that despite these shifts, silence continues to function in these poems in much the same terms, as a protective weapon shielding poet and speaker from the pain of intimacy. As a result, my focus here is primarily on the more marked shift that occurs with *The Wild Iris*, in which the stoic's stance begins to give way. And, as I explain in later sections, I see this shift linked directly to the move toward multivocal sequences (along with other micro-level changes). For a fuller discussions of the modulations evident in Glück's earlier work, see in particular Dodd, Keller, and Matson.

[7] Rae Armantrout, in her essay "Poetic Silence," describes what she calls "the types of human silence" (31). She lists six, but two in particular are relevant here:

> The silence which waits for an unknown response. Picard says of a poet he admires, "He leaves a clear space into which another can speak. He makes the subject his own, but does not keep it entirely for himself. Such poetry is therefore not fixed and rigid, but has a hovering quality ready at any moment to belong to another."
>
> There is the silence that occurs when someone you have been considering from a distance turns and stops you with a look. (32)

In her essays, Glück appears to value the former, but her poetry more often enacts the latter.

[8] Even "I was born," which in another context might suggest family, or at least maternal ties, here seems a stark, solitary occurrence.

[9] For a fuller reading of both this particular sequence and the way anorexia operates as poetic form in Glück's work, I would refer the reader to Keller's and McMahon's essays, and to Dodd's study. In addition, Calvin Bedient's review of *Ararat* ("'Man Is Altogether Desire'?. . .") also explores Glück's persistent need to eliminate desire from her speakers' lives and from her poetry, though from a less explicitly feminist perspective.

[10] Interestingly, in her essays Glück continually seeks to distance herself from "feminism," or at least its popularized stereotype. For instance, in "On Stanley Kunitz," she explicitly rejects what she sees as the feminist paradigm regarding the male teacher/female student

narrative. And in "The Forbidden," an essay reviewing the work of Linda McCarriston and Sharon Olds, with brief discussions of Carolyn Forche and Martha Rhodes, Glück mourns the fact that both Olds and McCarriston writer under the "constrictions" imposed on women writers – upholding the innocent victim (who may not ever be entirely innocent for Glück) and "giv[ing] encouraging voice to the life force" (*Proofs* 63). Despite these disavowals of feminist rhetoric, however, Glück's work engages in powerful ways with many of the same issues that concern contemporary feminist theorists, as this essay, along with the work of critics such as Bonds, Dodd, Keller, Matson, and McMahon, demonstrates.

[11] Cristanne Miller, in her forthcoming essay on Marlene Nourbese Philip, performs a similar reading of silence as a source of power in Philip's long poem *Looking For Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence*.

[12] These circumstances have received serious critical attention in the work of scholars such as Elizabeth Dodd, Lynn Keller, and Suzanne Matson, largely in terms of their relationships to and implications for feminist theories, as I noted earlier. Exploring them within the framework I have developed here not only extends the readings of silence in these circumstance, but also provides a needed basis for understanding the shifts that occur in form and tone in Glück's more recent work, which has yet to receive extended critical attention. Since Glück's first two volumes, *Firstborn* and *The House on the Marshland*, have both been the subject of several recent essays concerning these issues, I am focusing my discussion here on *Descending Figure*, *The Triumph of Achilles*, and most fully on *Ararat*.

[13] Suzanne Matson, in her essay "Without Relation: Family and Freedom in the Poetry of Louise Glück," examines the "charged and often dangerous structures of the family" and "the emotionally crippling effects of family and domestic life" that surface in Glück's work in detail.

[14] The image perhaps also evokes God breathing life into humanity, which increases the sense of tenderness and the value of this gesture; nevertheless, even in those terms, God remains the dominant figure and the now living being is full of his breath.

[15] Even when the union is more joyful, as in "Song of Invisible Boundaries," the result is language stripped to its barest structures. Together the lovers in the poem are "changed to a mute couple" able "to speak, in the end, only each other's names, / to speak, as now, not even whole words, / only vowels" (184). Note here as well that *both* the man and the woman are "mute" – in love, each loses the ability to speak. Though Glück most often figures silence as a condition imposed on women, her poetry makes it clear that it can be imposed on, and manipulated by, men as well.

[16] Both Dodd and Matson acknowledge this self-protective aspect of Glück's silences, but both downplay that aspect, Dodd in favor of the aesthetics of anorexia that is inward-directed and focused on perfection, and Matson in favor of the potentially positive elements

of Glück's sense of womanhood. Neither, I think, reads in that silence the kind of power that "Aphrodite," with its rock-hard language of control and advantage, suggests.

[17] While Keller and Dodd both recognize this protective aspect to Glück's silences, both also emphasize its "defensiveness" and ability to protect the speaker over its ability to wound the one against whom it is directed.

[18] In her essay "The Art of Silence and the Forms of Women's Poetry," Jeanne Kammer reads this kind of metaphoric work as one of the primary devices of "silence" or "linguistic compression" that occurs in women's poetry. It is, she notes, more precisely *diaphor*, that is, a metaphor "that produces new meaning by the juxtaposition alone of two (or more) images, each term concrete, their joining unexplained" (157). Unlike the more familiar *epiphor* found in men's poetry, which operates linearly and offers rational parallels between an abstract and a concrete image, diaphor is "rooted in the associational properties of the subconscious mind, its movement is not necessarily linear and does not require syntactic support" (157). As noted, Kammer reads this figure as predominantly female, rising partly out of "habits of privacy, camouflage, and indirection" associated with femininity. Again, though, her reading of this mode of silence positions it as a subversive, covert action that operates defensively; Glück's poem, however, insists on these modes of silence as an offensive as well as a defensive weapon.

[19] Diane S. Bonds, in her essay "Entering Language in Louise Glück's *The House on the Marshland*," offers a richly detailed reading of the blurring between literal and figurative in Glück's poetry by drawing on Margaret Homans' theories about women's writing (*Bearing the Word*).

[20] She is unable to defend herself physically.

[21] She makes the same point, perhaps even more directly, in "Animals" (*Ararat* 48):

> My sister and I
> never became allies,
> never turned on our parents.
> We had
> other obsessions: for example,
> we both felt there were
> too many of us to survive.
>
> We were like animals
> trying to share a dry pasture.
> Between us, one tree, barely
> strong enough to sustain a single life.

[22] As Keller points out, this muteness also frees the older sister from the "duplicity" of womanhood that the younger daughter, dancing to please her family, takes on, echoing the need to separate art and truth from the vulnerable eroticism of the female body.

[23] Despite the temptation to read these poems autobiographically because of the obvious parallels between Glück's primary speaker and the details of her own life, I want to retain the distance between poet and persona here. The poems are obviously drawn from Glück's own family experiences, as the autobiographical details attest, but whether or not they accurately record those experiences is another issue entirely.

[24] The second major focus of the volume is, of course, the father, who has just died. A more detailed examination of his role in the family dynamic appears in the next section of the chapter.

[25] Note here that silence is a weapon used by both mother and son, as well as by the absent father/grandfather, implying that it is not only women who rely on the unsaid for their power.

[26] Or, as subsequent chapters explain, as Philip's and Graham's poems do.

[27] And the presence of God as one of the speakers invokes the sacred as well as the secular implications of the term.

[28] For clarity, I will refer to Glück as the poet and to the speaker of the "Matins" and "Vespers" poems as the poet-gardener, who, like Glück, is a poet living in Vermont with a husband named John, and a son named Noah. Despite the obvious parallels, I again want to resist conflating poet and speaker, particularly because Glück as poet clearly possesses insights and strategies unavailable to her protagonist, as I will make clear in the latter part of this section.

[29] It is important to note that although the poet-gardener, God, and the flowers are all engaged in a loose dialogue with one another, these poems are not set up as a conversation in which one voice clearly hears and responds to the previous one. The speakers do address one another, but often the poet-gardener in particular doesn't seem to hear, at first, the voices speaking to her. The poems form a sequence, but not a tightly interactive conversation.

[30] The presence of God as a figure in this ongoing struggle for Glück is not new to *The Wild Iris*. Several of her earlier poems point to God as one locus of the inevitable wound. It is the presence of God – as God and as lover – that haunts the prioress in *Firstborn's* "The Cell," for instance. God is the one, the speaker acknowledges, who has placed the hump on her back the one who as taken her into the convent and pressed her to guide the nuns under her care. It is his presence she finds in the darkness, covering her: "Alone in all ways, / I can feel the fingers / Stir on me again like bless- / and the bare / Hump mount, tranquil in darkness" (34). God does not speak, but still, he is the one who "mounts her," his fingers

and her hump forming almost a single presence that is "always there in her life." Later, in "Lamentations," it is God who creates the world and longs for connection with his creation, " the world / filled with his radiance, / as though he wanted to be understood" (147). This is the God who reaches out in a voice inaudible to human ears, who creates, with the force of his presence, a "void" that marks his presence yet bars entry. He is the God who, as "Day Without Night" explains, "has no name, whose hand / is invisible: a trick / of moonlight on the dark water." Yet it isn't until *The Wild Iris* that God become *the* central figure in the struggle.

[31] One could also read in God, whom the petitioner repeatedly addresses as "Father," something of the cold, distant father of *Ararat*, and thus explore this volume more specifically in terms of the family dynamic.

[32] That suggestion is strengthened with the publication of *Meadowlands*, which appeared too late to form part of this chapter. *Meadowlands* returns to the realm of the human, and again to the wounds that occur between husband and wife, yet it returns with a different response, both poetically and emotionally, and the pain between this couple, who again bear strong resemblance to Glück and her own husband, appears far less distant than even the poet-gardener's pain in *The Wild Iris*.

[33] The "deep blue shadows" and "azure seawater" here form a marked contrast in particular to the more sterile, ghostly "waters blue and permanent" that hold the drowned children in the opening poem of *Descending Figure* (*First* 105). Where those waters signify death, these carry life, again reinforcing the shift underway in Glück's work.

[34] In a remarkably prescient statement Calvin Bedient, in his review of *Ararat* – which immediately preceded *The Wild Iris* – describes that volume as "a coffin lowered into the ground" ('Man . . ." 217); if *Ararat* is the coffin, *The Wild Iris* marks the resurrection.

[35] For clarity, I will include the first line of these prayers as part of the title, since all are called only either "Matins" or "Vespers" in the text.

[36] Calvin Bedient, in his review of *Descending Figure* ("Birth, Not Death, Is the Hard Loss"), explores this longing in more detail. He says of Glück that "she seems to suffer from a metaphysical amnesia, as if birth had deprived her of her native *gnoss* and left the bewildering nostalgia" (175).

[37] As noted above, the "you" addressed in the poems spoken by God (and by the flowers) extends beyond the poet-gardener and seems to encompass the reader as well as. In this poem, for instance, God talks of "your mouths / small circles of awe" to indicate the breadth of his indictment.

[38] This is not to suggest that the wounds in all of Glück's earlier poems are the fault of the speaker, particularly in the case of girls/women silenced by men. Rather, God's pronouncement in this poem reaches toward the more fundamental loss underlying Glück's

poetry, the condition of death and separation that lowers the bull's head. "End of Winter" and "Early Darkness" complicate the bull's perspective and refuse to allow him to blame the external world or fate and instead force him to see himself as more than a victim acted upon by an unseen hand.

[39] As Chapter 4 makes clear, Graham also relies heavily on dashes, particularly in her more recent poetry, as a means of suggesting fragmentation and incompleteness. Graham's work pushes the gesture farther, however, creating a sense of simultaneity by allowing thoughts to continually interrupt one another so that the poem seems to move tangentially rather than, as in Glück's work, linearly.

[40] The echo of here of Eliot and "April is the cruelest month" is obvious. And the month of April also falls under Taurus, the sign of the bull.

[41] Glück's image here, though brief, in many respects provides a contemporary version of both the Genesis account and Milton's more extensive account in *Paradise Lost*, in which the couple, in their grief and shame, turn on each other.

Chapter 3
Cartographies of Silence:[1]
Re-mapping Poetry in the Work of M. Nourbese Philip

> *Each poem has its own silence. Technique but the discerning of that silence. And composition – how you shape the words around the silence. To understand one's own silence is, therefore, to understand one's words.*
>
> M. Nourbese Philip, "Dis Place"

> *. . . to find the source and sound of our silencing, we must become cartographers of silence, mapping not only the known edges – the boundaries of our inner space – we must be moving beyond the boundary. To take soundings of the deep, where the voice is not one but "the many-voiced one of one voice / ours," polyvocal and many-tongued.*
>
> M. Nourbese Philip, "Dis Place"

As these quotations from a 1994 essay suggest, Canadian Afra-Caribbean poet Marlene Nourbese Philip is intimately concerned with silence and its bearing on language. In the first statement, in particular, she reads silence as the central element in poetry, the first principle around which everything else gathers. And like Louise Glück, she is concerned with the silence of persons – individuals who can not or do not speak. Yet where the silences in Glück's work remain primarily interpersonal and familial, Philip responds to silences that are inescapably cultural and social, linked primarily to the raced, gendered bodies of Afra-Caribbean women and embedded explicitly in a struggle over language. In both her essays and her poetry, Philip confronts directly the silences wrought by the domination of colonial and patriarchal cultures – the silencing of Africans in a Eurocentric world, of women in a male world, of blacks in a white world. And where Glück takes a consistently muted, almost indirect, approach, using her stark language to make the presence of each speaker's silence tangible, Philip's response is an outpouring of language –

emotional, multivocal, multilingual, asyntactic language. She becomes, as she says in *Looking for Livingstone*, a "cartographer of silence."

That cartography involves two separate, though linked, gestures, as the epigraphs above make clear. On the one hand, her poetry works toward a "discerning of that silence," or what the second epigraph calls "mapping the known edges." She shapes her words in order to make the silences she examines palpable and so restore them to history and memory. But at the same time she is also "tak[ing] soundings of the deep" that listen to the voice buried within the silence – a voice that, like the silence itself, is always plural.[2] And in making those twin gestures, her cartography pushes beyond the simple act of drawing boundaries that so dominates Glück's work; Philip explores the territory, and, more importantly, remaps the page as she goes in order to challenge the colonial and patriarchal domination that inscribed the silences. Within that project, as Philip herself notes, quoting African-American jazz trumpeter Miles Davis, "Composition is everything" ("Dis Place" 295); that is, the techniques and structures that Philip deploys in her poetic mapping function both to discern and to give voice to these silences.

Since leaving the legal profession to write full-time in the early 1980s, Philip has published a novel for adolescents, a range of essays, and four volumes of poetry: *Thorns* (1980), *Salmon Courage* (1983), *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989), and *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (1990).[3] As her poetry has developed and her writing engaged the relationship between language and silence more fully, Philip's work has become increasingly experimental, particularly in *She Tries Her Tongue*, *Looking for Livingstone*, and her recent essay "Dis Place The Space Between." Though I will

focus primarily on *She Tries Her Tongue*, in each of these texts Philip writes as a "cartographer of silence," remapping poetry to explore those silences, and in the process undoing the geographic and cultural maps imposed by European male colonizers. Her formal techniques – and specifically the ways she manipulates both language and space – are crucial tools in this process.

At the level of language, Philip creates a multivocal poetry designed to appropriate the English language imposed on Africans in the New World and use it to map both the silencings and the voicings of Afra-Caribbean identity. Where Glück reduces language, Philip multiplies it. In doing so, she incorporates not only Caribbean variants of English along with the standard dialect, but also documentary excerpts from politics, religion, folklore, education, myth, cartography, linguistics, private journals, and science. Moreover, like both Graham and Palmer, Philip repeatedly challenges both grammatical and syntactic patterns, forcing verbs and prepositions to act as nouns and rejecting the sentence patterns of 'standard written English' in favor of both those linked to Caribbean speech and those she invents. At the same time, she literally remaps the page itself in ways that are more explicitly radical and political than the other poets examined here. Her work "take[s] (up) space differently" ("Dis Place" 299) as it displays a conscious attention not only to traditional prosodic elements such as line breaks and line length, but also to the physical position of discourses, lines, and even words in relation to one another on the page. The page becomes a visual canvas on which the words are no longer bound by conventional margins and columns, but instead appear in a carefully arranged collage. Philip's poetry

refuses to "know its place" as that place has been defined by Western European traditions, and instead claims the entire territory of the page as its own. [4]

These two broad formal categories – language and space – provide a useful framework for examining Philip's double-edged confrontations with silence; she manipulates each in order to discern and sound the territory she explores. Though I discuss each category separately here, the two are woven tightly together in Philip's work, and often not only the same poem but the same passage deploys both in tandem to make its point. After all, the colonizers Philip engages used words to map the geographic space, naming territories, countries, and landmarks as a means of exerting cultural control.[5] It is only fitting that in the process of re-mapping the territory, Philip intertwines language and textual space, allowing her form to grow out of and participate in the larger goals of her poetry.

Poet as I-mage Maker

The ways Philip employs language and space in her encounters with silence grow out of her conception of the cultural work of poetry (or any art). In "The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became a Spy," the essay that opens *She Tries Her Tongue*, Philip explains the work of poetry, and all art, in terms of the concept of "i-mage," inflecting the word with the Rastafarian accent on the "i" in part as a way of privileging individual Caribbean identity, even at the level of the word.[6] Though at times i-mage is a somewhat ambiguous term in the essay, we can, I think, still trace its implications. Philip describes the i-mage loosely as "the irreducible essence" of a work of art that, like DNA, shapes and sustains the body of the text. As such, it is closely related to cultural and personal identity;

Philip claims that i-mages can "speak to the essential being of the people among whom and for whom the artist creates. If allowed free expression, these i-mages succeed in altering the way a society perceives itself and, eventually, its collective consciousness" (12). The i-mage of art becomes the image of a culture, making the term a more complex, or at least more encompassing, version of the commonplace notion that a culture's stories mirror its identity.

Given the power and significance of i-mages, the artist, as i-mage-maker, possesses the ability both to reflect her culture back to itself and simultaneously to shape the way that culture perceives itself. Such an ability is particularly critical, Philip argues, for Afro-Caribbean people because the process of colonialism destroyed, or at least seriously damaged, their ability to create their own i-mages. Africans brought to the Caribbean were stripped of their languages, separated from other members of their communities to make communication virtually impossible, and denied many of their traditional forms of artistic expression.[7] When they learned a language it had to be English, and any education they received, before or after slavery ended, drew on Western European cultural and artistic traditions. In Philip's terms,

> The societies that comprise the Caribbean identity may be identified by:
>
> (a) a significant lack of autonomy in the creation and dissemination of i-mages;
>
> (b) opposition by the ruling classes both at home and abroad to the creation of i-mages that challenge their i-mage making powers and the status quo;

(c) restricting of indigenously created i-mages to marginal groups, e.g. reggae and calypso. (13)

The European colonizers controlled the cultural space as much as possible and prevented Afro-Caribbeans from expressing any culture that challenged or deviated from the standards of European civilization. Prevented from creating their own art, and consequently their own i-mages, Afro-Caribbeans, Philip argues, were effectively denied their own identity and were instead always already defined by the dominant culture that surrounded them.[8] And as she further notes, the always already present definition is fundamentally negative and hostile towards the marginalized culture. That negativity becomes piercingly clear in her poem "Meditations on the Declension of Beauty by the Girl with the Flying Cheek-bones." With rhythmic, almost desperate insistence underwritten by accusation, the speaker asks,

If not in yours

In whose

In whose language

Am I

Am I not

Am I I am yours

Am I not I am yours

Am I I am

If not in yours

In whose

In whose language

Am I

If not in yours

Beautiful (*ST* 53)

The speaker must ask the questions because the i-mage imposed by the English colonizers offers no room for beauty in the form of a "woman with a nose broad / as her strength" or a man with "full-moon lips / Carrying the midnight of colour" (53). And though beauty is certainly a physical descriptor in the poem, Philip's mention of the woman's strength coupled with the repetition of "am I / I am," whose Biblical resonance evokes selfhood defined only by its own being, and "I am yours," with its evocation of slavery, implies a more encompassing sense of identity. The poem indicts the European denial of Afro-Caribbean beauty and reads that denial as a key tool in the broader colonial devastation of Afro-Caribbean identity.

In denying Afro-Caribbeans the right to self-definition, colonization imposes voicelessness – the colonized cannot speak for themselves. This voicelessness is even sharper for Afra-Caribbean women, who experience a double colonization as Africans within a European culture and as women within a patriarchal culture. These women are prevented from speaking by the strictures of both race *and* gender. As Carol Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido explain in their introduction to *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*:

> The concept of voicelessness necessarily informs any discussion of Caribbean women and literature. . . . By voicelessness we mean the historical absence of the woman writer's text: the absence of a specifically

> female position on major issues such as slavery, colonialism, decolonization, women's rights and more direct social and cultural issues. By voicelessness we also mean silence: the inability to express a position in the language of the 'master' as well as the textual construction of woman as silent. Voicelessness also denotes articulation that goes unheard. (1)

In claiming voicelessness, in all its forms, as central to Caribbean women's experiences, Davies and Fido describe a situation in which these women are denied the means to express themselves, to themselves and to those who write them out/off.

Such denial implies, to return to Philip's terms, a parallel lack of i-mage control: in this culture, Afra-Caribbean women cannot speak; they can only be spoken about. As the "girl with the flying cheek-bones" points out, the only image available is one that refuses her even the possibility of beauty – physical or otherwise. And, as I explain in more detail in the section titled "Re-Mapping the Page," Philip perceives this denial not only in terms of women's restricted access to language, but also, because of the threat of physical violence, in terms of their restricted access to space: to be an artist, a dancer, a singer, moved a woman outside the sphere of respectability and so opened her to the threat of violence and abuse. This is not to deny the presence of women as artists, and particularly writers, within Caribbean culture.[9] Rather it suggests that if, under colonial domination,[10] Afro-Caribbeans were prevented from creating the art and the i-mages that defined and expressed their culture, that prohibition is doubled for Afra-Caribbean women.

In response, Philip seeks to break that prohibition, challenging Western conceptions of race and gender and redefining Afra-Caribbean female identity.[11] Her poetry attempts to

find a language, in short, in which that identity *is* beautiful. As part of that search, she uses poetic form both to locate the historical silences and voices of that culture *and* to create new i-mages that distance Afra-Caribbean identity from the gestures of colonial and patriarchal control that continually seek to recontain it.

Re-Mapping Language: The Struggle for a Mother Tongue

Language and Colonial Domination

For a writer, "the tangible presentation" (*ST* 14) of the i-mage occurs in language. Philip's formal experimental strategies are thus deeply embedded in the problems that language, and specifically English, poses for a post-colonial woman poet attempting to redefine the i-mages of a culture. But the relationship between word and i-mage is complex; it is not a matter of either simple transmission or simple creation. Instead, according to Philip, "[t]ension is created by the interplay of i-mage and word – i-mage creating word, word giving rise to further i-mage and so on" (14) in dynamic interplay that imbues language with strongly regenerative, even redemptive, power.[12] At the same time, language under the colonial system – specifically in the imposition of English[13] and the censure of native languages – served as a principle mechanism by which the colonizers maintained control over the both the native people and the slaves imported from Africa, as many post-colonial theorists have argued. As Ashcroft, et al. point out in *The Empire Writes Back*, under imperialism "Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth,' 'order,' and 'reality' become established" (7).[14] Such is certainly the case for

Africans brought to the Caribbean. Slaves were often separated from other members of their societies to prevent communication, and consequently rebellion. Those caught speaking any language other than English often incurred serious physical punishment, including having one's tongue cut out. Moreover, teaching English to "ignorant Africans" became part of the process of civilizing them, stripping them of their own native cultures and indoctrinating them into the values and beliefs of Western Europe.[15] To speak proper English was a step toward being beautiful – at least as Europeans defined beauty.

Philip's characterization of the role language played in the process of colonization closely parallels that formulated by Ashcroft et. al, Tiffin and Lawson, and other post-colonial scholars. In "The Absence of Writing" she explains, "language was one of the most important sites of struggle between the Old World and the New World" (15), and she goes on to call the resulting eradication of African languages, coupled with the process of renaming African and Caribbean landscapes with English words, "one of the most devastating and successful acts of aggression carried out by one people against another" (15). In light of the intimate link between word and i-mage, Philip asserts that "in stripping [the African slave] of her language, in denying the voice power to make and, simultaneously, to express the i-mage – in denying the voice expression, in fact – the ability and power to use the voice was effectively stymied" (14). Without the ability to render its own i-mages, a culture loses the power to define itself; it is forced into a numbing silence. This silence creates a fundamental paradox for writers attempting to redefine Afra-Caribbean identity – a paradox that Philip's poetry grapples with explicitly.

"Discourse on the Logic of Language": Mother Tongue, Father Tongue, and the Cleft Palate

So close is the link between language and identity for Philip that she writes, "[t]o enter another language is to enter another consciousness" (15); in learning and being pressured to live within English, Africans in the Caribbean lost, to a large degree, their own consciousness, and subsequently their own identities. This loss becomes even more troubling because the native African languages are replaced by a language that Philip regards as fundamentally hostile to African identity. As the "girl with the flying cheek-bones" reminds us, this language has only distorted names for the beauty of non-whites. As another poem explains, English

kinks hair
flattens noses
thickens lips
designs prognathous jaws
shrinks the brain
to unleash the promise
in ugly
the absent in image ("Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue," *ST* 78)

The English language, this poem argues, defines the marginalized image of the African body *in relation to* the European body at the center, and in doing so stamps the African as ugly deviations. Africans speaking English are thus forced to

> use a foreign language expressive of an alien experiential life – a language comprised of word symbols that even then had affirmed negative i-mages about her, and one which was but a reflection of the experience of the European ethnocentric world view. . . . The paradox at the heart of the acquisition of this language is that the African learned both to speak and to be dumb at the same time, to give voice to the experience and i-mage, yet to remain silent. (*ST* 16)

The paradox Philip speaks of comes from the fact that the English language she was born into is the very language that cut her off from her African heritage, defining her as always outside the privileged norms. In order to write, she must use this alien native tongue, but in order to sound the silence English imposes, she must bend, shatter, and rebuild that tongue into a language *without* "the promise / in ugly."

Philip's poem "Discourse on the Logic of Language," from *She Tries Her Tongue*, illuminates this paradox more fully as it explores an Afra-Caribbean woman's relationship to English. Formally, the poem employs a number of strategies examined in later sections of this chapter. Here, however, it provides a useful touchstone for discussing Philip's larger project as it exposes the links between language and multiple forms of oppression and illuminates the problem of language for the post-colonial poet. Four pages long, the poem actually consists of four distinct, simultaneous discourses. The two left-hand pages each contain three elements. A meditation on the English language as "anguish" appears down the center of the page, continuing, like any traditional poem, from the first to the second page. To the right of that meditation, italicized in the margins, are colonial edicts (one on

each page). The first orders the separation of Africans from members of their own "ethnolinguistic" group, denying a common language among slaves and preventing "rebellion and revolution" (56). The second describes the penalties for slaves "caught speaking [their] native language" (58), which include cutting out the tongue and putting it on display. In contrast to those orders, the left margin contains, in capital letters running perpendicular to the other two columns,[16] a description of a mother 'tonguing' her newborn daughter clean (explained on the first page) and blowing her own words into the child's mouth (explained on the second page). In counterpoint to those three discourses, the two right-hand pages of the poem turn to science. The first describes "those parts of the brain chiefly responsible for speech" (57), named after Drs. Wernicke and Broca. Broca, this passage explains, believed Blacks, women, and all non-Caucasians had smaller brains and consequently were inferior. The second page takes the form of a multiple-choice anatomy test on the tongue, whose answers juxtapose the medical and the political, as in the second question: the tongue may be "(a) the principal organ of taste. / (b) the principle organ of articulate speech. / [and/or] (c) the principal organ of oppression and exploitation" (59).

The meditation on the anguish of English forms the core of the poem, rising out of and responding to the surrounding discourses. The anguish the speaker feels results from the fact that for her, English is both "mother tongue" and "father tongue," both native and foreign language. The meditation begins with her attempt to state a simple fact:

> English
> is my mother tongue.
> A mother tongue is not a foreign lan lan lang
> language . . . . (56)

For a woman born in the Caribbean in the twentieth century, English is by definition her "mother tongue" – the "native" language linked, at least officially, to home. The description along the left margin clarifies the function, and the power, of a mother tongue. First, the mother uses her tongue to cleanse her daughter from "THE CREAMY WHITE SUBSTANCE COVERING ITS BODY" (56). The obvious weight carried by "WHITE" here implies that a mother tongue should cleanse this child from the alien white European culture imposed on it. Second, having removed the alien substance, the mother replaces it with a language, and hence a culture, drawn instead from her own female ancestors. This mother blows into her daughter's mouth "HER WORD, HER MOTHER'S WORDS, THOSE OF HER MOTHER'S MOTHER, AND ALL THEIR MOTHERS BEFORE" (58), tying the child to a comforting matriarchal history of speech.

Although English, as the speaker's birth language, *should* function as this kind of mother tongue, the stutter in the poem's opening lines ("lan lan lang / language") suggests a rupture in that process. As the language of the colonizer, English is simultaneously an imposed tongue. The colonial edicts in the right margins make explicit the violence of that imposition and the power of a dictatorial "father tongue" – language of imperial domination that controls, commands, and oppresses.[17] The father tongue declares that the penalty for a slave speaking his or her native language is "removal of the tongue" (58), literally silencing any non-European discourse and preventing an answer from those under domination. The juxtaposition of the two edicts points to the narrowness of the gap between the symbolic silencing effected by the first edict, separating slaves from those who speak their own language, and the physical silencing effected by the second, ripping out their tongues.

In light of this oppression historically embedded in a black woman learning English in the Caribbean, the speaker of the meditation comes to the only logical syllogism possible:

> English is
> my father tongue.
> A father tongue is a foreign language,
> therefore English is
> a foreign language
> not a mother tongue. (56)

The logic of the language forces her into a contradictory position: English is the language of her birth but it is also an imposed language.[18] Though mother tongue in name, English is not the tongue that *cleanses* her from the "creamy white substance" of colonization, but rather the tongue that *imposes* it. The multiple choice questions on the right-hand pages reinforce this paradox: even though it can be "the principal organ of articulate speech," the tongue is also "the principal organ of oppression and exploitation" and "contains ten thousand taste buds, none of which is sensitive to the taste of foreign words" (59). English thus becomes "a foreign lan lan lang / language / l/anguish / anguish" (58), "language" itself literally transforming under the pressure.

The multiple-choice questions further complicate this anguish by framing the tongue as an instrument of *patriarchal*, as well as colonial, oppression, as evidenced by the first question:

> A tapering, blunt-tipped, muscular, soft and fleshy organ describes
> (a) the penis
> (b) the tongue
> (c) neither of the above
> (d) both of the above (59)

As (d) makes clear, tongue and penis function in parallel, both imposing themselves on the body of a woman.

Philip spells out the historical ground for this link between colonial and patriarchal oppressions more fully in her essay "Dis Place The Space Between." As she explains there, Afra-Caribbean women were brought to the New World primarily for their bodies – they functioned as both the site for producing new (infant) slaves and the means of pacifying adult ones:

> The space between the black woman's legs becomes. *The place*. Site of oppression – vital to the cultivation and continuation of the outer space in a designated form – the plantation machine . . . .The "black magic" of the white man's pleasure, the "bag o' sugar down day" of the black man's release. *And* the space through which new slaves would issue forth. (289)

The power of the penis literally invades the body of an Afra-Caribbean woman against her will, paralleling the way the English tongue invades her mind. She has no voice because she has lost her language: it has been replaced by the power of the phallus. "Harnessed" (Philip's term) in this way, the Afra-Caribbean woman needs a mother even more desperately to tongue her clean of this invasion (the creamy white substance perhaps also suggesting seminal fluid) and blow new words into her mouth.

With her mother tongue denied by the pressure of the external discourses represented within the poem, the speaker is left silent:

> I have no mother
> tongue
> no mother to tongue
> no tongue to mother

to mother
tongue
me

I must therefore be tongue
dumb
dumb-tongued
dub-tongued
damn dumb
tongue (56)

For Philip, breaking this dumbness requires a radical re-formation of language itself. Her poetry, particularly in *She Tries Her Tongue*, works "to engender by some alchemical practice a metamorphosis within the language from father tongue to mother tongue" (*ST* 24). She begins with English as the imposed father tongue, designed to position white European culture at the center and black African culture at the margins, or better yet off the page, and attempts to transform it into a language of home that reaches back through "all the mothers before."

The tongue's position in "Discourse" as "the principal organ of articulate speech" as well as of exploitation suggests the possibility of such a transformation, and the cry for this alchemy emerges in the poem's final lines:

tongue mother
tongue me
mother tongue me
mother me
touch me
with the tongue of your
lan lan lang
language
l/anguish
anguish
english
is a foreign anguish (58)

In this plea for a mother to tongue her, the speaker acknowledges that such a transformation must involve being touched by "the tongue of your / . . . anguish," that is, by the pain of a past that has been silenced by colonial power.[19] In addition to marginalizing and denigrating Afro-Caribbeans, colonization also works to mask its own violence by prohibiting any discussion of it. History, after all, is written by the victors. To make or find her mother tongue, then, Philip must first "use the language in such a way that the historical realities are not erased or obliterated, so that English is revealed as the tainted tongue it truly is" (*ST* 19); she must, that is, map the edges of these silences. For Philip, encountering such pain and finding (or making) a language to talk about it is central to the process of rebuilding Afra-Caribbean i-mages. "English" must become "english," as it does in the final lines of the poem, stripped of its power and position as a proper noun and reduced to a malleable variant. Only through such a process, involving not only the dislocation but also at times the destruction of English, can the alchemy Philip seeks occur.[20]

Multivocality 1: Dismantling the Authority of Colonial Discourse

One of the most prominent formal elements in Philip's "alchemical process," particularly in *She Tries Her Tongue*, is multivocality; her poetry brings together a range of voices speaking to, with, over, and against one another, as "Discourse on the Logic of Language" exemplifies. The presence of multiple voices in poetry is certainly nothing new – given the work of Pound, Eliot, Olson, Williams, and others, we could even argue (as some critics have) that multivocality is a hallmark of twentieth-century experimental poetry, perhaps as a reflection of democratic ideals or as a tool for enacting and responding to the

fragmentation of culture. The multivocality in Philip's work, however, responds not to the general conditions of European or American culture, but to the specific nature and history of Afra-Caribbean women, and it functions, as I suggested in Chapter 1, as part of her larger project of discerning and sounding their silences. Within that project, Philip's re-presents the other voices within her poems both to expose the silences/silencings within seemingly innocuous texts and to reclaim language for the poet and those she speaks to/for. She appropriates prior texts for her own ends so that, for example, an edict intended to maintain order within a "civilized" society instead stands revealed as an act of savage brutality. The poem offers no explicit commentary on the edicts; rather, their position relative to one another and the surrounding texts exposes their violence.

In considering the role(s) of multivocality in Philip's poetry, the work of Russian theorist M. M. Bakhtin provides a useful backdrop because of the way Bakhtin deals with the relationship between past and present texts.[21] Both writers view language, and the discourses within any language, as inherently ideological; in Bakhtin's words, "all languages . . . are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values" (*Discourse* 291-2). A similar sense of language undergirds the post-colonial theories of language explained earlier, as well as Philip's own sense of the writer's ability to create and reflect the i-mage – the ideological identity – of her culture. Within this framework, two of Bakhtin's concepts in particular prove relevant to Philip's poetry: 1) the interconnectedness of every utterance,[22] and 2) the connection between one's relationship to prior utterances and one's identity.

First, Bakhtin recognizes the historical, polyvocal nature of speech, emphasizing that every utterance exists not as an independent entity but always already in relationship to the utterances that preceded it:

> . . . any speaker is himself [sic] a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances – his own and others' – with which his given utterance enters into one kind of relation or another (builds on them, polemicizes with them, or simply presumes that they are already known to the listener). Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances. (*Speech Genres* 69) [23]

It is precisely this "complexly organized chain" that Philip makes apparent in a poem like "Discourse on the Logic of Language." The utterance of the poem's primary speaker is linked to the history of racism and oppression embodied in the edicts and in the beliefs of Dr. Broca, but it is also linked through a matriarchal lineage to an African history tongued clean of the "creamy white substance" of Western culture. Rather than simply alluding to those prior utterances, however, Philip incorporates them into her text and renders the chain itself, and its complex dynamic, visibly present.

In this way, the multivocality of Philip's restores the "historical realities" that physically and symbolically silence Afra-Caribbeans. By juxtaposing multiple discourses and effectively contextualizing the utterances, the poems in *She Tries Her Tongue* break the illusion of universality and insert the (oppressive) reality of a particular time and place and

language. Such a gesture is critical because, as Philip explains, one of the principle ways a language masks its oppressive character is through the veil of objective universality. This veil becomes particularly apparent for her in the discourse surrounding poetry:

> *Eliot talked of the objective correlative – the arousal in the reader of the exact emotion the poet felt as he wrote. This assumes the existence of certain universal values that would or could prompt the reader to share with the writer his emotions. This assumption is never articulated and the so-called universal values were really a cover for imperialistic modes of thought and ways of acting upon the world. The patterns of culture, the images, the forms of thinking, the Literature that were being imposed around the world on different people were very specific to a very specific culture (Western/European), and a very specific class within that culture – they were, however, propounded as universal.* ("The Habit of Of" 212).

The fallacy of Eliot's universalist assumption becomes strikingly clear in the image of Caribbean school children reading English pastoral lyrics, full of daffodils and dairy cows but devoid of any features of West Indian landscape, as the model for poetry.[24] Against such assumptions, Philip deploys an array of texts to break the veil and re-establish particular historical circumstance. Thus the "anguish of English" in "Discourse on the Logic of Language" emerges not as a "universal" condition but rather as one wrought out of the conditions of slavery in the Caribbean and the racial and patriarchal hierarchies of the larger colonial enterprise. The poem's multivocality locates the silence – in this case the

silence of the speaker and of her ancestors – by literally representing the forces that imposed it and so marking its borders.

But the relationship between any given text and the utterances that precede it involves more than simply historical progression. Bakhtin outlines a range of possible interactions (one "builds on . . . polemicizes with . . . or simple presumes"), and in *Discourse in the Novel* he links the character of that interaction to identity development. Each of us is born into a world of language spoken by other people, or what Bakhtin calls "alien discourse" (345) and those alien discourses initially define who and what we are. They function, Bakhtin explains, as "authoritative":

> The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it . . . it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. . . . It is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the word itself that authoritative discourse seeks to elicit from us; rather, it demands our unconditional allegiance. (*Speech Genres* 342-3)

The authoritative word here parallels Philip's father tongue, with its desire to dominate. For Afro-Caribbeans, the authoritative, alien discourses include those of colonial domination and Eurocentrism that "kink hair," "flatten noses," replace palm trees with daffodils, and marginalize and silence them as Other.[25] The acceptance of this authority in poetry manifests itself in the attempts of early Caribbean poets such as James Grainger and Francis Williams to write lyrics in what Lloyd Brown calls "slavish imitation of the European pastoral mode" (*West Indian* 22) because such lyrics, the father tongue declared, represented

"good writing." The cultural authority of English (and English literature) allowed it to function as the universal standard, reinforcing colonial power at the center.

Discourses do not inevitably remain authoritative, however, and according to Bakhtin, developing one's identity is then "the process of distinguishing between one's own and another's discourse, between one's own and another's thought" (*Discourse* 345). This development hinges on the ability to make the word one's own, which involves for Bakhtin a transformation not unlike the one Philip seeks:

> [T]he word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his [sic] own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. (*Discourse* 293)

Although Bakhtin writes primarily in terms of individuals, Philips work applies a similar formulation to the identity of a culture. The appropriation and reaccentuation Bakhtin describes occurs in Philip's poetry[26] as she rips words from the mouths of colonial oppressors and wrenches them to serve her own ends. In "The Question of Language is the Answer to Power," she proclaims this seizure directly:

> [T]he word
> that in the beginning was
> – not his
> I decree it mine
> at centre
> soft
> plastic
> pliable
> doing my bid as in
> smash
> the in-the-beginning word (*ST* 71)

The language that presents itself as inviolable authority becomes instead "soft / plastic / pliable" and English becomes english as Philip "smashes" and reforms the language in her own i-mage.

These reformulations emerge clearly in the poetry of *She Tries Her Tongue*. Philip appropriates colonial texts in "Discourse on the Logic of Language," for example, and accents their complicity in the speaker's anguished silence. In "Universal Grammar," her appropriation takes a more aggressive turn as she more clearly "smashes" the word. The poem literally "parses" colonial discourses in a way that destroys their authority and further exposes their violence. It opens by defining parsing as "*the exercise of telling the part of speech of each work* [sic] *in a sentence (Latin, pars, a part)*" (*ST* 62).[27] Later, it recasts the definition, describing parsing as "the exercise of dis-membering language into fragmentary cells that forget to re-member" (66) and so inflecting the grammatical discourse with political and historical overtones. "Universal Grammar" thus takes an educational tool of Western culture (as well as Chomsky's own universalizing project) and turns it back on itself to expose the violence within the language. The poem re-accents English by literally parsing its own text; the left-hand pages provide a politically charged gloss on the right-hand pages by parsing key words, dismantling colonial texts in order to dis-member them and remember those they attempted to silence.

One of the sentences Philip parses is the fragment that forms the primary thread of the poem, building on itself each time. The first right-hand page (opposite the definition of parsing) opens with:

Man
Man is

The tall man is
The tall blond man is (63)

until, on the final page, we read

The tall, blond, blue-eyed, white skinned man is shooting
an elephant
a native
a wild animal
a Black
a woman
a child
somewhere (67)

Philip's re-presentation of the sentence, adding only one or two words at a time to focus our attention on each element, performs a kind of indirect parsing; it dis-members the sentence to reinforce the implications of each new term. As a result of this deliberate, gradual increase that defines the man first, then his action, then his target, his violence against all that he perceives as Other appears to emerge out of the adjectives that define him: tall, blond, blue-eyed, white-skinned. Nothing less than Aryan perfection forms the foundation of his shooting. Built this way, the sentence is not neutral; it carries the violent weight of colonialism and patriarchy. To reinforce this weight Philip also directly parses part of the sentence – its subject:

man *– common noun, male gender, singular number, third person, nominative case governing the verb, is. And woman.* (64)

This explanation yokes the linguistic to the cultural, foregrounding the fact that man's function, in both the sentence and in a patriarchal, colonial culture, is to dominate.

The violence inherent within the structure of the English language becomes even more pointed as the poem parses "raped" – a word which appears not in the sentence above but in a second text appearing below the completed sentence on the final page – "***Mother's***

Recipes on How to Make a Language Yours or How Not to Get Raped." The title again fuses linguistic domination to patriarchal oppression. Directly opposite this title, we read:

> *raped – regular, active, used transitively the again and again against women participled into the passive voice as in, 'to get raped'; past present future – tense(d) against the singular or plural number of the unnamed subject, man.* (66)

This definition makes clear the power struggle and exposes the ways in which the language itself erases the subject of the sentence in order to position the victim – the woman – as the sole actor: it was, the grammar implies, her fault after all for getting herself raped. By parsing the verb, Philip re-accents the language to uncover the silent subject, the man who manipulated the sentence (and the woman) to hide his own position as one who in fact "governs" and violates.

The parsing that occurs in this poem, literally moving word by word to redefine the language, functions as a metaphor for the re-accentuation that occurs across the volume. By juxtaposing different voices and merging or interrupting one discourse with another – linguistics with feminist politics, for instance – Philip "dis-member[s] language into fragmentary cells" in a way that both exposes the work it does within racist and misogynist systems and dismantles its authority. Torn apart, these cells cannot re-member themselves to resurrect their power. In this way, she refuses to grant prior utterances the "unconditional allegiance" they implicitly demand and instead subjects even the most "innocent" of them to intense scrutiny.

Similar acts of dismemberment – one voice interrupting and consequently re-accenting another –occur throughout *She Tries Her Tongue*, from the revisionary

mythmaking of the volume's opening poetic sequence, "Over Every Land and Sea," which transposes the myth of Ceres and Proserpine onto Afro-Caribbean women and relies on vernacular Caribbean english, through the title poem, which stands as the volume's final statement and traces the movement from silence to sound. Two additional examples in particular illustrate the range of discourses Philip dismantles in her work. The first, from "She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks," interrupts the Act of Confession from the *Book of Common Prayer* with the speaker's own confession, an ironic apology for her lack of "proper" language:

> *I do not presume to come to this thy table*
> father forgive
> *most merciful father, trusting in my own righteousness*
> foreign father forgive
> *but in thy manifold and great mercies.*
> forgive her me this foreigness
> *I am not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table*
> forgive me this dumbness
> *but thou art the same Lord, whose property*
> this lack of tongue forgive
> *is always to have mercy*
>
> . . . . . .
>
> *Is it in the nature of God to forgive himself –*
> *For his sin?*
>
> ***The Book of Uncommon Prayer*** (95)

Cutting her confession into the Anglican one in this way implies that the apparently universal humility suggested by the Confession actively works to further marginalize Afra-Caribbeans by reinforcing the image of subservience and unworthiness created by colonial racism. The final lines of the passage, accusing God of sin and thus undercutting the Confession's declaration of God's mercy and our unworthiness, expose the oppression that

provoked the speaker's own confession. Why, the poem asks, should she confess as "sin" what is in fact simply her difference. Dismembering the language of religious power marks it as simply another tool to silence the Other.[28]

The second example occurs in "The Question of Language is the Answer to Power." That poem begins with a series of apparently harmless *Lessons for the Voice* that attempt to teach proper pronunciation – reminiscent, at least for British and American readers, of Henry Higgins attempting to teach Eliza Doolittle to speak correctly. Philip's choice of examples for those lessons, however, interrupts the discourse of refinement and culture with the violence of slavery, pointing again to the ways in which language functions as a tool of oppression:

> *LESSONS FOR THE VOICE (1)*
>
> *Vowels are by nature either long or short. In the following list the long ones appear in capital letters. These vowels are all shaped predominantly by the lips, though the position and freedom of the blade of the tongue affects their quality.*
>
> *When practicing these words, it is helpful to use a bone prop.*
>
> *OO as in how did they 'lose' their word?*
> *oo as in 'look' at the spook.*
> *OH as in the slaves came by 'boat' (dipthongal).*
> *AW as in the slaves were valued for their 'brawn'.*
> *o as in what am I offered for this 'lot' of slaves?*
> *OW as in they faced the 'shroud' of their future (dipthongal).*
> *OI as in they paid for their slaves with 'coin' (dipthongal).* (70)

The examples forge an immediate link between physical enslavement and the imposition of a foreign language. Speaking "correctly," as Shaw's play reminds us, has always been a measure of class, and those in the upper classes have attempted to equate it with one's humanity. Anyone who belongs to "civilized" society pronounces his or her words properly

– that is, as the upper class Brit does; to do otherwise is to be classified as "uncouth" or "savage." And so even these lessons for the voice – the attempt, ostensibly, to civilize the alien tongue – enact a form of cultural oppression that colludes with the physical oppression of slavery. The answer to the first question, "how did they 'lose' their word?" lies in the dehumanization of Africans demonstrated in the examples that follow. They lost their word because they were transported like cattle, looked on as spectacles, bought and sold as commodities useful for the plantation machine.[29] The discursive collisions that pervade Philip's poems explore that violence, mapping its edges, and thus play a critical role in Philip's struggle to locate and explore Afra-Caribbean silences. If indeed "the question of language is the answer to power" – if language is a means to power in the ways Philip and many other post-colonial writers and theorists believe – then to seize language from the mouth of Western culture and dismantle it into "fragmentary cells" is the first step in the alchemy Philip seeks.

Multivocality 2: Caribbean Identity and "The Many-Voiced One of One Voice"

Multivocality also operates in a second, more constructive way in Philip's poetry to sound the silences and re-make the i-mages. The disruptive juxtaposition of multiple voices historicizes these poems and foregrounds the complex chain of utterances that gives rise to silence, as explained above. But it can also foreground what Philip regards as the inherent multivocality of Afra-Caribbean identity. In addition to disrupting the illusion of universality, Philip also "set[s] out to destroy the lyric voice, the singularity of the lyric voice" ("Habit" 210)[30] because that singular voice also denies or effaces Afra-Caribbean

experience. To more accurately evoke experience, she relocates the speaking subject within a chorus of voices. A multiple, dialogic mother tongue operating within a network of relationships replaces the monologic, authoritative father tongue. [31]

Philip is by no means alone in invoking multivocality as a component of Afra-Caribbean identity. In *Out of the Kumbla*, Davies and Fido turn to the metaphor of a quilt, in which various themes, stories, identities, and times are "braided or woven" together, to describe the kinds of structural experiments they find in much of contemporary Caribbean women's writing, including works by Jamaica Kincaid and Michele Cliff. The search for a voice and a language, Davies and Fido observe, forms a primary theme in much of this writing, and that search often results in an orchestra of voices and genres, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in cacophony (6).[32] Philip suggests one impetus behind this multivocality within her poetry when she asks,

> Is the polyvocular the natural voicedness of women and Blacks? Is it because our sense of self is constituted of so many representations — the gaps, the silences between those selves — the many selves presented to us as African or woman. ("Habit" 211)

She explicitly links polyvocality to the silences she grapples with, suggesting that because a series of externally imposed representations created the gaps in Afra-Caribbean identity, the silence of those gaps cannot be broken by one voice speaking alone.

This need for multivocal dialogic community becomes apparent in the volume's opening sequence, "Over Every Land and Sea." The sequence rewrites the myth of Ceres and Proserpine from within the Caribbean, with Ceres as the primary voice, speaking in

Caribbean demotic as she searches for her daughter. That search marks the desire for female community and occurs within a dialogue of voices. As this earth-mother and creator-goddess calls to her daughter, we also find the voices of Ovid (from whose narrative Philip draws the epigraphs for the individual poems in the sequence), and Cyane (silent in Ovid's telling), along with another voice speaking in something closer to standard English who may or may not be Ceres (in "Dream-skins"). The poem also relies on the absent presence of both Dis, who comes to stand for the colonizer, and Proserpine, who, as Mara Scanlon points out, functions as figure for the Caribbean (4), and for Africa, lost and silenced in the crush of colonial history. And as Scanlon explains, both Ovid's tale and Philip's rewriting of it center on the relationships among women, with Calliope telling the story of the estranged mother and daughter to Pallas (4). Through Ceres' search for her daughter and her desire to re-establish the community, and the communal voice, broken by Dis's interference, the sequence becomes a parable for the lost tribal communities fragmented when the colonizers dis-placed Africans and made them into slaves in the New World.[33]

Though "Over Every Land and Sea" plays out the dialogic nature of the mother tongue hungry for a response, the search for a communal voice, along with the role of formal multivocality in that search, stands out more clearly in the volume's title poem, "She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks." The heteroglossia becomes nearly overwhelming in this poem whose title declares it to be the long-silenced expression of an Afra-Caribbean woman. The poem itself is sixteen pages long – the longest in the volume, and in many ways the fullest expression of the i-mage Philip seeks/creates. The left-hand

pages form an extended lyrical meditation by the poem's main speaker, the woman who "tries her tongue." In harmony with that meditation, the right-hand pages include prose sections from texts labeled ***The Practical Guide to Gardening***, ***Facts to Live By and Die***, ***How To Build Your House Safe and Right***, ***The Acts of the Apostles***, ***De Matribus et Advenis*** (translated as "On Mothers and Strangers"), ***Klein's Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language***, and ***Of Women, Wisdom, Fishes, and Men***. The only exception to this pattern is Philip's revision of the Act of Confession (cited earlier), in which the speaker's words and the external text alternate line for line. Some of the prose citations, such as the description of Pentecost from the Acts of the Apostles and the definitions of "history" and "memory" from *Klein's Dictionary*, are verbatim textual citations. Others manipulate or explicitly rewrite prior utterances, as in the transgressive Act of Confession or ***How to Build Your House. . .***, which begins with the story of the last of the three little pigs but then poses a series of socio-economic questions that concludes "the right choice of materials secures safety" but that that choice depends on availability and resources. Still others are Philip's own creations. As these fragments enter into dialogue with one another, the cumulative effect becomes much more than simply historical contextualization, or even a Bakhtinian re-accentuation. Instead, the accumulation of voices becomes a tapestry in which the voices become strands of Afra-Caribbean identity that the speaker weaves together to break her own silence and approach what the poem refers to as "pure utterance" – the articulation of her i-mage in a language not poisoned by colonial and patriarchal oppressions.

The poem begins with a declaration of community and a simultaneous recognition of its loss:

> the me and mine of parents
> the we and us of brother and sister
> the tribe of belongings small and separate
> when gone. . .
> on these exact places of exacted grief
> i placed mint-fresh grief coins
> sealed the eyes with certain and final;
> in such an equation of loss tears became
> a quantity of minus. (84)

The speaker mourns the communal fragmentation that attends the linguistic fragmentation discussed earlier. Balanced across from those lines are instructions from ***The Practical Guide to Gardening***; its explanation of transplanting serves as a metaphor for the needs of the African in the New World: "*It is important, when transplanting plants, that their roots not be exposed to air longer than is necessary. Failure to observe this caution will result in the plant dying eventually, if not immediately*" (85). This caution heightens the loss spoken of on the left as literal roots merge into the communal voice of remembered history that roots a woman to her past – and to herself. The absence of historical roots becomes a matter of life and death.

The poem continues to elaborate on this need for roots. We hear the speaker's call to "seek search and uproot / the forget and remember of root words" (86) as she struggles to live "in the absence of a past mortared with / apart" (88). The only past she has is full of gaps in which people were torn apart from one another and denied access to their own histories through the destruction of their "root words." Her "testimony" thus bears witness to the

blackened stump of a tongue
torn
out
withered
petrified
burnt
on the pyres of silence
a mother's child foreign (92)

Only the stump remains to locate the silence and remind us of what is *not* spoken; the tongue is torn out by its roots physically and metaphorically.

The poem's prose sections reinforce these cries. From the declaration that "*Memory is essential to human survival*" from ***Facts to Live By and Die*** (87) to the question, "*Without memory can there be history?*" (97) based on the definitions of "***history***" and "***memory***" from ***Klein's Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*** (itself a means of tracing roots), the poem demands that the reader acknowledge the gap experienced by the speaker that results from the destruction of her language. Voice after voice presses the point home to form a chorus echoing back on itself. As the prose and the poetry appear on facing pages, suggesting that they be read simultaneously rather than sequentially,[34] they join together in polyvocal harmony, accenting and balancing one another. The speaker cannot break her silence alone; these other voices of history and memory must also participate in her declarations.

Against the declarations of silence and loss in history, however, the voices in the poem also search for and believe in a new language for the future. Even as the speaker places the "grief coins" on the eyes of those lost to history, she also faces "a future biblical with anticipation" (84). Alongside the "oath moan mutter chant" that mourns the loss, we find

> praise-song poem ululation utterance
> one song would bridge the finite in silence
> syllable vocable vowel consonant
> one word erect the infinite in memory (90)

In these alternate moments we hear the possibility of speaking something new and whole that approaches what Philip refers to as "sing[ing]" (94, 98) that produces "pure utterance" (98).

This pure utterance requires a host of voices, as both the structure of the poem itself, with its heteroglossic abundance, and the proclamations of those voices attest. Perhaps the most notable proclamation is Philip's quotation from the ***Acts of the Apostles***. Unlike her challenge to the *Book of Common Prayer*, which smashes one element of the Christian tradition, her incorporation of the Pentecost story upholds the text to celebrate the possibility of bridging silence.[35] The narrative appears opposite the section beginning "praise-song" quoted above:

> *. . . the day of Pentecost was fully come. . .*
> *And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.*
> *And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.*
> *And they were filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues. . .*
> *. . . every man heard them speak in his own language* (91)

The polyvocality described here reaches out to each person within hearing, touching each with his (or her) mother tongue, his native language, yet allowing them to speak together.

The poem's final prose section reinforces this ideal of communal harmony where identity emerges out of the gathering, shared rather than isolated. The passage describes the oldest woman and the youngest girl of an unnamed tribe returning the skeleton of the first

salmon of the season back to the river to "ensure future gifts of winter food" (99). On the page facing this vision of two women joining together in an act designed to preserve the future of the tribe, the speaker declares her own hope:

When the silence is
Abdication of word tongue and lip
Ashes of once in what was
. . . Silence
Song word speech
Might I . . . like Philomela . . . sing
continue
over
into
. . . pure utterance (98)

Philip's choice of Philomela here resonates sharply with Afra-Caribbean experience; like the mythic princess, African women were taken from their homeland, beaten and in many cases raped, and, to prevent their rebellion, silenced. The only alternative in such instances is to forge a new kind of language, one not imposed by the perpetrators of the violence. Hence Philip seeks, and attempts formally to enact, the kind of pure utterance Philomela sang once she was transformed (a kind of alchemy) into a nightingale. The woman whose tongue was cut out found her voice and spoke purely in the company of the sister who loved her, in a language untainted by the one who destroyed her.[36]

Linguistic Fracture

Philip's re-mapping of language works not only on the macro level, in both the disruptive recontextualization of prior utterances and the insistent presence of a multivocal identity described above, but also on the level of the word itself. Her poetic language is marked both by her strategic use of the Caribbean demotic and by her transformation of

grammatical categories, pressing verbs and prepositions into service as nouns to create syntax that serves her own purposes. Both strategies represent ways of bending the language to enact the alchemical transformation Philip seeks and allow the unspoken to make its presence felt on the page.

First, Philip, like many Caribbean poets (including Derek Walcott, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Merle Hodge, Grace Nichols, and Louise Bennett), refuses the hegemony of standard written English as the only dialect suitable for poetry. That decision is highly political, of course, and has been hotly debated among both writers and critics, some insisting on rejecting English and writing only in Caribbean dialects, others insisting on their right to use English as it comes to them.[37] Regardless one's position in the debate, the decision to reject English, in part or in toto, clearly de-authorizes that language by making it only one of many variants available for expressing experience. "English" thus becomes "english," non-capitalized and non-dominant. Moreover, when a poet educated in the English literary tradition chooses to write in her own demotic variant, she is further claiming not only that English holds no inherent authority, but that it is actually unable to fully express her experiences.[38] For Merle Hodge, the issue is even stronger: to write in a language other than Creole is to devalue her mother tongue, and implicitly the thought processes, and hence the very identity, of those she writes to and for:

> Think of the implications [of writing in standard English] – we speak Creole, we need Creole, we cannot function without Creole, for our deepest thought processes are bound up in the structure of Creole, but we hold Creole in utter contempt. (Hodge "Challenges" 204)

Disdaining Creole, or any Caribbean variant, becomes a way of silencing parts of Caribbean experience, of refusing to give voice to what Philip would refer to as the i-mage of the people.

Philip makes similar claims in the introduction to *She Tries Her Tongue*; significantly, though, she sees the whole range of languages, from Caribbean demotic through standard English, as central to Afro-Caribbean identity:

> In the absence of any other language by which the past may be repossessed, reclaimed and its most painful aspects transcended, English in its broadest spectrum must be made to do the job. To say that the experience can only be expressed in standard English (if there is any such thing) or only in the Caribbean demotic (there *is* such a thing) is, in fact, to limit the experience for the African artist working in the Caribbean demotic. It is *in the continuum of expression* from standard to Caribbean English that the veracity of the experience lies. (*She Tries* 18)

Because the Afro-Caribbean woman possesses more than one language, she must work along the linguistic continuum, drawing on both extremes and forging new variants in the middle, to give voice to her experiences.

The movement back and forth along this "continuum of expression" is evident even in Philip's early poetry. Her first volume, *Thorns*, begins with "Poem," written in language we have come to expect from contemporary American poetry:

> Poems fall
> shaving curls of layered
> laughter ringed and hued
> in sympathetic shades,

slivers of marbleized pain
fragmented illusions splintering
slowly on the air,
existence chiseled, chilled
into experiences gained and
smoothly lost as emotions are
welded onto the membranes of time. (1)

The "fragmented illusions splintering / slowly" and the "emotions . . . / welded onto the membrane of time" could surface just as easily in any workshop poem. And the poem exemplifies a "chiseled" and "chilled" existence in its elegantly cut language, itself icy and smooth. Yet that poem is immediately followed by "Nostalgia '64":

Liming[39] by de street corner
dressed to kill
from stingy brimmed hat
to pointy toe shoes,
Limacoled wit de freshness
of a breeze in a bottle
checking out de girls dem
cruising by
"buh how yuh look sweet so"
talking bout de latest caiso
who's a jackabat
an' who not,
liming by de street corner
dressed to kill. (2)

Upbeat jazz sounds replace the somber rhythm of "Poem" and "de freshness / of a breeze in a bottle," with its sensory liveliness has cast out chiseled language in favor of words more clearly belonging to these men "liming by de street corner / dressed to kill." The poems in this volume continue to move back and forth between these dialects, suggesting that neither one alone can completely represent Afro-Caribbean experience.

This pattern becomes more complex in Philip's later work where she weaves demotic and standard englishes together, as in the first two poetic sequences in *She Tries*

Her Tongue, "And Over Every Land and Sea," discussed earlier and "Cyclamen Girl." "Cyclamen Girl" in particular foregrounds the issue of language choice as it moves back and forth between dialects in order to recount a young girl coming of age under the twin ideologies of her Caribbean world and the imposed Christian doctrines. As Philip describes this cyclamen girl "caught between / blurred images of / massa and master" (38) – between Caribbean and "proper" English (but caught under patriarchal dominance either way) – the poetry reflects the blurred boundary:

> ***Eucharistic Contradictions***
>
> with a speech spliced and spiced
> into a variety of life and lies
> sowbread host in we own old mass of
> double-imaged
> doubly imagined
> dubbed dumb
> can't-get-the-focus-right reality
> of mulatto dougla niggerancoolie (39)

Like the girl, the language of the poem is caught between the double images of language, between "speech spliced and spiced" in assonant tones of contemporary English poetry and "in we own old mass" of Caribbean images.

This double-voiced discourse becomes even more apparent in Philip's essays. "The Absence of Writing" begins with a narrative about Philip's childhood told in a Caribbean tongue, then moves into a reflective discussion of that childhood in standard English. Her explanation of this move (which revises an earlier published version that used only standard English) reiterates Philip's reliance on a linguistic continuum:

> I was not completely satisfied with my argument then [i.e., when the first version of the essay was published] that the dilemma as to what language

> was appropriate was answered by my argument that the English language in its complete range belonged to us, and whatever mode best suited our needs should be used. In fact, the problem was that the piece itself did not, as I now believe it ought to, reflect that range that I spoke of. Unlike the former piece, the opening paragraphs of the present piece [i.e. its second publication in *She Tries Her Tongue*], explaining the absence of writing in my early life, are written closer to the Caribbean demotic than to standard English. Could or ought I to have continued the entire piece in this style? Perhaps, but I do believe that the present piece is a far truer reflection of how I function linguistically than the original one. (24)

The linguistic continuum more closely represents the i-mage of Afro-Caribbean culture and the influences that have shaped it. The title of her essay "Dis Place The Space Between," for instance, depends on the blurring of the standard English verb "displace" and the Caribbean demotic noun phrase "dis place" to communicate the relationship between the inner space of a woman's body – particularly Afra-Caribbean women, as discussed earlier – and the colonial/patriarchal power that controls, and so displaces, dis place.

While Philip's use of the demotic, and her continual blurring of the lines between the demotic and the standard dialects of English, presents one important formal strategy for re-mapping language, it is not her only one. Potentially more powerful are her mutations and transformations of standard English that in a sense re-enact the Afro-Caribbeans' historical transformation of standard English into its demotic variants. The historical transformation is one aspect of the process of mimicry Homi Bhaba describes in his seminal essay "Of

Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." The creolization of English into various Caribbean dialects enacts the ambivalence of mimicry, which is always, in Bhabha words "almost the same, *but not quite*" (127). That slight difference disrupts the power of the self-proclaimed standard. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, in *The Empire Writes Back*, build on Bhabha's argument, suggesting that creolization is not a "failure" of Africans to learn English properly, but rather a strategy of resistance and appropriation through which the colonized maintain an independent identity and refuse to submit entirely to the domination of the colonizer's culture.[40] To take English and transform it asserts one's identity by claiming the alien language one's own.

In the same way, Philip claims the language of standard English but forces its words to serve her own needs by transforming verbs and prepositions into nouns and remaking syntax according to her own rules. Those transformations represent acts of linguistic power that support Philip's claim in "The Question of Language is the Answer to Power" when she "decree[s] [the word] mine / at centre / / soft / plastic / pliable / doing my bid. . ." (71). The work of making language pliable and plastic appears notably in "Discourse on the Logic of Language" as "language" is visibly and metonymically transformed into "anguish." At the beginning of the poem we learn that

> A mother tongue is not
> not a foreign lan lan lang
> language
> l/anguish
> anguish
> – a foreign anguish. (56)

This move from "lan" to "anguish" is repeated twice more in the poem, once to declare that "my father tongue / is . . . / a foreign anguish" and again at the end of the poem[41] to mark

"english / [as] a foreign anguish" (58). In each case, Philip controls the word to express the speaker's experience of being trapped within a foreign language that must be transformed if it is to be her own. She exerts a similar control when she fractures certain words ("dis-member," "re-member") and runs others together ("niggerancoolie," "absencelosstears")[42] to force language to express more fully the dislocation within Afro-Caribbean experience and the elimination of the space African histories and languages occupy. Fragmented or compressed, the language formally functions as an i-mage of that history.

More pervasive than these visual and oral dislocations, however, are the overt appropriations of grammatical categories; again and again Philip transforms verbs, adverbs, and prepositions into nouns, giving weight and power to concepts that are often grammatically marginalized. To be a noun, grammatically, is to possess subjectivity rather than simply functionality, to be *named* rather than silenced and erased. In a sentence, agency, and consequently metaphoric power, rests in the nouns. By forcing words into this subject position, Philip foregrounds their presence in history as well as in the sentence, re-sounding the silences. This grammatical control becomes evident in "Universal Grammar," as its parsing draws conscious attention to the relationship between grammars and ideologies. In that poem, we see how the "tongue trembles / on the again and again / of forget" (65) and Philip parses for us both "again" and, indirectly, "forget":

> ***again –*** *adverb used incorrectly as a noun modifying the transitive verb, forget, used incorrectly as a noun.* (64)

By claiming "again" and "forget" as nouns, Philip positions both the act of forgetting and the frequency with which it was/is practiced under colonization as concrete elements of

Afro-Caribbean experience. Moreover, the explicit parsing emphasizes that the act is a deliberate one. She uses these words "incorrectly" as an act of defiant revolution, challenging the colonizer, but also emphasizing that for Afro-Caribbeans, "again" and "forget" are not simply words of time or movement, but nouns that merit their own names.[43]

Similar transformations appear throughout Philip's more recent work; in *She Tries Her Tongue* we read of "the wide of open mouth" (34), "the elsewhere of time" (49), "the in of beginning" (71), and "the beyond of pale" (79), along with "the forget and remember of root words" (86) and "the begin of word" (88), all foregrounding places and acts that traditionally lie silently outside the center. It is in *Looking for Livingstone*, however, that Philip most directly connects the issue of grammar to the question of silence. Nearing the end of her journey – the search for both the illusive Dr. Livingstone (whose discoveries became acts of naming and colonizing a continent) and for her own language in the form of silence – the poem's speaker, called only The Traveler, frames the central question:

> How parse the punish
> in Silence
> – Noun
> – Verb
> absent a Grammar (8)

"Silence" is always both noun and verb, the sentence imposed by the colonizers on the Africans they oppressed and the refuge taken by those Africans in the wake of an alien culture that imposed its control.[44] But because English literally and metaphorically denies Afro-Caribbean experience and refuses to acknowledge its own oppressions, the speaker does not have the means to expose the punishment that language inflicts – to delineate the ways it operates in words themselves. Philip's re-mapping of the grammar of this language

provides one way of parsing its "punish" (again, verb made into noun) to make visible what the language strives to erase.[45]

Re-mapping the Page: The Struggle for Space

For Philip, however, locating silence and reclaiming poetry as a site for the expression and examination of Afra-Caribbean female identity is not solely a matter of language. It is also, as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, a matter of space –the outer public space of streets and stores and woods, the inner space of a woman's body, and for the poet the white space of the page. The commodification of the African woman's body in the colonized Caribbean, discussed earlier, makes her inner space – specifically, the space between her legs – the site of a second power struggle in which the penis, rather than the tongue, functions as the primary weapon of attack. Philip's essay "Dis Place The Space Between" articulates this struggle over space and the links between outer, inner, and textual spaces, and simultaneously lays out her own strategy for reclaiming the territories. In doing so, it provides critical insights into *why* Philip deploys space as a weapon in this struggle.

"Dis Place" is a multivocal, mixed-genre essay that draws on the experimental linguistic strategies outlined in the previous section as it weaves together poetry, drama, prose, standard English, Caribbean demotic, and quotations from sources ranging from Foucault to Philip's own journals to colonial texts dating back to 1665. The essay begins with self-reflection as Philip reconsiders an earlier piece, "Earth and Sound: The Place of Poetry." "Earth and Sound" explores the question of place and the ways poets respond to it

so as "to write *from* rather than *about*" a given physical space ("Dis Place" 287). What Philip reconsiders, however, is not what that essay says but what it *doesn't* say: it entirely omits any examination of the ways being female might affect the way one writes from and about place. Gender is silenced in the discussion. "Dis Place," in response, both discerns and sounds that silence. In doing so, it creates a detailed – though not necessarily linear or logical – explanation of the profound links between women and place/space.

Philip argues in this essay that one of the critical silences of any text, any language, is the silence of a woman's body:

> silence is
> silence is
> silence is
> body and
> text
> text and
> body filaments of silence holding them together (300)

The intricacies of this web of silence joining text and body emerge from Philip's conception of space as itself gendered. Even before she turns to the inner space of Afra-Caribbean women, she argues that space, inner and outer, reads differently for all women because of the threat of rape:

> By far *the* most efficient management tool of women is the possibility of the uninvited and forceful invasion of the space between the legs – rape. Which is a constant. A threat to *the* space – the inner space between the legs. Even if never carried out, this threat continually and persistently inflects how the female reads the external language of place, or public space –the outer space. (288)

This threat means that a woman's sense of physical space – the places she lives, writes, shops, eats – is always colored by a binary that defines that space as either safe or unsafe. The universality[46] of this threat means that in some sense every woman reads space in "gendered language" (288).

Having established the gendering of space, Philip acknowledges that every experience of that gendering is inflected by the circumstances of individual women (race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and so on), and turns her attention primarily toward Afra-Caribbeans. More specifically, Philip argues that because of the history of African women in the New World, "The space between the black woman's legs becomes. *The place*. Site of oppression – vital to the cultivation and continuation of the outer space in a designated form – the plantation machine" (289). The colonial system used the space between a black slave woman's legs to service both white and black men alike, and so sustain the place – the plantation – on which she lived, so that inner space and outer place are inextricably joined. The uninvited physical appropriation of her body to maintain that place produces a sense of "dis place-ment," in which "dis place" is the space between a woman's legs, the act of displacement that pushes her into the marketplace where she is commodified, and finally the geographic place of the Caribbean itself:

> Run it down: s/place mutating into dis/place, and even further into the *dis place* of Caribbean demotic English. *Dis place:* the outer space – the plantation, the New World. *Dis place* – the space between. The legs. *Dis place:* the result of the linking of the inner space between the legs with the outer place resulting in "dis placement." For the black woman "dis placed"

> to and in the New World, the inner space between the legs would also mutate into *dis place* – fulcrum of the New World plantation. (290)

Clearly, Philip makes a strong connection between the space of a woman's body[47] and the external public space. But, one is tempted to ask, what does this have to do with poetry? How does the outer space of the world intersect with the white space of the page? For Philip the silence of/on the page – here specifically, her failure to address gender in "Earth and Sound" – stands as one instance of the broader silence imposed on Afra-Caribbean women by the threat of rape and the structures of colonial and patriarchal culture. Those structures repeatedly "put women in their place," dis-placing them to a realm where they have no public voice. Philip claims that "the silence at the heart of the word is / body – the irreducible – body african" (302). Bodies brought to the Caribbean as slaves in turn become texts – objects read, used, and written onto by the slave traders and owners who control them. Within this framework, "'Missing' becomes a metaphor for the silence around the text that omits the woman's s/place. Words crowd her out into silence" (296-97). Stripped of their mother tongues, forced to take the father tongue into their mouths,[48] denied access to public spaces for the sake of propriety yet transformed into a public "thoroughfare,"[49] these women literally and figuratively embody silence.

As "Dis Place" makes clear, this link between body and text is not simply metaphorical; the literal silencing of Afra-Caribbeans – through the removal of physical tongue and mother tongue – makes it metonymic.[50] The linguistic play inherent in the terms "sentence" and "body" throughout the essay reinforces this metonymic alignment of public space, bodily space, and textual space. Both words carry physical *and* textual

valences: "sentence" slides between the punishment imposed on a prisoner and the grammatical structure on the page, just as body is both the material body of a woman and the linguistic body of the text. The sentence of silence is thus simultaneously the judgment pronounced on Afra-Caribbean bodies by white male colonizers and the fact that the only sentence these women can utter within the body of the colonizer's text is always full of silence.[51]

In response to the silences imposed by this gendering and racializing of space, Philip formally remaps the page itself, using as her model the jamettes: in the Caribbean, the jamet class included those men and women who live outside the boundaries of the social order "dividing the world between the space and place of respectability and that of the underworld, the lower classes" (290).[52] Jamettes (the feminine form of the word) rejected the conventions and morals of the middles class, but didn't belong to the criminal classes either; although some jamettes were prostitutes, many were not. Philip explains (quoting Bridget Brereton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad 1879-1900*, 166-69) that

> the men and women who comprised the jamet class in Trinidad were 'singers drummers, dancers, stickmen, prostitutes, pimps, and badjohns in general.' Jamette women often worked as domestics in middle-class homes, but middle-class society regarded them as transgressive. Jamet gangs or bands often met and fought for supremacy. (315).

Philip values the jamettes' transgressiveness, manifested in the control they exert over their bodies and their space as they refuse the place assigned to them by the politics of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. A jamette signifies "a woman possessing both the

space between her legs and the space around her, knowing her place" (290). She could walk the streets freely and sell or give her body when and where she chose. As a result, Philip explains, "To read the silence around the text one must become a jamette poet – possessing the space between the legs – the inner space – uncompromisingly – as the outer space" (297). Being a jamette poet means possessing space differently – possessing it in a way that defies the threat posed by the outer space and defies the enforced commodification of the inner space. Such defiance provides one mechanism for revoicing the silenced female body.

While Philip uses the jamettes as her primary model for this repossession, she also draws on women's physical bodies for her seizure of space. Women inherently "take up space differently" not only because of the threat of rape, which denies them the ability to possess the outer space freely, but also simply because of the shape of their bodies, particularly during pregnancy. Philip foregrounds this difference in one of the longer poetic sections of the essay:

> 2.
> high heels
> push
> pushing the body up
> away from
> earth
> thin bodies taking
> up
> less & less
> space
>
> 3.
> fetus in place
> pushing
> pushes body to occupy
> more

space
dis
tended belly taking
up
more & more
space (297-98)

Here Philip contrasts the domination of patriarchy, which attempts to literally narrow the space women occupy by imposing standards of tall slimness, with the resistance to that limitation manifested in the expansion of a woman's body during pregnancy. The physical refusal to "stay in place" seen in the swelling fullness of that body then becomes a catalyst and a model for women's ability to occupy more space in other ways:

5.
to move
leaping from occupying space to
occupying the idea
the thought
to make it your own
taking up
more & more (298)

If a woman's body can occupy more space than the patriarchal order allows, then her mind and her language can also claim their own public space. The poem mirrors this "crazy wild dissension" (298) as the slender opening of the first stanza – few words, neatly in line – spreads across the page in subsequent passages. The poem occupies three full pages, and even though Philip relies primarily on short lines, she both piles those lines on top of each other to draw out the length of the poem, and shifts their placement on the pages so that they refuse to remain "in line," confined in the position prescribed by high heels and literary traditions. The poem's structure thus functions in tandem with its language to enact, rather than simply explain, the ways a woman can "take / (up) / space / differently" (299).

This pattern of claiming space by stretching poems out across several pages and continually dislocating the left margins of each line recurs throughout this essay on place, and appears prominently in *She Tries Her Tongue* as well. The volume's nine poems occupy 72 pages. The title of each poem possesses its own page, and in several poems, notably "Meditation on the Declension of Beauty by the Girl with the Flying Cheek-bones" and "Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue," Philip double spaces every line, claiming "more & more" space for her words. And her attacks on language and claims to power sweep back and forth across the page, as in the final section of "Testimony":

VI

shall I
strike
under tongue and foot
them
– these words
hold aloft
up
in either hand
harmless
the word
that claims
and maims
and claims
again (82)

Philip's placement of these lines reflects her power to possess the territory of the page and hold words aloft, manipulating the father tongue at will and regaining some of the control denied to her ancestors.

Philip also controls textual space by centering key lines and sections in a gesture that subverts the marginalization of both Afro-Caribbean and women writers. This gesture is particularly crucial in "She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks" because both its title and its position as the final poem mark it as the culmination of the struggle with silence and the desire to reclaim language. Importantly, not every section in first-person (i.e.,

spoken by the "she" of the title) is centered. The first six are primarily left-justified, though certain sections fragment across the page, reflecting the control of space described above and also the fragmented silences of the speaker herself. Thus when she describes

this
thisthisand this
disfigurement this
dis

memberment
this
verbal crippling
this

absence of voice
that
wouldnotcould not

sing (94)

the brokenness of the words and their scattered positions embody the disfigurement described in the passage. And the position of "sing," alone in the left-hand corner and cut off from the rest of the text, further emphasizes her silence. In the final two sections, however, when the speaker proclaims the power of language and reaches for her own song, Philip centers the lines to signify the speaker's reclamation of her own space – the center long denied to her:

Hold we to the centre of remembrance
that forgets the never that severs
word from source
and never forgets the witness
of broken utterances that passed before and now
breaks the culture of silence
in the ordeal of testimony;
in the history of circles
each point lies
along the circumference

diameter or radius
each word creates a centre
circumscribed by memory. . .and history
waits at rest always

still at the centre (96)

These words literally create the still center that remembers the brokenness but simultaneously moves toward a new wholeness. As the testimony of an Afra-Caribbean woman, these words break the silence and are physically "circumscribed" by memory and history through the quotations that surround them – the definitions of history and memory on the facing page, but also the story of the three little pigs, the revision of the *Book of Common Prayer*, and so on. Rising out of these "Ashes of once in what was / . . . Silence" the speaker hopes that she, like Philomela, might now "sing" (98).

Philip re-maps poetic space in ways that move beyond the utterance of a single speaker, however. In the multivocal sections of her work, she often consciously positions discourses in relation to one another to visually reinforce her inflections of prior utterances. These effects become particularly apparent in both "Discourse on the Logic of Language" and "The Question of Language is the Answer to Power." Both position the colonial discourses so as to marginalize and fragment them. In "Discourse," for example, the colonial edicts imposing silence on slaves appear in brief italicized paragraphs in the inside margin of the page –visually lighter and more delicate, and occupying less space, than the rest of the text. The poem recognizes their role in transforming language into anguish, but it displaces them from the authoritative center and relegates them to the margin in defiance, reserving that center for the Afra-Caribbean woman they subjected to silence. The story of the mother tongue also appears in the margin (where the edicts wanted it), but rather than

remaining small and silent, it sweeps across the page in capital letters, commanding attention and forcing readers to shift their own position. We must literally turn the book sideways in order to read the story. The mother tongue, though perhaps still marginalized within Western culture, here shouts its presence and demands recognition.

A similar use of space occurs in "The Question of Language." As the poem develops, the "Lessons for the Voice" cited earlier are broken apart and marginalized (again in the fragile, light italicized text) in favor of the speaker's own declarations of linguistic control:

OH as in the slaves came
by boat
AW as in they were valued
for their 'brawn'.

but I fancy the new –
in everything
insist upon it
the evidence of newness
is
upon us
without nigger slave coolie
the wog of taint
the word
that in the beginning was
– not his
I decree it mine
at centre
soft
plastic
pliable
doing my bid as in
smash
the in-the-beginning word
centre
it at open
clean split (71)

The devaluation of Africans-made-slaves, though still present, appears overwhelmed by the speaker's assertion of power. As she decrees the word her own, she literally forces the voice

of the colonizer to the margins here; when it attempts to intrude, she deftly steps around it and continues her speech.

As a jamette poet, then, Philip consciously uses the space on the page differently, both to mark the silences imposed by history, as in the fragmented sections of "She Tries Her Tongue," and to mark her own claim on the space and assert her presence, drawing boundaries as she sees fit rather than submitting to the lines drawn by the colonizer. Position functions as a metonymic signifier and the way Philip de-colonizes and re-maps the space of the page, as demonstrated here, plays a critical role in her ongoing encounter with silence.

Conclusion

Unlike Glück, then, Philip explicitly perceives her own poetic experiments as strategies within a larger cultural project that involves the failures and possibilities of language itself. In her work, silence and inexpressibility have explicitly social and political roots: English fails to express Afra-Caribbean experience because, as a tool of colonial domination, the language has been complicit in the denigration and effacement of that experience. Like Glück, Philip grapples with the silences imposed on women by patriarchal structures, and both poets rely on form as a primary tool in that encounter. But where Glück uses silence as a shield and a weapon to reclaim power for individual women in what appear as poems of personal, rather than communal, struggle, Philip capitalizing on creolized demotic languages, develops a highly multivocal structure that enables us not only to experience the silences of the text but more significantly to locate, acknowledge, and

counter the cultural silences imposed on Afra-Caribbean women by colonial and patriarchal oppression. Her poetry, though formally more complex than Glück's, is less emotionally resistant to the reader. It both demands and creates a listener, deploying poetic form as a tool for cultural transformation. As a result, Philip is far more concerned than Glück with both remarking the territory (demonstrated by her conscious manipulation of space) and reclaiming language (demonstrated by her appropriations and transformations of both prior utterances and grammatical categories). She is not content to point only to the aporia of art and locate what the Western poetic tradition cannot say, though her poetry certainly foregrounds the gaps and silences. Ultimately Philip is forging a mother tongue that, in allowing her to map cultural and historical silences, also allows her to forge new i-mages and re-present silenced voices.

Endnotes

[1] The title of this chapter comes from Philip's own description of her work; the phrase appears in both *Looking for Livingstone* and the essay "Dis Place The Space Between." Philip herself gives no indication about whether or not she derives this phrase from Adrienne Rich, but certainly for US readers it evokes the Rich poem discussed in Chapter 1.

[2] Throughout this essay, I retain Philip's term and write of "sounding" the silences as well as "voicing" or breaking them. "Sounding" implies probing the depths of these silences to discern what might be buried within them, and it explicitly connotes an attitude of exploration. I take it as separate from "discerning" or "mapping the known edges," which implies locating the gaps in history and literature and language; once the edges of those gaps are located, one sounds them to discover the nature of what is missing. Such a discovery, or sounding, may involve giving voice to those who were once denied language, but it may mean only being able to gesture toward what might have been said. Some silences may only be explored, never fully "broken." I retain Philip's term, then, to suggest that her poetry *explores* silences, locating and probing them, and sometimes – but not always – giving them new voice.

[3] Some critics have referred to *Looking for Livingstone* as prose or a 'novel,' but Philip herself, in an interview with Janice Williamson, clearly views it as poetry: "It [*Looking for Livingstone*] started out as the last poem in *She Tries Her Tongue* . . . but grew so long it became a book in its own right" (Williamson 226). She also refers to it as a manuscript of poetry in several of her essays, including "The Habit Of," "Dis Place," and "Who's Listening" (*Frontiers*).

[4] Unlike the collages of certain Language poets, however, Philip's collages are still "readable" in the traditional sense. And her use of the poetic page as a "terriroty" to be mapped bears some similarities to movements such as Black Mountain and concrete poetry.

[5] Philip makes this point in the opening passage of *Looking for Livingstone* as she describes the way Livingstone "was shown the Zambezi by the indigenous African and 'discovered' it; was shown the falls of Mosioatunya – the smoke that thunders – and renamed it. Victoria Falls" (7). The heavy irony in her use of "discover" reminds readers that such places were known and named long before Livingstone and his counterparts entered the territory, yet their discoveries, immortalized in the act of naming the "new" place, stood as "truth" for much of recent history. Tiffin and Lawson make a similar point in their introduction to *De-Scribing the Empire* by analyzing Hillary's climbing, and naming, of Mount Everest.

[6] As Ashcroft et al. note, Rastafarian practices see even "me" or "we" as implicated in the subjection and non-assertion of self that English imposes on Afro-Caribbeans. (47).

[7] The one key exception to this, as Philip notes, is in the area of music, but even there, African musical forms, though permitted, were denigrated and mocked until the first half of this century.

[8] In positioning the creation of cultural i-mages outside the dominion of the Afro-Caribbean people themselves in this way, Philip's discussion clearly parallels claims made by a number of post-colonial critics, including Ashcroft et al., Spivak, Said, and others.

[9] See, for example, Cudjoe's "Introduction" to *Caribbean Women Writers*, in which he traces the women's literary tradition in the Caribbean, beginning in the 19th century with the works of Mary Prince and Mrs. Seacole.

[10] And, as a number of recent critics, including Philip, have pointed out, this domination did not end with the political independence of the West Indies. Philip and others see the exportation of American culture in the form of television, music, McDonald's, and so on, as simply a more subtle form of colonization, but one that still places the control of popular culture, and with it art and for Philip the creation of i-mages, in the hands of those other than Afro-Caribbeans themselves.

[11] In undertaking such a project, of course, Philip risks the label of "essentialism," reducing all Afro-Caribbean women to a single experience. Yet her attention to the historical material conditions surrounding that identity, and her acknowledgments, particularly in several of the essays collected in *Frontiers*, of the role of class, nationality, and sexuality suggest that she views her redefinition as one of *many* that need to occur by artists across class and national backgrounds. At the same time, however, Philip does see a certain amount consistency in the material conditions shaping Afro-Caribbean female identities, rooted in the separation from cultural roots, the denial of mother tongue, the prohibition against public speech, and the threat of physical violence. Such elements, I think she would argue, are present regardless of class and nationality, though the weight those elements carry may vary from woman to woman.

[12] In taking such a position, Philip effectively places herself on the cusp of contemporary theories about language. She acknowledges, along with Nietzsche and his postmodern descendants, the power of language to create worlds, but at the same time refuses to grant language the sole creative authority. Language may shape our realities in many ways, but reality, or for Philip, the i-mage specifically, also exerts pressure back on language. Language's transmissive and creative functions become inseparable in Philip's view.

[13] Or French, Dutch, etc. Since Philip is from the English-speaking Caribbean, my focus here is on those colonies.

[14] Because this issue has been examined thoroughly by a number of post-colonial critics and theorists, I have chosen simply to highlight the key issues here. For fuller discussions of the ways in which language acts to reinforce imperial domination, I would refer the reader to Ashcroft, et al. as well as to Tifflin and Lawson (*De-Scribing Empire*). In addition,

Chamberlin (*Come Back to Me My Language*) provides an extensive and insightful examination of this issue as it concerns the West Indies specifically.

[15] Within the larger issue of language, education played a key role, as Ashcroft, et al. point out, particularly once slavery ended and Afro-Caribbeans gained at least limited access to the larger social structures of the colonies. The educational systems, always established by the colonizers, "install[ed] a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalized all 'variants' as impurities" (7), establishing English as the 'proper' language, the language of power.

[16] That is, so that the reader must turn the book sideways to read it.

[17] Though a number of feminist critics and writers, including Hélène Cixous, Alicia Ostriker, Audrey Lorde, and Paule Marshall, have written about the issue of women locating a mother tongue, one of the most useful parallels to Philip's mother tongue/father tongue binary in this poem is in Ursula LeGuin's Bryn Mawr Commencement Address (*Dancing in the Dark* 147-60). LeGuin explains, "The essential gesture of the father tongue is not reasoning but distancing – making a gap, a space, between the subject or self and the object or other. . . . The father tongue is spoken from above. It goes one way. No answer is expected, or heard" (148-49). While the father tongue, for LeGuin, is the language of command, of lecture not dialogue, "[t]he mother tongue, spoken or written, expects an answer. It is conversation. . . . language not as mere communication but as relation, relationship. It connects. It goes two ways, many ways, an exchange, a network" (149). Philip's juxtaposition of colonial edicts and the mother tonguing her child clean relies on a similar formulation.

[18] In playing out this syllogism, of course, the poem is also manipulating, and mocking, the larger discourse of Western logic.

[19] Interestingly, Eavan Boland, an Irish poet who writes out of similar concerns about woman and nation in a post-colonial culture, sees a similar need to encounter the pain of the past in order to move into the future. As she says in a poem titled "In Exile," "[M]y speech will not heal. I do not want it to heal" (*Outside History* 46).

[20] Philip's position here has much in common with the formulation Edward Kamau Brathwaite develops in *History of the Voice*.

[21] Indeed, when talking about multivocality, or, to use Bakhtin's term, "heteroglossia," one can hardly avoid Bakhtin's work given its current prominence in critical discourse.

[22] Bakhtin uses the term "utterance" as his primary unit of analysis (rather than, say, the word or sentence used by linguists); an utterance is simply everything said after a speaker opens her mouth and before the next speaker begins talking (or writing). Hence an

utterance may be a word, a sentence, or even an entire book. Throughout this section I will follow Bakhtin's use of the term.

[23] Note that this sense of every utterance as "response" differs in several key respects from the concept of all post-colonial writing as an act of "writing back" to the imperial center. First, Bakhtin's formulation recognizes that *every* utterance is a response; in that sense, every text, rather than simply post-colonial ones, "write back" to whatever precedes them. Second, and perhaps more importantly, "writing back" positions the imperial center as the *only* source of prior utterances in the chain, and positions post-colonial texts in something more like direct dialogue with the imperial utterances. Bakhtin's use of "response" is, I think, more general in that he both recognizes a range of prior utterance (i.e. "a very complexly organized chain"), rather than simply one, and also sees a whole range of possible relationships between each link in the chain – that is, writing back, in subservience or defiance, is not the only possible option for the post-colonial writer.

[24] A number of post-colonial, and specifically Caribbean writers, have addressed the irony of reading only the "great" English literature that had no relevance to their lives or their landscapes. As Edward Kamau Brathwaite points out in *History of the Voice*, "[I]n terms of what we [Caribbean writers] write, our perceptual models, we are more conscious (in terms of sensibility) of falling snow, for instance – the models are all there [i.e. in their educational background] for the falling snow – than of the force of the hurricanes which take place every year" (8).

[25] The preceding utterances also include, of course, remnants of African languages, stories of African history covertly passed on, the stories about Caribbean heroes such as Touissant or Nanny of the Maroons, etc. However, for much of Caribbean history such alternate discourses have held little ideological power, often being pushed aside in favor of European standards. They are not "authoritative" in Bakhtin's terms.

[26] As it has occurred in Afro-Caribbean culture almost since its inception through the process of creolization.

[27] The italics here is Philip's; throughout this essay I have mirrored her format in the use of both italics and bold script, unless otherwise noted.

[28] This is not to suggest that all of Christianity, or all Christians, marginalized and denigrated the Afro-Caribbeans. As Chamberlin points out, there were divisions within the church between those who opposed and supported slavery, and Philip herself appropriates certain Biblical texts for liberatory purposes (see the discussion of Pentecost on p. 128).

[29] This loss becomes clearer when one reads backwards from the examples to the opening instructions about vowel sounds. In light of the revoicing that occurs within the lessons, the "position and freedom of the tongue" that affects the "quality" of sound now functions metonymically for the position and freedom of the Afra-Caribbean herself: sold, ridiculed, valued as labor and object, the Afra-Caribbean has suffered a loss in 'quality' not only of

speech but of life. Again, the double-voicedness of this poem, in which the discourse of slavery interrupts the discourse of refined education, serves to reveal the ways in which English, in various guises, has worked to strip the word away from Afro-Caribbeans, replacing the African voice with the European one.

[30] In challenging the singular lyric voice, Philip's project parallels the work of Language writers such as Ron Silliman or Charles Bernstein, who also reject the unified lyric speaker.

[31] Paule Marshall, describing her own literary heritage, touches on a similar sense of communal voice in "From the Poets in the Kitchen" when she describes sitting in her mother's kitchen as a young girl listening to the rich, varied back-and-forth talk among the Bahamian women. And bell hooks relates similar memories: "Dialogue – the sharing of speech and recognition – took place . . . among black women. I can remember watching fascinated as our mother talked with her mother, sisters, and women friends. The intimacy and intensity of their speech – the satisfaction they received from talking to one another, the pleasure, the joy" (*Talking Back* 6). For both these women, and for Philip in many of these poems, the mother tongue is a chorus of voices in dialogue with one another, not a single voice holding forth alone.

[32] Certainly, beginning with Irigaray and Cixous, some feminist theorists have argued for multiplicity as a persistent characteristic of women's writing in general. The terms of such an argument, however, are beyond the scope of this project; I want to focus here solely on multiplicity as Philip, as well as critics such as Davies and Fido, sees it – not necessarily as an essential or universal element rising out of women's bodies, but as the result, for certain Afra-Caribbean women in particular, of the particular cultural and ethnic histories that have shaped their identities.

[33] Mara Scanlon, in her talk, "Rewriting Caribbean Women: Revisionary Mythopoesis in Marlene Nourbese Philip," (MMLA Conference 1994) provides a more extensive reading of this poem and its relationship to both Afro-Caribbean and Greek mythology.

[34] Such a reading is suggested not only by the fact that the left-hand pages seem to form a continuous speech, so that the right-hand pages appear as a concurrent discourse rather than an interruption, but by Philip's own comments about reading these poems aloud. She explains, "Much of the poetry in *She Tries* . . . has become unreadable, in the sense of one person getting up before an audience and reading. . . . [ellipses mine] On one occasion, when asked to read a certain poem (*Universal Grammar*) aloud, in desperation I call on a student to assist me – the work immediately becomes a mini-drama. Constantly changing depending on who is reading it. Along with me. The polyvocular. The multiplicity of voices. That is the New World. . . . [ellipses mine]" "("Habit" 211).

[35] Though Philip gives no explanation of her validation of some elements of Christianity and her repudiation of others, I would speculate that one way to account for the difference is in the fact that the *Book of Common Prayer* belongs to the Anglican Church, and hence is part

and parcel of the colonizer's language, whereas Pentecost, and its emphasis on the workings of the Holy Ghost, has been an integral element in the African-American churches and hence, though originally part of an imposed discourse, has been appropriated and adapted as a vital element within Black culture.

[36] As in the story of Ceres and Proserpine, the story of Philomela also depends, much more explicitly, on the communion of women as a means to defeat those who commit violence against them.

[37] See, for instance, Brathwaite's arguments in *History of the Voice*, and Walcott's essay "The Muse of History," as well as the debates among Nigerian writers Wole Soyinka and Onwuchekwa Chinweizu. Since my concern here is primarily the use of the various dialects in Philip's poetry, it is not my intention to explore this debate extensively; for a fuller discussion of the issues surrounding choice of language and of the pervasive use of Caribbean variants in poetry, I would refer the reader to Ashcroft et al.'s work in Chapter 2 of *The Empire Writes Back* and Chapter 3 of Chamberlain's *Come Back To Me My Language*, as well as to Brathwaite and Walcott.

[38] As Caribbean poet Grace Nichols explains, "I do not think the only reason I use Creole in my poetry is to preserve it. . . . I find using it genuinely exciting. Some Creole expressions are very vivid and concise and have no equivalent in English" (Nichols, "Battle" 284).

[39] According to Philip, "liming" is a term "commonly used to refer to the pastime of standing idle at roadside corners passing the time of night or day. Also used to refer to convivial gatherings of people for the purpose of talking and drinking" (*Thorns* 54).

[40] In *The Empire Writes Back*, they explain, "[P]ost-colonial writing abrogates the privileged centrality of 'English' by using language to signify difference while employing a sameness which allows it to be understood. It does this by employing language variance . . . which assists in the work of language seizure whilst being neither transmuted nor overwhelmed by its adopted vehicle" (7). Their discussion of this transformation has much in common with Bakhtin's discussion of "making the word one's own" described earlier.

[41] That is, The end of the first-person section that occupies the center of the left-hand pages, quoted earlier.

[42] Similar manipulations of language occur in the work of many Language writers; again, my point is that in Philip's writing, they function not to point to "language" as referential in abstract, theoretical terms, but rather to focus on the effects colonization and slavery had on the language, and thus the identity, of Afro-Caribbeans.

[43] One could argue, of course, that many poets appropriate grammatical categories in this way. My argument here is not that Philip's strategy is new in and of itself, but rather, as in the case of each of the experimental poets under discussion here, that she is using the strategy in particular ways to foreground what has traditionally been silenced or overlooked

in language. Her transformations, I would argue, carry explicitly political overtones tied to the particular silence of Afro-Caribbean experiences, and that explicitness distinguishes them from similar acts in more conventional poetry.

[44] For a fuller reading of this volume, and particularly of the ways silence becomes something sought as well as resisted, I would refer the reader to Cristanne Miller's essay, "M. Nourbese Philip and the Poetics/Politics of Silence."

[45] Philip performs a similar kind of foregrounding through her punctuation and her line breaks, both of which serve to isolate particular ideas and issues. This strategy is at work in the gradual building of "*The tall, blond, blue-eyed, white-skinned man is shooting*," as well as in Philip's recent essay, "Dis Place," where we read "For the black woman, place and space come together in the New World as never before. Or since. To create. S/Place. The immutable and irrevocable linking of the inner place or space. Between the legs. With the outer space – 'place' of the New World plantation machine" (289). Each period serves as an emphatic isolation of concepts, here those related to women's bodies, typically ridden over, in language as well as in culture, as explained more fully in the next section.

[46] For Philip, the threat is universal not in the sense that every woman experiences it in the same way regardless of race, class, nationality, etc., or even that it is always at the forefront of women's experience, but simply in the fact that it is present, to whatever degree, in virtually every woman's life.

[47] Interestingly, in doing so Philip, like other feminist theorists such as Nancy Chodorow, rewrites the space Lacan defines as lack as instead not only fullness, but fulcrum, balancing the whole world of the plantation in its lap.

[48] That tongue equated, as noted earlier in "Discourse on the Logic of Language" and other poems, with the penis, so that linguistic and physical rape border one another closely.

[49] Slang term, particularly in the Caribbean, for a loose woman.

[50] In this insistence on metonym rather than simply metaphor, Philip echoes, consciously or not, the same arguments set forth by Homi Bhabha in "Of Mimicry and Man," in which he argues that the process of mimicry itself functions metonymically. Ashcroft et al., as well as others, also press this argument.

[51] Philip's awareness here of body as text, of body inscribed with the text of its culture, reflects her awareness of postmodern theories of language and body. Note, for instance, that she cites Foucault's *History of Sexuality* several times in the essay. Thus she describes a woman's' body as the "text which [each woman] learning to read" (302). This act of reading becomes particularly apparent for women in the way slave women manipulated their own bodies by continuing to nurse their children in order to avoid sexual intercourse and/or impregnation – the penetration of the penis always linked, in Philip, to the penetration of the tongue. Thus she asserts, within the course of her essay, "The Body

African henceforth inscribed with the text of events of the New World. Body becoming text. In turn the Body African – dis place – place and s/place of exploitation inscribes itself permanently on the European text. *Not* on the margins. But within the very body of the text where the silence exists" (303). And here, with her suggestion of the ways the African body is inscribed on the text of European culture, she makes a claim consistent with Toni Morrison's argument in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" (*Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 Winter 1989, 1-19), where she argues for a reappraisal of canonical *white* American literature "for the impact Afro-American presence has had on the structure of the work" (19) – a presence she insists is the "ghost in the machine," present but unacknowledged.

[52] The term itself, according to Philip, derives from "diametre," itself a boundary line between two halves, touching both but part of neither.

Chapter 4
"What Clicks Beneath This Talk":
The Failure of Language in the Poetry of Jorie Graham

> *"There is a hatred of literature in the writer, or art in the painter: it is the love of what art and literature conceal by representing it, and which it is therefore necessary to represent, and conceal again. One tries to listen to and make heard the secret affection, the one that says nothing . . . ."*
> Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and the jews*.

> "Are you listening? We need the scream to leave its mark. . . ."
> ("Manifest Destiny" *Materialism*)

> "You must be merciless and find it. / The secret in it. Graffiti on air. Wingscrape. Listen — "
> ("Annunciation With a Bullet in It" *Materialism*)

> " . . . Listen. Do you hear it at / last, the spirit of / matter, there, where the words end — their small heat. . . ."
> ("Pietà" *The End of Beauty*)

> " . . . listen — / what clicks beneath this talk, / beneath the hissing of the storyline. . . ."
> ("Room Tone" *The End of Beauty*)

Where the poetry of Louise Glück and M. Nourbese Philip rests primarily in the human world, dwelling on the silence of those who cannot or will not speak, Jorie Graham's work roots itself more firmly in the metaphysical realm. And although her more recent work engages the material world as she turns to particular historical moments (the Civil War, the Holocaust, Tienenmen Square), her encounters with silence are, to the extent that these terms are separable, more philosophical than political or interpersonal.[1] In poem after poem Graham commands us, compels us, even begs us to listen, immediately positioning her work within the poetry of invitation Glück describes. What she begs us to listen to, as the lines quoted above suggest, is not a human voice but "graffiti on air" – something inexpressible that lies beyond the edge of words and "clicks beneath this talk."

In a 1984 essay, Graham explains this compulsion to listen in terms of her attraction to silence:

> I think I am probably in love with silence, that other world. And that I write, in some way, to negotiate seriously with it. If poems are records of true risks (attempts at change) taken by the soul of the speaker, then, as much as possible, my steps are toward silence. Silence which is the absence of speech, or the ability to speak, the reason or desire. Silence which drowns us out, but also which ignores us, overrides us, silence which is doubt, madness, fear, all that which makes the language bend and slip. I need to feel the places where the language fails, as much as one can. Silence which is awe or astonishment, the speech ripped out of you. All forms of death and mystery, therefore, working in each poem against the hurry of speech, the bravery of speech. And I think it is very important to feel the presence of that ocean in the poem, in the act of writing the poem. ("Some Notes" 409)

In some respects, Graham's language here parallels the language of Glück's essays; both poets are drawn to what lies in the gaps formed by language, and both speak of those gaps in words that evoke, if not the transcendent, at least the sublime. Yet Glück, particularly in her first five volumes, typically perceives silence as an experience more amenable to control. Glück *uses* silence – to suggest, to imply, to speak without speaking. Though powerful, her silences are in many respects "tamed," at least in the poet's hands and, as Chapter 2 explains, never involve the fallibility of language itself.

In contrast, the silences Graham describes in the passage above are far more uncontrollable, and more threatening, for the poet – more like the silence Philip confronts in *She Tries Her Tongue*. The telling phrase in that passage – the one that persists throughout Graham's career and comes to bear most directly on this effort – is her attraction to "the places where the language fails." An inescapable companion to language, silence for Graham is a force to negotiate with, not simply a tool to wield. The desire to enter into such negotiations brings her goals much closer to Philip's than to Glück's in that she engages in poetic exploration; Graham too becomes a "cartographer of silence" whose maps explore the territory as well as mark its boundaries. She crafts poetry that draws readers in and enables us to hear "what clicks beneath this talk." Like Philip, Graham recognizes that language cannot say everything, and she seeks to work a kind of poetic "alchemy" (to borrow Philip's term) that probes those silences and makes the failures palpable.

In Philip's work, of course, the limits of language arise out of the specific cultural and historical circumstances surrounding the Afra-Caribbean encounter with "the anguish of English"; her negotiations with the failures of that particular language and the silences it imposed probe the complex relationships between language and power and suggest that no single language system adequately represents all experience. In Graham's work, in contrast, the limitation results from "the hurry of speech" dominating our daily lives and overriding any moment of silence or failure. Through its logic, its narrative structures, its sheer abundance, language creates the illusion that it can adequately express experience and so seduces us into believing that we need not look beyond the words. Our ordinary ways of using language allow us to surround ourselves with what Robert Frost calls "small man-

made figures of order and concentration" in order to comprehend and contain the universe (113). To develop a poetics of the unsaid, Graham experiments with ways to manipulate poetic form in order to take us beyond those safe, familiar figures — figures that include sentences that operate smoothly according to predictable rules, stories in which all the loose ends are contained, coherent narrators who make sense of both self and world. Such patterns, her poetry argues, even as they enable us to manage the world, also prevent us from listening to its silences precisely because they substitute the representation for the reality and fail to point beyond themselves.

Graham views silence, then, as an inescapable complement of language. "Silence" becomes the name for what we experience when words fail, rather than a word associated with personal or cultural prohibitions. And across her poetry, these failures of language merge with the failures of other forms of representation – painting, photography, history, television, memory – so that the philosophical questions she poses reach through language to the broader issue of the failure of any representation. In part, as the passage above suggests, the failures of language occur because certain emotions, as well as certain metaphysical encounters ("all forms of death and mystery") remain "inexpressible"; any attempt to render them in words manifests the inadequacy of language to represent non-linguistic experience. But the failures also arise out of language's necessary exclusivity: typically,[2] to represent an experience in language the speaker selects certain elements, omits others, and orders a simultaneous whole into a linear sequence. Both the omitted elements and the simultaneity of the moment are effectively silenced by the representation – the unsaid and the unsayable equally embody "the places where the language fails."

Importantly, Graham's desire to locate the gaps and failures in language is not a desire to dismantle it entirely; she does not reject linguistic representation. Despite its inadequacies, representation in language remains necessary as one method of both encountering and ordering the world. Language allows us to give shape to experience and to remember what might otherwise be lost completely. It fails, but it is all we have. As a result, even as she fragments stories and sentences and speakers, those elements never disappear entirely. Instead, they thread their way through Graham's work to create poetry that is "a vessel for active tension" ("Interview" 88) that allows us to see *both* language and the silence around it. She attempts to craft poetry that, as Lyotard says all art should do, "bear[s] witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it" (47).

After examining the problems and possibilities of representation more thoroughly and providing a brief overview of Graham's poetic responses in the next two sections, this chapter explores in detail the ways in which her poetry creates the active tension that manifests the "aporia of art." In particular, it traces the development of an increasingly experimental form that moves from the more conventionally constructed personal lyrics of her first two volumes through the extended multivocal, asyntactic, non-linear poems of her more recent work. As I argue, those developments represent an increasingly complex negotiation with the silences evoked by the act of representation. Graham moves from using meditative personal lyrics to tell her readers about the failures, to using more experimental forms to compel us to confront those failures in the act of reading itself. Her

more recent work foregrounds the inevitable silences of representation at the same time that it anchors itself in recognizable syntactic and narrative structures.

"Where Shall the Scream Stick?": Representation and Silence

"Manifest Destiny," a poem from Graham's most recent volume, *Materialism*, articulates the tensions inherent in representation in more concrete terms and provides a useful touchstone for this discussion. The poem begins in a Civil War museum full of murals depicting the battle scenes, diary pages photographed and blown up for twentieth-century tourists to read, and even a bullet with bitemarks left by a wounded soldier bearing witness to his pain. Confronted by all these artifacts, the speaker senses the confused reality of war they are supposed to represent:

> Earlier it was
>
> muzzleflash, dust. All round in the woods
> voices and order but you can't be sure whose.
> Here's a sunken place by the road for
> shelter, for the speechless
> reload.
>
> Tents that way, or is it fog?
> Or is it freedom?
> A horse with his dead man
> disappears.
> The line is *where* that has to be maintained at all
>
> cost?
> Smoke clears and here's
> a thousand peachtrees,
> a massacre of blooms, or is it smoke? (95)

The uncertainty of the entire experience is marked by the failure to answer even seemingly obvious questions. This ungraspable, inexpressible chaos finds its locus for the speaker in

the bullet that bears the marks of a soldier silencing his own pain. The bitemarks make his unvoiced screams powerfully visible: the soldier silences his pain, but leaves behind "this leaden permanence" to record its presence. In contrast, the speaker turns to the diary in which a captain uses language to record one southern soldier's confused horror as he asks "oh / God what made You / come down here to fight?" (96) and asks,

> Do you think these words are still enough?
> And the next thing and the next thing?
> Where is the mark that stays?
> Where is what makes the mark
>
> that stays? (97)

Given the visible impression of the silenced scream, she questions the power of words to enact such embodiments.

Amid the reified exhibits, though, the scream and the human suffering that it signifies are lost. These representations, constructing a narrative and offering up stilled images to recall the war, instead cover the violence the way the peachblossoms continually cover the battlefield, hiding the brutality. Searching for "something speechless and dense and stationary" that she senses behind these images, something that touches the actual experience of war, the speaker cannot penetrate the veil:

> Hear the theories come to cloak it — buzz.
> Hear the deafness all over the trees, green.
> Hear his scream go into the light.
> See how the light is untouched
> by the scream that
> enters it.
> Dust motes.
> Peachblossom-fall.
>
> Where shall the scream stick?
> What shall it dent?

Won't the deafness be cracked?
Won't the molecules be loosened? (97-98)

The scream enters the world, here suggested by the light, but fails to "make a dent," so to speak. Like the reality of war it alludes to, the scream has been covered and silenced, first by the soldier refusing to speak it, then again by the "peachblossom fall" that continually blankets the battle scenes, and finally by the museum itself where the speaker passes from one exhibit to the next, straining her ears to discern the inaudible. All we have are the hollow indentations on a bullet that gesture toward its presence – all other forms of representation, including language, fail to take the mark.

The Run Run of Story

In her introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1990*, Graham locates her own concerns with the limitations of linguistic representation specifically in terms of the issue of "story." For her, the insistent narrowness of the linear plot associated with traditional Western narrative structures (following characters from a definitive middle through a climactic middle to a conclusive ending) leaves no space for the silences outside it. Describing her experience at a fiction reading, Graham frames it this way:

> The person in question stood up and read wonderful, funny stories. I laughed out loud; listened to the sentences flowing by — their aggressive overtaking of the space. There was no silence, there was the *run run* of story over it all. It sprayed forward over the unsaid until it was all plot. ("Introduction" xv).

As Graham experiences it, the fluid linearity of the plot dominates the available linguistic space.[3] The familiar patterns of characters, setting, conflict, and resolution form

comfortable, reassuring structures of "order and concentration" that she and the rest of the audience can follow easily. They command what Graham refers to in a 1992 interview as "frontal vision": we attend strictly to the forward motion of the plot, not to the discordant tangents that echo at the peripheries. No visible bitemarks gesture toward what lies "beneath the hissing of the storyline."

In writing poetry that shatters such motion, then, she confronts our tendency to single-mindedly pursue the storyline – what she calls, alluding to Keats,[4] our "irritable reaching after fact, [our] desire for resolution, graspable meaning, ownership" ("Introduction" xvi). Pursuing that desire develops frontal vision but neglects the peripheral vision necessary to encounter the unrepresented world outside the story. Our ability to look sideways atrophies. To reverse that atrophy, Graham's poetry disrupts our pursuit of plot; as she explains, "poems with resistant surfaces frustrate frontal vision long enough to compel the awakening of the rest of the reading sensibility — intuition, the body. To my mind (to my *hope*), that creates a more whole reader, the dissociated sensibility restored to wholeness by the act of reading" ("Interview" 100). By creating poems in which the familiar patterns break down, Graham foregrounds the failures of those patterns and so enables her readers to attend to the unsaid beneath them.[5]

As a result, Graham crafts a poetry that, like the bullet with bitemarks, points beyond the limitations of its language to what remains unsaid. Her efforts lead to an increasingly experimental poetic form marked by fragmentation, multivocality, grammatical and syntactic disruption, and highly non-linear patterns of organization. As she explains,

> . . . [T]hrough every period of human time, when we have sought to enter, to break the surface, one of the ways in has been crooked — the blindness that one may see. And in the poets that go that way, twisted syntax, breaks against smooth sequence or sense, line breaks of queer kinds, white spaces, interruptions, dashes, overpunctuation, delays, clotted rich diction, obscurity, disorder, ellipses, sentence fragments, digressive strategies — every modulation in certainty — are all tools for storming the walls. ("Some Notes" 415)

Her own poetic experiments employ just such tools to create the "active tension" between silence and language that she seeks to make present. The title of Graham's first book, *Hybrids of Plants and Ghosts* (1980), positions her firmly on the borderland between the representable and the unrepresentable. And the poems in that volume, as well those in her second volume, *Erosion* (1983) (whose title again suggests that moment where the concrete, material world gives way), seek to step as near as possible toward the unspeakable without getting hopelessly lost. Thus a poem like "Ambergris," from *Hybrids*, chases the "[s]quids that are never seen alive [but] surface / to follow the moonlight on the water," concluding that "anything / that flees so constantly must be desirable" (7). In that poem, as in most of Graham's work, the scent of these animals whose spirits are "*Joy, Fly By Night, Green / Paradise,*" continually eludes the speaker: "it moves before me almost within reach," she tells us, full of longing. Yet even as those first two volumes seek the border where language erodes, the poems themselves remain safely bounded and framed. With their lyric speakers,

short lines, coherent syntax, and tightly woven images and narratives moments, these poems cling to structures of order.

When Graham reaches her third volume, *The End of Beauty* (1987), however, these tightly woven lyrics begin to break and bend. *The End of Beauty*, marking quite literally the end of the beautiful poem as a well-wrought urn (i.e., contained and unified), disrupts the "figures of order and concentration" found in Graham's earlier work primarily by disrupting the narrative drive and creating surfaces that resist the thrust of the plot. Lines lengthen, syntax fragments, narrative structures are continually interrupted, and the subject has at least two voices. Importantly, though, Graham doesn't rest content with the moment of ending. Instead, in *Region of Unlikeness* (1991) and *Materialism* (1993) she searches for new ways to make the bitemarks visible on the surface of the poem. *Region of Unlikeness* returns to more ordered structures, but expands the content of Graham's work from the metaphysical to the historical. *Materialism* maintains that expanded focus and offers new formal developments as Graham moves from disrupting the story to opening up the present moment; she creates a poetics of simultaneity in which we find, as she writes in "Event Horizon," "everything at the edges of everything else now rubbing" (*Materialism* 53). If silences exist at the edges of our words and our stories, then *Materialism*, it seems, multiplies those edges to force them again and again into view. We find poems like "Concerning the Right to Life," which combines scenes at an abortion clinic with those of a mother tending her child's fever, the Annunciation, and Columbus' so-called "discovery" of America. At the same time, rather than rendering the whole world as subjective experience filtered through a single poetic eye/I, these poems attempt to provide an array of voices that

foregrounds the edge of any single speaker's utterance. For example, "The Break of Day" is a complex meditation on the relationship between the material and the immaterial that contains fragments from Plato, Flaubert, Heidegger, Marx, and Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, as well as the poet's own words. As each voice tells a different story, we begin to see more clearly what any one alone leaves out. In those fragments, and the spaces between them, Graham draws us again and again into a posture of attentive listening.

As Graham continues to develop resistant poetic structures, each new book takes us further outside comfortable, familiar patterns to lead us beneath the surface of language. At the same time, her understanding of what lies beneath that surface also continues to develop. In her early work, it remains linked to the metaphysical world alluded to in the 1984 essay – the realm of inexpressible human emotions, as well as conceptions of beauty and the sublime found in poems like "Ambergris." In her more recent work, however, she extends her reach to encompass cultural and material issues as well, including women's experiences, soldiers' screams, and the atrocities of the Holocaust and Tienenman Square. What unites the metaphysical abstractions with these (and similar) cultural moments for Graham is that both elude attempts to represent them. That elusiveness constitutes the silence Graham calls us to attend to. Hers is a poetry that, as my epigraph from Lyotard suggests, tries to listen to the "secret affection" that every representation only conceals further.[6]

"We Need the Scream To Leave Its Mark": The Need For Representation

Importantly, however, in creating a resistant poetics that points toward the places where the language fails, Graham never abandons representation; it remains present, and even *necessary*, as she works to expose what lies outside it. Stories, entries in a diary, and

museum exhibits may finally fail, but, her poetry argues, we must still inscribe these marks. In the same interview in which she expresses her desire to foster peripheral vision through resistant surfaces, she also offers the balance to that vision:

> Here is beauty, and here is order, and here is the made thing and the one-on-one relationship between language and the world. Let's love it again, let's roil that classicism up again. I didn't want to get so far that my passion for that was extinguished. . . . It gets really easy to trust the disintegration over the well-wrought urn. So you have to summon that urn again. I have had to write in that kind of music again in order to experience that kind of desire-for-order again, in a real way, not in quotes. So that I might be able to break away again in a different — and newly true — way. ("Interview" 102)

Rejecting constructions of order entirely, she implies, leaves us with only the void, and nihilism takes over.[7] As a result, her work continually returns to the urn as a kind of anchor binding the poetry to human desire. Order, narrative, linearity, coherent subjectivity, familiar syntactic patterns, and the like are all necessary — not merely 'necessary evils' but necessary goods.[8] One doesn't, that is, entirely abandon frontal vision to focus only sideways; such a move risks running into walls.

If we return briefly to "Manifest Destiny," the need for such anchors emerges in the speaker's repeated demand for a "mark that stays" (97). Even as she recognizes that the collected artifacts blanket the scream just as the peachblossoms blanket the battlefield, mirroring Lyotard's continual gesture of concealment, she also longs, almost desperately, for a language that can remember. At the close of the poem's first section, she declares:

Are you listening? We need the scream to leave its mark
on the silky down of
the petalled
light – (98)

The bullet, whose tangible indentations locate what could not be articulated, suggests that such a mark is possible. Its "leaden permanence," though it cannot re-present the scream, at least visibly records the memory of "a pain that will not / diminish" that the speaker and her companion can hold, literally and figuratively. Its indentations inherently gesture beyond themselves to what has been silenced – what, in fact, they could not hold. . The bullet forms an anchor for both the speaker as she moves through the museum and for the poem as it moves through an extended meditation on failures of language. It becomes a kind of ideal poem, holding both the visible and the invisible at once.

As a result, Graham makes poetry into "a vessel for active tension" (88) that allows peripheral vision to *coexist* with the frontal view. To keep both gestures alive, the figures of order and concentration enter into dialogue, structurally as well as thematically, with the unrepresented spaces outside them.[9] While her recent poetry incorporates techniques we've come to associate with experimental twentieth-century poetry — fragmentation, multivocality, grammatical and syntactic disruptions, non-linear narratives — she balances those with the stable narrative moments, grammatically coherent phrases, and recognizable speaking subjects. Through the constant movements back and forth between the accessible and the resistant, Graham attempts to open up the boundary "between the words we speak and those that unspeak us" ("Some Notes" 415).

Hybrids of Plants and Ghosts *and* Erosion*: Figures of Order and Concentration*

As I suggested earlier, though a concern for silence has dominated Graham's poetic career, in her first two volumes it remains primarily a thematic concern. Her early poems rarely "break the surface" or adopt the "crooked way" that invites peripheral vision. Instead, though they point toward the limits of representation, formally they remain figures of order and concentration. In a sense, they are bullets without bitemarks. "Framing," an early poem from *Hybrids of Plants and Ghosts* (1980), illustrates both the thematic concern and the formal restraint. The poem concerns a photograph of the speaker taken when she was four. "Something is left out, something left behind," the speaker explains, every time we erect a frame around experience — either by taking a picture or, implicitly, by making a poem. The poem explores that exclusion:

Framing

Something is left out, something left behind. As, for instance,

in this photo of myself at four, the eyes
focus elsewhere, the hand interrupted mid-air by some enormous,
sudden,
fascination.

Something never before seen has happened left of frame,
and everything already known
is more opaque for it.
Beyond the frame is why

the hydrangea midsummer will go no further, though it continues,
why this century, late and turning,
turns away; beyond
is where the story goes after all the knots are tied, and where

the insects meet in order to become
the grand machine they are the perfect parts of; beyond
is what the wind
leans toward, easy as can be, the sheep

we have already counted,
the world too large to fit.
Within, it would have been a mere event,
not destructive as it is now, destructive as the past remains,

becomes, by knowing more than we do. (35)

Here is the same problem encountered by the speaker in the Pink Palace Museum: the world is "too large to fit" into the frame provided by the photograph. In capturing the child, this photograph also points, if we look carefully, past her toward "some enormous, / sudden / fascination" that eludes representation. That fascination, though linked to the materiality of hydrangea and insects, remains insistently immaterial. It is a "why" that explains both the hydrangea and the century, a "where" that takes up once the story ends, a "what" that calls the wind toward it. The "frame" of the photograph becomes a metaphysical "frame" of reference whose limits are the story and the visible world. In describing these exclusions, however, the speaker also reminds us that framing obscures not only what we cannot see, but what we can — the story *inside* the frame is "more opaque" because of what happens beyond it. We do not see this child fully because we cannot see what she is gazing *at*.

Yet even as the poem gestures toward these limitations and exclusions, it also recognizes, in the final two strophes, the value of such frames as stabilizing figures of order and concentration. Had the world been brought into the frame, it would have become "a mere event," something safe and unthreatening. Instead, it remains "destructive" because of its vastness.[10] The past we seek to represent – in photographs, as here, or in museums or stories or poems – always "know[s] more than we do" and so not only eludes our grasp but, in these early poems, remains both desirable and threatening. To ward off that threat, the

poem, though it thematically gestures beyond itself, remains a figure of order. Like the photograph, the poem is carefully framed: a single speaker describes an image and her ensuing meditation in two single line strophes surrounding five four-line ones. Visually, the poem is neatly symmetrical. And like most of the poems in the volume, it can be contained on a single page, and its syntax remains grammatically controlled and linear. Even the extended sentence describing what the photograph leaves out proceeds in orderly phrases, each beginning with "beyond" and all meticulously joined together by semicolons. The way in which Graham builds her sentences here by stringing one phrase onto another, qualifying (as in "the past remains, / becomes") and extending each thought perhaps points toward the extended lines and fragmented, non-linear constructions that appear in *End of Beauty* and *Materialism*, but in this volume, that tendency remains carefully contained in coherent syntactical units, uniform stanzas, and single meditative speakers.

The poems in *Erosion* remain similarly ordered, though perhaps less fearful of the fascination beyond, as the title poem indicates:

Erosion

I would not want, I think, a higher intelligence, one
simultaneous, cut clean
of sequence. No,
it is our slowness I love, growing slower,
tapping the paintbrush against the visible,
tapping the mind.
We are, ourselves, a mannerism now,
having fallen
out of the chain
of evolution.
So we grow fat with unqualified life.
Today, on this beach
I am history to these fine
pebbles. I run them
through my fingers. Each time
some molecules rub off
evolving into
the invisible. Always
I am trying to feel
the erosion — my grandfather, stiffening
on his bed, learning
to float on time, his mind like bait presented
to the stream ongoing, or you, by my side,
the sleep rinsing you always a little less
clean, or daily
the erosion
of the right word, what it shuts,
or the plants coming forth as planned out my window, row
after row, sealed
into here . . .
I've lined all our wineglasses up on the sill,
a keyboard, a garden. Flowers of the poles.
I'm gifting each with a little less water.
You can tap them
for music.
Outside the window it's starting to snow.
It's going to get colder.
The less full the glass, the truer
the sound.
This is my song
for the North
coming toward us. (56)

Though "Erosion" does not address the silence of representation directly in the ways "Framing" and "Manifest Destiny" do, it still dwells on that same border between the visible – stones on the beach and wineglasses on the windowsill – and the invisible. The poem describes that border through a set of images that also describe the poetics at work across the volume. Here, as elsewhere in Graham's work, the speaker acknowledges her attraction to the failures and slippages. "I am trying to feel / the erosion," she explains, where what erodes is both the material world of the pebbles and the "right word" we use to represent that world. And in one respect, this volume displays an increased willingness to allow such erosions, indicated in part by the increased use of ellipses.[11] Those ellipses literally acknowledge the moments where words fail, functioning as small bitemarks that mark an absence. In doing so, they allow silence its space on the page and so draw our attention to the gaps.

But even as the poems tentatively seek this erosion, they retain a firm hold on order, as the example above indicates. Its erosion occurs gradually – molecule by molecule and word by word –from a position safely inside familiar structures. The opening lines of "Erosion" affirm the speaker's preference for sequential time, a neatly linear motion, over a more chaotic simultaneity.[12] The poem's final image of wineglasses lined up on the window sill creates a similar figure of order and stability. In one sense, this liquid keyboard embodies the dissolution Graham reaches for as each glass contains "a little less water" and the erosion of water, like the erosion of language, produces a "truer sound." But still, the glass that surrounds the artist's medium is never allowed to slip from its place on the sill, so that the erosion remains contained and managed.

Formally, the poem mirrors this contained dissolution, retaining order and structure with its smooth syntax, single speaker, and generally short lines. Graham's brevity, and, as noted above, her use of ellipses, themselves suggest the very dissolution of language she reaches toward. Both create silence on the page itself.[13] But despite those silences, the surface of the poem remains largely intact. Though the meditation in "Erosion" moves back and forth between the material and the immaterial, those movements occur through the orderly progress of lines and sentences. As in framing, the syntax remains clear, the lyric speaker remains present and in control of her thoughts, and the lines all return obediently to the left margin.[14] Across the volume, speakers can *talk* about the "erosion of the right word," but they do so from within smooth, elegant wineglasses controlled by the poet. The poem itself never erodes.[15] "This is my song," the speaker of "Erosion" declares, affirming both its melody and her mastery.[16]

The End Of Beauty*: Displacing the Beautiful Ending*

In Graham's third volume, *The End of Beauty* (1984), the elegantly-framed personal lyrics of those first two volumes break apart. The movement back and forth between orderly representation and the erosion of that representation persists, but now the balance shifts as Graham allows poetic form itself to erode in a number of ways. These are poems whose bitemarks are clearly visible; the gaps open again and again to confront us. As Graham breaks the surface to listen to the silences created by language, she leaves behind the wineglasses and adopts the "crooked" way described earlier – the way that employs "twisted syntax, breaks against smooth sequence or sense, line breaks of queer kinds, white

spaces, interruptions, dashes, overpunctuation, delays, clotted rich diction, obscurity, disorder, ellipses, sentence fragments, digressive strategies. . . " ("Some Notes" 415). By adopting these tools, Graham's poetry moves from describing or gently invoking the failures of language to more fully enacting those failures in ways that compel her readers to listen differently.

In *The End of Beauty*, the primary surface Graham breaks is the story: she frustrates frontal vision by continually undoing the plot to explore the silence beneath it. Like the reified narrative of the Civil War contained in the museum, the story cannot "take the mark" of the screams that sound at its edges because the insistent narrowness of a linear teleology leaves no space for silence. It commands frontal vision by forcing us to attend to the storyline, not to whatever echoes at the peripheries. The result, as Graham said of the fiction reading, is that "the *run run* of story . . . spray[s] forward over the unsaid until it [is] all plot" ("Introduction" xv). In its narrowness, this narrative motion becomes linked, particularly in this volume, with what Graham calls "ending-dependence":

> . . . the way the sentence operates became connected, for me, with notions like ending-dependence and eschatological thinking. With ideas like manifest destiny, westward expansion. Imperialism of all kinds. I began to notice how the forms our Western sensibility creates are, for the most part, ending-dependent. . . . Cause and effect, the link-up into narrative, all of this dependence on closure and strategies for delay in relation to closure, you know, whiz, bang, is terrific as long as we're thinking of it in terms of art. But when we start realizing that by our *historical* thinking we have created a

> situation whereby we are only able to know ourselves by a conclusion which would render *meaningful* the storyline along the way — it becomes frightening. ("Interview" 84)

This ending-dependence moves our attention from the multiplicity of voices exploding within the present moment to the endpoint where everything reaches its resolution. With the ending, and therefore the "meaning," in sight, we look towards it single-mindedly and listen only to what falls along the narrative line. And even those sounds matter only *in relation to* the conclusion; with the plot in place, nothing has meaning in and of itself in the present tense. One need not listen to the scream, nor seek a way to let it leave its mark, because the agonized screams of soldiers dying on a battlefield have no meaning in terms of stories of heroism and victory.

To enable us to hear "what clicks . . . / beneath the hissing of the storyline," Graham fractures that line on both the micro and the macro levels in this volume. Her poetic line lengthens (as do the poems themselves), sentence fragments pile up on each other endlessly, and syntax no longer clearly proceeds from subject to verb to period. Moreover, the neatly framed narratives that marked earlier poems are here subject to constant disruption and delay. And significantly, the delays she creates are not those associated with suspense — the mystery writer drawing the plot out to make the reader hunger for resolution; instead, they are delays designed to distract us from the ending all together. As a result, the "endings" of these poems tend to open out rather than close in as the tension between the story and what clicks beneath it remains unresolved.

As she writes poetry that, in its crookedness, is constantly undoing itself, Graham takes as her model Penelope, the woman who each night takes apart the tapestry she has labored so carefully to create. This nightly unweaving serves as the volume's dominant gesture, as revealed in the opening of "Ravel and Unravel":

> So that it's right, isn't it, that she should come to love it best,
> the unraveling, every night,
> the hills and cypresses turning back
> into thread again, then patience again, then . . . . (68)

She learns to love this unraveling precisely because it provides a way to break the frame and return the stilled, silenced moment to life. But importantly, this love of "undoing" does not completely exclude the made thing; Penelope both unweaves *and* reweaves the patterns, and Graham's work in this volume suggests that both gestures are necessary. Hence though the poems in this volume repeatedly disrupt the plot, they also engage narrative frameworks — both mythic narratives such as Penelope's, and personal ones. Similarly, while Graham disrupts or delays syntactic closure in some places, she retains syntactic logic in others (as in, for example, the four lines above).

Graham's experimental strategies in these poems thus disrupt the "run run of the story" to make the silence at the margins palpable without completely destroying the narrative threads. This gesture is evident in a number of poems in *The End of Beauty*, but it surfaces perhaps most directly in the volume's five "Self-Portrait" poems:[17] "Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them" (subtitled "Adam and Eve"), "Self-Portrait as Both Parties," "Self-Portrait as Apollo and Daphne," "Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay" (subtitled "Penelope at Her Loom") and "Self-Portrait as Demeter and Persephone." These poems negotiate between the plot and its silences both formally and thematically as they explore

the interplay between mythic characters.[18] The poems define self not as a unified, and thus neatly framed, subject but as two figures in constant motion, one relentlessly pursuing its storyline to the desired conclusion and exercising frontal vision, the other — the woman traditionally silenced by that storyline — resisting that pursuit and seeking instead to step out of the plot entirely and watch peripherally. [19] The sought-after conclusion takes a different shape in each poem: Eden for Adam, Eurydice's return to earth —and an earthly body — for Orpheus ("Both Parties"), sexual union for Apollo, the completion of the tapestry for Penelope's lovers, and finally Persephone's return to the safety of earth for Demeter.[20] Each poem also offers a different version of the interaction between the two impulses — Adam and Eve, for instance, "share the day" in a way that allows both his motion and hers to coexist harmoniously; Apollo and Daphne remain violently irreconcilable; Penelope moves back and forth between the story and its undoing. And because the poems enact this dynamic between closure and resistance formally as well as thematically, I would argue that they function metapoetically to describe a poetics that oscillates between "the story and its undoing." Neither the story alone nor its complete disruption will suffice; the scream must leave its mark, but it must leave its mark *on* something – one can't have bitemarks without a bullet. By moving back and forth between the two impulses, the poems make such marks.

In these portraits, the story is gendered male while the unrepresentable "something" outside the story is gendered female, as noted above.[21] Each male figure is associated in some way with linguistic representation. Graham says of these men that they possess "this Imperial, incredibly moving, yet absurd belief that one could seize, in language, the

nothing" ("Interview" 91), where "nothing" is another term, like silence, for that which resists representation (embodied, in these poems, as mythic women). Adam walks through the fields exerting his control by naming things; Orpheus sings in an attempt to describe and outline Eurydice; Apollo tries to carve his "autograph" on Daphne-become-tree; and Penelope's male suitors strive to push the story of the tapestry to its conclusion. In each case, the men attempt to write the women into their stories, "seizing" them in language as a way to ground their own (masculine) identities: by conquering or containing the woman, the man completes the narrative of success that defines him. He exemplifies the ending-dependence Graham spoke of in which "we are only able to know ourselves by a conclusion which would render *meaningful* the storyline along the way." Conquest becomes the means to ordered self-definition. Orpheus reaches down to Eurydice, for example, "seeking her edges . . . / . . . to find crevices by which to carry her up, / flaws by which to be himself arrested and made, / made whole . . ." (15). He needs her in order to finish his own story.[22]

The mythic women, however, resist the representation of the story because its narrative serves only to silence them; buried by the "run run of story," they stand, at least in the traditional versions of these myths, as voiceless ornaments (or museum pieces) designed to accentuate the patriarchal heroes. Nowhere in those versions do we hear the women themselves; the silenced world they represent enters the narrative only as the ground for the hero's self-knowledge.[23] In Graham's poetry, however, the presence of these women, speaking and acting for themselves, disrupts and challenges the named, ordered, bounded, masculine spaces. They speak from the peripheries outside the masculine narratives, and in

doing so mark the stories with their active presence.[24] Eve's gesture (taking the apple) becomes the "break from perfection" that creates freedom within the enclosed garden where she and Adam reside. Similarly, Daphne eludes Apollo again and again, first by challenging and questioning him ("can you really / see me, can you really know I'm really who . . . / . . . no one / believes that version anymore"), and finally by stepping out of the scene altogether.[25]

In relying on this mythic dynamic between masculine and feminine motions, Graham does not equate those motions with literal men and women. Instead, the male and female characters *together* compose the self-portrait, reflecting Graham's desire to stimulate peripheral vision so that it can work in concert with frontal vision to create "a more whole reader" ("Interview" 100). By juxtaposing the masculine and feminine characters, these poems attempt, in Graham's words, to "reincorporate the *hero* part of [the] psyche back into the unconscious, uroboric female. Not in some foolish way in order to dissolve 'him' — the *mind* — but to keep everything alive, to keep the tension alive" ("Interview" 88). The hero for Graham represents the (traditionally masculine) mind that orders experience and drives the narrative forward; while the female figure represents not only silence but also a non-hierarchical, intuitive, sensory, non-linear *mode of thinking* that remains aware of the fluidity of that order and senses what lies beyond it. In a "whole reader," the two modes operate together, much the way they do in these poems.

Significantly, that tension operates structurally as well as thematically to help create that reader. The resistant surfaces of these poems, like the resistant women within them, both invite and require the kind of peripheral vision Graham strives for because they direct

us away from the simple line of the plot. Though each of the "Self-Portraits" presents an important perspective on this interplay. "Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay," in focusing on the artist-figure of Penelope, most clearly articulates Graham's poetics, and the strategies visible here provide a representative sample of those operating across the volume. Like Penelope, Graham also weaves and unweaves tapestries, though out of words rather than threads, and "Hurry and Delay" explores both the possibilities and the limitations of such work.

The poem begins at the moment of undoing, immediately displacing the forward motion of the plot in favor of strategies for delay:

1

> So that every night above them in her chambers she unweaves it.
> Every night by torchlight under the flitting shadows the postponement,
> working her fingers into the secret place, the place of what is coming
> undone . . . . (48)

The "sentence" begun here continues for another 13 lines, reaching a period in section 8. Each line reframes this act of undoing in a new way, associating it with the softening of a pattern; the lifting of story, color, progress, history, bandage, kings, and days; the play between the "done and the undone" or alternately "the story and its undoing." The compilation of images links the tapestry (Penelope's "story") to patriarchal structures, through the references to "kings," "turrets / building the walls," and "wars" (section 9) and to the teleology implicit in "history" and "progress," all of which must be undone to free what was suppressed beneath them.

And yet, story occupies a more ambivalent role in this poem because it is also a "bandage" and "groundcover" for the soil in winter. Those images suggest a very protective

kind of covering, and the unweaving ultimately reveals "what was *healed* under there by the story" (48; italics mine). A bandage must always be removed eventually, of course, but this poem reminds us that story may serve constructive as well as destructive purposes. Graham's continual engagement with narrative – for example, the story of Penelope and Ulysses used here – throughout *The End of Beauty* reinforces this possibility. The storyline acts as a reference that anchors the poem to myth, giving it shape, even as it separates the narrative thread and rewrites the meaning of that myth.

Formally, the opening lines mirror Penelope's unweaving, taking apart the narrative by separating it into numbered sections of one, two, or at most three lines so that the story of Ulysses and the suitors waiting to replace him is displaced in favor of this examination of Penelope's own gestures. After section 1, the poem continues:

2

to make them want her more richly, there, where the pattern softens now,
loosening,

3

to see what was healed under there by the story when it lifts
by color and progress and motive when they lift,

4

the bandage the history gone into thin air,

5

to have them for an instant in her hands both at once,
the story and its undoing, the days the kings and the soil they're groundcover
for

6

all winter,

7

against choice against offspring against the minutes like turrets
building the walls, the here and the there, in which he wanders, searching
(49)

The one and two-line sections break the narrative flow by emphasizing the pieces rather than the whole. The lines, separated by the stanza breaks, though in some sense complete in themselves, seem more like threads pulled from the pattern and spread out before the reader. We become acutely aware not only of the lines but of the breaks and silences between them. These lines also resist the rigid syntactic boundaries we depend on for definition, so that edges of the "sentence," as well as the story, blur. In the early lines, commas provide some clue to phrasing, but as the unweaving continues we reach "against choice against offspring against the minutes like turrets," a line that prevents readers from visually locating the precise boundaries of each phrase. Is choice against offspring, and offspring against the minutes which are like turrets? Or are choice, offspring, and minutes all against something else, and that something else is like turrets? Neither the line itself, nor the preceding syntax, provides an immediate, definitive answer. Against the loose, unwoven threads, though, the numbers mark a coherent linear progression that continues alongside this gesture of undoing. "Hurry and Delay," along with the other "Self-Portraits,"[26] follows a numbered sequence that *does* move forward through time on a structured line.[27] The sequence creates a tapestry, or a bullet, that holds the bitemarks.

The poem goes on to explore the gaps exposed by those bitemarks. As Penelope pulls the threads out of the pattern, taking the story apart, she reveals "a *mouth* or a gap in

the fleshy air, a place in both worlds. / A woman's body, a spot where a story now gone has ridden" (49). The woman's body, read in these "Self-Portraits" alternately as womb (Eve), boundless fluidity (Eurydice), and object of desire (Daphne), here becomes the site where the two motions — the hurry towards conclusion and the delay countering that hurry — coalesce. The sexualized language of the poem[28] links this gap to the open vaginal space, described as "[t]he opening trembling, the nothing, the nothing with use in it trembling –" (49). This image transforms empty space (the margins, the hugeness and confusion) into an opening of "use" for its own sake. This nothingness where language fails is not nihilism, but rather what Graham calls an "alternative shape...centrifugal, something which we don't primarily identify by its limits." As we enter, it continually expands outward, in the same ways the poems expand outward in their long, separated lines.

Importantly, in this open space we find "the threads running forwards yet backwards over [Penelope's] stilled fingers" (49). That phrase, along with the other doubled phrases in the poem — "both at once," "the story and its undoing," "the here and the there," "the done and the undone" — continually reinforce the dual motions that operate across the volume. Graham's work, as I've suggested, attempts to hold two contradictory motions simultaneously in play with a vision encompassing both the language of order and concentration *and* the "doubt, madness, [and] fear" that exists in the places where the language fails. As a result, once the threads have been undone, the poem returns again to the narrative pattern, beginning with the question "is it wide enough to live on, immaculate present tense, lull / between wars" (49). Holding both motions within her hands, Penelope

has a "present tense" that suspends the "run run" of the masculine war plot. But the poem questions the viability of that space: can we in fact live in this gap without the press of plot?

For its answer, the poem returns to Penelope's weaving. In section 13 "her fingers dart like his hurry over this openness," closing the gap and recreating, at least momentarily, a shapely story defined by its limits. As the poem explores the value of story implicit in the images of bandage and healing, the sections grow more formally contained to mirror the motion. Penelope reweaves the fabric

14

> 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

15

> approaching ever approaching the unmade beneath him,
> knotting and clasping it within his motions,
> wrapping himself plot plot and dénouement over the roiling openness.... (51)

As in the rest of the poem, Graham strings out the sentence itself with an extended series of phrases, each line ending with yet another comma designed to resist closure and rub against silence and nothingness. At the same time, the density of the lines, no longer separated into single or double strands, leans toward closure and mirrors the desire to be "trapped" and "narrowed" into a safer, more contained space. The silent gaps of the page are literally

closed by this shift. The ordered pattern of the story becomes a safe haven that rescues the hero from the limitless chaos that threatens to overwhelm him. The pattern becomes not only the barrier that prevents us from seeing but a "noble design" that soothes and comforts.

However, while the poem recognizes the necessity, and even the beauty, of this shapely story, ultimately Penelope's unweaving forms the dominant gesture. Even as she allows the story to proceed like a lover, Penelope also continually prevents its climax. "Sitting enthroned what would either of us have?" she asks rhetorically. "[I]f he were to arrive" (51) this poem suggests (with arrival linked to the completed tapestry and to sexual climax), everyone would be left empty. In response, the poem opens out again; the last seven sections contain only a single line each, all without the benefit of a single comma to mark the boundaries:

. . . it is

17

the shapely and mournful delay she keeps alive for him the breathing

18

as the long body of the beach grows emptier awaiting him

19

gathering the holocaust in close to its heart growing more beautiful

20

under the meaning under the soft hands of its undoing

21

saying Goodnight goodnight for now going upstairs

22

under the kissing of the minutes under the wanting to go on living

23

beginning always beginning the ending as they go to sleep beneath her. (51-52)

The predominance of present participles resists forward motion by insisting on the current moment, and in the final lines Graham uses "under" four times, along with "undoing" to continually remind the reader of the process at work here. Penelope's "Goodnight" is, after all, only "for now." That "farewell" gesture of closure is followed by "the wanting to go on living" and "beginning always beginning the ending," insisting not on finality but on openness. The story, when coupled with the delay, keeps a process of continual renewal alive. In both poem and self, the story and its undoing – or alternately, language and the silences that mark its failure – must balance each other so that we can continue to hear "what clicks beneath this talk."

"Everything at the Edges of Everything Else Now Rubbing": Breaking Sequence in Materialism

Against the "run run of story," whose narrative thrust commands frontal vision, then, the poems in *The End of Beauty* employ a series of syntactical and narrative delays to undo

the plot. Those delays function, as noted above, as bitemarks in the bullet of the story, foregrounding gaps where the story fails and silence enters. In their efforts to disrupt the linear plot, the poems are primarily destructive, working to *dismantle* sequential form and disrupt a given narrative line. The title inscribes this gesture overtly by marking the volume as an ending; its poems crack the beautiful forms we use to manage, and inevitably mask, the world. Although such cracks are important in "breaking the surface," as gestures of negation only they remain limited; one needs new strategies to replace the now-broken frame. And while *Region of Unlikeness* (1991) follows *The End of Beauty*, those new strategies do not emerge clearly until *Materialism* (1993), Graham's fifth volume.

Region of Unlikeness, the volume between the end of one set of strategies and the emergence of another, represents an expansion primarily of subject matter rather than form. As a result, I will consider it only briefly here. Though the poems in *Region* are generally longer than those in *The End of Beauty*, formally they offer little that is new. The lineation is regular, though closer to the long lines of *The End of Beauty* than the shorter ones of *Erosion*, and many of the poems trace the meditations and experiences of a single lyric "I." As Mark Jarman points out, in many respects they retreat back into the very structures of narrative plot that Graham had just split apart (Jarman 258). Vendler makes a similar observation when she says of *Region* that "the gaze turns to single autobiographical self portrait (which replaces the mythological dual self-portrait) and the plot of narrative replaces bundled quanta of perception" (*Breaking* 84). In Graham's ongoing negotiation with silence, then, the volume contributes little to her formal development. It does, however, extend the nature of the "unsaid" beneath the story to include not only the

metaphysical, but also the historical and the cultural.[29] The concerns Graham voices about the connections between our "dependence on closure" and "ideas like manifest destiny, westward expansion . . . [and] [i]mperialism of all kinds" emerge more clearly in this volume because the political/historical dimension is forcefully present.[30] "Fusion," for instance, concerns the speaker's experience of hearing news of Kennedy's assassination as she sits in a theater watching *Lolita*. The events of the summer of 1968 in Paris, the trial of a German concentration camp guard, and the cries of the women in prison in Rome all make their way into these poems alongside Graham's more characteristic mythic invocations. The volume contains two poems titled "History," one called "The Phase After History," and another called "Short History of the West," foregrounding the prominence of material culture in the plots of history. Despite these extensions of content, though, the poems remain formally contained. As noted above, the syntax returns to more conventional patterns (though still fractured in places), and the narrative self filters the world through a single unifying eye. As a result, the frame of the story seems to regain a certain ground here, at least structurally.[31]

In *Materialism* (1993), however, the structural space again becomes critical in the effort to locate the unsaid beneath the storyline. This volume pushes beyond the gestures of "undoing" found in *The End of Beauty* to develop a complex poetics characterized by the speaker of "Manifest Destiny" as "everything at the edges of everything else now rubbing." (*Materialism* 100). Few of the poems in *Materialism* follow a single narrative. Instead, even when they begin with a narrative, they open up to include scenes, quotations, and images from a variety of discourses, speakers, times, and places. For example,

"Annunciation with a Bullet in It" combines a speaker nursing her dog who has been shot, fragments of the writings of Isabella Leitner describing her experience in Auschwitz, quotations from Lyotard who is in turn quoting someone who denies that the gas chambers existed, the speaker remembering reading *Anna Karenina* as a young girl (along with images from that novel), and, as a sporadic refrain, the angel of the Annunciation saying over and over, "FEAR NOT." In addition, the volume contains a number of poems that are more or less verbatim "adaptations" (Graham's term) excerpting texts as diverse as Plato's *Phaedo*, Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," and Audubon's *Missouri River Journals*. Throughout the volume, disparate events and disparate voices rub against one another to create gaps and fissure that, without a plot pressing down over them, continually lead us into the silences.[32]

By crafting a poetry in which everything – that is, every representation, every sentence, every word – rubs against everything else, Graham draws us to the boundaries themselves, and to the unsaid beyond them. The more edges a poem has — the more voices, the more digressions, the more shifts and fractures in syntax – the more visible the boundaries, and the places where the language fails, become. And the multiplicity of voice in the volume continually breaks the sequential narrative order, emphasizing instead the gaps in each story and the *simultaneity* of experience that any single sequential representation necessarily destroys. By drawing together so many different discursive strands, Graham does not replace the aggressive dominance of one plot with an equally aggressive cacophony of multiple plots. Nor does she include multiple discourses in an attempt to achieve comprehensiveness – an effort to get it all inside the frame. Instead, the

fragmented nature of the multiple strands in these poems creates a sense of incompleteness that foregrounds all the unrepresentable fullness of the moment and continues to gesture toward the silence that clicks beneath the storyline.[33] Importantly, in forging poems out of the fragments of memory and text and meditation, Graham also fragments these poems formally, incorporating strategies such as syntactic ruptures marked by ellipses, dashes, and an increasing use of parenthetical remarks; non-grammatical "sentences"; and long series of disjunctive lines and strophes. These formal fragmentations open up gaps within and between the discourses that further gesture toward the unsaid.

"The Visible World" (139-41), a poem that appears near the end of the volume, provides a useful image of this poetic structure. Alhough the poem relies on a single lyric speaker and is less complex than others in the volume, it details the impetus for the simultaneity and multiplicity that pervade *Materialism*, focusing specifically on the problem of sequence and the means of exposing what lies beneath the surface. The poem's premise is straightforward enough: the speaker is gardening, digging into dirt and moss and bringing everything to the surface in the process of planting a seed. The opening lines recall the larger project described in Graham's prose, suggesting the metapoetic dimension of the gardener's gesture:

> I dig my hands into the absolute. The surface
> breaks
> into shingled, grassed clusters; lifts.
> If I press, pick-in with fingers, pluck,
> I can unfold the loam. It is tender. It is a tender
> maneuver, hands making and unmaking promises. (139)

In the act of creating a space to plant her seed, the gardener literally breaks the surface of the visible world to expose what lies beneath it.[34] And in the course of the poem, the "plot"

of ground disrupted by the gardener becomes the "plot" of the story disrupted by the poet, turning the poem into a meditation on the places where the language fails.[35]

Most of the poem details this act of unfolding, which it links to time; breaking the surface of the ground is akin to breaking the sequence of time (and consequently of plot). As she spreads the earth out before her, this gardener sees

> The speed of light, down here, upthrown in my hands:
> bacteria, milky roots, pilgrimages of spores, deranged
> and rippling
> mosses. What heat is this in me
> that would *thaw time*, making bits of instance
> overlap
> shovelful by shovelful – my present wind blowing through
> this culture
> slogged and clutched-firm with decisions, over-ridings,
> opportunities
> taken?.... (139)

"The speed of light" is critical because, as the poem later explains, "'at C there is no sequence / because there is no time' – and since / at lightspeed, etc. (everything is simultaneous)" (141). Reaching the speed of light achieves an experience of simultaneity that spreads out the moment the way the speaker spreads out the dirt. Breaking the surface and digging together "derange" time – breaking its sequential *ar*-rangement.[36] Instances normally part of a distinctly ordered plot suddenly begin to overlap with each other and the solid boundaries of sequence dissolve – or, as the poem says, time "thaws." Gardening becomes a metaphor for the poetic structure Graham uses to disrupt that familiar order and reveal that there is more beneath the surface than any single plot can contain.[37]

The form of the poem mirrors this act of spreading out the dirt as almost every line breaks off at its end to leave two or three words hanging on the right edge of the next line. Graham both describes and enacts the process here:

> . . . .It isn't hard: just take this
> shovelful
> and spread it out, deranged, a vertigo of single
> clots
> in full sun and you can, easy, decivilize it, un-
> hinge it
> from its plot. Upthrown like this, I think you can
> eventually
> abstract it. . . . (140)

In the same way that digging "unhinges" the dirt, Graham's line breaks "unhinge" the poem, spreading out the sentences themselves to force the eye to the edge of every line, and to the silences that hang there. The words at those edges exist visually beneath the surface of the line, reinforcing the gesture and provoking peripheral vision. The proliferation of dashes and ellipses in the poem serves similar ends. Dashes suggest syntactic simultaneity by enabling one thought to break into another and continually shifting our mental vision from one thought to the next,[38] while ellipses, as explained earlier, foreground the incompleteness of any given thought.

The broken sentences disrupt the sequence of the poem and displace the line as the source of the meaning, in the same way that the narrative digressions and multiple voices (along with similar syntactic fragmentations) disrupt the sequence of the volume's longer poems. Embedded in a sequence, the instant itself is lost in favor of the forward rush toward meaning – silenced by "the run run of the story." By negotiating with silence as she

does here, Graham seeks a poetry able to reclaim that instant in its own fullness; as she explains,

> Disentangled, it [the instant] grows very very clear.
> Even the mud, the sticky lemon-colored clay
> hardens and then yields, crumbs.
> I can't say what it is then, but the golden-headed
> hallucination,
> mating, forgetting, speckling, inter-
> locking,
> will begin to be gone from it and then its glamorous
> veil of
> echoes and muddy nostalgias will
> be gone. . . . (140)

Language still fails here – "I can't say what it is," the speaker tells us even as "it" appears disentangled before her. But like the bitemarks on the bullet, this disruptive gesture locates the gap where the instant exists. We are able to strip away the "hallucination" wrought by the narrative — the veil blinds us to everything but itself by pretending that it in fact *is* an adequate representation – so that the instance "grows very clear," not as a step toward the resolution of the story, but in its own right. It is this disentangled clarity that Graham desires when she commands and compels us to listen for the unsaid.

The poems in this volume, then, attempt to break the surface – of history and of the material world – and expose the silenced life beneath by displacing the linear rush toward meaning and gesturing instead toward the simultaneity of experience. They do not, however, dig up and give voice to *everything* in an attempt to create an encompassing whole. If these poems reach toward any kind of whole, it is one founded, paradoxically, on incompleteness; the proliferation of fragments repeatedly reminds us, as Lyotard says, of art's ultimate inability to represent the world, alluding to the whole by foregrounding

absence and silence.[39] Graham describes this kind of wholeness when she speaks of poems that manifest

> the desire to find – (*via* all the accretions, layerings, partial views) – a *whole view*, a view which arrives at objectivity via all the failures, all the archeology of multiple subjectivities – rather than the old (fake?) objectivity of simple representation – representation as a coded statement of beliefs (agendas really) (usually the dominant culture's) trying to pass for an objective picture of reality. ("Interview" 90).

This "archaeology of multiple subjectivities" closely resembles the concept of "everything at the edges of everything else now rubbing" as well as the gardening process described in "The Visible Earth," reaching down and exposing not Pound's luminous moments or Eliot's objective correlatives, but partial views that again and again illuminate the places where the language fails. Even her statement, employing the same kinds of insistent parenthetical comments found in her poetry, foregrounds its own incompleteness; Graham continually interrupts herself and gestures "sideways" to still the forward motion of the sentence and so locate what has been left out.

Graham extends this archaeological process across the volume to break not only the sequence of the plot, but also the monovocality of its narrators. Like the other poets in this study, she reaches for a multiplicity of voices as well as stories in order to negotiate with silence. This multivocality is most notable in the "adaptations" described earlier that appear sporadically throughout the volume in both verse and prose poems. Excerpts from Audubon's *Missouri River Journals*, Bacon's *Novum Organum*, Dante's *Inferno*,

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, Plato's *Phaedo*, Benjamin Whorf's *Language, Thought and Reality*, McGuffey's *New Fifth Reader*, Whitman's *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, and Edward's *Doctrine of Original Sin* appear as poems unto themselves, while excerpts from Brecht, Stanislavsky, Marx, Heidegger, Lyotard, and Sir James Frazer, among other sources, weave through her own extended poetic sequences.[40] Vendler treats these adaptations primarily as background material for Graham's own work; they form "the context in which her poems are to be understood" ("Ascent" 28). She claims that these texts provide "the history of the material understanding of reality" that forms "the intellectual axes of Graham's present imaginative world" (28). While the adaptations and excerpts certainly do form such axes, I would argue that they also enter more dynamically into Graham's project, both thematically and structurally. Despite the variations in author, time, place, and genre, each excerpt unearthed by this archeological upheaval addresses the nature of representation.[41] The individual writers work in a variety of media– painting, drawing, poetry, acting – and discourses – science, philosophy, theology – but all explore, directly or indirectly, the relationship between the material and the immaterial world, and the role of representation in mediating that relationship. Even her adaptation of McGuffey's *Reader*, with its focus on pronunciation and stress in speech, emphasizes the status of language as a representational medium subject to play and slippage. In juxtaposing these writers, several of whom hold quite contradictory opinions on the possibilities of representation (as explained in detail below), Graham creates a complex dialogue of "accretions, layerings, [and] partial views" on the problem of representation that relies as much on gaps and failures as on words. That

dialogue not only illuminates the history of the problem and provides the reader with an overview of what has been said, but also highlights the incompleteness and the contestability of those sayings. The adaptations and excerpts become like the tangled mass of roots unearthed by the gardener in "The Visible World" – constantly alluding to the seething, silent life below the surface of which they form only a small part.

Though the interplay among adaptations across the volume merits a full investigation, the volume's prefatory poem, "A Capella" provides a concise example of the thematic and the formal issues at stake. The poem consists of five sections, each an excerpt from another writer (Bacon, Plato, Emerson, Whitman, and Plato again), with no commentary from Graham beyond the selection and arrangement itself – the voices sound, that is, without accompaniment as they rub against each other.[42] "A Capella" begins with Bacon's *Novum Organum* offering a scientific approach to knowing the world:

> We have but one simple method of delivering our sentiments, namely we must bring men to particulars and their regular series and order, and they must for a while renounce their notions and begin to form an acquaintance with things…. (ix)

Bacon insists that only by dissecting the world and examining its material forms can we begin to know it – we *need* structures of order and concentration. He acknowledges that human nature pays little attention to "invisible objects" and what we cannot see we ignore, but asserts that our attention to the invisible must come through a careful dissection of the visible world, entering more and more deeply into material forms, or, for the artist, representations. "[I]t is better, much better, to dissect than abstract," the empirical scientist claims.[43]

Importantly, though, Graham ends each of the three paragraphs she draws from Bacon with an ellipsis, as in the excerpt above, to suggest not only the incompleteness of her quotation, but also the incompleteness of Bacon's ideas. That sense of incompleteness deepens as the poem shifts from Bacon to Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* (the dialogue that culminates with Socrates' death). Socrates warns his students of the dangers of the very world Bacon favors:

> And were we not saying long ago that the soul when using the body as an instrument of perception – that is to say, when using the sense of sight or hearing or some other sense – were we not saying that the soul too is then dragged by the body into the region of the changeable, and wanders, and is confused — the world spins round her — and she is like a drunkard when she touches change? (x)

Socrates locates the unsaid in Bacon's discourse. If we take the soul here as one version of the world that consistently eludes representation, then Socrates' question implies that any effort on the part of this soul to enter the material world by inhabiting a body leads inevitably to violent confusion.

Emerson and Whitman complicate this debate and ground it more directly in language, and specifically poetry. Emerson reminds us that "the poet finds himself not ever near enough to his object," so that the subject of the poem remains "a referred existence, an absence, never a presence and a satisfaction" – like Socrates' soul. Yet Whitman, with his celebratory exaltation, immediately contradicts the distance Emerson projects. In Graham's excerpt from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" the poet declares:

> Thrive, cities! Bright your freight, bring your shows, ample and
> sufficient rivers;
> Expand, being; keep your places object.
>
> We descend upon you and all things — we arrest you all;

> We *realize* the soul only by you, you faithful solids and fluids;
> Through you color, form, location, sublimity, ideality;
> Through you every proof, comparison, and all the suggestions
> and determinations of ourselves. (x)

In light of Emerson and Whitman, then, the excerpts from Bacon and Socrates can be read in terms of the specific relationship between silence and language as well as the more general relationship between the invisible and the visible. If Bacon and Whitman grant permission to use language (akin to the visible) as a means of ordering and encountering the invisible world, Socrates and Emerson remind us that all our attempts at linguistic representation end in failure. The poem forces these contending voices to rub against each other, troubling the smooth surface of any single voice and exposing, through the fragmentation and juxtaposition of those texts, the gaps between them. And as Graham excerpts more and more writers, this debate continues throughout the volume, with every statement, every declaration about the necessity or the fallibility of representation immediately questioned and challenged by the multitude of other voices that surround it. "A Capella," like the volume, offers no resolution to the debate, but only insists that it be heard and the effort to produce bitemarks on bullets continue. We must continue both to speak and to speak our failures.

In a similar vein, many of the volume's longer poems combine texts from a variety of sources and continually interrupt the lyric speaker's sequential narrative to gesture toward the edges of the story. Over and over these poems "dig into the absolute" and break the surface in order to open up the moment itself to all that story and language conceal. To understand the ways in which this poetics of simultaneity operates in these longer poems, I want to close this chapter by returning to "Manifest Destiny." As explained earlier, the

poem begins with the speaker walking through the Pink Palace Museum in Memphis, Tennessee, and examines the problem of representation: how to make silences present in language in the same way the bitemarks make a soldier's silenced scream present on a bullet. The poem's principle narrative – about the speaker working her way through the museum and listening for its elusive hum – forms the "bullet" whose surface the poem seeks to disrupt. To accomplish that disruption, Graham creates a complex interplay of images and ideas that unearths an array of simultaneous, inexpressible experiences and creates bitemarks in the story.

The first and third sections hold closely to the principle narrative, but rely on present tense verbs for both the speaker moving through the museum *and* the history she encounters. The verb-al subtlety disrupts the sequence and allows the edges of the two stories to rub against one another chronologically:

> No chloroform so whiskey's
>
> used and sometimes — now lifting up out of the
> incandescent case — the
> bullet we bend close
> to see the
> bitemarks on — three dark impressions — whose footprints
> on bottomland —
> whose 8,000 bodies, sticky with blossom, loosening into the wet
> field,
> the still-living moving the more
>
> obedient bodies of the already-dead
> up and down during the night,
> petals continuing to cover them.
> *Flashes of lightning showed hogs feeding on the dead* says the
> captain who hears the wounded rebel under him say "oh
> God what made You
>
> come down here to fight? we never

would have come up there."
Look, he lives to write it down. (96)

The past tense appears only in the diary quotation. All else – lifting the bullet from its museum case along with moving dead men off the battle field – occurs in a synchronic present. And as in "The Visible World," the dashes accent that present tense by creating an impression of constant interruption – everything happens at once, reminding us that the exhibits conceal a living history that does not fit neatly into a flattened linear sequence.

A similar chronological disruption occurs in the third and final section of the poem, which pushes the archaeology back even further. Again the past surfaces in the present tense as the poem moves from the soldier silencing his scream to "the young man's great-grandfather" in James Town in 1762. We find him offering his wife the first peach from the tree he starts from seeds that come from Amsterdam – these peaches linked inextricably to the peachblossoms that fall over the young man's bloody battlefield:

She puts the churn down a minute. The child is crying.
Here, he says, try it. And her mouth
over the rough skin, the fire
needing attention, the child
starting to scream.
Here the mark on the surface of that

peach.
Here the note she puts in her journal
that night.
The words for it — that taste.
The season it stands at the heart of, that
sweetness not entirely sweet.
A fruit part sunshine part water she writes.
But what she's thinking is his face when he came into the room

holding it
this morning. What was it
he held in his hand

that his face
could not see
could not hold? (103-4)

The poem is no longer about the direct experiences of its speaker, but about a woman two hundred years dead, buried by the story but still alive underneath it. Her bitemarks in the peach resonate against her husband's silence rather than her own, but the poem binds this moment to the bullet and the soldier through both its language and the subtlety of its line breaks. Her diary mirrors the captain's, offering inadequate words to describe a moment, and the scream, the bite, and the surface of the peach all recall the poem's opening images. By isolating the line "starting to scream" and hanging the phrase "Here the mark on the surface of that," unfinished at the end of the stanza, Graham sharpens this evocation and inescapably joins this moment to the war a hundred years later.[44] The story lies spread out in a continuous present that breaks the ordered sequence of history and reminds us of everything the museum's exhibits fail to represent. Both bitemarks offer the same testimony, pointing to an unsaid and to the inadequacy of language to contain it.

Both the first and the third sections, then, expose the aporia of art and enable the scream to leave its mark by taking bitemarks out of the narrative sequence and disrupting chronology. But the formal strategies at work in this volume involve more than simply opening up a single narrative, as the second section of this poem demonstrates. The narrative "I" disappears and the poem moves from inside the museum to a peach orchard on the Mississippi River, site of the Shiloh Battlefield. Physically, the section is still bound to the Civil War. But its images probe the relationship between the river (figured as stream/scream) and the light, figured metaphorically as Leda and the Swan, and implicitly

suggesting the relationship between silence and language. The tone is more meditative and philosophical as the opening lines both separate and join this section to the two that surround it by foregrounding the failure of language:

> She's the scream he's the light.
> They are playing, sort of, at Leda and the Swan.
>
> No, she's the *stream* he's the *blossomfall*?
>
> Do you think these words are still enough?
>
> Something out there on a spot in the middle of the
> river.
>
> Where the sun hits first and most directly.
>
> Where there's a little gash on the waterfilm.
>
> An indentation almost a cut his foothold.
>
> Her a stream, yes, though not less a girl,
> him the light become winged in its lower reaches,
> almost biting the water there where it touches
>
> or so the story goes – (98)

The images – scream, light, blossomfall – all link this section to the previous one. The poem is still concerned with words that are not enough. But in shifting the framework, Graham moves the problem of linguistic representation from the material to the mythic, and ultimately the metaphysical – creating yet another edge and interrupting the "natural" sequence formed by Sections 1 and 3.

Formally, the section demonstrates other key shifts. The more narrative 1st and 3rd sections employ strophes that, though fragmented, join together, as you can see, to create a continuity that enables the story to cohere. The strophes in Section 2, however, are

generally only one line each, and, in the first half of the section at least, those lines all end with decisive periods regardless of their grammatical unity. The effect is to fragment the section into a series of irreconcilable instants that mirror the impossible marriage of scream and light and once again illuminate the moment of failure:

> He wants to go into her, he goes through.
>
> Can't seem to find her: can't seem to find her.
>
> The more he enters the more she disappears.
>
> Can't seem to find her, can't seem to find her.
>
> The insects whining high, and whining low.
>
> The toothed light down hard on the sinewy scream.
>
> She is asking for it he is not there.
>
> He is promising forever she is not there. (99)

Just as he fails to enter her and leave his mark, each line fails to enter the one that follows it, and our eyes are drawn not only to the words, but to the inescapable gaps between them. As the section progresses, the language becomes more abstract and the divorce between scream and light emerges as a metaphysical problem:

> Where the scream is, the light is broken for
> the instant —
> Where the light is brighter the scream is
> the instant —
> Where they thought they could marry —
> In which they thought they could touch
> each other —
> The instant: they can't see it: a scent: in it
> the place something maybe took
>
> place but what —

> How can the scream rise up out of its grave of matter?
> How can the light drop down out of its grave of thought?
>
> How can they cross over and the difference between them swell with existence?
>
> Everything at the edges of everything else now rubbing (100)

Even in the instant when a marriage between scream and light is possible, reinforced by the lines coming together into a longer strophe, Graham still fragments her sentences with dashes that resist cohesion and disrupt the forward motion of any conventional marriage plot – between Leda and the swan as well as between thought and matter or language and silence. This fragmentation becomes even stronger in the final lines of the section as Graham joins together a series of parenthetical expressions and phrases full of ellipses that expose again and again the layers of unsaid that remain underneath any smoothly written sentence.

The questions this section poses – "How can the scream rise up out of its grave of matter?" "How can the light drop down out of its grave of thought?" "How can they cross over and the difference between them swell with existence?" – become in many respects the driving force of this volume, and the strategies at work here recur again and again as Graham strives to let the difference between the language of thought and the experience of matter "swell with existence" – as she strives, that is, to enable us to listen to the silences.[45] The best we can hope for, as this poem says, is the everything at the edges of everything else now rubbing – only there, with the gaps exposed, can we love both the language and the places where the language fails.

Conclusion

Over the course of her career, then, Graham has developed increasingly experimental structures in her attempts to engage silence and foreground the unsaid present in any representation. To enter language, for her, is always to enter silence. Not content with simply conceding inexpressibility, she creates structures that foster the peripheral vision necessary to listen to whatever lies beneath or beyond the story's edge – structures that continually attempt to give shape to what they cannot say. Unlike Glück, who until *The Wild Iris* crafts her poems out of a silence that often appears the result of human choice, Graham shares with Philip an explicit awareness of silences that result from the failures of language itself, though as noted earlier her concerns are more philosophical than political. In their metaphysical slipperiness, though, her silences occupy a less readily definable cultural position than Philip's, and often the surfaces of her poems appear more resistant and less explicitly confrontational even as both women challenge current modes of language use. Importantly, Graham's resistant surfaces, as this chapter demonstrates, differ sharply from the resistance offered by Glück's poems in that Graham's attempt to transform readers, drawing us in rather than holding us at arms' length. They do not create poems "caught in amber," as Glück says, but poems whose very complexity and resistance invites us to break the surface. Graham's challenge is to use language in ways that explicitly acknowledge its failures without rejecting it entirely, so that the poem is both accessible *and* resistant. The multivocal, fragmented, asyntactic poetics of simultaneity she develops by the time she writes *Materialism* meets that challenge by offering us narrative threads yet continually

gesturing, like the bitemarks on the bullet, beyond the smooth, hard surface of the poem to the elusive “graffiti on air” that hums just outside our hearing.

Endnotes

[1] This distinction is particularly apparent in the different functions of the first person lyric in Graham and Glück. Graham relies much more heavily on meditative, impersonal speakers rather than on personal lyric "I's." The personal "I" certainly appears throughout Graham's work, but it almost always appears within a larger "philosophical" meditation. The single speaker functions as an agent of the poem rather than, as in Glück's work, its subject.

[2] I say "typically" here because a number of writers, including Graham as well as many of the Language writers, attempt to complicate, and often disrupt or displace, this representational use of language.

[3] Certainly Graham is not alone in her critique of this form of story, and her concerns do not take into account alternative paradigms that, in many ways, address the same concerns she confronts in her poetry.

[4] Keats, in a letter to his brothers, defines his Negative Capability as that condition "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. . ." (Abrams 863).

[5] Along with this concern over our cultural obsession with plot and meaning, Graham also talks about her work in terms of the dominance of the image in contemporary culture. Our reliance on image creates, as she sees it,

> . . . a pervasive distrust of *thinking* people; a distrust for all nonlucrative activities; a general impatience with depth, and a shortened attention.
>
> Sound bites, shortcuts, clips, trailers, minimalist fragmented 'dialogue,' the Reagan-era one liner on the way to the helicopter: the speed with which an idea must be 'put across' is said to be determined . . . by the speeded-up, almost decimated attention span of the bored, overstimulated viewer who must be caught, bought, on the wing, as he or she is clicking past, 'grazing' the channels, wanting to be stopped, but only momentarily. ("Introduction" xix)

Soundbites, of course, are the verbal equivalent of advertising images – a quick flash that "gets the point across" as quickly and mindlessly as possible. The pervasiveness of minimalist language and rapid-fire images, built on the assumption that international politics, local news, and the benefits of the latest laundry detergent can all be adequately explained in one-page ads and thirty-second commercials, leads to a culture that operates almost entirely on its frontal vision. And while soundbites and MTV may move away from the "run run of the story," they do so at a speed that still creates that "aggressive overtaking of space" and so excludes silence. Graham's efforts to slow down her readers attempts to work against the rush of commercial culture in an attempt to revive that "decimated attention span." However, her concerns with this soundbite culture, though certainly present in her poetry, are less central to her work than the problems of story and sequence discussed above.

[6] In *Heidegger and the jews*, Lyotard explores this concealment primarily in terms of the ways representation substitutes the image for the reality. Once something is represented, he argues, it is more easily effaced and we as viewers lapse into a forgetful complacency – we have the representation, the memorial, and hence the "problem of forgetting" is ostensibly resolved. With the representation comfortably in place, we no longer need to remember. Consequently, we forget. Similar formulations permeate the discourse of poststructuralism – in Baudrillard's conception of the simulacrum, for instance, and in Derrida's pronouncement that every signified is always already another signifier and the referent, or the real, always remains at a distance. Instead of functioning iconically, the representation displaces the thing represented. Not all theorists, however, necessarily view this displacement as problematic in the ways the Lyotard and Graham do.

[7] Obviously, not all poets view nihilism and anarchy as "bad" states to find oneself in. In Graham's work, however, such states represent a loss of one's humanity and selfhood, as well as a loss of one's connection to the world itself.

[8] To speak of "necessary goods" here immediately raises the specter of Stevens' "necessary fictions," and in fact Graham has much in common with Stevens. Though such explorations are outside the scope of this project, future studies of Graham's work would do well to examine those commonalties in more detail.

[9] Not all of Graham's readers acknowledge this dialogue. In particular, while Helen Vendler, in her essay "Jorie Graham: The Moment of Excess" (*The Breaking of Style*), accurately reads the impulse to formlessness that surfaces in Graham's work beginning with *The End of Beauty*, she reads that impulse as more pervasive than it is, I would argue. In Vendler's reading, that impulse becomes not only present but dominant. In her words, "[T]he preeminent move in the book [*The End of Beauty*] is a struggle against the intellectual and formal dénouement of shapely closure. Rather, there is now in the poet an assent . . . to uncertainty and unpredictability: this is the vertigo felt as one abandons old and predetermined ways in favor of the pull of the unknown beyond the precipice of the new . . ." (78). I would argue, however, that this assent that Vendler so aptly describes is always balanced by an equally powerful assent to form as an epistemological necessity.

[10] To say that bringing the world inside the frame reduces it to "a *mere* event" necessarily critiques the representation because it implies a certain reductiveness, and in this sense the poem perhaps towards Graham's later willingness to bend her poetic frames. However, here what lies outside the frame remains more threatening than tantalizing, and the poem, even though tantalized by that destruction – it is, after all, a "fascination" that exists beyond the border – still inclines toward the safety of the frame.

[11] Only 10 of the 45 poems in *Hybrids* use ellipses, while they appear in 23 of the 33 poems in *Erosion*, and often ellipses appear in several places in those poems.

[12] These lines form a marked contrast to the poetics Graham favors by the time she reaches "The Visible World," a poem from *Materialism* discussed later in this chapter. In that poem

the speaker moves in the opposite direction: “Bring this pellucid moment – here on this page now / as on this patch / of soil, my property – bring it up to the top and out / of / sequence,” the speaker there demands (141).

[13] In those terms, Graham’s poetry has much in common with the poetry of invitation and suggestion Glück values and at times offers.

[14] At times, in both this volume and in *Hybrids*, Graham indents every other line; her lineation remains regular, however, throughout any given poem. And like those in *Hybrids of Plants and Ghosts*, the poems in *Erosion* remain what Bonnie Costello calls “a form of rescue from the flux” (Costello 386). That is, in their formal control, as well as in their images, these poems allow us to look at “the dismemberment of reality” (377), but continually return us to a place of order and safety. The poems function as icons in Costello’s view – recognizable images that allude to something beyond themselves, but never leave the viewer lost in the unknown. Similarly, Helen Vendler characterizes Graham’s work here as poetry of “deliberation” in which the poet proceeds, “increment by increment, to a mastery of the world” (*Breaking* 74). Their primary gesture is one of control. For a fuller discussion of the ways in which the poems in those early volumes continual resolve themselves into safety, see the discussions by Costello (“Jorie Graham: Art and Erosion”) and Vendler (“Jorie Graham: The Moment of Excess” in *The Breaking of Style*).

[15] Whether or not Graham *wants* the poems to act as points of rescue is debatable, since so many of them, as Thomas Gardner points out, seek “the ultimate limitations of one’s language . . . [and permit] us to run our hands along the cracks and gaps explosively patterning all of our attempts to order things” (Gardner “Accurate” 4). But despite the suggestion of those fissures at the edge of language, the poems themselves rarely, if ever, crack in mid-stream to lead us outside the vision of the narrator to a place beyond the safety of the story.

[16] In establishing this sense of mastery of the poem, Graham’s early work perhaps shares certain characteristics with Glück’s, as discussed in Chapter 2. But despite the fact that both poets write controlled verse, that control produces markedly different effects, I think. Where Glück uses control to keep her readers at a distance, Graham’s more meditative, philosophical tone in fact invites readers in and the control forms a kind of safety net around both speaker and reader, as Costello’s essay noted above suggests.

[17] For brevity, I will refer to these poems as "Gesture," "Both Parties," etc. for the remainder of the essay. Note, as well, that Vendler, in “The Moment of Excess,” includes “Pollock and Canvas” as a self-portrait since it also uses the numbered stanzas and, at least in part, enacts a dynamic similar to those found in the titled “Self-Portraits.” On similar grounds, her list in *The Given and the Made* includes “Orpheus and Eurydice” and “Noli Me Tangere.” However, here I am treated only those poems Graham herself titled “Self-Portraits.”

[18] In reworking both Greek and Judeo-Christian myths, these five poems belong, at least to some extent, to the tradition of revisionist mythology Alicia Ostriker traces in *Stealing the Language* and explored by a number of other feminist scholars in recent years. Significantly, however, while Graham does "re-vision" the position of the women in these myths, she does not see her work as explicitly feminist. She describes the two figures as "motions of the spirit" happening "within the psyche" of human beings of either gender ("Interview" 87) and her primary concern, as my discussion makes clear, is on the nature of these motions rather than on their implications for issues of gender. Nonetheless, those issues remain inescapably present throughout the poems.

[19] Importantly, the last two "Self-Portraits" alter this dynamic slightly. In "Hurry and Delay" Penelope embodies both motions within herself, weaving her tapestry in deference to the men who pursue her and unweaving it to create her own free space of delay. In "Demeter and Persephone" in contrast, Persephone occupies the space of the silenced woman while Demeter, though also female, functions more as a phallic mother, upholding the ordered framework. Hades represents the absolutely unbounded world that stands opposed to Demeter's safely ordered framework. His unboundedness, however, becomes a kind of nihilistic destruction rather than an open freedom, and Persephone — the silenced woman – ends up resisting the constraints of both her mother and her lover by moving between the two worlds.

[20] Or alternately, her permanent inhabitation of hell for Hades.

[21] Graham's treatment here of masculine and feminine gestures, linking linear, rational thought to the male figures in the poems and fluid, intuitive thought to the female figures, certainly runs the risk of accusations of essentialism. Despite the fact that Graham dissociates these motions from actual men and women and argues that the two motions are "within the psyche" ("Interview" 87) of each individual, her characterizations create a number of problems and are potentially destructive from a feminist critical stance. However, because Graham applies this male/female binary only within the context of these poems (rather than across her work), and because her larger project —that is, this negotiation with silences — pays little heed to "masculine" versus "feminine" constructions of language and representation, a thorough investigation of these questions and problems lies outside the scope of this dissertation.

[22] Several feminist scholars have raised similar points. Irigaray, for instance, in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, explains, "In order to touch himself, man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman's body, language. . ." (24). In Irigaray's framework, woman traditionally functions as merely a kind of prop through which man knows and touches himself.

[23] Again, in "Demeter and Persephone," it is only Persephone who occupies this silenced position in the poem.

[24] Graham's portrayal of these women as figures silenced by the patriarchal narrative, who nevertheless continually disrupt the story clearly has much in common with certain strands

of feminist critical theory of the late 1970s and 80s. By linking women to the silent spaces outside patriarchal language, Graham's poetry most obviously parallels the work of French feminists such as Irigaray and Cixous. As silenced figures, these women represent the same kind of feminine excess those critics describe; in Graham's poems, these mythic women continually resist all (masculine) efforts to define or possess them. Eurydice, for example, despite Orpheus' need to locate her edges and return her to the surface, instead sinks back into the river. She prefers the unbodied fluidity, explaining that "the drowning is too kind, / the becoming of everything which each pore opens to again, / the possible which each momentary outline blurs into again" (15). At the same time, because they are presented as self-portraits, the poems implicitly raise the issue of autobiography addressed by a number of American feminist theorists. As they enact the opposition between masculine and feminine definitions of self, the poems parallel the work of critics such as Sidonie Smith, Domna Stanton, and Shari Benstock who focus specifically on women's autobiographical practices. These critics argue that the presence of a female "I" challenges the unity and teleological of the traditional (male) autobiographical subject by creating "fissures of female discontinuity" (Benstock 20) that works against teleological development, much the way Daphne interrupts Apollo and refuses to let him "get on with the story" he wants to tell.

[25] "She stopped she turned, / she would not be the end towards which he was ceaselessly tending, / she would not give shape to his hurry" (32), the poem tells us, rewriting Daphne's transformation as an act of resistance that refuses the representation Apollo attempts to impose on her.

[26] "Pollock and Canvas" follows this same pattern in its second section. Other poems in the volume such as "Orpheus and Eurydice" and "To the Reader" also employ one- or two-line stanzas, but without the numbering.

[27] Helen Vendler, in "Jorie Graham: The Moment of Excess," reads the numbering scheme in these poems as working in tandem with the longer lines and fractured syntax to take the poem and its readers out of safety and meaning. But the poem itself is titled "Hurry and Delay," and, along with the volume's other "Self-Portraits," it mediates between *two* motions — the movement toward closure and the movement away from it. In consequence, I would argue that in fact the numbering represents the forward narrative line of the poem, comparable to Penelope's *weaving* of the tapestry during the day (her "hurry" to complete the story), while the other elements mentioned above constitute the unweaving.

[28] As in the previous "Self-Portraits" (most notably "Apollo and Daphne," in which Apollo wants "to possess [Daphne], to nail the erasures, / [3] / like a long heat on her all day" (30)), the "story" here becomes not only the mythic narrative, but the sexual one as well. Even in our most personal moments, Graham suggests, we find ourselves trapped in a narrative with only frontal vision.

[29] Though the "Self-Portraits" in *The End of Beauty* figure the unsaid in terms of women's experiences and women's bodies, which potentially links the poems to the material world,

those women remain mythic rather than material. Moreover, because they function as one part of the binary that forms "self," these mythic women represent, as Graham herself says, "modes of thinking" or motions "within the psyche" rather than cultural/historical experiences.

[30] As Helen Vendler aptly puts it, "Graham's tendency, in her first books, toward the exalted and the prophetic has been severely tempered, by the time she writes *Regions of Unlikeness*, toward the material and the actual" (*Given* 116).

[31] For a fuller discussion of the themes and directions of these poems, see Helen Vendler's reading of Graham's work in *The Given and the Made*.

[32] Graham's strategies here certainly owe much to the modernist collage of Pound, Eliot, and others. My concern in examining her work, however, as I note in Chapter 1, lies less in the "originality" of her poetic structures and more in the ways in which those structures function within the larger project of making the unsaid audible.

[33] In making this claim here, I take issue with Helen Vendler's reading of the multiplicity in *Materialism*. In *The Breaking of Style*, Vendler treats these poems as attempts at totalization rather than incompleteness. In her words, "Total coverage is the ultimate effect toward which Graham has been tending with her long lines ever since they first appeared" (85), and her reading of the poems in this volume emphasizes such a gesture. However, as I have shown throughout this chapter, I see Graham's primary impulse not as the desire to "say it all," but rather, with Lyotard, to say that it cannot be said, and to remind her readers again and again to what has been silenced in the very act of saying.

[34] In many ways, the image Graham present here of reaching down into the dirt and bringing up what lies buried there resembles Pound's images in *The Cantos* of Ulysses calling forth the dead in Canto I and So-Shu churning the sea in Canto II. But where Pound (and poets such as Olson and Williams who followed him) performed these upheavals to reveal the "luminous moments" of the past and somehow shape the future, Graham's own upheaval's serve to illuminate the moment itself and the nature of representation, as the arguments in this chapter make clear.

[35] This metapoetic level becomes even sharper later in the poem, as when the speaker says, for instance,

> Bring this pellucid moment — here on this page now
> as on this patch
> of soil, my property — bring it up to the top and out
> of
> sequence. Make it dumb again – won't you? – . . . .

[36] Richard Jackson, in *The Dismantling of Time in Contemporary Poetry*, examines the problem of time, and of locating and fixing the present moment, as it manifests itself across the work of a number of contemporary poets. But Jackson's concerns are primarily with

poets who seek to *stop* time in some sense – to achieve Eliot's "still point" in a way that works against the continual slippage of the present into the past. His discussion of those poets focuses on the relationship between construction of time and construction of self – which becomes particularly important for Graham in the "Notes on the Reality of the Self" poems throughout *Materialism*. But, as I argue here, Graham's challenges to time differ from those Jackson locates in poets such as Stevens in that her primary concern is with the time *of the story* – the need every narrator has to select and sequence an experience that occurs in unselected, unsequenced form.

[37] It is interesting to note that in dealing with silence, both Glück and Graham turn to the image of the garden. For Glück, however, the garden is the source of her anguish, representing temporality and the immanent silence of God; she learns to love it almost out of desperation, as Chapter 2 explains. For Graham, the act of gardening still represents an encounter with silence, but here the gesture is continually welcomed as a way out of the limitations imposed by linguistic representation.

[38] In other poems in the volume, parenthetical expression serve a similar purpose; at some points the poem becomes a long series of parentheticals, suggesting that in fact *everything* is a tangent and the narrative line lies far behind.

[39] This poetics has much in common with the poetry Glück describes in her essays, as discussed in Chapter 2 – poetry that develops its richness from the power of ruins.

[40] Notably absent from this list are texts by women; the only woman writer Graham draws on significantly is Isabella Leitner, whose Holocaust memoir forms a substantial portion of the poem "Annunciation With a Bullet In It." Despite her occasional interest in specifically female experience, Graham demonstrates little explicit interest, in this volume at least, in female intellectual or poetic precursors.

[41] Vendler's comments do loosely address this fact, but she does not, to my mind, allow it to carry significant weight in her understanding of Graham's project.

[42] In that sense, the poem mirrors the appearance of the longer adaptations across the volume; the often adaptations appear as poems unto themselves with no explicitly commentary from the poet. We simply have one voice rubbing against another.

[43] Obviously, Bacon stands sharply against not only other voices in this poem, but against the Romantic tradition of poetry itself and Wordsworth indictment of those who "murder to dissect." The choice, Graham seems to assert here, may not be as straightforward as Wordsworth suggests.

[44] In those lines, Graham also plays out the homonym so that aurally "here" becomes "hear," and we again find ourselves compelled to listen for something left unsaid; the line both locates and commands, thus pointing beyond itself to what it cannot say.

[45] The urgency of the questions is reinforced by the fact that these lines are repeated, with only the substitution of "water" for "scream," in an earlier poem in the volume, "Event Horizon" (53), which again questions the potential and the stability of representation.

Chapter 5:
"Words Made of Mirrors":
Re-Sounding Language in the Poetry of Michael Palmer

> *"The importance of an artist is to be measured by the number of new signs he has introduced into the language of art. . . ."*
>
> Matisse (in Palmer, "From the Notebooks")

If Glück is the poet for whom the question of language is most tangential, Michael Palmer is the poet for whom it is most central. Palmer is clearly the most experimental of the poets gathered here – and perhaps the most abstract in that his poetry often resembles linguistic or semiotic theory transposed into poetic form. He provides a fitting conclusion for this project because his focus on the signifying functions of language leads him to adopt many of the formal strategies found in each of the earlier poets, but he deploys those strategies in more extreme and elliptical forms. His work disrupts syntax, relies on long sentences that often omit punctuation almost entirely, eschews linear narrative, resonates abundantly with words drawn from other writers yet rarely signals – let alone documents – those references, and relies extensively on textual silences. The result is poetry that resists conventional meaning at every turn and provoked one review to compare reading a Palmer text to "slamming your head against a streetlight stanchion" (Logan 24).

While such metaphors make for provocative reviews, however, they offer little useful insight into Palmer's work. His poetry does present a dense surface that denies the ready consumption possible with more narrative or discursive lyrics, but that surface readily yields – more readily, one might argue, than Glück's – to readers willing to enter into his explorations of language and allow his poetry to redefine the reading process. Like each of these poets, Palmer writes in part to create readers able to hear what lies buried beneath the

surface of our daily language acts. Unlike Glück, Philip, and Graham, however, Palmer does not take up the question of language *in relation to* a particular external silence, be it personal, political, metaphysical, or historical. Instead, he focuses on the signifying process itself, using poetry to explore territories of linguistic meaning that exist outside those operative in the rational teleology of ordinary discourse.[1]

In embarking on such an exploration, Palmer employs what he calls "counter-poetics":

> . . . a poetry of a certain kind of complexity and resistance – resistance in terms of resistance to meaning in the simplest sense, certainly not resistance to signification in the larger sense. Resistance, let's say, to preinscribed meaning. Resistance to the political orders of culture as represented by conventional gestures of narrativity, conventional gestures of emotion, and so on. ("Counter-Poetics" 1)

For Palmer, "the question of how language means is a continually open one" ("The Man" 127), but that question is continually silenced by the conventional uses of language that surrounds us. In his view, the late twentieth century possesses a language stripped of all but its narrowest signifying functions both through the rhetoric of political expediency, whose doublespeak empties language of any meaning, and through the rhetoric of consumer culture, whose soundbites and slogans which permits only transparent meanings fit for easy digestion. Buried beneath this surface, Palmer argues, lies a language alive with possibility and the poet's task is to make those possibilities sound again. As the epigraph from Matisse

(as quoted by Palmer) suggests, the poet must introduce "new signs," or more precisely, as I explain in the next section, signs that signify in new ways.

To date, Palmer's explorations of language have resulted in seven volumes of poetry, numerous chapbooks, essays about poetry and poetics, and collaborations with both dance companies[2] and visual artists. His poetry has appeared in anthologies such as *19 New American Poets of the Golden Gate* (1984), *In the American Tree* (1986), *"Language" Poetries: An Anthology* (1987), *The Best American Poetry* (1990, 1993), *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders* (1993), and *Postmodern American Poetry* (1994), and his work is often associated with Language writing.[3] He has also been the subject of a number of interviews that have appeared in journals ranging from *Contemporary Literature* and *Sagetrieb* to *Acts* and *River City*. Despite the proliferation of interviews with and essays by Palmer about both his own poetry and poetics in general, however, few scholars (beyond the occasional book reviewer) deal directly with Palmer's work. Most often, critics who do choose Palmer as their subject produce essays that more closely resemble prose extensions of the elliptical, disjunctive mediations on language offered by Palmer's poetry than attempts to investigate the nature and scope of his particular poetic project. Such is the case, for instance, in Linda Reinfeld's treatment of Palmer in *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue*, as well as in many of the articles in the special issue *Occident* devoted to Palmer and Michael Davidson. Such essays enter into Palmer's project and usefully extend and/or respond to his work, but they offer little comfort for readers seeking entry into the poems and little assessment of the poet's project as a whole.[4]

In this chapter, I join with the small number of critics, including Normal Finklestein and Eric Selinger, who are beginning to remedy that critical gap by examining Palmer's work more fully. I argue that both the silences of language Palmer confronts and the formal strategies he uses to overcome those silences and keep an array of signifying possibilities in play are critical to understanding his work. To explore these two issues in detail, I focus on Palmer's most recent volume, *At Passages*, which offers detailed investigations of both the linguistic decimation that confronts us and the generative power of artistic form, and so provides a suitable "passage" into Palmer's oeuvre. After considering in more detail Palmer's interpretation of Matisse's dictum, particularly as it applies to the task of the poet, I then turn to *At Passages* and examine first the silences Palmer confronts and second the ways in which he uses form to counter those silences.

Resuscitating Language: Poetry and the Introduction of New Signs

In several essays and interviews, Palmer discusses his own explorations of linguistic meaning in terms of Matisse's claim about the artist's need to introduce "new signs." The epigraph that opens this chapter appears in "From the Notebooks" (1984), a collage essay Palmer constructed from his working notebooks. Although "From the Notebooks" reflects Palmer's readings and musings strictly during the time he wrote his fourth volume[5] of poetry, *Notes for Echo Lake* (1981), he returns to this particular quotation in later interviews and essays, elaborating on the relationship between the task of the visual artist and the task of the poet:

> . . . [O]bviously some of it has to do with **resuscitation**, and one of the poetic functions is to revive the signifying capacity of various signs – to, in a sense, re-introduce them. But with Matisse you have the simple fact that any hack can come along and paint a tree without it having any signifying capacity at all – everyone does. So how then do you introduce the figure of the tree as a thing that signifies? . . . . It's a little bit like, in a sense, one particularly naive model of poetic composition having to do with finding a subject matter and then filling it in. So people will fill it with white butterflies and white rabbits and large and small elephants and so on, and then they wonder why it doesn't mean anything. And another person may have these same figures emerge through their work, and they may still be white butterflies and white rabbits and large and small elephants and suddenly there's an actual experience of a signifying capacity, of a presence of things. ("Dear Lexicon" 15-16).[6]

In the "naive model," as Palmer calls it, the white rabbit appears as a one-dimensional "symbol" for purity or innocence or rebirth or some similar abstract concept taken as the poem's a priori subject. The image exists in a prefigured, one-to-one correspondence with its referent so that the poem can be readily consumed, with no slippage or complexity. In such instances, the rabbit is not a new sign; it is an old, stagnant, tired sign reused but oddly silent because it fails to resonate. For that rabbit to "signify," its meaning(s) must emerge *through* a poem (or a painting or a dance) and resonate in multiple dimensions. The poem,

along with its language, can then renew itself on each subsequent reading and leave "the question of how language means" continually open.

Palmer offers a useful image for this kind of disruptive renewal of language in the closing stanzas of "Untitled (September '92)" in *At Passages*:

> Is it that a fire
> once thought long extinguished
> continues to burn
>
> deep within the ground,
> a fire finally acknowledged
> as impossible to put out,
> and that plumes of flames and smoke
>
> will surface at random
> enlacing the perfect symmetries
> of the Museum of the People
> and the Palace of the Book
>
> Or that a Gate of Hours speaks
> in a language unfamiliar,
> unlike any known,
> yet one clear enough
>
> clear as any other
> and clear as the liquid
> reflection of a gate,
> gate whose burnt pages
>
> are blowing through the street
> past houses of blue paper
> build over fault lines
> as if by intent. (74-75)

Both the unquenchable fire and the unfamiliar language represent forces that cannot be contained in predictable categories. They challenge the "perfect symmetries" that have come to mark the stagnated reading processes of this century implied by the Museum, the Palace, and the "houses of blue paper" erected to hide the fault lines where language slips

and cracks. The gate this poem describes creates a "passage" through the dead zone of stagnant meaning to a place where, as Palmer says in one essay, "making sense [becomes] a process, not a reference to a norm" ("Counter-Poetics" 8).

Emergent, resonant meanings such as those Palmer describes require acts of destabilization and defamiliarization that allow the sign to generate meanings within the poem and open up areas of signification beyond those available in linear, narrative, teleological speech. In Palmer's poetry, as I explain in detail in the final section of this chapter, those acts include a reliance on textual silence manifested as the absence of narrative, the disruption of syntactic structures, the brevity of lines and stanzas, the recurrence and transformation of words and phrases across a volume, and an extensive intertextuality. Yet such destabilizations do not represent, as mentioned earlier, a "resistance to signification in the larger sense" nor do they entail the creation of an infinitely open field of nonsense. Palmer repeatedly eschews the idea of the poem as simply "endless semiotic *jouissance*" ("Dear Lexicon" 29) and suggests instead a model of poetry that is both play and constraint:

> We forget that [the poem] is variable within certain limits, and there's nothing we can do about that – which is terrific. And that the poem only occurs there, in the event of the poem, which is in its engagement with the reader. . . . And so, I am interested in acts of composition that emphasize this without becoming simply buckets into which anyone can drop whatever they want. The poem is not simply an aleatory event. ("Counter-Poetics" 8)

Palmer's poems, that is, offer more than endless play. Often, as this chapter demonstrates, they examine the nature of language, exploring the theoretical and philosophical issues surrounding the signifying process thematically at the same time that they formally enact dimensions of that process typically silenced by a cultural of easy consumption.

As the above quotation suggests, however, the introduction of new signs requires a transformation of the reader as well as the poem; Palmer's poetry necessitates a reader willing to make meaning *with* the poem rather than be handed meaning *from* it. If the poem is an "event" through which meaning occurs and which can recur differently across time, rather than an object through which meaning is presented outside of time, then the act of reading becomes part of the event and the reader enters the process as participant rather than recipient. Palmer thus resists the caricatured New Critical reader who resembles nothing so much as a treasure hunter on a quest for the one true meaning at the heart of the poem; instead he creates poetry "that insists that the reader is an active part of the meaning, that the reader completes the circuit" ("The Man" 128).

On a certain level, Palmer's conception of the poem as event and the reader as active participant in the process of making sense offers nothing new; an array of theorists in this century as well as earlier ones have explored the signifying process as something more than an act of passive transmission. And Palmer is well aware of this ongoing dialogue; both his poetry and his essays engage with theorists such as Wittgenstein, Lacan, Deleuze, Barthes, and Derrida as well as poets such as Rilke, Hölderlin, and Celan, all of whom grapple with the nature of the linguistic sign. Entering into this discussion, Palmer offers, as the

remainder of this chapter demonstrates, poetry that *foregrounds* the openness of meaning and the active nature of making sense by inexorably resisting any other model.[7] He deploys an array of formal strategies that prohibit acts of passive transmission and invoke reading habits that move beyond the ability to swallow a linear narrative and instead rely on the active use of alternative logics. These poems call the reader into a process of making sense from, through and with them. To reinvoke Glück's formulation, they are poems that reach toward invitation rather than exclusion, despite what may appear as an intimidating and impenetrable surface.

"Whoever Has Not Choked on a Word": Language on the Edge of Exhaustion

In his review of *At Passages*, David Levi Strauss aptly characterizes what he calls the "postmodern aporia" that permeates the volume:

> The place is the English language in the final years of an exhausted century. . . . Globally, English has become the official language of false optimism, and the medium of the most effective integration propaganda in history. Locally, the signal-to-noise ratio plummets as the channels proliferate and clog up with product. And the language we use is increasingly inadequate to its increasingly reduced tasks. (26)

The volume emerges amidst a language "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"; the poet who writes in and through that language must take up the ruins and craft a new tongue "unlike any known / yet one clear enough."

Strauss's description echoes the frame Palmer sets up in the opening sequence, "Letters to Zanzotto." The eight poems in this sequence are addressed to the twentieth-century Italian experimentalist poet Andrea Zanzotto (1921-), who, like Palmer, grapples with the workings (and failings) of language. As critic John P. Welle notes, Zanzotto's poetry is

> informed by the main currents of modern European though – the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, as a well as recent developments in linguistics, structuralism, poststructuralism, semiotics – and it probes both the nature of language and the historical manifestations as the poet lives them. (*The Poetry of Andrea Zanzotto* 11)

Zanzotto's fourth volume, *La Belta* (*The Beauty*, 1968), in particular figures prominently in Palmer's sequence. Not surprisingly, *La Belta* marks a key shift in Zanzotto's career; it foregrounds "the metalinguistic and metapoetic tendencies of Zanzotto's previous work" and enacts those tendencies through formal experimentation that "fracture[s] the tenuous bond linking the signifier to the signified" by disrupting syntax, narrative, and logic in ways that parallel Palmer's own (Welle, *Peasant's Wake* ix-x).

Writing in the midst of the economic, social, political, and linguistic upheavals postwar Italy, Zanzotto examines the fragmentation and destruction of both landscape and language. His poetic experimentation seeks to resist the dominant cultural discourses that in his view contribute to that destruction.[8] Both thematically and formally, then, Zanzotto presents a sympathetic counterpart for Palmer – writing in a different language but with shared concerns and strategies. He thus makes a fitting recipient of "Letters" that address

this emptiness.[9] In addition, he situates Palmer's concerns in a broader context: this sequence implies that both the conditions Palmer addresses and the responses he constructs reach beyond the what might be construed as a narrow circle of American elites to form part of an international dialogue.

For the remainder of this section, however, I want to set aside the intertextuality between this sequence and Zanzotto's work and consider the poems first as an examination of language in contemporary culture. As such, these letters provide a rich matrix of images for a language stripped of its signifying capacity. "Letter 1" begins by setting out the conditions of decay and exhaustion that characterize the end of the century:

> Wasn't it done then undone, by
> us and to us, enveloped, sid-
> erated in a starship, listing
> with liquids, helpless letters –
> what else – pouring from that box,
> little gaps, rattles, and slants
>
> Like mountains, pretty much worn down
> Another sign of breakage, wintering
> lights, towers and a century of hair,
> cloth in heaps or mounds, and limbs,
> real and artificial, to sift among (3)

The opening stanzas situate "us" – the poet and Zanzotto, but also the readers of this poem who inhabit the same era – in the midst of devastation. The poem presents a catalogue of decay, juxtaposing the "breakage" implicit in the "worn down" mountains with the violence implicit in hair, cloth, and "limbs / real and artificial" scattered across the landscape in order to evoke the constant succession of wars that have torn the century apart. Palmer's diction emphasizes the emptiness of the age by painting us all as exhausted victims, "enveloped" and "listing" helplessly in space.

This physical decay coincides, even in the opening stanza, with the decay of language. The heavy alliteration of a starship "listing / with liquids, helpless letters" immediately foregrounds the words themselves. The liquid l's that permeate these words create a slow, heavy rhythm that parallels the worn landscape; the only sounds that emerge under these conditions are "little gaps, rattles, and slants.". Subsequent stanzas bear out the connection between physical and linguistic devastation:

> Did they really run out of things
> or was it only the names for things
> in that radial sublimity, that
> daubed whiteness, final
> cleansing and kindness, perfect
> snow or perfection of snow
>
> leaving us peering at the bridge,
> its central syllable missing,
> and the ground here and there
> casually rent, cartoon-like,
> lividly living, calling in counter-talk:
>
> *Whoever has not choked on a word* (3)

The barrenness of the broken landscape is mirrored in the barrenness of a language that has "run out of . . . the names for things." We are left peering at a gaping hole with no language to bridge the gap of the torn century. The "final cleansing" that seems a kindness in its attempt to purify the landscape becomes a form of semantic whitewash that empties language and leaves us all "choking on a word." By the poem's final lines – "The few / trans things smelling of sex and pine / said what to them / and to us as them" – all language appears lost to memory; syntax and sense no longer hold sway here.

Parallel images of physical and linguistic emptiness and decimation play back and forth across the sequence, as if the poet holds the conjunction up to the light and turns it first

one way, then another. "Letter 4," for instance, juxtaposes the scientific language that pervades "our time" with the violence of a blood-red landscape:

> words for chemicals and tastes
> and almost remembered names,
>
> hurriedly chalked equations
> for the kinds of snow in our time
> and always, behind
>
> the landscape,
> a snow more red than white (6)

"Letter 5" traces the decay across time; "Days were called the speed book / then the scream book, rail / book then the book of rust" (7), the poem explains, suggesting a parallel degeneration of language and machine echoed in the final stanza by a series of negated images. Through such images, these poems reveal a century that has repeatedly "choked on a word."

The roots of this choking are embedded elliptically in "Letters to Zanzotto," but before locating them there I want to turn first to Palmer's essays and interviews. These prose pieces offer a more explicit discussion of the silences of language and so provide a series of clear pathways back into the poetry. In "Counter-Poetics and Current Practices,"[10] Palmer writes extensively of the "disintegration of faith in the sign" – the pervasive awareness in this century that "the acoustical image and the concept" or, in poststructural terms, the signifier and the signified, do not and cannot coincide ("Counter-Poetics" 11).[11] As I note in Chapter 1, the inadequacies of language and the disjunctions between word and thing have a long poetic history, but the manifestations of those disjunctions in the poets considered here bear the marks of a century in which that dis-ease circulates more widely

than ever before. In "Counter-Poetics," Palmer attributes much of the disintegration of faith to the rhetoric of war, and particularly the rhetoric surrounding both World War II, where the language of purity was used to mask genocide, and Vietnam, where the language of peace was used to justify the otherwise insupportable US engagement. Palmer repeatedly points to the elision between war and peace that surround these conflicts; as he succinctly puts it, "languages break down when we live in a world where pacification means annihilation" (12). That breakdown is more acute in this century because of the scale of both the wars and the propaganda efforts behind them. The distortions wrought by the public political uses of language, though not unique to Hitler, Johnson, and Nixon, have permeated this culture to a far greater degree than ever before possible because of the rise of mass media. The widespread dissemination of empty political rhetoric inevitably creates widespread linguistic distrust and dis-ease that ruptures the signifying process.

At the same time that he recognizes the disintegration of faith in the sign that prevails in certain segments of culture, Palmer also recognizes the power of the dominant discourse that prevails in others. Hundreds of thousands of Germans believed Hitler and favored his "final solution;" hundreds of thousands of Americans supported the war in Vietnam as a necessary means of keeping Communism at bay and maintaining peace. Such discourses gain their power by asserting univocal authority; they position themselves as the kind of Bakhtinian authoritative discourse described in Chapter 3 which treats language as a vehicle for the transmission of nonnegotiable dictums. The problem of creating new signs is then compounded, for the artist by the power of authoritative discourses to appropriate and transform images – particularly accessible, mimetic images – to its own ends. In one

interview, for instance, Palmer and David Levi Strauss discuss the way a picture taken by a photojournalist in Nicaragua appeared in both *Mother Jones* and *Soldier of Fortune* in the same month. Enshrined in "the Museum of People and the Palace of the Book," the sign becomes a one-dimensional ventriloquist's dummy that speaks only in the voice of its puppeteer. The more powerful the puppeteer, the more authoritative and monolithic its voice. Political rhetoric thus silences language in two ways: on the one hand, its doublespeak empties language of meaning by rupturing the signifier/signified relationship; on the other, it takes every sign as its own and attempts to close off the linguistic fissures that could disrupt the doublespeak.

"Letters to Zanzotto," as it portrays the decimation of land and language, carries traces of this political rhetoric that so empties language. The violence of "a snow more red than white" set against "words for chemicals and tastes" and "hurriedly chalked equations" in "Letter 4" evokes the atomic bomb, developed under the rhetoric of patriotic necessity and scientific advancement; "the kind of snow in our time" described by those equations carries in it the prospect of a nuclear winter. Similarly, the "final cleansing" of "Letter 1," may suggest the confluence of Hitler's "final solution" and the continued attempts at "ethnic cleansing," both of which rely on linguistic distortions to make palatable the wars that rend the ground and litter it with limbs and hair and cloth.

The opening lines of "Letter 3" examine this kind of linguistic whitewash in more theoretical terms, probing the patterns of substitution that use words as masks:

> "Our errors at zero: milk for mist, grin
> for limbs, mouth for names – or else hours
>
> of barks, stammers and vanishings, nods

> along a path of dissolving ice. The sign
>
> we make for 'same as'
> before whatever steps and walls,
>
> shutters flapping in the lighted body
> called null or called vocative. . . . (5)

As we substitute one word for another, creating equivalencies that replace limbs strewn on a battlefield with grins of victory and "peace," we follow "a path of dissolving ice" – seemingly solid yet full of holes as the language melts away under our feet. We are left with "stammers and vanishings," a blocked or silenced language that calls forth only emptiness. The level of displacement increases as the poem continues, so that at the end we are left "retelling ourselves / what we say we've said / in this tongue which will pass." The lines reinforce the rupture of the sign by evoking our unbridgeable distance from the thing itself; we possess only layers of language, and those transitory and constantly dissolving.

The infinite displacements of political doublespeak coincide, for Palmer, with a commercialization of language that permeates our consumer culture and further disables the signifying capacity of the sign. On one level, this commercialization trivializes experience by enfolding it in a daily barrage of soundbites and slogans. We have "run out of the names of things" because the names have been co-opted. As Palmer explains,

> I was at a loss about certain dimensions of emotion, in that I didn't know how to permit them without being absurd. It's like love language, for example, which is not exactly what I'm talking about, which is patently absurd. If you can imagine, say, writing a love letter to someone, how would

> you re-invent the circumstance of that? It's so layered with a curiously debased sentimentality, that is not what you're saying. ("Dear Lexicon" 23)

In the case of "love language," as Palmer calls it, the mass-produced sentimentality of Hallmark cards and Harlequin romances strips private language of its power. His own poetry, as the above quotation suggests, rarely turns to love, but the problem is the same when confronting emotions such as loss and dismay over a destroyed landscape. What "new sign" expresses the poet's horror at the aftermath of war when that horror appears nightly in living rooms across America as just another television image?[12]

In "Letters to Zanzotto," the "debased" language of soundbites becomes most apparent in "Letter 7" (9-10), where it enters the poem directly. The poem begins with the same sense of linguistic disintegration that permeates the sequence as it describes "the buried walls and our mouths of fragments." But as the poem proceeds, its territory becomes less abstract and more directly rooted in the language that surrounds us:

> Messieurs-Dames, Meine Herren und Damen, our word-balloon,
> you will note, is slowly
> rising over the parched city,
>
> its catacombs, hospitals and experimental gardens,
> its toll-gates, ghettos and ring-roads,
>
> narcoleptics and therapists and stray cats
> Ladies and Gentlemen, our menu for this flight,
>
> due to temporary shortages,
> will be alpha-omega soup, Bactrian hump, and nun's farts
>
> As we enter the seventh sphere, you will discover a thin
> layer of ice just beginning
>
> to form on your limbs
> Do not be alarmed, this is normal

> You will experience difficulty breathing, this is normal
> The breathing you experience is difficulty, this is normal (9-10)

The landscape, with its parched cities, ghettos, and catacombs, is still dark and barren. But the poem masks the horror of that landscape through familiar panaceas, beginning with the incantatory "Ladies and Gentlemen" in various languages. Floating above the destruction, we hear the gentle but empty reassurances of flight attendants that appear like "word balloons" in the mouths of cartoon characters, insulating us from discomfort. The reference to "temporary shortages," the pacifying offers of food, the promise that whatever we experience – turbulence, difficulty breathing, displacements and fragmentations – is "normal," all reflect the reassuring soundbites intended for our (mindless) dining pleasure.

By juxtaposing the hollow reassurances with the images of ice forming on limbs and difficult breathing, the poem implies that this daily barrage of empty words in fact produces the very numbness it reassures us about. Under these conditions, all our breathing does become "difficulty" as the lines double back on themselves to expose the ways abnormal, and abhorrent, circumstances are normalized through language. The words themselves become nothing more than "nun's farts" – a radically disjunctive, sacrilegious phrase made "palatable" as its significance is glossed (over) by the familiar phrasing.

At the same time, the process of commercialization silences language because, in transforming language into a soundbite that can be quickly and thoughtlessly consumed, it enforces the dominance of a single digestible meaning and denies the broader, more resonant complexities of the word. In doing so, it relies on a passive reader who consumes the soundbite without examination. It thus parallels political rhetoric, which also speaks in

a single dimension and posits communication as a one-way transmission. This easy consumption of language is most troubling for Palmer when it emerges in contemporary poetry. In both essays and interviews he repeatedly disparages what describes as "the throw-away world of poetry" ("Counter-Poetics" 5). He explains the problem in detail in a 1985 interview:

> There is an Anglo-American empirical tradition that takes as a model a kind of simple version of reference, where a poem is a place in which you tell a little story, the conclusion of which is at the bottom of the poem just where it is supposed to be. It easily mirrors a shared emotional experience, a sort of consumer verse that you'd see in the pages of the *New Yorker* or the *Hudson Review*, where the function of the work and the mechanisms of the poem do not admit a certain level of mystery. This is the kind of thing that's taught in most creative writing workshops. If you go to such a workshop with the intention of learning one or another circumscribed formula in order to publish the results in *American Poetry Review*, usually you'll produce this well wrought verse which effectively denies the mysteries of reference embedded in the poem. Further, it denies the level of profound human risk that goes into being a poet, in the way Baudelaire or Dickinson or Rilke understood being a poet. It doesn't admit that the question of how language means is a continually open one. (126-27) [13]

These are the poems in which butterflies and rabbits and elephants appear as prefigured symbols empty of meaning – the poems that fail to introduce new signs.

Despite the obvious narrow-mindedness of Palmer's view of creative writing workshops, his comments do illuminate his own desire to allow language to resonate as fully as possible and to explore "the mysteries of reference" denied by linear narratives. He hints at such mysteries in the opening of "Letter 7." Before ventriloquizing the reassuring platitudes of consumer culture, the speaker asks, "can you calculate the ratio between wire and window, / between tone and row, copula and carnival." The accusing tone of the lines implies that we cannot in fact calculate that ratio; we have lost the ability to connect words in any but the most simplistic sense. "Wire and window," "tone and row," and "copula and carnival," are all joined aurally rather than logically, with the interplay of sound suggesting possibilities of meaning unavailable in easily consumed rhetoric. Only by restoring this level of elliptical possibility can the artist introduce new signs in the poem.[14]

In Palmer's view, these problems are compounded because coherent, accessible narrative poetry not only silences linguistic resonance but also participates in the abusive discourses of power by debasing "chic" political topics for the sake of self-aggrandizement. He "accuse[s] mimesis," as he says in "Letter 5" because it too easily become a form of appropriation.[15] As he explains:

> [P]art of the problem for me of the political in the poem, which has always concerned me very much, is how do you allow it [i.e. instances of violence, oppression, etc.] to enter in a, so to speak, **materiality**, without it becoming subject matter in some debased sense. [H]ow can it become present in some other kind of actuality rather than re-framed into what we think of as the more conventional 'political poem' – which particularly in our current

> moment, when we have a sort of poets' shuttle down to Nicaragua and so on to **get** material, everyone acting like La Pasionaria or something – which seems to me ultimately a complete betrayal of what is to be meant by the political. . . . It becomes **decor**, and it also becomes ultimately self-congratulatory, in that you get to say you're on the right side, and then sell it. ("Dear Lexicon" 12).

The mimetic too easily lends itself, in Palmer's mind, to triviality and misappropriation – the image serves both *Mother Jones* and *Soldier of Fortune*. When experience is represented using the same linguistic registers and narrative modes found on television newscasts, Palmer implies, it no longer provide sites of real meaning. Poems that rely on a mimetic, linear sensibility remain content with "engendering that little shiver of recognition, and then passing out of one's memory" in the same way the nightly news quickly gives way to today's repeat of *Seinfeld* or *Roseanne*. Such poetry, at least in Palmer's view, offers only another vehicle to propagate the twin discourses of political power and consumer culture.

The result, as "Letters to Zanzotto" suggests, is a century in which we have all "choked on a word," be it the word of political leaders selling their agendas, advertisers selling their products, or poets selling their sensitivity. The words that come to us in an infinite array of soundbites are never new signs; they are merely old signs stripped of their signifying capacities and narrowed until they serve a single domineering master. And the easy digestion of the signs that flash across our screen simultaneously demands and creates readers who consume without questioning. Reading becomes an act of simple reception: we

skim the surface of a text to find the "gist" of the argument, thoughtlessly swallow the received meaning, and move on. The "question of how language means," along with the mysteries of reference embedded in the word, are, under these conditions, repeatedly silenced.

"What of the Words Reversed": Form and Transformation

"Letters to Zanzotto," like much of Palmer's poetry, plays and replays the silence imposed on language, bearing traces of both its sources and its implications. At the same time, these poems offer responses to that silence designed to move beyond the decimation and create the kind of clear but unfamiliar language described in "Untitled (September '92)." Such a language functions, as the lines cited earlier suggest, like a smoldering fire that "surface[s] at random" to disrupt the "perfect symmetries" of a tamer, more digestible discourse. For Palmer (as for many Language writers), poetry that creates these kinds of disruptions operates as political resistance in the broadest sense by working against the dominant cultural discourses – the very discourses that silence language. Poetry

> can be a constant challenging, say, of the discourse of power that at this moment Reagan and Mondale are involved with. The poem in that regard gives lie to the political rhetoric by exposing the deeper nature of language, even when it is not thematically a 'Workers, throw off your chains' poem. ("The Man" 136) [16]

It "gives lie" to political rhetoric by exposing the slippages of language that undermine the univocal voice of authority. In the same way, it gives lie to the commercialized discourse of

soundbites and slogans by resisting easy consumption and provoking readers into a more complex role that demands active engagement rather than passive reception.

To enact these disruptions and provocations Palmer manipulates poetic form to undermine conventional discourse and introduce new signs that give voice to multiple registers of meaning. Palmer's poetry operates according to non-linear, non-consumable, logics that allow meanings to emerge through the act of reading. Explicit references to these logics surface occasionally in "Letters to Zanzotto." "Letter 2," for instance, offers a set of images similar to those found in "Untitled (September '92)." The poem consists of four brief phrases framed as questions:

> Letter 2
>
> Belowabove: hum of the possible-to-say?
>
> Forest in which the trees grow downward
> and through the leaves and mist a small boat in flames?
>
> Song of the closed mouth?
> Of an alphabet underground? (4)

Each question approaches the "hum of the possible-to-say" that exists above and below the more familiar linguistic registers by reversing those registers. The poem tentatively offers a world in which the word driven underground, its "normal" patterns transformed, speaks most clearly.

"Letter 7" offers a grimmer, more determined vision. After parodying the omnipresent voice-over reassuring us that "everything is normal," the speaker concludes with a kind of call to arms:

> Dear Z, Should I say space
> constructed of echoes, rifts, mirrors, a strange

year for touring the interior
Should I say *double dance, Horn, axis* and *wheel*

Dear A, Scuttled ships are clogging the harbors
and their cargoes lie rotting on the piers

Prepare executions and transfusions
Put on your latest gear. (10)

As in "Letter 2," the possibilities begin on a tentative note; in response to the caricature of language in its "word balloon," the speaker poses an alternative speech constructed of gaps, reversals, and words that suggest circular or spiral motions rather than linear ones. But as the image moves from the emptiness of hot air balloons to the waste and decay of clogged harbors and rotting cargo, the tentativeness gives way to a more decisive call to action. Language requires both execution and transfusion in order to restore it to new life.

"Letters to Zanzotto," however, while it enacts those executions and transfusions, does not examine them explicitly. Consequently, I want to turn now to another series in the volume, "The Leonardo Improvisations." If the "Letters" explore the fragmentation and decimation of language in our time, these five "Improvisations" (titled simply by number – "1," "2," etc.) explore workings and reworkings of artistic form by engaging, albeit elliptically, with the work of Leonardo da Vinci. The primary subtext for this sequence is da Vinci's notebooks, which offer extensive artistic and scientific treatises, theories, and musings on topics that include the natural elements, anatomy, philosophy, artistic technique, mathematics, optics, and astronomy, to name but a few.[17] Palmer uses particular elements of those notebooks as a catalyst for his own examination of artistic, and particularly poetic, form. As a result, these "Improvisations" provide a useful base for discussing both the

formal strategies Palmer deploys and the ways those strategies attempt to make language speak again.

The sequence title offers a useful metaphor for Palmer's formal style: much of his poetry resembles a musical improvisation, creating what he describes as "an open-ended series of variations on a theme that are meant to explore the richness of a particular melodic line" ("The Man" 134).[18] This image, stressing as it does the possibility of free play within the constraint of "a particular melodic line" that grounds and focuses the variations, provides an important counterpoint to critics who see Palmer's work as meaningless ramblings full of more nonsense than sense. In a recent interview, Palmer explains that duality more fully, again relying on a musical analogy:

> I was recently listening to a jazz musician named David Ware, who's a great tenor saxophonist . . . . [H] was saying that when he first started playing with [Cecil] Taylor, he would just start to blow as a soon as Taylor would give the signal. And Taylor would say to him, "Well, this is actually a different tune than the last one we played, and maybe you should be paying attention to what we're doing here." Ware was just twenty-three at the time, and he just wanted to blow. But then he realized there was a curious sameness to that expression of energy, to putting himself on automatic pilot and into a streaming pure expression of conscious/unconscious, pure spontaneity . . . . [I]t lacked complexity, and it lacked attention to the context in which it was happening – to, in this case, the notes around it, or, in the case of writing, to the words around it. ("River City" 98)

Improvisation, whether musical or linguistic, cannot simply be "a streaming pure expression." Or, as Palmer says elsewhere, poems must be more than "buckets into which anyone can drop whatever they want. The poem is not simply an aleatory event" ("Counter-Poetics" 8). Instead, it is a series of carefully constructed variations that provide a focus for exploration.

The nature of these constructions emerges perhaps most clearly in the second "Improvisation," which suggests a series of transformations and permutations similar to those at work in Palmer's poetry:

> 2
>
> What of the words reversed,
> word meant
>
> for mirrors, words lost, voices
> heard, mirrors
>
> which return. What of the
> body there,
>
> the body which turns, the
> face which
>
> returns the gaze. What of
> the backward
>
> book, the hidden book, the
> waves of
>
> bent light in ascending air.
> What possible
>
> eye requires such blank signs.
> What worlds
>
> appear as more real
> reflected there. (46)

Like “Letter 2,” this “Improvisation” offers a series of reversals and refractions like those produced by a mirror. The poem takes its cue, in that respect, from da Vinci’s notebooks, which are literally “words reversed, / words meant / for mirrors”: the notebooks are written backwards so that they can be read only by holding a page up to a mirror and reading the reflection.

Palmer takes that single act of reflection as a baseline and improvises his own exploration of form on top of da Vinci’s work, creating an array of reflections that more closely resemble a circus’s House of Mirrors than a scientist’s looking glass. Words and images (“the body”) are reflected back and forth in a series of complex distortions, disappearing and reappearing in ways that ultimately destabilize reference. Defamiliarized by these turnings and returnings, the words function as “blank signs”; freed from their conventional positions in discourse, and hence, for Palmer, from both debased sentimentality and hypocritical rhetoric, they no longer carry the “preinscribed” meanings Palmer works against. Like da Vinci’s notebooks, any poem made of such words cannot be read at a glance; it becomes “unconsumable.”

A word, of course, is not a canvas in that it cannot ever be fully blank; fragments of meaning and association adhere regardless of the disruptions and resistances created by the surrounding context. Yet Palmer’s phrase is useful in that it suggests both the poet’s desire to strip language of familiar, conventional (and for Palmer, often degraded) meanings, and the reader’s reaction upon encountering such texts. Reading these poems, we initially “draw a blank”; we make meaning out of that blankness by encountering the words as if for the first time and exploring the semantic possibilities offered by the poem itself. The blank sign

silences one layer of meaning in order to create space for those layers normally silenced by the rhetoric that bombard us on a daily basis. Hence I want to retain Palmer's notion of the "blank sign" throughout this chapter not to imply a tabula rasa but to suggest a language that has been defamiliarized to such an extent that it can no longer be readily consumed. Once the sign is "blank" in this sense, it can then be reinscribed – reintroduced as a new sign whose meaning is open-ended and layered rather than fixed and limited. The result, as the final lines of the poem quoted above suggest, is a reflection that paradoxically produces a "more real" vision of the world flattened by ordinary language use.

This second "Improvisation" thus becomes a metapoetic commentary on the form of Palmer's own work. Palmer's first task, like da Vinci's, is to create "blank signs" that resist easy consumption and place the reader in a position of uncertainty and instability. That blank sign then regains its signifying capacity through a series of both internal and external mirrors. Words and phrases recur throughout a volume not as motifs but as a series of internal refractions that allow the signs to accumulate layers of open-ended meaning. At the same time, the extensive intertextuality operating in these poems makes them mirrors for a broad range of external texts as "voices [are] heard," then lost, then heard again throughout a volume. The particular nature of those reflections creates patterns of forgetting and remembering that destabilize voice and again produce layers of meaning that shift and expand as the poems are read and reread.

Mirrors Within Texts

Da Vinci created his blank signs by physically reversing the words of his notebooks to produce an unreadable text. For Palmer, the reversals are figurative rather than literal; he creates his blanks signs by resisting conventional patterns of narrative and syntax – or as "Letters to Zanzotto" says, by "accus[ing] mimesis" – producing texts that cannot be read according to conventional reading strategies. His poetry presents a series of gaps and silences that mediate against easy consumption yet paradoxically allow him to generate a field of play that allows language to speak more fully by keeping the question of meaning open. In that sense, the silences of Palmer's text, though they appear to present a more resistant surface, in fact open themselves more readily than the hardened silences of Glück's woman "with her thighs cemented shut."

These gaps in Palmer's work are everywhere apparent – gaps in narrative, in logic, in syntax, and in the lines and stanzas themselves confront us at every turn, as much of the poetry cited thus far demonstrates. But those silent spaces, rather than erecting a wall that refuses the reader access, instead create an openness that allows multiple meanings to resonate at once. To understand these gaps and the ways in which they serve both to defamiliarize and restore language in detail, I want to look closely at the first of "The Leonardo Improvisations":

1

Can the
two be

told the
two bodies

be told
apart be

told to
part can

the two
be drawn

the two
be drawn

apart (45)

Like much of the work already cited here, the poem seems built largely on absences: we have only two unnamed, undescribed bodies that may or may not be separable. [19] Nothing in the poem anchors these bodies to a particular context, and no speaker defines himself or suggests why we ought to separate the bodies. The poem's form reinforces this sense of absence; the lines are only two words long; the stanzas, as is characteristic of much of Palmer's work, are only two lines a piece; and the lines lack any punctuation that might more clearly define syntax and meaning. Even when Palmer allows his lines to lengthen to five or six words, as in some of the poems cited earlier, the relative brevity of both line and stanza work together to create a series of gaps and stops that slows our reading. And although he does use commas and periods occasionally in his text, more often than not such textual clues are absent; the poems typically rely on line and stanza breaks, as in the

example above, to provide loose syntactic units whose borders are always in question. All of these gaps serve to defamiliarize the poem and create a resistant surface that does not yield a single meaning at a glance.

Even as the poem exemplifies the blank signs Palmer creates, it also exemplifies one of the primary ways he revoices those signs to restore language to full voice. "Improvisation 1" presents in concentrated form the kind of intratextual mirroring of words that occurs both within and across poems in this volume. Mirrored back and forth, the blank signs accrue meaning through the process of reading and rereading. Palmer articulates this process when he describes his use of colors and numbers in *Echo Lake* as "a cumulative thing, . . . the building up of a nonsystematic relationship to color and number that begins with the fact of their own linguistic categories. It is almost like building a vocabulary, one whose meanings accrue over time" ("The Man" 135). Palmer elaborates on this accrual of meaning in terms of his use of the letter "A" throughout that volume:

> [I]t's a sign, let's say, whose mystery is reduced as you proceed. Is that a way of putting it? In other words, it's a sign perhaps whose initial introduction has almost a character of arbitrariness,, at least in the experience of reading, it seems to me. . . . [L]ike any sign, to some degree it gradually becomes legible as its attendant contexts grow, either the context of rereading or the context of reading over the space of its definition across the book. ("Dear Lexicon" 30-31)

Because the sign enters the text out of context, or as Palmer says, with "a character of arbitrariness," it holds no preinscribed meaning. Instead, an active reading allows it to accumulate signifying possibilities that resonate freely across poem and volume.

This accumulation process operates in the first "Improvisation," first within the poem, then across the sequence and ultimately across the volume. Within the poem, the words "told" "apart" and "drawn" reflect back and forth, acquiring layers of inseparable meaning. These words repeat, but the repetition is always skewed – like "waves of *bent* light" refracted by mirrors. In the opening four lines, "told" signifies a literal telling – can the story of these two unidentified bodies be told? But "told" then becomes "told apart," suggesting the need to distinguish rather than communicate. In the fourth stanza, the word shifts a final time to become part of a directive – can one order the bodies to part? In the same way "drawn" shifts back and forth between artistic rendering and separation. The syntactic and grammatical shifts between stanzas creates a slippage that opens up multiple resonances for each term. Perhaps most importantly, the poem offers no single resolution for those resonances. Rather, the initial arbitrariness and the gaps in syntax and logic create space for all the meanings; the poem becomes a meditation on both the process of representation and the process of separation.

Those possibilities become more complex as one reads and rereads the entire sequence, particularly for the initially abstract sign at the center of the poem, the word "body." When we first encounter it, the term has no locus of meaning; it appears out of context, as I noted earlier, though the sequence title may suggest either da Vinci's art or his scientific studies. But "body" recurs in the second and the third "Improvisations" (both

cited earlier), where it is linked both to human bodies and to the textual bodies of books. The defamiliarized blank sign thus begins to acquire context through the reading process.

The fourth "Improvisation" adds an even more concrete point of reference by invoking the well-known image of da Vinci's study in human proportions:

> the body is encircled –
>
> a circle is drawn –
> circle that is impossible
>
> around an actual body
> body which tastes of salt
>
> and does not exist
> within the perfect circle
>
> it fashions around itself
> and whose circumference it touches
>
> with the tips of the fingers outstretched
> and the soles of the feet at rest
>
> The body is framed by mirrored words (48)

On one level, these lines accurately describe the drawing in da Vinci's notebook – a male figure inscribed within a circle, surrounded by the reversed words of the notebooks themselves. The familiar drawing actually contains two bodies superimposed on one another; we see a total of eight limbs – two legs straight down and two legs spread apart, two arms straight out and two arms pointing slightly upward. The first "Improvisation" can then become, on rereading, a meditation on da Vinci's sketch that encompasses both the act of representation (are the two bodies drawn separately?) and the act of seeing (can we separate one from the other as we view?). Yet the layers of meaning added by earlier poems, particularly where body becomes joined to book, suggest a meditation on language

as well: if the body is textual, the poem asks whether or not we can separate the layers of meaning that adhere to individual words and phrases within that body. It foregrounds the visual/verbal slippages that invite us to see both bodies simultaneously.

This accrual of meaning also extends beyond the borders of the sequence as a unit. Reading back and forth across the volume yields still more layers of resonance. "Body" occurs repeatedly within "Seven Poems in a Matrix for War," for instance, where it is linked both to the body of the man at home watching the Gulf War on television and the bodies destroyed by bomb attacks.[20] In the course of this intratextual mirroring, the term functions not as a recurrent motif or a symbol with a preinscribed meaning that "rings a bell" each time it appears. Instead, as "The Leonardo Improvisations" demonstrate, it begins as a decontextualized sign that develops significance through an active reading process. Its recurrence across the volume sets up a matrix of possibilities that exposes the slippages in even a single term, simultaneously undermining fixed meaning and allowing language to speak in different voices.

The volume's final poem, "Cites," provides the most complex example of these slippages and transformations and thus bears brief examination here, particularly in light of the kind of reading it demands. The poem consists of two hundred seemingly random three-word phrases; the title suggests that each phrase is itself cited from another work. Even more strongly than earlier examples, "Cites" offers, at first reading, a decontextualized array of blank signs, as the first page demonstrates (the line numbers are my addition for clarity):

1 can lie, but

2 under the grey
3 a part seen
4 is spherical, is
5 unearthed, all smoke
6 an unbridgeable gulf
7 arched and taut
8 preceded this gazing
9 anemone and the
10 but the buried
11 strands, salty to
12 harbors and their
13 space constructed of
14 and the cawing
15 wrack, wheeling of
16 rising over the
17 in its parabolic
18 walls and our (91)

Separated from one another by gaps in both syntax and logic, these brief phrases, at first glance, seem to bear no relation to one another. But a continual rereading of the volume reveals that many of the "cites" here come from earlier poems in the volume – much of the material above, in fact, comes from "Letters to Zanzotto"[21] "Cites" thus mirror all that preceded it.

This mirror, though, like all the ones Palmer creates, refracts rather than simply reflects. It alters the context,[22] and consequently the meaning, of these mirrored phrases, enacting even more radically the instabilities and possibilities that exist within language. One brief example demonstrates the kind of shifts at work. "Letter 8" asks "what does the world / before you need / to become perfect" and examines the possibility of "a language of nets" in which sign and referent draw near to one another. The poem closes with a call to make language speak again:

> Take inside your mouth
> unearthed, all smoke, blue
>
> and citron, actual word
> for that earth and smoke (12)

Yet when the phrase "unearthed, all smoke" reappears in "Cites" (line 5), it lies not near "actual word" but near "an unbridgeable gulf" so that the smoke becomes part of the illusion. "Cites" focuses not on actual words but on decontextualized signifiers and the gaps between them. Those gaps become clearer if we parse the opening lines, including the title, as follows: "Cites can lie, but under the grey a part is seen, is spherical, is unearthed, all smoke. An unbridgeable gulf, arched and taut, preceded this gazing." Such parsing, of course, does not represent the only meaning for the opening lines – the form resists fixity and instead creates possibilities. This particular parsing offers a way of talking about the "unbridgeable gap" of language, in which we may glimpse parts of a whole, but only through a haze. That part may be unearthed, but it remains "all smoke" and the gaps in language envelope our glance. If the poem itself is "this gazing," then all that comes before it represents that gap.

This intratextuality matters both for the slippages it creates among the phrases the recur – the meaning of words becomes unstable and thus open to play – and also, equally importantly, for the reading process it engenders. We read "Cites" and make meaning from it in large part by moving back and forth through the volume to locate the resonant phrases. The more I read the poem and the volume, the more syntactic and semantic possibilities emerge from what appeared to be two hundred random phrases. The syntax doesn't hold, and each reading or each discovery of a cross reference produces another shift, but once we cease searching for a linear logic and allow the phrases to echo and circulate across the volume, the poem becomes another complex exploration of the possibilities and failures of language itself. This movement creates both recognition and misrecognition; as I begin to locate references, I also begin to hear echoes, both elsewhere in the volume and in "Cites," where there are none. These misrecognitions then function not as errors but as suggestions that generate new contexts and connections between phrases. "Cites," like *At Passages* as a whole, takes us into the House of Mirrors, but what we find there are reflections of language itself and the possibility for exploring its resonances.

Mirrors Between Texts

As I suggested above, however, *At Passages* offers us not only a series of internal refractions, but a mirror of the texts its author reads. These poems are awash in "voices heard," both as direct quotation and as more subtle allusion or gesture. However, Palmer's use of intertextuality differs markedly from both Graham's and Philip's; source texts are

neither adapted to create a dialogue nor dis-membered to reclaim identity. Instead, they appear as traces and fragments that function as both postmodern autobiographical gestures and sites of improvisational, layered meaning.

Typically "quotations" in Palmer's texts are both brief and undocumented; he rarely uses quotations, italics, or other typographical indictors to mark words borrowed from another writer or speaker. As a result, the intertextuality in Palmer's work is difficult to detect and more difficult to trace – it forms, that is, a blank sign that we cannot readily access. Even the titles of the two sequences discussed here, which suggest at least one source a piece, do little to alleviate the "blankness" since they offer no means to navigate those sources. Zanzotto has written fourteen volumes of poetry to date, while even the selected translation of da Vinci's notebooks runs over 1200 pages.[23] One locates references by reading and rereading Zanzotto's poetry or da Vinci's notebooks until a resonant phrase, often only a few words long, emerges; one then returns to Palmer's work, reading and rereading the poems until the echo sounds again. And those cross references account for only a fraction of the quotations embedded in Palmer's work. He literally fills his poetry with words from sources that include Wittgenstein, Matisse, Deleuze, Rilke, Hölderlin, Stein, Zukofsky, Eliot, and *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, to name only a few.[24] In such cases, cross references are, as often as not, the result of chance encounters on the part of the reader. The words of writers from across centuries and cultures appear as a visually seamless whole in Palmer poetry, forming a "hidden book" of blank signs that accumulates meaning only through multiple rereadings of a broad array of texts.

The third of "The Leonardo Improvisations," considered in the context of da Vinci's notebooks, offers a useful case study of this intertextuality. The poem, cited in full below, mirrors those notebooks on several levels:

> 3
>
> First write of all water
> in each of its motions
>
> Then eddies of air
> in the form of bell towers
>
> Then a book of the building of cities
> and the burning of cities,
>
> book of the winged man and the hanged man,
> book of miter and argonaut, nautilus,
>
> double helix of the twin stair
> book of the moon as mirror
>
> and words made of mirrors,
> book of the body and its memory,
>
> body as a measure and body as a question,
> book which explains our shadows,
>
> book of the ram's horn lute and the monochord,
> intervals of light along its string,
>
> book of the trace and book of the fragment,
> book of the earth split in half. (47)

On one level, the poem mirrors da Vinci's words directly: "Write first of all water in each of its movements, then describe all its beds and the substance in them" (Leonardo 693), the painter/scientist tells himself. Palmer's ensuing litany of books also mirrors da Vinci's work, though more elliptically: the notebooks are full of reminders to write the "book of"

this subject or that, and those reminders occasionally become extended lists. At one point, for instance, da Vinci writes:

> Book of the inequality of the curve of the sides of ships.
>
> Book of the inequality of the position of the helm.
>
> Book of the inequality of the keel of ships.
>
> Book of the difference in the holes through which water is poured out.
>
> Book of the water contained in vessels with air and of its movements.
>
> (Leonardo 733)

And da Vinci's list continues through over a dozen similar topics. Palmer's poem thus adopts patterns from the notebooks even where it doesn't directly quote them.

The topics Palmer suggests, moreover, form a third kind of mirror; much of what he includes appears in the notebooks. Da Vinci writes extensively of the body, the moon, the earth, mirrors, cities, and music, along with a broad range of other subjects. His notebooks are "a book of the building of cities and the burning of cities." Written backwards, they are even literally "words made of mirrors," as Palmer's poem says. At the same time, the litany applies to Palmer's own work in which body, earth, moon, shadow, cities, music, water, and air all recur and his volumes, full of both internal and external allusions and citations, are "made of mirrors" as well. The result is an improvisation that uses da Vinci's notebooks as a baseline for exploring the process of textual composition.

This multifaceted interpenetration of texts serves a number of different purposes in that exploration. In part, it reformulates the concept of autobiography and questions the doctrine of Author as solitary and unique. As Palmer explains,

> I'm a very intensive reader, and reading, to some degree, is coextensive with my experience of the world. I don't differentiate it as more or less important than, say, seeing an oak tree. . . . . If a piece of Baudelaire comes flying through or six words from an interview with Charlie Parker, it's autobiographical in a curious way. It's a way of reconstituting all of those things that do build that self, which is not, in my mind, a unitary self. ("River City" 103)

These intertextual traces thus mark the self as constructed out of and through the voices of others, echoing the Bakhtinian formulation of identity developed in detail in Chapter 3. Identity emerges not as something solitary and unique but rather as something layered and multiplied, paralleling, in certain respects, Philip's formulation in *She Tries Her Tongue*.[25] Composition, in such a context, is less an act of inspired originality than an act of harmonization.

Unlike Philip, however, Palmer refuses to delineate either the voices or the relationships between them. Nor does he, like Pound or Eliot, expect his readers to know, or to seek out, every source text. Because he uses quotation so heavily (*Sun*, for instance, consists almost entirely of quoted phrases) and draws on both written and oral texts, it is virtually impossible to compile an annotated copy of his work. More importantly, such an effort would miss the point. As Palmer tells one interviewer, "I don't go around expecting everyone to have a footnoted edition of my works. On the contrary, I could footnote it myself if that were the intent. I'm not just setting up an industry of "seeking out . . . ." ("Dear Lexicon" 18).[26] Instead, his poetry unsettles readers by calling voice into continual

question. This questioning leads, as it does in "Cites," to a continual series of "misunderstandings" in which, as Palmer says, "there are things that you've read in there, thinking they were quotations, which are not and vice versa, also thinking they were not when they were" ("Dear Lexicon" 20).[27]

By incorporating quotation so extensively while refusing to document it, then, Palmer creates a series of blank signs that destabilizes the speaking subject; we never know precisely whose words appear on the page. Even if we can assign particular phrases to other authors, as in the third "Improvisation" quoted above, we can never be certain that the remaining words belong solely to an Author named Michael Palmer. I may not have been able to locate the phrase "the intervals of light along its string" in my selected and translated edition of da Vinci's notebooks, but that doesn't mean the phrase isn't there – it *sounds* like something the Italian painter may have written. Barring that, it may well have come from yet another writer or speaker. As readers, then, the more we reader Palmer's work, the more we hear multiple voices speaking at once, creating what Benjamin Hollander calls "a kind of exchange of identities" ("Dear Lexicon" 20) that blur the boundaries between Palmer and those he quotes. And this "exchange of identities" becomes even more complex at the level of the word or image. The terms "body," "word," and "mirror" pervade both Palmer's poetry and da Vinci's notebooks, but *At Passages* provides no access to a point of origin – we cannot establish whether Palmer worked with the confluence of terms first and then encountered da Vinci, or vice versa. The same instability occurs with the repetition of "snow" in the "Letters," a word that also circulate through Zanzotto's *La Belta*.[28] In

creating this instability regarding origins, Palmer disrupts the clearly identifiable lyric speaker whose voice controls and defines the terms of the poem.

The blurring of authorial voice that results from Palmer's ambiguous intertextual play in turn opens up possibilities of meaning. By forcing the reader into a position of uncertainty with regard to "source texts," the poems prohibit easy consumption. A footnote, or even the presence of quotation marks, narrows the scope of the cited word or phrase by fixing it with prior significance – precisely the kind of "preinscribed meaning" Palmer works against. As readers, we *know* that a quotation came from somewhere else and meant something else first, and the reference provides a point of stability that frames or encloses meaning. Moreover, in conventional discourse, locating the source is typically essential to fully grasping the meaning.[29] By removing the external clues, Palmer "leave[s] the words free to operate" ("Dear Lexicon" 18) as blank signs within the context of his poem, breaking the limitation imposed on them by an authoritative original and leaving the reader free to read 'as if for the first time.' By imposing one silence (the name of the author), he creates space for an array of linguistic possibilities. Even before we encounter da Vinci's notebooks, for instance, we can recognize the ways these "Improvisations" gather and reflect the formal concerns of Palmer's own art. Cross references are similarly unnecessary for making meaning through "Letters to Zanzotto," as the previous section demonstrates.

"[L]eaving the words free to operate," however, does not negate the intertexuality itself, nor does Palmer intend it to. When asked about the reader's need to locate the subtexts of his work, he responds with a kind of "both/and" answer:

> I don't think the reader has any responsibility *per se* [to uncover the sources of the poem's subtexts]. I think it depends on the reader involved. I'm unhappy to think of the idea of readers reading at a level untroubled by the notion of where I'm sampling from. Some readers will recognize more initially; some won't recognize any. I don't think one kind of reading is privileged over another; I think that they're interestingly different. ("River City" 103)

Both recognition and lack of recognition can produce, in Palmer's mind, viable readings of his work; such viability is the necessary corollary of leaving words "free to operate." But if an unrecognized reading yields one layer of meaning, recognizing subtexts expands those meanings, adding layers of resonance that generate new possibilities without erasing old ones.

To demonstrate this layering effect more clearly, I want to return briefly to "Letters to Zanzotto," and particularly to "Letter 3," which I explored in some depth earlier. The opening lines, as I suggested, frame our language use as "nods along a path of dissolving ice." The poem then concludes:

> . . . . I'd wanted to ask
>
> about dews, habits of poplar, carousel,
> dreamless wealth, nets, embers
>
> and folds, the sailing ship "Desire"
> with its racks and bars
>
> just now setting out. This
> question to spell itself. And the waves of us
>
> following what follows,

retelling ourselves

what we say we've said
in this tongue which will pass (5)

Palmer's poem examines the instability of language and the way it traps us in an echo chamber of words divorced from the referent itself.

But the poem's final line comes from Zanzotto's poem "Vocative Case" (also alluded to via the term "vocative" in stanza 4). "Vocative Case" also explores linguistic instability and failure, but offers a much darker and more personal encounter with the problem. Part 1 of Zanzotto's two-part poem appears (in translation) in full below:

Oh my mutilated toys
thoughts in which I believe and see myself,
voracious vocative
decerebrated yearning.
How filthy and infertile
a sky enfolds
harmonies of cut ears of corn, hesitant
veins of streams,
and here it already steals
the lamps from tables,
substitutes the good.
As wires mesh onto ridges
ridges onto snares onto cranes onto antennas
and tomorrow becomes a dull
monster in a yesterday
continually capsizing.
Sound motion
love soften in slaver
in caprice, the sun – thrown torch –
escapes me.
I speak in this
tongue that will pass. (Welle *Selected Poetry* 91)

Zanzotto's poem does not "make sense" of Palmer's – the reference is not an obscure clue that, once found, illuminates the final lines and fixes the poem's meaning. Instead, it forms

a parallel composition that imbues the dissolution of language with a violent sense of personal loss as the poet confronts the limitations of his own language in the face of an increasingly industrialized and decaying landscape. The encounter with "Vocative Case" layers the cooler surface of Palmer's text with a more passionate intensity at the same time that the presence of Italy, torn apart physically, politically, and linguistically by World War II ("yesterday continually capsizing"), expands the context of the devastation encoded in Palmer's poem. But those layers neither negate nor diminish the meanings of that emerged without Zanzotto's text. Instead, both layers coexist much the way two (or possibly more) figures coexist in da Vinci's sketch of human proportions or the way the profile of a young girl coexists with the face of an old woman in the familiar optical illusion.

This unmarked yet ever-present textual mirroring creates a continual pattern of what Palmer calls "dehabituation and recognition." The word or phrase appears out of its original context, defamiliarized so that it no longer carries prescribed significance, and enters the poem as a new sign. Yet because the poems are in fact multivocal compositions, the meanings of that sign expands over time as its readers encounter more and more of the texts Palmer sampled to create his improvisation. By denying us immediate access to subtexts, Palmer frustrates our ability to consume the poem in its entirety at a single reading, inviting us instead to allow its layers to accumulate through continual rereading.

Conclusion

Reading Palmer's poetry, with its narrative and logical gaps, may indeed initially seem like beating one's head against a steel post; the texts he offers resist our attempts to

consume them according to familiar patterns. But the texts do not bar all gates; even if we cannot enter through the front door of the Museum of the Book, we can enter through the gates of a language "unlike any known yet one clear enough" if we are willing to accept the paths it offers. He silences conventional meaning in language in order to evoke the more elusive layers of semantic possibility that are themselves silenced by our dominant discourses. Through a complex series of both internal and external mirrors, Palmer creates a language made of traces and fragments that allow the silenced possibilities to emerge elliptically, via resonance and echo rather than teleology. By creating "blank signs" that destabilize unconsidered reading habits, his poetry attempts to lead us into readings that transform empty, stagnated discourse into new signs that continue to resonate across time.

Palmer's assessment of Proust in fact provides an accurate summary of his own work:

> [T]he resistance of the syntax to scanning or speed reading (one could say, to the habits of the new century where readers have already become viewers, scanning the texts of silent films) enforces upon the reader this inhabiting of the text – one must take the time and must again and again turn back. ("Period" 250)

The reference to silent films is particularly apt here because of the way the written text, like the commodified discourses Palmer rejects, carefully controls the film's meaning: a viewer consumes the text and imposes it on the images appearing on the screen, silencing any meanings not clearly present in the words. A Palmer poem, then, is like such a film without the familiar dubbing; the film is still silent, but the absence of the controlling, monologic

"voice" forces viewers (or readers) to attend to all the otherwise-silenced possibilities. We make, rather than receive, meaning, and suddenly the theater is full of sounds.

For Palmer's work to truly exists as an event whose meaning continues to break the silences and expand over time, however, it must have an attentive reader, one willing to inhabit a broad range of texts again and again with an ear for nuance and echo. In making such demands, Palmer opens his work up to charges of elitism – charges he is often quick to deny. He attempts to work against such elitism by crafting poetry that yields, as his comments about readers' responsibilities cited earlier indicate, to the uninitiated as well as the initiated. We *can* make meanings through repeated readings of the volume itself, and those meanings will resonate at a variety of ever shifting levels. The subtexts are, in theory, never crucial. Nonetheless, just as a musical improvisation holds greater significance for the listener who recognizes the various riffs and baselines the musician samples than for the one who does not (though both may take pleasure in the composition), the rich intertextuality of his poetry yields itself fully only to those who enter the door his work opens and train their own reading habits to develop the subtle attention necessary to locate the resonances.

Endnotes

[1] For Palmer, these questions of language are intricately joined to questions of subjectivity, which form a second critical node in his poetry. When discussing Hölderlin, for instance, he writes, "It struck me that, in [Holderlin's] context, the unraveling of the sign was involved with the unraveling of the subject" (Counter Poetics 11), and Palmer's poetry takes up the unraveling of the subject in parallel with the unraveling of the sign. While I do briefly consider Palmer's work on identity in this chapter, however, it is his work with language that is most relevant to this project and I leave fuller discussions of the formulation of identity in his poetry to the work of future scholars. Those interested in this aspect of Palmer's work may find his essay "Autobiography, Memory and Mechanisms of Concealment" (1985) a useful starting point. In addition, Linda Reinfeld's chapter "Michael Palmer by Michael Palmer," in *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue*, takes Palmer's concern for identity as its central issue and offers a limited account of his work in this area.

[2] Specifically, the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company in San Francisco. Palmer has commented on this collaboration a number of times in essays and interviews.

[3] Interestingly, despite the fact that critics often position Palmer as a Language poet and Palmer himself is in dialogue with a number of Language writers (as evidenced, for instance, by his references to conversations with Bob Pereleman, Clark Coolidge, and others; his inclusion in Perelman's *Writing/Talks*; and his choice of writers included in *Code of Signals*, a collection of essays edited by Palmer), Palmer consistently distances himself from Language writing. In a 1986 interview, for instance, he explains "I was happy to see them [Language writers] as people to discuss the poem with. On the other hand, a poet like Barrett Watten, let's say, works much more rigorously from an aesthetic program than I do. . . . I would say that the way I inhabit language, or language inhabits me, is in a sense more traditional than the way through procedural models that many of the so-called Language poets work" ("The Man" 129). A definition of Language writing, particularly one that provides a clear sense of who is "in" and who is "out," is far beyond the scope of this project, but Palmer's repeated attention to lyric poetry and his refusal of the poem as a display of "endless semiotic activity" ("The Man" 131) positions him on the more "conservative" end (if one can imagine such a position) of the spectrum represented by Language writing.

[4] One could argue, of course, that such comfort and assessment are both contrary to the poetry itself, and that the exploration I offer here produces precisely the kind of reading Palmer seeks to resist. I hope, however, that my work with Palmer's poems begins to unravel how the poems work in order to provide points of entry that allow the texts to continually resonate rather impose fixed, univocal "explications." "Reading" a Palmer poem is always a tenuous process; its meanings continually slip out from underneath even

the most careful explication. As a result, the readings I offer here are always provisional, intended to provide beginnings rather than conclusions.

[5] Not including his seven chapbooks, several of which form parts of later volumes.

[6] Palmer makes similar claims in "Counter-Poetics and Current Practices," (1987), when he notes that " any clown can throw a green elephant or a tree or a leaf into a poem and pretend they have an image when in fact that isn't the way the sign is renewed. Anybody can tell you they feel happy in the poem and it's not the sign for that" (10). Here too he links the problem back to Matisse's statement.

[7] Such attention to the reader's role in the production of the poem is particularly characteristic of Language writing, as evidenced by the work of Charles Bernstein, Bob Perelman, and others.

[8] For a fuller reading of Zanzotto's work, interested readers should refer to Welle's insightful study, *The Poetry of Andrea Zanzotto* (1987) as well as to his "Introduction" to *Peasant's Wake for Fellini's* Casanova *and Other Poems* (1997). In addition Vivienne Hand's *Zanzotto* (1994) provides a useful assessment of the poet's later career, while Beverly Allen's *Andrea Zanzotto: The Language of Beauty's Apprentice* (1988) does the same for earlier volumes.

[9] Though Palmer studied in Italy and has traveled extensively in Europe, his published writings offer no indication as to whether or not he knows Zanzotto personally (as he knew, for instance, Robert Duncan, to whom another series in the volume is dedicated). As a result, I am treating the correspondence as a literary device only.

[10] The essay is actually the transcript of a series of three talks given by Palmer.

[11] In investigating the signifier/signified relationship, of course, Palmer (like Zanzotto) enters into dialogue with poststructural thought, and his essays, notebooks, and interviews reflect his reading of theorists such as Barthes, Derrida, and Lacan (among others) in these areas.

[12] The issue of war itself surfaces even more directly in "Seven Poems within a Matrix for War," a sequence in *At Passages* that responds to the Gulf War and attempts to come to terms with the realities that get lost as the war is reported by the media. In the sequences' first poem titled "H," for instance, Palmer writes, "From the screen poured / images toward me. / The images effected a hole / in the approximate center of my body. / I experienced no discomfort / to my somewhat surprise" (15). And in the second "H," he writes "And the name once again to be the old one / Saint Something, Saint Gesture, Saint Entirely the Same / as if nothing or no one had been nameless in the interim / or as if *still* could be place beside *storm* / that simply, as in a poem."

[13] Palmer's assessment of the dominant modes of contemporary poetry, and of the value of "telling little experiences that we've all had together," as he so snidely puts it in "Counter-Poetics" (5), is particularly short-sighted in my view in that it fails to account for richness and variety of those shared experiences and of the value of telling them together. His repeated disparagements of the single lyric voice, and of overtly political poetry, are similarly narrow. A full examination of the problems with his position, however, lies outside the scope of this project, and despite their inadequacies, his objections do illuminate the impetus behind his own work.

[14] Whether the poetry that appears regularly in *The New Yorker* does in fact close down these levels of meaning and, as Palmer says, "mystery," is of course open to serious debate.

[15] This accusation certainly parallels Graham's concerns, particularly as they emerge in *Materialism*. But where Graham still finds value in narrative even in the midst of its problematic domination, Palmer eschews linear teleology entirely and sees no way to enter into it without co-option or appropriation.

[16] Palmer makes similar claims elsewhere. In "Counter-Poetics" he writes ". . . I do mean the political dimension [of experimental poetry], as challenging the sense that a Ronald Reagan may make in a public address or the sense of a language that speaks of pacification when it means annihilation. I think the poem challenges that appropriation of the language which the discourse of power represents. I think the poem represents. . . an undermining of the possibility of the lie, and a reappropriation, a taking-back of the language and the means of signification." And in his 1989 interview in *Contemporary Literature*, he says, "I'm very conscious of the role that poetry can play as resistant to and as a critique of the discourse of power by undermining assumptions about meaning and univocality" (6).

[17] In his selected translation of da Vinci's notebooks, which runs over 1100 pages, Edward MacCurdy divides the painter's writings into forty-five separate topics, along with five other sections that include personal statements, letters, dated notes, references to other books, and "miscellaneous."

[18] Palmer frequently relies on musical terminology to provide an alternative to the rational teleology he rejects. In discussing *Notes for Echo Lake* with Lee Bartlett, for instance, he explains, "[I]n the back of my mind was the question of musical notes, which are never far from the feeling of my work" (142) and notes that *First Figure* "has a range of references to figures in a dance" (142). In addition, as noted earlier he speaks and writes repeatedly of his collaborations with the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company and the relationships among music, dance, poetry. Not surprisingly, then, he cites Zukofsky's image of "lower limit speech/upper limit music" as a poetic reference point. [18] However, he very explicitly does not seek to create music, and consequently also cites Zukofsky's qualification of that image: "[Zukofsky] also said we have to recognize that the musical sign and the linguistic sign are not the same thing, and that a poem that confuses its modes ultimately, that aspires to music

in a way that a lot of *fin-de-siecle* poets did, will end up in the problems Swinburne ends up in" ("Counter-Poetics" 4), all but abandoning sense for sound.

[19] One wonders, reading such a passage, what a critic such as Greg Kuzma, who berated Glück for writing poetry that provides "markedly too little information as to human situation or perspective" and fails to erect a suitable narrative framework, would make Palmer's work.

[20] . It echoes across "Letters to Zanzotto" as well as the poems longest sequence, called simply "Untitled," each time shifting context slightly and acquiring a new layer or nuance that changes each subsequent reading of "Improvisation 1" – or perhaps reading "Improvisation 1," where body becomes linked to artistic form, expands our reading of it elsewhere.

[21] Line 5, 9, 10, 12 14, 15, 16, and 17 come from Letters 8, 6, 7, 7, 8, 8, 7, an 7, respectively.

[22] Even when two phrases from the same poem appear next to each other in "Cites" they are taken from different parts of the 'original' poem.

[23] And Palmer, of course, reads Italian and studied in Italy, so may well have access to all the texts.

[24] Twice Palmer has published excerpts from his own working journals, and both "From the Notebooks" (1984) and "Nuages – or Further Notebook Selections" (1984) suggest the range of his reading; many of the writers cited in those notebooks surface either directly or obliquely in the poetry.

[25] For a more detailed account of Palmer's investigations of identity, see Linda Reinfeld's *Language Poetry: Writing As Rescue*.

[26] Although Palmer told Lee Bartlett in the mid-80s, "Maybe [the intertextuality] is also a directive to people to go out there and look at that in the way that a lot of the stuff Pound threw into *The Cantos* was to get people to read a wonderful Chinese or Provencal poet," his later comments suggest that such "directives," if present, are loose and inviting, rather than elitist and commanding. And in his most recent (1994) interview, he comments, "There's an important distinction, for me, between the way I allow those subtexts to flood through my work, which is a way of reading myself and reading those things that have gone into the formation of myself, and the way someone like Eliot uses subtexts . . . . [R]ather than being a form of literary reference in the Eliotic sense, where you're waiting for a scholar to come along and say 'That's the *Bhagavad-gita*, or that's *Henry IV*,' my use of subtexts is more like a kind of sampling in the midst of composition – adding tones, adding a little trumpet solo from here and a little passage of schizophrenic speech from over there and so on" ("River City" 103).

[27] Through the lack of documentation, Palmer even puts himself, to a lesser degree, in the same position. He tells Hollander and Strauss, "I suppose if I went back to my manuscripts I could easily reconstruct exactly what is what, but I deliberately slightly muddied those waters for myself so that I could recover the thing in some primary dimension afterwards – that I wouldn't be consistently aware of where it all came from" ("Dear Lexicon" 20). Such muddying is, of course, limited where the poet himself is concerned, but again Palmer works toward that elision of a unified voice, a single self at the heart of the poem.

[28] "The Perfection of Snow," a phrase appearing in "Letter 1," is the title of a Zanzotto poem, and the image recurs in "Yes, the Snow Again" and other poems in *La Belta* (*Selected Poetry of Andrea Zanzotto*). Such allusions to Zanzotto's work were apparently lost on reviewer Stephen Burt, who reads the presence of snow, particularly in "Letter 5" as "a wished or dreamed up snowy land: perhaps Minnesota ('thousand lakes'), or Minnesota on film, or in a book about film"; it's worth noting here that even "film," which Palmer uses in "Letter 5," echoes in *La Belta*.

[29] Such is certainly the case, for instance, in Philip's work, which deliberately and explicit relies on historical context; Graham's adaptations also rely on the status of their original authors to carry part of the meaning.

Chapter 6:
Reading Outside the Lines:
Toward a Conclusion That Begins Again

"Those who have ears to hear, let them hear."

Matthew 11:15

This project began with silence – with its presence as issue, image, and often formal device in the work of a significant number of contemporary poets. In many ways Jorie Graham's definition of an almost universalistic poetic project marked my own starting point: "For it is the desire to engage the silence, and the resistance of that silence, that tugs at speech; silence [is] the field into which the voice, the mind, the heart play out their drama," Graham writes in her introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1990* (xxiv). In enacting such engagements, the poets examined in this study present a spectrum of the kinds of silence that "tug at speech" here at the end of the twentieth century – silences of gender, ethnicity, and history, as well as the silences of the signifying process itself. Drawn from different "schools" as defined by literary historians, these poets nonetheless share a common desire to attend to what exists at the margins of conventional discourse – to what they call "silence." Even more importantly, the dramas they play out encompass, and in many ways depend on, formal as well as a thematic engagements. Rather than existing as part of an *a priori* political or aesthetic agenda, form is instead a dynamic, critical tool in the act of engaging the silence. The concept of silence thus becomes a critical nexus for understanding both thematic issues and formal practices operating in contemporary poetry.

As the preceding chapters have revealed, however, this attention to silence, whatever its form, brings with it a concentrated attention to the habits of language that permeate our culture. In essays and interviews, these poets consistently refer not only to silence, but also

to the "noise" created by the dominant discourses of Western culture – by the discourses of patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, and orderly whitewashed histories, but also by the patterns of teleological narrative, linearity, univocality, and transparent language that undergird those discourses. Such patterns seem particularly prevalent in a consumer culture where the soundbite is everything and the meaning is lost in the voiceover of the next commercial. Glück bemoans poetry's "premature linguistic satiation," borrowed from the nightly news, in which "the ratio of words to meaning favors words" (*Proofs* 82); Philip argues that poetry "demands the kind of attention which today few people are prepared to devote to any activity. With the exception of sex, perhaps" ("Habit" 213); Graham struggles with the "the speeded up, almost decimated attention span of the bored, overstimulated viewer . . . 'grazing' the channels" ("Introduction" xix); Palmer disparages consumer-poetry that "stands as a kind of decor in one's life. . . the kind of thing for hammock and lemonade." Together, these poets grapple with a culture raised on easy, unconsidered consumption – of language as well as of goods.

In this culture full of words but empty of meaning, "speaking the unspoken" becomes a twofold problem for these writers. First, the incessant outpouring of words – news stories, commercials, Harlequin romances, political doublespeak, museums commemorating and reifying history – drowns out the voices these poets attend to. Even if those voices begin to speak, they are easily subsumed or appropriated by the dominant culture. Women find themselves in relationships where their sentences are always finished by those around them; Afra- and Afro-Caribbeans are denied their own language and forced to swallow the master's tongue; museums mask or distort the scenes they seek to represent;

politicians transform social realities into palatable rhetoric. Sometimes this drowning is intentional, as in the colonial attempts to erase African language and identity or in the substitution of "pacification" for "annihilation" to justify war. At other times, it seems more an unintentional side-effect, as in museums and family relationships. Intentional or not, however, in the eyes of these poets the dominant discourses function as agents of silence.

Such silencing is complicated, however, by a second problem. These discourses not only silence certain voices by talking over them; they also foster particular modes of reading and making sense that deaden our ability to hear anything else. Glück, Philip, Graham, Palmer and their contemporaries find themselves writing in a culture that serves up narratives and slogans for easy consumption, creating a kind of attention-deficit disorder that prevents us from reading outside the lines handed to us on television and in magazines. By transforming language into a consumable item, these poets claim, the commercial soundbites and nightly "entertainment" news stories promote superficial, unconsidered reading; as a result, we lose our ability to attend to the silences. Afra-Caribbean women do not speak the father tongue and war does not fit into a museum diorama, but if we can "make sense" only of the father tongue, all other sounds fall on deaf ears. To turn to Graham's metaphor (developed in Chapter 4), because the dominant discourses demand only frontal vision, peripheral vision atrophies. And it is peripheral "vision" or attention – the ability to hear multiple voices at once, to make connections non-linearly, to read not only the narrative but what the narrative suppresses – that is necessary to listen to what the silence holds.

Ultimately, these poets, and the poetry they produce, argue that the habits of language that dominate the end of the twentieth century in Western culture provide neither the space for silence nor the tools for hearing it. And they are by no means alone in their assessment; writers from Wendell Berry to George Steiner, Stanley Cavell to Neil Postman, reach similar conclusions about the linguistic satiation of American culture and its affects on our attention spans and reading habits. One need look no further than the World Wide Web to discern the explosion of words at the turn of the century; the Web offers us more words than we might have dreamed possible, an infinite array of information and details all transformed into manageable chunks of images[1] scanned in passing while clicking from one screen to the next.[2]

As a result, though silence may still be figured, as I suggested in Chapter 1, as the gap between experience and representation, the nature of the representation controls both the shape of that gap and also our ability to experience it. Looking at the attention paid to silence by contemporary writers, poet Joan Retallack offers what may be a more useful definition of silence in our time:

> What we've learned from this 'coincidence of silences' (as venerable and portentous as a 'siege of herons' or a 'murder of crows') is that silence itself is nothing more or less than what lies outside the radius of interest and comprehension at any given time. We hear, that is, with culturally attuned ears. ("RE:THINKING" 345)

Each of the poets examined here treats silence, as Retallack suggests, as part of the larger issue of cultural attention spans. In these terms, then, the poets gathered here do not

necessarily "speak the unspoken." Though they do *at times* articulate silenced voices, they grapple with silences that are unspeakable as well as unspoken, and more often they are concerned with making those silences palpable rather than articulate. Glück consistently draws attention to her own silences, forcing the reader to acknowledge what has not been said; Graham repeatedly draws attention to the "aporia of art"; Palmer takes us into a Hall of Mirrors that presents a complex array of semantic possibilities without definitively voicing any one. Even Philip, who does work to create space for Afra-Caribbean voices, insistently uses poetic form to map silences that cannot, and perhaps should not, be broken. Their poetry becomes, at its best, a way of bearing witness; as Lyotard writes, "Art and writing . . . can make this noise, the multiplication and neutralization of words, because it is already silence, attest to the other silence, the inaudible one" (48).

As the work of these poets reveals, attesting to the "inaudible silence" on these terms demands a willingness to write outside the lines laid down by the dominant discourses. Formal transformations are essential to locating the silences because formal conventions – the neat lines of teleology, rationality, and univocality – are complicit in their production. As a result, the structures these poets develop operate outside familiar modes of representation, continually pushing the boundaries of the poem outward to open up territory not included in the "radius of interest and comprehension" that (de)limits contemporary culture. Glück draws on "the power of ruins"; Philip becomes a "cartographer of silence"; Graham "breaks the surface"; Palmer "resists preinscribed meaning." Relying on different images to describe their projects, and developing different styles, each nonetheless rejects conventional gestures of teleology, narrative, and logic in markedly similar ways. They

craft poetry characterized by non-linearity, non-normative syntax, disrupted (or obliterated) narrative, and an expansive multivocality in order to map the silences they grapple with. As the preceding chapters demonstrate in detail, the results both disrupt linear, univocal discourse and lead us into nonlinear, multivocal patterns through which silences can emerge.

Importantly, as the poets' essays and interviews repeatedly reinforce, *writing* outside the lines implicitly involves training or creating an audience able to *read* outside the lines. Each writer is acutely aware of his or her audience and the context in which the poem emerges, and each attempts to create "poetry of invitation," as Glück calls it. These poets do not simply use form to engage silences; they deploy formal innovations to create poetic structures that foster the habits of reading, thinking, and listening necessary for readers to hear those silences. They seek, that is, to retune their culture.

Their projects thus take on ethical, perhaps even moral, overtones. These poets do not write as an act of "self-expression"; they write to trans-form their audiences, alternately demanding and persuading us to hear the voices that *Baywatch* and Bill Clinton and Tom Brokaw drown out. Such hearing, they claim, is essential to our survival, not as consumers or voters or even readers, but as human beings with whole sensibilities. Graham, in words that could refer to any of the poetry examined here, frames it this way:

> [I]t was the resistance of the poem – its occlusion, or difficulty – that was healing me, forcing me to privilege my heart, my intuition – parts of my sensibility infrequently called upon in my everyday experience in the marketplace of things and ideas. I found myself feeling, as the poem ended,

> that some crucial muscle that might have otherwise atrophied from lack of use had been exercised. Something part body, part spirit. Something the species should never evolve away from. ("Introduction" xvi)

For Glück, that "something" takes on more explicitly personal overtones; for Philip and Palmer, more explicitly political ones. But each poet manipulates form out of a desire to exercise some version of these atrophied muscles – the muscles that enable us to tune out the politicians, the colonizers, the newscasters, the museum guides, the wandering husbands, the dominating parents, and the advertisers and hear instead Afra-Caribbean women, Civil War soldiers, the mysteries of language, and perhaps even the voice of God. Poetry that privileges the peripheral, the non-discursive, the non-consumable restores something vital to our personal, political, historical and philosophical sensibilities.

Claims like these are both bold and provocative, resting as they do on an ethical understanding of what it means to be human and participate in larger cultural communities. As such, they merit a fuller investigation than this conclusion provides, and suggest an important area to be developed in the next phase of this project. The discussion of silence framed in the opening chapter can and must be more fully contextualized within the dominant linguistic paradigms that shape contemporary habits of reading and meaning. Such contextualization will inevitably enrich the discussions of individual poets, further focusing my investigation of their work and also providing a clearer ground for assessing the relative success (or failure) of their attempts to teach audiences to read outside the lines. Certainly they are not all equally effective. Glück's engagements, as I have suggested, too often demand readers' attention without inviting their participation, while Palmer, despite

his desire to resist the elitism of obscure reference, crafts poetry most accessible to those willing and patient enough to stumble through repeated readings until new patterns emerge. Philip and Graham, in contrast, balance more effectively (to my mind) the new and the old patterns, offering readers points of entry but continually destabilizing those patterns in order to push the edges of our vision.

Despite such qualifications, I see as vital the overarching project of all four poets, and of numerous other writers who share their concerns. We need to listen to the margins, exercise peripheral vision, and learn to make meaning along alternate lines. In turn, I measure the value and significance of this study by the extent to which it explores and extends the work of these poets, demonstrating the ways in which their formal innovations represent engagements not only with the fields of silence, but with the cultural habits of language and thought that produced those fields. At its best, my work makes such poetry more visibly present to the audiences it seeks to transform, bringing it into view in a way that doesn't diminish its strangeness but rather argues that its strangeness is the point.

Endnotes

[1] Although the Web contains a great many words, those words in fact appear as images on the screen, and their visual representation is crucial to the ways in which they are read, as virtually every guide to Web-page design makes clear. In many respects, then, words on the Web are images as much as, if not more than, they are texts.

[2] The web, of course, has both its critics and its opponents. Some argue that it is a place of postmodern freedom where everyone has a voice and knowledge can be disseminated more widely than ever before. Others argue that the vast expanse of information is itself ultimately empty because the web offers no way of evaluating information; it presents all sides as equal, and it is often the graphical effect – how easy a site is to read – rather than its quality or validity, that determines readership. Regardless of how one views the impact, however, the web as a site (or sites) of exploded language transformed into screen images leaves little to argue with.

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