

Jorie Graham's Overlord:  
Poetics, Ethics, and *Différance*

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## Introduction

Reactions to Jorie Graham's *Overlord*—like reactions to the poet herself—have varied widely. There are the celebratory—“This is a difficult, fragmented set of poems from a brilliant, sensitive, searching mind” (Walpole)—and the ambivalent. Of the latter, Willard Spiegelman raises a measured critique of the volume: “The question of whether [her] talk makes sense, or sounds instead like pretentious palaver; whether the talk rises to the level of music, and whether what she has been writing can be legitimately called ‘poems’ has been on the minds of her friends as well as her foes, for a long time” (Spiegelman 176). When critics dislike *Overlord*, they tend to focus on Graham's verbal and linear excesses. In a negative review, one critic notes that “...Graham's cascading ruminations can turn too theatrical and self-conscious...as the poet cannot escape the knowledge that her private Gethsemane is, in fact, a public garden” (Muratori). David Orr goes further, redoubling allegations that Graham has a Christ complex in a review titled “Jorie Graham, Superstar” which describes *Overlord* as a “sententious, well-meaning blunder” (15). Given the wide variety of opinions, *Overlord*'s legacy has yet to be decided.

While the above reactions might easily be written off as the result of contemporary poetry's politicization, it is nonetheless worth observing that two significant themes repeatedly emerge in reviews of *Overlord*—themes which are central to my analysis. The first, of course, is the expansiveness and difficulty of her language—the fact that Graham's poems not only span multiple pages and threaten to fill the wide margins of *Overlord*, but that her particular lyricism seems to be struggling against “poetry” itself. The second is Graham's ethical force. She confronts weighty questions of how one should live—both as an individual and as a citizen—throughout the volume. By its end, Graham certainly suggests that the world is in need of saving.

Regardless of where one falls on the question of Graham's pretensions, however, it is impossible to dismiss the fact that *Overlord* is an ethical volume charged with ethical insight. Not only do the poems themselves raise ethical questions, but Graham's self-conscious approach to writing displays the thoroughness of that questioning; even writing about ethics itself must be ethical. Taken together, these themes point toward questions which must be answered in order to produce a reading of *Overlord* which is faithful to the text. Either Graham's distinct style is evidence of poor execution, or it contributes to the meaning of her project; either Graham's ethical commitments are extra-poetic, unnecessary, and "sententious," or they cannot be divorced from her poetic without a loss of meaning. I will therefore attempt to explore the connection between poetics and ethics in *Overlord*, examining to what degree Graham's poetic can be called ethical, and how her ethical commitments bear upon her style.

Yet I do not wish to totally marginalize the pseudo-religious motifs of *Overlord*, even if doing so would inoculate Graham from the charge of moral heavy-handedness. The sequence of poems which are titled "Praying" (followed by the date of the attempt) present fertile ground for examining the linkage between style and ethics. They also provide an opportunity to think more deeply about the volume's title. In the "Praying" poems, the meaning of "Overlord" expands from a mere historical allusion to the title of an entity—the "Lord" of Graham's prayers and the Overlord that reigns over the seemingly inescapable cycle of violence which haunts her work. This Overlord, however, is spoken to only once and is never rendered present in the text; indeed, the very nature of the "Praying" poems requires the Overlord to be a sort of absent god. Yet the Overlord can nonetheless be encountered in the work, wreaking havoc in and upon the lines of *Overlord*, complicating the ethical questions which I have deemed so important. Whatever it is, it straddles the boundary of present and absent. Analyzing this character will therefore require

thinking “theologically,” though only theologically in the sense that the god we are reasoning about is no god at all, not even a purely absent god.

*Overlord* therefore requires a theoretical paradigm which can account for the Overlord within it; this paradigm, I will argue, is Jacques Derrida’s *différance*. Just as *différance* produces an endless chain of violent repetition, so too does the Overlord. The latter is merely an addressable version of *différance*, one which Graham can refer to by name—though that fact does little in the way of containing its violence. I will also explore the power of *différance* to interpret the entire volume, revealing ways in which Graham’s theoretical commitments shape her ethical and stylistic choices into a unified whole. This does not mean that I will deconstruct *Overlord*—in fact, my primary deconstructive move will be targeted at deconstructive ethics. From the outset, it is important to keep in mind that although *différance* is central to an understanding of Graham’s poetic, it cannot explain the force of her ethical commitments. The burden of making that claim believable, of course, is mine. Much of this work will be concerned with the possibility of ethics after *différance*, a possibility that will ultimately open true resistance to the Overlord.

Although it is not my intention to produce an apology for *Overlord* as good poetry, any careful reading must begin by expecting to find something of worth in the text under consideration. Yet this defense, though true, will not satisfy pessimistic readers—and rightly so. I have already indicated where my allegiance lies by my selection of *Overlord* as a candidate for analysis. To borrow a phrase from J. Hillis Miller, “The choice of examples...and their ordering, is never innocent” (*The Ethics of Reading* 10). The authors in my introduction appear in the order that they do—Graham, Derrida, Hillis Miller—precisely because that is the order in which I will discuss them. From a close reading of Graham, I will pass into a close reading of Derrida

and Graham together. Finally, I will place the ethical commitments of Hillis Miller in concert with those readings. While this is the arrangement that works best for my purposes, I might have chosen another order or another set of texts. Justifying this particular selection and arrangement will be the task that lies behind my task; indeed, it is the ultimate task of all works of criticism. Yet if we read Derrida and Hillis Miller well, we learn that there is never any “sufficient” level of justification. Nor can we assume that we have read a given text correctly. If we wish to find “something of worth” in a text, what we find might only be a projection into the text of what we already consider worthy.

It is this unsettling revelation which *différance* heralds; it is also this revelation, broadly speaking, which makes *Overlord* unsettling. Graham is no aesthete content with poetry for its own sake. She writes about decisions that have mortal consequences now and will continue to have mortal consequences for eons to come. War, discrimination, alienation, nuclear waste, existential despair, homelessness—Graham deals with all these topics and more in turn. Perhaps it is not such a horrible thing if Graham takes herself seriously and becomes “self-conscious” in *Overlord*. What an analysis from *différance* ultimately shows in its failure to account for Graham’s total poetic is the radical nature of her critique. Her ethical probing reaches a spot more foundational than any “justification” of poetry’s existence. For Graham, before poetry can be “justified,” it must be ethical. Whether or not *Overlord* is good poetry hinges on the question of whether writing is or can be ethical—but so too does the viability of the lyric tradition. My main argument can be distilled into the claim that this is not too hyperbolic a formulation for the challenge which Graham confronts.

Graham ultimately answers this question in the affirmative—there can be ethical poetry. At its conclusion, *Overlord* comes to rest with a statement of hope, the very thing that proves so

elusive throughout the volume. It is only after reading through the material and materiality of *Overlord*, however, that a reader can arrive at that point—not the “point” of a specific place on a page, but the appreciation of how costly that hope is. As one reads through *Overlord*, it becomes apparent that Graham is “reading through” her own catalogue of suffering and violence which must be acknowledged in order for that frail hope not to collapse, when it comes, beneath intellectual and aesthetic rigor. Graham opens her expansiveness to a near-total erasure in order to find something that might survive the void. That thing—“*the given thing*” (*Overlord* 88), as she calls it—is ethics itself. Yet before we can arrive at that conclusion, there is the difficult task of reading. It is to that task which I now turn.

## Jorie Graham: The Ethics and Poetics of Loss

*Overlord* is a challenging volume of poems. It comes relatively late in Graham's still unfinished career, and marks—like other volumes before it—a shift that could be roughly described as pessimistic. Released several years after the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy, it is circumscribed by the event but not obsessed with it as a distinct rupture with a stable past. The volume, after all, takes its name from Operation Overlord of World War II, best known for D-Day and the storming of Normandy. The fact that Graham reaches back to another period of American history to describe the current one is not only an argument that World War II formed a direct causal chain that led to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>; it is also a general argument that war inevitably begets war. Graham, after all, not only writes on the Trojan War but also imagines a distant future in which the radioactive waste of the present remains a cause of concern. *Overlord* is war poetry in a general sense—not about a war, but about War. Graham's work has always grappled with the spirit of violence that cannot be exorcised from human culture in general and western culture in particular. Graham has drawn on the kaleidoscope of war and wartime violence in previous poems such as *The End of Beauty*'s "What the End is For" and *Region of Unlikeness*'s "From the New World,"<sup>1</sup> pairing them with mundane but nonetheless violent experiences of late-twentieth century life—a strained marriage and a grandmother with dementia—in order, it would seem, to identify the existential thread which unites them all. Her early poetry seems to argue that if the thread could be found, a cure for endemic violence might accompany it. There is, however, no hope of a cure in *Overlord*. Humanity's situation is

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<sup>1</sup> The text which I have for both of these poems is from *The Dream of the Unified Field*, a collection that spans Graham's early career (and which won her the Pulitzer.)



terminal, not just with regard to the material body and physical violence (of which there is plenty), but in the spiritual realm as well. As Graham says, “Words no longer prophesy. The third eye has an / infection or an allergy the doctor can’t tell he gives it drops (*Overlord* 66-7). This is a remarkable statement for a poet. The poems in *Overlord* are an exploration of a wound which will not close because it is infinite, for although Graham condemns certain facts of existence—that the United States is fighting wars in the Middle East in her name—she is powerless to stop them. It is this powerlessness against the void which serves as the unifying theme of *Overlord*. She wrestles against an anti-God who cannot be encountered because he does not exist, a god of the void and absence which nonetheless seems to be the common denominator present in all suffering. Graham expresses this Overlord most clearly in the failure of language, specifically in language’s failure to bridge the gap between the material and metaphysical. All language, especially the artful use of language, seems to be a structure capable of supporting the weight of an ontology which might, within its system, hold the key to a world without violence. Language, however, fails. Graham is not alone in this determination, but her hallmark is that she styles the poetics of loss as the only ethically responsible poetics. Other poets (such as Gertrude Stein) question language’s limits through repetition or syntactic ploys; while Graham employs these devices, her primary method of erasure is to multiply words, line lengths, and the overall length of poems (as Helen Vendler would say) to excess. Such a poetics constitutes ineluctable homage to an Overlord that is irresistible because it is beyond encounter.

### **Style, Form**

Before one reads the words of *Overlord*—even before opening the cover—one encounters the material book itself. While the almost square shape of *Overlord* as a physical

artifact does not make it unique among Jorie Graham's books,<sup>2</sup> that fact alone does not mean its shape was not influenced by its subject matter. Its width almost matches its height; one might turn it in any direction and it would be no thinner. In this sense, its very silhouette seems to offer an objective materiality that survives moving the book or even shifts in points of view. That the book could be called "solid" when it is a frantic meditation on the material world in search of ontological ground seems no accident. If such a thing were possible, it would provide the ground that Graham seeks. It is only "almost" a square. Its very shape is indicative of the desire that it cannot fulfill.

Yet there is much more to be said about the shape of Graham's poetry than the shape of the volume; there are the poems themselves. The shortest, "Little Exercise," is fourteen lines; the rest all occupy two or more full pages. Not only that, but the lines themselves are lengthy, as these lines from "Praying (*Attempt of Feb 6 '04*)" show:

The cell-information of the bird just now in this hour in  
this second going extinct, where is that information  
going to be stored. I am afraid. "Everything must  
exist in some form even extinction" I try. Like a breath  
after the sentence is uttered, done, mouth shut with  
meaning. That breath is in the air, isn't it, literally *in* it—  
an exam of some kind would find them, the breath-molecules—no?—  
and the *said thing*?—well, yes, it too is there, somewhere—  
and the music—god what an orchestration—of all the footsteps  
at once, right now, on this planet, I will not list all the surfaces

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<sup>2</sup> A cursory search on amazon.com reveals that *Never*, *Place*, and *Sea Change* share similar formats

they tap against, I *will* put in all the grammars playing themselves out  
in *all* the languages, spidery, all speaking at once, wind moving through  
the corn, the speakers speaking stopping listening speaking. (67)

The poems cascade through *Overlord*, unfettered by standard notions of syntax and how long a line should be. Helen Vendler hypothesizes that, “The long line...is first generated by Graham as the formal equivalent of mortality, dissolution, and unmeaning” (78). It is tempting to describe these poems as written in a stream of consciousness, but that categorization does not do justice to the meticulous philosophizing that Graham accomplishes on almost every line—a philosophizing which is present within the very structure of the lines. The poems, like the volume, are formed to be “solid” in a very physical sense. At the most basic level of their form, they are meant to convey a certain amount of heft—a weightiness that would escape, say, a pair of quatrains in iambic tetrameter.

Yet this does not exhaust the entire question of Graham’s idiomatic formalism. It is fruitful to ask why these particular line divisions were chosen, but it is perhaps more to the point to notice not just the points at which Graham breaks her lines but also the way in which she does so. The initial words of her lines are not capitalized—a break from traditional English poetics, but not an unprecedented move.<sup>3</sup> Coupled with the long lines and lack of rhyme scheme, however, the lack of capitalization gives some traction to the impression that these weighty poems have taken on a prosaic form. As Helen Vendler observes in her study of Graham’s long lines, “Historically, the line has been the characteristic unit distinguishing poetry from prose; it is the most sensitive barometer of the breath-units in which poetry is voiced” (71). If this is true, then Graham brings us close to the border between the two. The liminal potential of the poems’

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<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, many other poets—most of whom had their careers in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century—who employ this style for different purposes and to different effects.

form is reinforced by the lack of readily apparent reasons for the line breaks—reasons, in the case of initial capitalization, which are founded only in convention and its affect. Perhaps the enjambments are entirely random. The formal line structure of the poem might very well be a skeleton over which a mismatched skin is draped, a skin that might be shifted into a different but equally mismatched position with a decisive tug. If to proceed with this assumption would mean to proceed in bad faith, it is nonetheless an assumption that the text invites.

The possibility of an arbitrary form is one which Graham might willingly foster. In “Exquisite Disjunctions, Exquisite Arrangements,” Brian Henry observes that “Graham’s complex syntax indicates a series of grammatical disruptions that are instances of conflict for a poet visibly working against her own music and eloquence. This disjunctive lyricism—a lyricism struggling against itself—creates one of the primary dilemmas of her poems” (103). This “lyricism struggling against itself” is certainly evident in the previous selection and will be encountered on the thematic level when I examine poems from *Overlord* in greater detail. It is also important to remark that Graham—unlike, say, e. e. cummings—does not eschew punctuation outright; in fact, she can use punctuation to excess. Her lyricism’s struggle against itself is sustained by a way of using syntax which marks the passage of her mind from one state to another but cannot properly be called a state of mind. It is a writing which foregrounds the subtleties of “extralinguistic” punctuation and hesitation. Surely one cannot give a comma and a dash the same “weight” even though the marks are not words and have no “literal” denotation. But to speak of weight is to speak of something with material substance. Surely this is inappropriate in the case of Graham’s syntax, which leads to nothing solid—not even a sound. It marks only, perhaps, the performer’s intake of air as he reads. This is exactly the function which Vendler says line breaks serve; Graham’s enjambment now seems even more arbitrary, yet all

the more important. Graham's interrogation of the line leads to an interrogation of the reader's presence—their "there-ness". The abstraction of form has ontological stakes which might be determined by the breath of some other. We return, therefore, to the weightiness of *Overlord* and remark that for all its squarish pretensions at weight it is a thin volume, and the leaves of its individual poems are thin indeed. Even on the level of style, Graham interrogates her ontological aspirations not through redaction, but expansion.

### **Violence and the Despair of Language**

As the above quotation shows, these elements exist in the themes of the poems as well as their form. That passage is from a poem entitled "Praying (*Attempt of Feb 6 '04*)," one of the volume's six poems to be titled "Praying" followed by a date. Praying is, for Graham, a verbal exercise even if it is not an explicitly audible one; it therefore invokes not only questions of language but also those of presence. In order to examine Graham's breathing, let us return to the first part of the selection:

The cell-information of the bird just now in this hour in  
this second going extinct, where is that information  
going to be stored. I am afraid. "Everything must  
exist in some form even extinction" I try. Like a breath  
after the sentence is uttered, done, mouth shut with  
meaning. (67)

Remembering the earlier comment on Graham's syntax, it is important to notice that the first sentence is interrogative and would normally end in a question mark. In the earlier "Praying (*Attempt of June 6 '03*)," Graham asks "Why does even the use of the question mark seem too /

pronounced for the way it feels” (16). The fact that Graham sometimes fails to use the question mark not only exposes the false sense of givenness which surrounds grammatical rules but also betrays a lack of confidence in the ability of these marks to convey the real. More to the point, Graham does not “say” a statement; she attempts a hurried, breathless “try.” In this passage, the possibility of meaning implies closure—even the physical closure of the shut mouth—and in the example given, it is coterminous with extinction. The sentence is life, but the breath is the possibility of an afterlife, a presence that transcends the audible word.

Graham’s remaining task is to find some ground which makes the breath—and the metaphysical reality it signifies—ontologically stable. She must attempt to render the breath in an inexhaustible sentence. Therefore Graham asks:

That breath is in the air, isn’t it, literally *in it*—  
an exam of some kind would find them, the breath-molecules—no?—  
and the *said thing*?—well, yes, it too is there, somewhere— (67)

That Graham is less skeptical about using the question mark here indicates the high stakes of her questions. Her attempt to extrapolate from the material to the metaphysical depends upon this attempt to locate breath molecules in the air and, even more so, on her attempt to locate the “said thing.” Yet breath molecules, let alone words, dissipate rapidly. In order for this examination to happen, however, time must be stopped—the order of events must be interrupted so that an analysis can take place. Or, more precisely, Graham desires to suspend time so that an exam can take place, an event which if not overtly medical nonetheless recalls the doctor giving her “third eye” drops. There is no escape from the terminal nature of terminal material. That breath which represented the possibility of the afterlife is as physically ephemeral as the sentence; to accurately represent the breath in a material form—or, rather, in poetic form—would make

extinct the very thing that she hopes to prove exists. Yet if breath fails as a metaphor for ontology because of its ephemeral nature, it nonetheless escapes the closure of materiality that would short-circuit the possibility of metaphysics.

Graham must therefore continue to write towards a closure which she simultaneously resists. Making the jump from material to metaphysical and thereby to a stable ontology is her desire, but the very fact that she cannot do so ensures that the metaphysical cannot perish because it cannot be made material. This stasis is achieved, of course, at the cost of ontological surety. As Vendler writes:

Earthly desire itself is the thing allegorized by Graham's long horizontal line, desire always prolonging itself further and further over a gap it nonetheless does not wish to close. In this search by desire, mind will always outrun body. And the linear ongoingness necessitated by the continuation of desire means that the absence of shape, far from meaning dissolution and mortality, now stands for life itself. (79)

Graham's postponement of ontological surety likely leads her to construct longer and longer lines and poems littered with the irregular syntax of ephemeral breath, broken at odd intervals. In the poet's own words from "Praying (*Attempt of June 8 '03*)," "the minute I stop scribbling here / I will be gone" (10). That Graham conceives of her project as scribbling implies it has no definite purpose—no destination at which to arrive—and also undercuts the fact that it is a linguistic exercise. Graham is very suspicious of language. It is not only in the unit of the line that Graham's struggle is conflicted, but in the very exercise of writing. There is, after all, a way to read Graham's poems which treats them as an exercise in reexamining vocabulary; in the previous poem we find a number of words italicized: *make, operational, by accident, real, the*

*enemy, meant, read through*, and more besides. While the italics are sometimes used for quotation, they are far more often used to interrogate certain words, throwing suspicion on the fixity of their meaning. That this graphical maneuver should be indeterminately connected to both suspicion and quotation is significant. It serves to show that all language is “borrowed” (in the sense of a radical intertextuality) and therefore cannot be trusted. Italicization functions as the revealing of this fact which, however, delays recognition of the word’s meaning—and, if Graham has her way, postpones the closure of meaning indefinitely.

This desire for postponement likely explains the move behind one of the volume’s most desperate passages, found in “Praying (*Attempt of June 14 ’03*).” After imagining a scene in which a poet is ushered into the court of Agamemnon to give news of Helen’s departure, Graham begs:

Keep us in the telling I say face to the floor.

Keep us in the story. Do not force us back into the hell  
of action, we only know how to kill. Once we stop singing we  
only know how to get up and stride out of the room and begin  
to choose, this from that, this from that, this from that,—and the pain,  
the pain sliding into the folds of the brain and lodging. (33)

Storytelling, specifically poetry, is broached here as a possible preventative to violence. If only the breath and the sentence could continue indefinitely, perhaps violence could be eliminated. She styles closure as violence and constructing (or, rather, claiming) a closure as a violent act. More specifically, closure can only be constituted by “choosing” from among equally valid alternatives and is therefore unjust by definition. The repeated “this from that” not only highlights the arbitrariness of the choice but also its inexorable repetition. The seemingly



awkward syntax of a comma followed by a dash indicates that the phrase will continue *ad infinitum*, and that the reader is only spared this endless procession by the poet turning her attention to something else—in this case, the pain caused by choosing. Graham seeks to postpone the choice in order to circumvent violence.

Not only is language unable to prevent violence in Graham’s conception, but it is also unable to mend or communicate the damage done by violence. In the poem, Graham equates the pain of choosing with nuclear waste. The brain becomes a cavern with “crevices on the side walls” in which pain “find[s] the spot of / unforgetting” (33). Earlier in the poem, Graham describes a similar scene:

*Waste* comes  
in, I know they are  
burying our waste, that it will last hundreds of millions  
of years in the mountain, that they are trying to cover it with signs they  
do not know how to develop in  
a language that will still communicate in that far  
future saying don’t open this, this is lethal beyond  
measure, back away, go away, close the lid, close  
the door. (31)

Much like nuclear waste, pain will continue to have negative effects far into the future. This passage’s longest line is, significantly, its most linguistic line. It is no coincidence that the effort described here—the effort of communicating across “deep time”—is the effort to discover a universal human language that transcends culture and the particularities of history. Graham does not believe that this language can be developed. Yet the pain-waste of the present will continue

into the future; knowledge of the waste's danger as well as ways to warn others will be lost. Furthermore, Graham makes the claim that individual pain is incommunicable (and turns Plato's allegory on its head) by imagining the mind as a cave. Each person's pain is their own particular pain; they are stuck in radical isolation. Language provides no escape. Like a blunt scalpel, the use of language promises a degree of restorative power, but it cannot deliver. Language only carves and deepens particular wounds.

### **Poetics and the Ethics of Choosing**

Graham's poetics, however, falls prey to the same problem of choosing that she highlights as the origin of violence. When she writes, "is it that we cannot tell each other apart, so we have to / make up / something that will count as difference—*real* difference..." (8) she is stating, once again, her suspicion of choice. But let us consider the italicized words in that sentence. Either it was chosen arbitrarily or with some purpose in mind. If it is the former, then Graham has engaged in the very behavior that she laments, choosing "this from that." Why not italicize the entire poem? But of course there is a very salient reason not to italicize the entire poem; in that case, italics do not carry the same weight and cannot indicate the interrogation of given meaning. Italics must be set off against a different style of type for the effect to occur.<sup>4</sup> If, however, Graham's selection of words is not arbitrary, then the use of italics betrays her ultimate inclination towards some fixed meaning and, therefore, a violent closure. In the same way, there is a very good case to be made that certain beginning or ending words for lines are highly

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<sup>4</sup> This is Saussurian linguistics at its most basic. Of course it might be claimed that I am falling prey to the hermeneutic circle here, claiming to have found meaning in Graham's italicization and then using that as a basis to critique the view that Graham's choice of individual words is arbitrary. This seems to be a tautology at best. In fact, I am forming a hypothesis about a formal element and then questioning the application of that formal element. Even if my hypothesis about the formal element is incorrect, the identical conclusion reached by both (mutually exclusive) possibilities about its application shows that my original hypothesis about the function of italics does not interfere with this part of the analysis.

meaningful, yet this appears not to be a fixed rule across all lines—let alone all poems. In order for Graham’s poems to exist—in order for them to have a shape at all—Graham was forced to choose a shape. This is simply another way of saying that the line must eventually end; Graham cannot write forever. The poem must terminate; the line that resists ending must end, and as soon as the poem becomes fixed in a volume it is fixed in space and time as a material artifact. The closure that Graham resists is the closure of death; despite her resistance, it is an irresistible closure.

If Graham believes that writing is complicit in the cycle of violence, then it is curious that she chooses to write at all. Certainly this move makes her an accomplice in the destructive activity that she laments. It is Graham herself who says, after all, “*we* only know how to kill” (33, emphasis mine). Graham’s horror at a violent world is therefore not exclusively produced by others’ actions; she is among those who knows how to kill. While this is a moment of welcome honesty, it is nonetheless problematic. We should also not forget the image of the singer in the house of Agamemnon:

The

poet ushered in. To sing of what has happened. Right here.

On this floor. The voice telling its story. Long, slow, in detail. All of them

Waiting. Listening for the terrible outcome. In detail. The opening

of the singer at the throat. The still bodies of the

listeners, high on this outpost, 3,000 years ago, the house of

Agamemnon, the opening of the future. There. Right through the open

mouth of the singer. What happened, what

is to come. And the stillness surrounding them when it is done,

the song. And the singer still. And the chalices empty. (32)

The audience listens to the poet to hear the “terrible outcome,” their bodies “still”—almost deathlike, even after the song is over. Although the target of this critique seems to be lyric poetry in general, the Yeatsian echoes of “What happened, what / is to come” implicates the modern dream of a “scientific” literature of high aesthetics which exists for its own sake. Graham, however, is not content to place all the blame on those who perpetuate such an aesthetic by implicitly exonerating herself via an appeal to temporal distance and more enlightened sensibilities. She locates her imaginary poet “Right here. / On this floor,” the same spot that she occupies, “Knees tight, face pressed,” (31) from the effort to pray. Graham is obedient to her sense of ethical responsibility and does not attempt to claim that she has broken from this tradition; instead, she seeks to probe its depths from within. In a profound reading of Graham’s earlier work, Alex E. Blazer notes that Graham’s poetry, “. . .is wrought out of the lyric (and the lyrical ‘I’) but devoid of the lyric’s content and lyricism’s constraints. Her poetic language touches the real of subjective being precisely by nullifying itself. A Graham poem is anguish personified” (125). Her poems can be traced to the lyrical tradition, but achieve much of their force by struggling against that tradition.<sup>5</sup> After all, Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium,” which is indicative of the desire to transcend mortality through the unmitigated aesthetic beauty of created objects, expresses a desire akin to Graham’s attempt to find a material ground for ontology. The difference—and it is a significant one—is that Graham is not content with beauty’s answer since, in her view, it unjustifiably occults the problem of violence.<sup>6</sup> Yeats recognizes the necessity of

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<sup>5</sup> In this context, the title of Calvin Bedient’s “Postlyrically Yours” says as much as needs to be said. We can add “postlyrical” to a number of other traditions to which Graham and her writing is “post-,” structuralism and modernism being foremost among them.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Vendler offers an explanation of Graham’s line structure that brings her into dialogue with another poet: “Graham’s combination of indefinitely stretching right-edge horizontality with occasional right-edge vertical drops refuses both the model of step-by-step upward mental advance and the model of investigative penetration inward

violence; Graham condemns it. Her poetry is thoroughly ethical. Through the process of creation, she foregrounds creation's fundamental violence, problematizing her art.

The question of why she continues to write is given at least a partial answer by yet another passage in *Overlord*. "Praying (*Attempt of June 6 '03*)" is the second "Praying" poem in the volume; it focuses primarily on images of Normandy's hedgerows—from which so many soldiers never emerged in Operation Overlord—and a cat with AIDS that Graham has adopted. This cat "is also very smart and beautiful. We have no / name for it" (*Overlord* 16). That fact is enough to inform the reader that it will not live long, but, more importantly, that a name implies a sense of permanence for the one who bears it—even, perhaps, a sense of immortality in the negative sense. Graham, however, confounds that assumption in a description of her habits of writing, comparing herself to the terminally-ill cat:

Every morning now I am putting these words down  
in the place of other words. Over them. In order to cover them  
up. The cat this morning, because something, as we were told to expect, is starting to  
go wrong,  
is scratching and scratching at the hard floor to cover up a trace  
of what she has not done. I pick her up to calm her but she pulls away and goes back  
to what looks, to my species, like shame, the work of the  
ashamed. I feel there is nowhere to turn. (17)

The passage's parallelism is remarkable; Graham implies that the desire to write is the product of a sickness and also an attempt to mitigate an imaginary shame. Surely this passage is evocative of Graham's previously-encountered lines, "Words no longer prophesy. The third eye has an /

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from the beautiful into the true" (79). To adapt Keats to Graham, if beauty is truth and truth is beauty, then beauty is irrevocably violent—but it is not enough to simply know that fact.

infection or an allergy the doctor can't tell he gives it drops" (66-7), "My person is sick" (58), and her remarks about "scribbling" (10). She will eventually die, of course, but Graham does not have a physical illness. Her sickness is existential, spiritual. The fact that she has a name cannot overcome this. The name by itself is weighted with sediment that imparts a sense of shame which is all the harder to shake because it has no discernible metaphysical cause. Her desire to write is therefore only a sign that something is going wrong. This metaphorical scenario—and we must not forget that it is metaphorical—implies that the sense of shame (and psychology in general) might be nothing more than a symptom of purely material processes, the sum total of which indicates the brute truth that we are going to die.

In this context, Graham places the task of naming as yet more scratching, the creation of more traces.<sup>7</sup> The above passage continues:

I have borrowed money. I have borrowed faith. I have borrowed words, style, thoughts, obedience. I have borrowed the smile, I have borrowed the still moonlit field, the hoarfrost glowing in it, borrowed the phone, called the number listed, called the other number, also borrowed one person's name, then another's, also gave one name to a newborn person. I have tried to understand the messages. (17)

In this passage, Graham intertwines the "borrowings" of everyday ephemera with those of her poetic career ("the still moonlit field, the hoarfrost glowing in it..."), her attempt to save the cat ("called the number listed, called the other number"), and those of major life events—being born, marrying, and having a child. By summarizing the list with "I have tried to understand the messages," Graham sets up the entire sequence of borrowings as a communicative exchange.

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<sup>7</sup> As we will see later in an examination of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, this vocabulary is not on accident. There is a sense in which the "proper name" is improper.

Unfortunately, “words no longer prophesy” (66). While the practice of borrowing—or, to be more specific, the practice of naming—is necessary for life to continue, the exchange is based upon a polite fiction which obscures the fundamental fact that we own nothing in this life.

Graham admits this elsewhere in *Overlord*, saying, “...the minute I stop scribbling here / I will be gone” (10). Only the person’s continued activity can act as proof of their continued survival. Since the rhetorical move of borrowing a name is proof of the original name’s impermanence, naming cannot impart permanence.

### **The Ethics of (God’s) Absence**

We have seen, to this point, that Jorie Graham’s *Overlord* employs a host of devices that attempt to keep closure and the violence of choice at bay and that, despite these maneuvers, Graham cannot help but continue to engage in choice-as-violence as she writes her poems. The poem is itself a choice that Graham continues to make in the most active sense of the verb, choosing “this from that” as she forms her poems. Yet even if this fear of choice transcends her historical moment, even if she is “right” about the permanency of violence to the point of ontological correctness (at which Graham herself might cringe), the question of why she continues to write—to continue to cover the shame that has no ground—even when aware of its implications is an important one. As Timothy Baker has written of *Overlord*, “The self—and the world—may be revealed by the void, but the desire to shore the self up against that void is still powerful” (143). Graham’s silence would result in a loss of self. In an attempt to explore how Graham herself imagines this question, I will offer a reading of one final “Praying” poem, the last one with such a title in *Overlord*.

The poem, “Praying (*Attempt of April 19 '04*),” is remarkable for its sense of ethical responsibility in the face of powerlessness. It also the poem in which the influence of Graham’s unspoken Overlord is most strongly felt. The poem begins with a declaration that the desire to express despair is forbidden:

If I could shout but I must not shout.  
The girl standing in my doorway yesterday weeping.  
In her right hand an updated report on global warming.  
An intelligent girl, with broad eyes and a strong  
wide back. What am I supposed to tell her? (*Overlord* 80)

There is a disjunction, in this passage, between the apparent health of the girl and the sickness of the planet—even the apparent health of organisms on the planet and the overall state of the environment. Graham’s ethical dilemma is created by this tension between a distant irrecoverable loss and the need to continue living in the present; in essence, it is created by the same tension felt in the other “Praying” poem in which her cat has AIDS. In this case the ethical demand is likewise felt as a linguistic matter, although this time the connection is much more explicit. “What am I supposed to tell her?” In essence, this is the question that Graham might ask of all her poems; the choice seems to be between telling the truth and telling a lie.

Graham’s ethical responsibility, however, does not allow the situation to be addressed in such a straightforward manner. A few lines later in the poem, Graham ponders the deferral of the question:

Has the human eye changed. The eye doctor asks me  
if it is more like dust or soil, the matter my eye splays  
against the empty walls. More like dust. Then it’s ok.



It's really my own blood I see.

It will disintegrate, not right away. When it goes  
from dust to soil I should come back. Writing this  
has been a very long detour I know.

No one likes to lie or be lied to. (Ibid.)

The parable is yet another instance in which Graham masterfully transitions from a general perspective (“Has the human eye changed”) to a particular account that is later revealed as a parable for general application. Once again, she presents storytelling as the delay of the inevitable; in this case, the speaker will eventually lose her sight despite the doctor’s polite lie. The speaker, though, has apparently made use of the same stall tactic:

How do I stay awake  
for this. The slumber is upon me. How I said to the girl  
it would be all right *in the end*. Not to worry. There  
was  
another suicide here last week. One must be so careful  
re the disappearance of hope. A new illusion must present  
itself immediately. When I pray now  
this is what I pray for. That the girl not stand like this  
in the doorway, with her facts on the sheet in her right hand,  
hardly able to find a normal breath. The verdict  
*is* irreversible. Meaning the word cannot be taken back.  
It is said. It is said. That is what the boy who jumped  
left in his note. (81)

Graham must continuously resist ethical slumber, not glossing over the gravity of the situation with a conventional, culturally-prescribed response. This ethical move is incarnated in Graham's poetics; Blazer remarks that, "This kind of writing, since it seeks to break itself open—if not down—is by definition opposed to itself, its own image-, symbol-, and myth-making. Convention writing re-presents reality; this writing presents the real" (149). Yet the need to present the real is balanced against the fact that the truth of the "real" is psychologically destructive. This should not be too surprising—Graham views closure as violence, and if closure, then why not also truth as the closure of meaning? At the same time, however, Graham cannot have an ethics without truth; the student standing before her and the environmental devastation of the earth are, on a material level, the same order of truth. She cannot deny one and affirm the other.

Yet if the ethical crisis is precipitated by a matter of material truth, it nonetheless hinges on belief. Graham herself does not doubt that the environment is doomed; to say that there is widespread pollution which is currently harming the environment is one thing, but to say that this necessitates the total destruction of the earth's ecosystems and the death of the planet is quite another. Graham, of course, has no reason to doubt the statistics—even less so since they play into her overarching narrative of a primal violence that exceeds all attempts to contain it. Predictions, however, incorporate nonverifiable assumptions. Why does Graham doubt the reality of the metaphysical yet confirm everything that fits within the narrative of materiality? The assumption that the material is somehow more real is itself a metaphysical assumption. What first appeared as a simple divide between material and metaphysical now looks as though it might be a privileged hierarchy. The following passage from Graham seems far from innocent:

She can be

soothed today, friend, but not tomorrow. Tomorrow she  
will jump out a window or pick up a gun or believe  
with a belief that hums so loudly no human reason  
will ever reach into that hive again, that whatever  
happens

will be ordained. All will be a sign.

You will never again be able to scare her.

A story so firm it will abolish the future.

Coming in to grip the thing we call Time. (*Overlord* 82)

At stake here are the grounds for belief—the theory that belief and death are the same response to the trauma of closure, both of which dehumanize the subject. In Graham’s search for a ground, there are no grounds for belief; there is only the strictly materialist postulation of a cause.

Therefore it is not simply *a* closure which Graham’s poetics seeks to forestall, but *the* closure of belief. The position of the metaphysical skeptic is, in her mind, the only ethically acceptable position, and it is that position which Graham consistently takes. The ethical moment is therefore best summarized by the closing lines of the poem, “I do not know what to tell her, Lord. I do not / want her / to serve you. Not you. Not you above all” (*Ibid.*) Death is a foregone conclusion; Graham does not pray for life, only that the student not come to believe in the Overlord.

Although some might claim that Graham’s belief in the Overlord whom she resists affirms the real presence of a deity, that claim is not borne out by her philosophical schema. If the reader takes Graham’s attempts at prayer as sincere homage to a deity (or even to something as nebulous as a cosmic force), then we can perhaps begin to discover what kind of god this Overlord is. Graham receives no revelation and no comfort from the Overlord. Her prayers are

neither answered nor acknowledged. If the Overlord is a real god, then it is a god that Graham never encounters nor hopes to encounter, a powerless god who lacks presence. Since the term “Overlord” in its historical setting refers to an act of war, it is possible that the Overlord refers to the systemic death caused by human differentiation, yet to make even this conjecture is to overlook the fact that this systemic death is not a substance but a process, a recurrence—an arrangement of traces and not a thing in itself. And besides, Graham only refers to the Overlord as “Lord.” While the majuscule indicates obeisance, the term—even if it is a “proper” name—is still a floating signifier, supported by a negative theology at best. By implying that she serves the Overlord, Graham is ultimately affirming her subservience to the void of death. If, as she believes, this inexorably absent despot lies at the heart of human existence, how can she do anything other than serve it willing or unwilling? Graham’s final prayer is a prayer that will not be answered because it cannot be answered; even were the Overlord able to grant the request (and in this hypothetical scenario there is already the double absurdity of an actual Overlord which is present), to do so would be to defy itself.

The ethical dilemma is, ultimately, whether Graham’s speaker should allow the girl to look death in the face or shield her from it. The first time, Graham’s speaker offered consolation: “How I said to the girl / it would be all right *in the end*” (81). This is an ironic way of offering comfort without denying the fact that there will be an end. But that answer was only a delay in the action, a polite fiction like the one her doctor told her. Below the idiomatic layer of “in the end” is the truth of the end; in the doctor’s advice that her eyesight will not worsen but that she should come back when it does there is the truth that she is going blind. The girl has come back. By this point, Graham’s advice to not console the student is predictable:

Don’t tell her she’s wrong when she comes to your

doorsill.

Let her weep. Do not comfort. Do not give false

hope. (Ibid.)

This is yet another instance of her desire to “stay awake for this” (81). She must continue to bear witness. The positioning of “doorsill” and “hope” as outrides is therefore significant. Graham interrogates them by placing them outside the line, showing that she has not “fallen asleep” to them. On the one hand, bracketing them as extra-linear serves to discredit the terms as such—yet if that were all that was required, Graham might have simply italicized them. As Brian Henry says, “Graham’s outrides...are rarely slack; they not only hang at the right margin, but ride the crest of the white space before them, actively occupying the page and forcing the reader to read down the page as well as across it” (104). By placing the outrides on individual lines, Graham draws more attention to the words than they would receive otherwise. The implication is not play in the meaning of the word but the play of the choice of the word—Graham need not have chosen “doorsill” or “hope.” To meet the girl anywhere else would have entailed the same conversation; to offer anything false would be ethically impermissible. The situation’s particulars manifest, in Graham’s poetry, as outrides. What this stylistic choice portends is not the discounting of hope proper, but the removal of hope as a consideration in the speaker’s ethical dilemma. Graham’s answer reflects that position; there is no answer for the facts and figures.

## **Conclusion**

“What am I supposed to tell her?” (*Overlord* 80). I have written so much on this ethical question because I believe it is the question to which all Graham’s poems reply. Yet, even if it is the volume’s primary ethical movement, it is not the first—not even the first ethical movement in

that particular poem, which begins, “If I could shout but I must not shout” (Ibid.) The question, as we might have guessed all along, involves not only what is to be told but also how it is to be told. From where does Graham’s “must not” come? Surely Graham’s speaker does not feel constrained by a sense of hopeful propriety. Even though she might want to “go down singing” (82), that desire in itself is not enough to exert normative force on her activity. That Graham would consider a metaphysical constraint legitimate seems highly unlikely, and a theological one is out of the question. If there is an ethical imperative at all, then it seems that it must be imposed by the Overlord<sup>8</sup> to which Graham’s poetry—and all poetry, if she is correct—is subservient. The stakes are indeed high; Graham writes on the cusp of an ethical consciousness that is breaking forth in contemporary verse. In Kirsten Hotelling Zona’s review of Graham’s work before *Overlord*, she writes that, “...while Graham’s poetry points up current debates over poetic form, it also forces us to confront the moral stakes that underpin such discussions” (676). If that was true of her poetry before *Overlord*, it is certainly true afterward, only with redoubled urgency.

In order to identify this ethical Overlord (if the question of the Overlord’s identification is even an intelligible one), we turn now to the ethical writings of Jacques Derrida and J. Hillis Miller. The resistance of closure and the problematizing of signifying systems in Graham’s work suggest an engagement with a flavor of postmodern thought heavily engaged with what might have been called (if it had kept the same assumptions) a form of semiotics. Derrida, of course, transforms the question of signification into a question of presence and absence, play, and violence—in a word, deconstruction. That these are themes central to *Overlord* is, I argue, more than coincidence. Building on his thought, J. Hillis Miller closely examines the ethics of reading

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<sup>8</sup> As I will argue, however, the question of the “Overlord”—or *différance*—is very much a metaphysical and even theological one.

from *différance*, work that, given the assumptions which deconstruction makes about texts, is easily adapted into an ethics of writing. Perhaps these writers of writing will retrace the trace of the Overlord.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Outride: Careful readers will note that I have left Graham's materialism by the wayside. In a sense, I make no apologies for this. The privilege which Graham affords the material world is, if unsupported by a belief of some sort, counteracted by the doggedness with which she pursues metaphysical questions. Her theoretical projects are unbalanced from the start, continuing on an unsteady path until the doubts of the metaphysical subsume the material world's solidity. Thomas Gardner has written of Graham, "We find in her work what Cavell calls 'endless specific succumbings to the conditions of skepticism and endless specific recoveries from it, endless as a circle, as a serpent swallowing itself'" (114). This is the fate of the long line as well; it tracks across the page, but the poem will inevitably find itself the same distance from the left margin, on another line. This is also the fate of Graham's attempt at density; the more Overlord attempts to take on "weightiness" the more we are confronted with its insubstantiality. Yet, if the process forms a self-consuming "0", the particular material on the page nonetheless remains. If she cannot—must not—shout, how does Graham continue to write, and why does she use these particular words? I have consigned this question to the outride because it is ultimately a question of hope. Like Graham's "hope," I might have chosen another topic to occupy the outride. But in this particular situation I did not, and Graham, in her particular situation, did not. We cannot dismiss this question so easily; we will return to it again.

## The Overlord and *Différance*

The task that lies before us is to investigate the paradox of Jorie Graham's ethical Overlord in its fullness, without reducing whatever that fullness is to a reflection of our own critical image. It is only after determining what kind of lawgiver this Overlord is (if, indeed, this absent Overlord *is*) that we can determine the ethics of and in Jorie Graham's writing. It is my goal within this chapter to establish the identity of the Overlord—although this claim, given what I will argue, might appear to be disingenuous in retrospect. I maintain that Jorie Graham's Overlord is an addressable version of a concept which Jacques Derrida refers to as *différance*, the cornerstone of his poststructuralist, postmodern critique of a violence-occluding presence. I do not mean to imply that Jorie Graham was consciously intending to evoke *différance*; my claim is merely that *différance* offers a way to understand *Overlord*, even if Derrida's thought only influences Graham's work indirectly. It is first necessary to explore his philosophy in order to establish the parallels, diving into the definition of *différance*, presence, play, supplementarity, and other essential terms of Derrida's thought. Having done so, I will make the congruences explicit in order to show that Jorie Graham's Overlord is merely an addressable *différance* which pervades *Overlord*, traceable not only through the volume's contents but even down to the finest granularity of its style.

### *Différance*

Since Jacques Derrida's thought defies the question of a ground and center, determining what exactly Derrida's philosophy is can be problematic. The concept<sup>10</sup> of *différance*, if not

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<sup>10</sup> Such a thing, of course, might not be a text at all. For those familiar with Derrida's work, I ask your indulgence as I use words to describe Derrida's thought that Derrida would have rendered suspect either graphically (through



central, is surely an indispensable one. Derrida himself defines it as follows: “We provisionally give the name *différance* to this *sameness* which is not *identical*: by the silent writing of its *a*, it has the desired advantage of referring to differing, *both* as spacing/temporalizing and as the movement that structures every dissociation” (*Speech and Phenomena* 129-30). Both differing and deferring are significant ways in which *différance* operates, although neither alone exhausts the word’s valence. “Differance”<sup>11</sup> was originally presented as a lecture; *différance* was therefore heard as indistinguishable from the traditional concept of “difference” in western metaphysics. The concept, however, is no mere metaphysical claim, but is a radical critique of the tradition of metaphysics as such. As Derrida points out, “Now, in point of fact, it happens that this graphic difference remains purely graphic: it is written or read, but it is not heard” (132). The very sound of the word is an example of the “sameness that is not identical.” Using the term brings homophony to the foreground, allowing Derrida to introduce what he calls play—a concept which can be roughly defined as indeterminacy in language due to multiplicity. Derrida uses a linguistic move, the play of homophony in *différance*, to question the hegemony of metaphysics and the stability of all grounding in Western thought. Yet Derrida’s argument is not merely a linguistic one. *Différance*, first and foremost—although even the assumption of a first and foremost establishes a hierarchy which *différance* itself overturns—is a critique of presence, the logos, and philosophy’s pretensions to closure.

*Différance* is a move that takes advantage of gaps in language; it is therefore rhetorical. It should be noted, before proceeding, that Derrida’s style follows his content. Although it is tempting to say that he engages in “experimental criticism,” the term is only applicable insofar as

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crossing out, perhaps) or in the course of his argument. I shall give a full defense of this impropriety in the course of the argument, but for now it is sufficient to remark that even Derrida’s text struggles against itself.

<sup>11</sup> Whenever “differance” appears as such in the translation of text or title, I will keep it as such. The default spelling for my own text, however, will be *différance*.

*différance* itself can be termed an “experimental” philosophy. Since it becomes very clear that thinking *différance* involves a critique of scientificity, *différance* necessarily posits itself<sup>12</sup> as transcending the Experiment and the entire history of empirical investigation. Therefore Derrida’s specific tone, style, and form—his quintessential rhetoric—is the only permissible one for a conscientious critic who upends the relationship between content and rhetoric, truth and form. This style makes Derrida’s texts very difficult to read, but perhaps this is an acceptable state of affairs—especially when one considers that *différance* only reveals that reading is always already difficult.

### **Derrida, de Saussure, and the Deconstruction of Linguistics<sup>13</sup>**

In order to understand Derrida’s central critique of metaphysics—which is far more multifaceted than this brief introduction can imply—it is helpful to consider the specific case of his critique of Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure was the father of modern, structural linguistics. As such, he represents an intellectual movement that immediately preceded Derrida and to which, at least in part, Derrida’s theory of *différance* responds. To call *différance* a semiotic theory would be akin to calling Plato’s philosophy a theory of furniture manufacture, but it is nonetheless significant that Derrida formulated *différance* (at least in part) as the product of his critiques of semiotic theories. Deconstruction’s path begins and ends with the sign; crucial to the understanding of *différance* is understanding in what way Derrida’s critique of semiotics is a critique of the metaphysics of presence.

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<sup>12</sup> The use of this term in reference to *différance* is, as will soon become clear, especially egregious.

<sup>13</sup> This section was written after an encounter with Derrida’s critique of de Saussure. It is partially an analysis of what Derrida has written, partially an attempt to fill in the gaps of Derrida’s writing—a practice which is necessary due to the elusiveness of Derrida, but one which Derrida would say is “necessary” in the sense that it is always occurring.

Momentarily laying aside the question of whether Saussure's project is delineating or constructing a system<sup>14</sup> we can say that the *Course in General Linguistics* is concerned entirely with exploiting the supposedly systematic structure of language to study it scientifically. Saussure declares, "*The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure as his primary concern, and relate all other manifestations to it*" (9, italics in original). This system is actually two systems wedded into one—the synchronic and diachronic. Synchronic linguistics is Saussure's primary subject of interest and concerns a language in a particular state at a particular time, e.g. the dialect of English spoken by the residents of a neighborhood in Queens, New York, on July 1, 2013. While this level of specificity may seem quibbling, it is required because synchronic linguistics is defined *against* diachronic linguistics, the study of language over time. Synchronic linguistics requires the linguistics of the single quanta; diachronic linguistics necessarily involves comparison over multiple quanta. As we will see, there are many binary distinctions in Saussure, but this is one of the earliest and, at least to his structural treatment of language, the most important. It is synchronic linguistics alone, interestingly, which comprises the science of linguistics proper—and it is therefore with synchronic linguistics that we shall be initially concerned.

Synchronic linguistics is predicated on the study of signs within a clearly delimited system. In Saussure's conception, it is appropriate to think of a particular synchronic language as a form (in the Platonic sense) which is embodied in particular instances of speech. It is clear, however, that the language-speech binary—without which Saussure's linguistics would be impossible—is a hierarchical, segregating binary. As Saussure says, "A language system, as distinct from speech, is an object that may be studied independently...A science which studies

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<sup>14</sup> In Derrida's thought, establishing any closed system by segregating (and making hierarchical the relationship of) an outside and inside is always, according to Derrida, a dubious fabrication.

linguistic structure is not only able to dispense with other elements of language, but is possible only if those other elements are kept separate” (14). He later dismisses speech outright: “The other elements of language, which go to make up speech, are automatically subordinated to this first science” (18). Derrida identifies this move as the hallmark of metaphysics; for now it is sufficient to remark that this is a pattern which we have seen before (in the elevation of synchronic linguistics) and will see again. This distinction is necessary to prevent Saussure’s system from collapsing into a banal tautology bereft of explanatory and normative power (e.g. the language is simply what people speak, and what people speak is their language). Saussure must introduce the concept of the mistake, and he places it in speech. He does so through a musical metaphor: “The symphony has a reality of its own, which is independent of the way in which it is performed. The mistakes which musicians make in performance in no way compromise that reality” (18). Just as a particular table missing its leg would not compromise the form of the table, the form of the symphony (or the language) is not threatened by an irate violinist interrupting a performance to curse at the conductor and walk offstage. Saussure’s linguistics is dependent upon a metaphysics of the highest order, specifically manifest as a score which transcends its performance.

We might ask in what way the symphony is “real” without its performance, and doing so will expose one of Derrida’s critiques of metaphysics. Perhaps the symphony is real because it is written on sheet music. It is helpful, here, to point out that Saussure erects another binary-hierarchy early on in the text of his *Course*: the binary of speech and writing. According to Saussure, writing is often privileged because it is perceived as more permanent than speech, the visual receives primacy over the auditory, it makes possible and is reinforced by literary projects such as dictionaries and grammars, and disagreements are easier to solve with solutions based on

writing (26). Yet for all this, "...writing obscures our view of the language. Writing is not a garment, but a disguise" (29). Indeed, Saussure views writing as having a negative impact on the body of language, assigning all sorts of ills to its practice in hyperbolic language. Derrida rightly questions the moralistic tone with which Saussure discusses writing, leading him to ask, "Why wish to punish writing for a monstrous crime, to the point of wanting to reserve for it, even within scientific treatments, a 'special compartment' that holds it at a distance?" (*Of Grammatology* 42). This question will be broached again; for now, it is sufficient to say Saussure's pure symphony must have its reality independent of (and even opposed against) an impure writing. In order to salvage the distinction between speech and language at this juncture, it is necessary to provisionally consider his conception of language as thoroughly Platonic, unsupported by a material existence. That this seems an unlikely position for the exacting, scientific Saussure should already give us pause.

Why Saussure is so eager to erect this particular binary remains unclear. If writing yields a false sense of permanency, then we might expect speech to obtain actual permanency. This is, however, not the case; Saussure maintains, "Its manifestations are individual and ephemeral" (19). Perhaps writing's particular offense lies in the fact that it elevates the ephemeral nature of a sign's particular application into an event that appears fixed. Yet the fact remains that, in Saussure's thought, the distinction between speech and writing—unlike the distinction between speech and language—serves no meaningful distinction, yet writing is viewed with moral suspicion while speech is not. This binary—the binary between speech and writing—is the central target of Derrida's analysis of Saussurian linguistics. Although such a point applies to Saussure, it does little (at least that we can see at this stage in the argument) in the way of formulating a Derridean critique of the *Course*. The rupture between the permanent and

impermanent in Saussure does not occur along the border of speech and writing but rather along the border between the use of signs and their systematicity. It is the abidingness of the structure of signs itself—though *particular* structures are mutable—which is the site of permanence.

The permanence of the system enables Saussure to make his boldest claim—that although signs are in themselves arbitrary, they acquire positive meaning by differing from other purely negative signs. Saussure claims that, “*In the language itself, there are only differences*” (118) and expands it by saying that, “In a sign, what matters more than any idea or sound associated with it is what other signs surround it” (118). Since signs are arbitrarily applied to that which they signify, it is only the fact that “mother” is not “father” or “brother,” etc., that gives the word “mother” its meaning. The sign “mother” might well invoke either of those two other words by having a similar sonic texture—or might evoke the German “Mutter” due to their similar signification—but the fact that it is different from these other signs carves out a space within the language where all that is not referred to by the other signs can be signified. This leads Saussure to say, “Although signification and signal are each, in isolation, purely differential and negative, their combination is a fact of positive nature” (118-9). It should be apparent that ascertaining the signification of a particular sign depends upon not only assuming that there is a system of signs but also upon clearly delimiting that system. For this reason Derrida writes, “...the condition for the scientificity of linguistics is that the field of linguistics have hard and fast frontiers, that it be a system regulated by an *internal* necessity, and that in a certain way its structure be closed” (*Of Grammatology* 33). The addition of a word to a language must necessarily shift the meanings of all other words in the system to some degree. Linguistics can only be scientific if the linguistic system is totally closed.

It is clear that the previous description of meaning based in difference requires a perfectly static system that synchronic linguistics makes as a foundational assumption. In point of fact, we might wonder whether any language, including the language of the previously selected residents of Queens, might *ever* be static—if it can ever be at rest. Saussure himself paradoxically acknowledges that “Absolute stability in a language is never found” (139). It would seem that Saussure meant this “never” to refer to the overall stability of a given language over time, but “over time” is itself a problematic phrase. How much time does language require to change? Answering this question, of course, requires knowledge of how language changes in general. In Saussure’s appraisal, linguistic change is not a product of an individual’s desire to change the language but is instead a product of the arbitrariness of signs and the passage of time (73; 78).<sup>15</sup> Surely the amount of time required would be at least the amount of time to say one word—and here we witness the revenge of that which was excluded from the science of synchronic linguistics: speech. The “mistakes” of speech—the present misuses of language—form the language of the future. Paradoxically, these mistakes should be unintelligible since they deviate from the form of language (19), yet they often have a discernible meaning. In Saussure, the intelligibility of a synchronic system is formed, in no small part, by the “unintelligible,” extra-linguistic mistakes of speech. Saussure’s metaphor of the symphony is insufficient yet again; when the violinist curses the conductor, the “mistake” is not rewritten into the score. We can now say that whether or not Saussure was as thorough a Platonist as I have been alleging, his linguistics is not Platonist at all. Yet if there is no form of a language—if the totality of language is constantly being reformed by ephemeral mistakes—then what basis does Saussure have for

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<sup>15</sup> It is very difficult to appraise Saussure’s assessment of personal agency in this process, and since it is outside the scope of this work, I will brush by it only in passing. The tension in Saussure’s text on this matter is perhaps one of many slippages caused by constructing a unified system based on mutual exclusions.

establishing a science of language in the first place? None, of course: “A science which studies linguistic structure is not only able to dispense with other elements of language [e.g. speech (see 18)], but is possible only if those other elements are kept separate” (14). The distinction between language and speech collapses, leaving Saussure’s project null and void.

Derrida’s critique of Saussure recognizes that writing is a chief source of mistakes in speech. In his quotation of the linguist, “Mispronunciations due to spelling will probably appear more frequently and as time goes on, the number of useless letters pronounced by speakers will probably increase.” (42) Whether these mistakes arise from the inherent perversity of the individual or the bad influence of writing is not clear. Such a distinction, however, is not necessary to realize that the element which was even more excluded than speech in Saussure’s *Course*—writing—is no small source of linguistic change and therefore necessary for the constitution of language.<sup>16</sup> This is why Saussure spends time isolating writing; it is the foil without which his linguistic system would not function (34; 39). The speech-language binary is in fact predicated on the more peripheral speech-writing binary. Writing routinely “usurps” speech, and therefore, in order for the system of language to be closed, speech must be segregated from language. The fact that this possibility comes to the service despite Saussure’s intentions leads Derrida to write, “...what was chased off limits, the wandering outcast of linguistics, has indeed never ceased to haunt language as its primary and most intimate possibility. Then something which was never spoken and which is nothing other than writing itself as the origin of language writes itself within Saussure’s discourse” (44). The notions of outside and inside with respect to language— notions on which the science of linguistics relies— cease to have meaning under such circumstances.

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<sup>16</sup> In Derrida’s argument, it becomes *the* source of language change.



Derrida, however, is not content with merely deconstructing Saussure. He has arrived at the conclusion that “There is an originary<sup>17</sup> violence of writing because language is first, in a sense I shall gradually reveal, writing. ‘Usurpation’ has always already begun” (*Of Grammatology* 37). His remaining goal is to see in what way linguistics can open into a *grammatology*, or the study of the arche-writing that lies behind and makes possible all language. Various gleanings are immediately apparent; if Derrida’s thought challenges the metaphysical presuppositions of Saussure, it embraces it at tangents in a variety of ways. It is perhaps no accident that Derrida’s definition of *différance* requires both distance in space and time, taking Saussure’s need for a system demarcated by time and space (de Saussure 100) and turning it on its head. It is exactly because the opening of space and time lead to the deferral of presence that such a system can never be realized. Indeed, Derrida’s elevation of writing into a playful arche-writing that makes possible all language inverts Saussure’s system-speech-writing hierarchy. Yet Derrida does not stop by inverting Saussure, and to posit *différance* as a metaphysics of writing would be to horribly misread Derrida. If the exclusion of writing is the result of a metaphysical prejudice, then Derrida’s critique of that prejudice must be explored in order to elucidate (if such an attempt is possible) *différance*.

### **Presence *e(s)t* Absence<sup>18</sup>**

Derrida, of course, is not content with merely deconstructing Saussure; in “Linguistics and Grammatology” he proceeds with the deconstruction of linguistics as a science of signs not

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida uses this word, I believe, because it is less implicated by the metaphysics of presence than “original”—a word which explicitly evokes a *logos*.

<sup>18</sup> The title for this section is meant to evoke the insight in Gayatri Spivak’s footnote to the section title “The Outside and the Inside” in *Of Grammatology*, p.30. I reproduce it in its entirety here: “The title of the next section is “The Outside ~~is~~ the Inside” (65, 44). In French, ‘is’ (*est*) and ‘and’ (*et*) ‘sound the same.’ For Derrida’s discussion of the complicity between supplementation (and) and the copula (is), see particularly ‘Le Supplément de copule: la philosophie devant la linguistique,’ *MP*, pp.209-46.”

as an end in itself but to expose the metaphysics of presence en route to a differential “grammatology.” The first part is simple; to translate<sup>19</sup> the deconstruction of linguistics’ inside/outside into a deconstruction of presence/absence, we need only to recall the provisional definition of *différance* as involving spacing/temporalizing (*Speech and Phenomena* 129-30). Saussure, although he does not recognize the irony, rightly observes that “Demarcation in time is not the only problem encountered in defining a linguistic state. Exactly the same question arises over demarcation in space. So the notion of a linguistic state can only be an approximation” (100). What Saussure probably means by “space” is geographic region, yet it is interesting that a language—which can never be fully instantiated in the material world—must nonetheless be the occupant of a space. The language and system must be present somewhere. Returning to the idea of speech, Saussure implies that the resting place of the entire language system must be at least pointed to—if not made present—in order for the difference to generate meaning: “In reality, the idea [which leads someone to say a word] evokes not just one form but a whole latent system, through which oppositions involved in the constitution of that sign are made available. The sign by itself would have no meaning of its own” (128). The sign is never given by itself, but always as a member of a system which must exist *a priori* as the unquestionable given. The only hope for a definite science of linguistics and absolute meaning is the absolute presence of the system. In this case, the system is the site of the logos, the infinite signified, which grounds meaning. Yet the definite system is the result of unsystematic mistakes which escape its closure and which cannot be definitely excluded from the system at any point in time even if, as Derrida does not concede, there is such a thing as a “point in time” which is not already a motivated way in which

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<sup>19</sup> “Translate” in the sense of a geometrical translation, for it is my appraisal of Derrida that the deconstruction of one binary is merely a task formed on a particular instantiation of metaphysics’ general prejudice. Not only must a particular line dividing two particular points be translated, but also the very concept of a Cartesian line.

to understand reality. In a Derridean critique of linguistics, our judgment of the sign can only ever be provisional because the system can never be made present. Presence must be infinitely postponed.

The study of this “arche-writing,” of the working of *différance*, is what Derrida refers to as grammatology. Derrida refers to this concept generally as “writing” to imply that the exclusion of writing to the outside is a product of this systematic denial of the unsystematic in metaphysics. Yet there is a deeper connection between the two: “If I persist in calling that difference writing, it is because, within the work of historical repression, writing was, by its situation, destined to signify the most formidable difference. It threatened the desire for the living speech from the closest proximity, it *breached* living speech from within and from the very beginning” (*Of Grammatology* 56-7). This is the “writing” which precedes speech, not graphic “representation” in what Derrida would call the “vulgar” or “narrow” sense, but the ceaseless play of signs which makes impossible “the onto-theology of signs and the metaphysics of presence” (50). In lieu of the metaphysics of presence, Derrida proposes the trace—which not only evokes the act of writing as tracing,<sup>20</sup> but also the death-as-disappearance of the subject which produced what is written.<sup>21</sup> This is, however, only one area of study with which grammatology is concerned—if I may be so bold as to suggest that grammatology is definitely concerned with anything.

In his provisional investigation of grammatology, it is the trace which Derrida uses to think *différance* in its productive role. Derrida’s thought on this is largely manifest, in this essay,

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<sup>20</sup> And a tracing of something which is itself a trace—the system of differences.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida’s comments approach seem to evoke Levinas through “the trace” (70), inviting us to (correctly) predict that *différance* will manifest in an unknowable other, for the other has already disappeared and—like all signs—is in constant danger of being familiarized and becoming unmotivated.

as the turning on its head of Saussure's theory that meaning is a product of differences. Derrida, of course, has in mind a more primordial difference than Saussure:

The unheard difference between the appearing and the appearance...is the condition of all other differences, of all other traces, and *it is already a trace...The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general...the trace is not more ideal than real, not more intelligible than sensible, not more a transparent signification than an opaque energy and no concept of metaphysics can describe it.* (65)

The trace escapes the closure of metaphysics as a beyond-outside which collapses the inside-outside binary. As such, the pure trace is unthinkable. Yet it allows both the sensible and intelligible to take shape. Derrida writes, "...it should be recognized that it is in the specific zone of this imprint and this trace, in the temporalization of a *lived experience* which is neither *in* the world nor in 'another world,' which is not more sonorous than luminous, not more *in* time than *in* space, that differences appear among the elements or rather produce them, make them emerge as such and constitute the *texts*, the chains, and the systems of traces." (65) Communication and culture in general are therefore predicated on the originary absence which produces them.

Yet to what degree is *différance* mere absence? Naively, we might define *différance* as a condition of absence. I say "naively" because one way of understanding Derrida's writing is reading it as a continual critique of the idea of the definition; it should therefore be no surprise that any definition of Derrida's terms must be "provisional" and always subject to revision. Very early on, Derrida styled his thought as "opposed to the text of Western metaphysics" (*Speech and Phenomena* 158) and then, as is typical of his style, promptly questions the very possibility of

conceiving of such a thing. This leaves us on a very awkward footing; in order to be faithful to his text (to use a favorite phrase of J. Hillis Miller which we will encounter in the next chapter), we must be willing to entertain the thought that the text alone is insufficient, both for the interpretation of this passage and for understanding *différance* itself. Indeed, Derrida writes that “Any exposition would expose it to disappearing as a disappearance. It would risk appearing, thus disappearing” (134). *Différance* is, therefore, elusive. It cannot be revealed because it is a concept which defies revelation, and any description of it would be fundamentally faulty simply due to the fact that it does not abide even the fiction of presence. To call *différance* an anti-metaphysics<sup>22</sup> offhand is already a fundamental misreading of Derrida’s text. Derrida writes that, “...we question the authority of presence or its simple symmetrical contrary, absence or lack” (139). Just as the question of revealing *différance* does not make sense because it is not a presence, so too the process of positing *différance* as mere absence is incorrect. The play of *différance* transcends this binary; how else could Derrida write, “Although it *does not exist*, although it is never a *being-present* outside of all plenitude, its possibility is by rights anterior to all that one calls sign...” (*Of Grammatology* 62). Not only that, but the process of thinking *différance* delegitimizes all binaries—which, as we have seen, Derrida distrusts.

Perhaps the perpetual need to efface everything metaphysical explains the motivation behind some of Derrida’s more outlandish claims. Not the least of such claims is that which he makes in “Differance”: “Differance is neither a word nor a concept” (*Speech and Phenomena* 130). Taken at face value, this statement is preposterous—but taking anything Jacques Derrida says at face value is a poor reading strategy. When Umberto Eco says “...frequently Derrida—in order to stress nonobvious truths—disregards very obvious truths that no one can pass over in

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<sup>22</sup> Yet this is what I *will* do in the subsequent chapter, though (hopefully) in a more nuanced tone.

silence” (*The Limits of Interpretation* 36), it is difficult to think of a passage to which it is more applicable than this one. Of course “*différance*” is a word in the sense that it can be employed in writing or speech. But the particularity of *différance* escapes the closure of the graphic and phonic signifiers used to denote it—not only that, but it calls into question the concept of a “word” just as it calls into question a logos. And if the “word” is called into question, then so is the “concept,” that darling of logic which represents a thought whole in itself, clearly delineated as if it were structuralism in miniature. Yet none of this is clear at the beginning of his thought; it is only in hindsight, after patient reading, that his meaning begins to make itself clear. This is the challenge of reading Derrida—that one must constantly suspect the text of misrepresenting him. The lesson that *différance* teaches by example is that all texts ineluctably misrepresent.<sup>23</sup>

Derrida’s ceaseless interrogation of his vocabulary necessitates the many quotations, italicizations, and crossing-outs that are present in his text. As he writes, “To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words ‘proximity,’ ‘immediacy,’ ‘presence’...is my final intention in this book” (*Of Grammatology* 70). Nor is the form of his argument a mere necessity that follows from what he intends to accomplish; it is the spirit of the work: “Differance is therefore the formation of form” (63). Its product is seen in instantiation, in the particular instance of speaking or writing which Saussure was so eager to bracket. I have been forced to adopt this strategy of verbal meditation in order to render Derrida’s texts as faithfully as possible. To anticipate J. Hillis Miller in the next chapter, however, I am afraid that I have still been unfaithful to Derrida’s text. Yet we must all use borrowed vocabularies. Though Derrida attempts to go beyond the “original”—and again I have redoubled—meaning of a word, he is still bound by the vocabulary given to him. Even his neologisms are fabricated from the

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<sup>23</sup> To question whether or not this is a misrepresentation of *différance* is a question that must be asked—and which will be asked in the next chapter.

bricolage of the logos. He must focus on the minutia of texts—what might be termed the excluded or supplementary—in order to challenge the status quo, and this redirected focus naturally entails a shift of primacy from Platonic form as essence to form as structure, the particularity of instantiation. This is, of course, the search for and the willful multiplication of signs outside of the traditional realms of semiotics, for everything motivated is a sign, and deconstruction is the reversal of becoming-unmotivated. The style of *différance* is a will to play.

There is another sense in which an attention to form is also foremost in Derrida's line of argument, for any line of argument is first encountered as a configuration of lines on a page. It is no accident that in Derrida's attempt to unthink metaphysics he was forced to look into the gaps in meaning—the subatomic interstice between appearance and appearing—and was thus led to examine the gaps between words. For Derrida, the blank space that surrounds (and even inhabits) writing is the space which escapes the closure of language but without which language would be impossible. The space is the field which opens absence, specifically, writing as the absence of the subject—for what is the need for writing if one is truly present? As Derrida notes:

Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject....As the subject's relationship with its own death, this becoming is the constitution of subjectivity. On all levels of organization, that is to say, *of the economy of death*. All graphemes are of a testamentary essence. And the original absence of the subject of writing is the absence of the thing or the referent. (69)

Therefore, in Derrida's thought, all writing always already declares the absence of the one who writes. Additionally, subjectivity is formed by this lack of presence. Derrida's attention to the problem of spacing makes every possible aspect of a text—even margins—more than marginalia.

There is space for space in play; even *it* signifies, for signifiers always operate as reminders of absence.

This attention to space's absence as the precondition of writing also drives the critique of presence: "When I say *I*, even in solitary speech, can I give my statement meaning without implying, there as always, the possible absence of the object as speech—in this case, myself?" (95). For Derrida, this use of deixis implies that which it does not explicitly say—that "I" might refer to someone else, and therefore the one referred to by "I" is subject to the condition of absence. This, then, is the arche-writing that precedes even speech. Put another way, "That the signified is originally and essentially (and not only for a finite and created spirit) trace, that it is *always already in the position of the signifier*, is the apparently innocent proposition within which the metaphysics of the logos, of presence and consciousness, must reflect upon writing as its death and its resource" (73). Derrida is, of course, channeling a formulation of "the death of god" here—specifically the death of the Christian God—which is a trope that will figure prominently in my discussion of Jorie Graham. For Derrida, it suffices to say that the scope of arche-writing—*différance*—is such that it dismantles *all* claims of a present logos, even theological ones. Yet this death is necessary for writing to be used as a "resource." Matched with and inseparable from the deadliness of *différance* is its fecundity, inexhaustible in an endless chain of play. Yet how long can one continue to speak in this way? For Derrida, being is only encountered as a becoming-dead.

## **Supplementarity**

Having passed from the sign to the death of metaphysics, the task that remains is to show the arche-writing within the writing—within the text itself, and in the practices of writing and



reading. While this move is predicated by my initial choice of Saussure's linguistics as a point of departure for *différance*, it is by no means obvious what the implications of reading with an awareness of arche-writing are. This analysis is also, necessarily, an examination of how *différance* can be a productive force. So far I have spoken of *différance* primarily as a negative force, as the force of death. For Derrida, death is one side of the binary which *différance* gives rise to as signs undergo the process of becoming unmotivated. He uses the term "supplement" as a near synonym for *différance*—a fact that is substantial in its own right, and another example of a sameness that is not identical. It is true that Derrida's choice of word, in this case, is largely a product of its occurrence in the Rousseau texts<sup>24</sup> that he is reading to generate his critique, yet if its use by Derrida were entirely unmotivated then there is no reason why he should adopt it at all. Indeed, the word seems to carry a different weight in his thought. Whereas *différance* implies an ungraspable, unencountered otherworldliness, the term "supplement" connotes not only material existence but use. Specifically, the supplement refers to the use of the sign that engenders the multiplication of play. Since Derrida relentlessly interrogates the slippage between being and beings, however, this necessary differentiation between existence and action is only provisional.

Derrida begins his examination of the supplement (much like his examination of Saussure's linguistics) by noting a fundamental contradiction in Rousseau's writing between the author's experience and his theory of writing. In Derrida's reading, Rousseau argues experientially for writing as a reappropriation of a positive presence, but in his theory it leads to cultural degeneracy (144). Derrida refuses to isolate these two threads; neither does he attempt to resolve the paradox. He reads them together, in the context of the whole text—but before he does so, he announces the supplement, declaring, "If indeed one wishes to surround it with the entire

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<sup>24</sup> The "Rousseau texts" in question being primarily the *Confessions* but also parts of *Emile*, the *Dialogues*, and the *Manuscrit de Paris*. Rousseau is Derrida's main antagonist in *Of Grammatology*.

constellation of concepts that shares its system, the word *supplement* seems to account for the strange unity of these two gestures” (Ibid.)<sup>25</sup> In Rousseau, the supplement appears to function as an additive—if writing allows Rousseau to be present, then that is because it enhances his presence. Yet, as Derrida points out, this additive has no part in the original presence: “It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void...As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness” (145). This is indeed a strange state of affairs; the exterior supplement is necessarily added to the interior to make it an even stronger manifestation of interiority (Ibid.) This formulation, of course, is not new—it is exactly the same as Derrida’s reading of Saussure, in which writing was placed exterior to language in order to make language more linguistic. Not only that, but Rousseau’s use of the word “supplement” in this case implies a preexisting presence.

Derrida, as one might expect, proceeds exactly on that point and confounds the presence/absence binary. The supplement is a negative force in culture because, as Derrida says:

The supplement will always be the moving of the tongue or acting through the hands of others. In it everything is brought together: progress as the possibility of perversion, regression toward an evil that is not natural and that adheres to the power of substitution that permits us to absent ourselves and act by proxy, through representation, through the hands of others...The scandal is that the sign, the image, or the representer, become forces and make “the world move.” (147)

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<sup>25</sup> In context, the announcement is premature; it is, after all, made only two paragraphs after his introduction. The rest of his essay is an *ex post facto* justification of the use of this term—which, as is typical, he will justify during the course of the argument.

This fact engenders, in Rousseau, a state in which city life incorrectly comes to be viewed as natural and nature becomes the supplement for society—an inversion of the natural order (Ibid.) The supplement here is imagined as supplementary to an absence—not, as before, a presence. In this context, it becomes the source of contagion and degeneracy. The supplement reinforces the absence of separation, the negative distancing of modernity and city life. It adds absence to absence. What, then, is the nature of this supplement that works no matter which way the nature-artifice hierarchy is positioned? Simultaneously external to both presence and absence, it almost escapes the bounds of reason. As Derrida remarks, it is “*Almost* inconceivable: simple irrationality, the opposite of reason, are less irritating and waylaying for classic logic. The supplement is maddening because it is neither presence nor absence...” (154). Once again, this formulation is familiar. It is a description of *différance*, and to acknowledge it as such is to provide all the explanation of the theory of the supplement that is needed.

Such a description does not, however, exhaust the supplement. It is here that Derrida makes a decisive move toward a grammatology of the supplement, which unsurprisingly manifests as the grammatology promised in his reading of Saussure. It is even predicated on the same assumptions—it is as if Derrida has resumed his examination of linguistics *in media res*. Derrida’s description of the first move of grammatology is worth quoting at length:

We should begin by taking rigorous account of this *being held within* [*prise*] or this *surprise*: the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system. And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the

patterns of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*. (158)

In order to describe the fecundity of the supplement, Derrida appeals to a concept previously encountered in his critique of Saussure—the system of signs. That the system should reemerge at this point is intriguing; the immediate question to be asked is whether this system is the same as Saussure’s or is something different entirely. As to the former option, it would seem that the possibility has been exhausted—yet Derrida’s critique does not assume that a structural system is impossible, only that it cannot be definitively delineated. As to the latter, it is interesting that Derrida does not immediately interrogate the concept of the system. The term recurs a few pages later when Derrida mentions “the system of [Rousseau’s] writing” and mentions a “textual system that I inhabit” (160). That the system, in the above passage, is not the system of language but the system of logic is not as significant as it might appear (although it is significant); the grammar of logic is merely predicated on the grammar of a language. Derrida has borrowed from Saussure without entirely effacing the concept of the system. Here, in the examination of supplementarity—despite Derrida’s continued redoublings and careful effacement—we have found a theory of *différance* that bears no little resemblance to Saussure’s structural linguistics. While this will have important implications for my eventual effort to deconstruct the ethics of deconstruction, we must take Derrida at his word for the time being.

We can estimate that his system is not the linguistic system but the system of texts—that an individual may have mastered a subset of texts and signifiers, but can never have mastered the entire chain of texts because the chain of texts is, per the definition of the supplement, limitless. Indeed, the “production” which such a reading entails is necessarily, according to Derrida, a text:

“And what we call production is necessarily a text, the system of a writing and of a reading which we know is ordered around its own blind spot” (164). Even the reading of writing is ordered around its own blind spot, and is therefore a text. Derrida famously declares that “*There is nothing outside of the text*” (158); the chain of supplements continues, delaying a presence that never was. Such is the conclusion to which we have read—the textuality of the world is inescapable. The inevitability of textuality is the inevitability of death. Of course, “inevitability” itself confines time to a trajectory, assumes a spatial structure of time with “points” of “presences.” In Derrida’s thought, everything is already dead, already text; the movement of history is the becoming-unmotivated of the text. Yet even this formulation uses the vocabulary of being and becoming—and this one. It would seem that no terms are safe to use. Perhaps I should start over. ~~Such is the conclusion to which we have read—the textuality of the world is inescapable.~~

### ***Overlord and the Supplement***

The prior exploration of *différance* is key to interpreting Graham’s *Overlord*. By now it should be clear that the questions which Jacques Derrida addresses are also central to Graham’s writing. This is not to say that Graham intentionally wrote the volume to evoke *différance*, but that *différance* is the ideological ancestor with which Graham most prominently engages.<sup>26</sup> We can observe this kinship on a variety of levels—not only thematically, but also on the level of style and even typography. Graham’s *Overlord* is yet another name for *différance*; her poetics in *Overlord* is a poetics of the supplement.

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<sup>26</sup> Nor is it a pure manifestation of *différance*, to be sure—a fact to which we shall later return.

## Typography, Style, and the Supplement

If we follow the implications of Derrida's insistence that not even the whitespace of a text can be ignored, then Graham's *Overlord* evokes the supplement even on the level of typography. I have previously noted Graham's use of italics to draw certain terms into question. Derrida (or at least his translators) also use various typographical techniques—such as crossing out and hyphenation—to explicitly interrogate members of the metaphysical lexicon. The fact that both writers use typography to interrogate the givenness of a word at the very moment it is introduced suggests that a need to induce radical alienation is common to the projects of both. For Derrida, this necessity is a result of a struggle against a metaphysical tradition which constantly threatens to undermine his analyses through its monopoly on the lexicon. Graham is thoroughly philosophical, and her italicization no doubt functions in the same way—with the important caveat that since Graham is writing poems, she is not only struggling against a philosophical tradition but also a poetic one. As Derrida might say, a crossed out or italicized word will likely be perceived as motivated and therefore revealed as previously having become unmotivated. The effect is the same in both cases.

Graham's use of irregular line breaks and outrides also invokes *différance*. On the most basic level, these elements interrogate the givenness of traditional lineation. Concerning a volume which came after *Overlord*, Graham has described the process of writing as “working with lines that acquire momentum as they move down the page, yet need to carry that momentum across shifting distances of breath and attention” (“Q & A” 1). She also states that, “...all lines, it seems to me, aim to create, carry and measure out voice” (Ibid.) Although these statements offer a potential rejoinder to the idea that Graham styles herself as a poet of *différance*, it is nonetheless significant that Graham, even in the short interview referenced,

invokes much of the language with which *différance* is concerned: distance, breath, and the voice.<sup>27</sup> Her outrides in particular are a prime example of supplementarity—they are set off from the line to which they belong (or do they belong to a line?), isolated from it yet charged with an inordinate amount of significance because they have been placed on the “full” line’s outside.<sup>28</sup> In this formulation, however, there is no “full” line, no outside. Not only that, but there is no absolute margin against which to judge the line. The outride declares the existence of the right margin as a valid candidate for alignment and, therefore, as more than a delimiting factor. Graham, once again, offers some insight into her conception of alignment on the page: “I think of the center as a place where the past and the future break from each other, but also where they are married and contend with each other” (2). This could easily be a description of the operation of *différance*; neither married nor divorced, the middle is a liminal space which produces left and right but is neither. Graham’s style and typography show the reader what they have known all along, and what the bulk of the lyrical tradition has obscured—that standardized line length and alignment is a mere convention that has gradually become unmotivated.

### The Overlord as *Différance*

Beyond the stylistic level of Graham’s poetry—a level, with a nod to Saussure, that we might term “syntactic”—it is necessary to situate *différance* in relation to the “semantics” of her theme. That theme can be expressed as the ineluctable repetition of violence; this is also the theme which Derrida uses to describe *différance* in practice. At first, the move from *différance* to violence seems counterintuitive. What does the production of binaries have to do with violence?

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<sup>27</sup> Graham does not, of course, need to consider herself a poet of *différance* in order to be a poet of *différance*. Yet I will consider ways in which Graham resists *différance* in my conclusion.

<sup>28</sup> In the logic of *différance*, the same effect is achieved whenever the outride is used. The only variable is what counts as the “outside,” which naturally bears on the poet’s aesthetic choices. For Hopkins, an early adopter of the modern outride, the demarcation of inside/outside is metrical; his outride is primarily a metrical supplement and not, unlike Graham, a supplement of diction.

As long as we remain on the level of language it is difficult (although not impossible) to make a claim for linguistic violence. Derrida, however, offers a lengthy case study of real-world violence which is ultimately revealed to be a manifestation of a primal linguistic violence, the very violence at the de-center of arche-writing. He devotes an entire chapter in *Of Grammatology* to Lévi-Strauss's writing on the Namibkwara, who, among many other practices, consider it taboo to reveal or speak their proper names. In Lévi-Strauss's account, he provokes the young children of the tribe into disclosing the names of others by fueling rivalries among them. Derrida considers the moral and cultural factors contributing to this situation in an examination of violence. As he says, "What the Namibkwara hid and the young girls lay bare through transgression, is no longer the absolute idioms, but already varieties of invested common names..." (*Of Grammatology* 111). The oddness of the interdict lies in the fact that no proper name is unique to a person; if it can be reproduced, then it is not properly proper.

Intrinsic to Derrida's argument is the multivalency of "proper" both as "fitting" and "moral." Just as he is not content to produce a rival semiotics, he is also not content to examine this situation only as a linguistic phenomenon. It is, more properly, a grammatological phenomenon: "To think the unique *within* the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of the arche-writing: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence..." (112). This is the first violence, and it is followed by a second which aims to conceal the primary violence through prohibitions; the second violence is what Derrida calls the "moral" violence (Ibid.) It is only on the third level of Derrida's violence that we encounter physical violence, often as the refutation of the moral "law." As Derrida says, "...a third violence can *possibly* emerge or not (an empirical possibility) within what is commonly called evil, war, indiscretion, rape; which consists of revealing by effraction the so-called proper name, the originary violence



which has severed the proper from its property of self-sameness” (Ibid.) The violence of the petty disputes of the Nambikwara is only the third violence in a chain, the next link of which always acts against the previous. There is an arche-violence of Writing, followed by the “moral” violence which seeks to keep the loss of presence a secret. The effect of that violence can in turn be undone by a violence which defies the moral law. At each level something is inscribed (language, a legal code, a wound); the act of inscription is the act of violence.

Derrida uses this critique to simultaneously question the grounds of Eurocentric anthropology and that of an “innocent” culture free from violence. I mention the former not only because it is true to Derrida’s text, but also because it shows Derrida, in this case, is thinking through the ethical potential of *différance* in the real world. Lévi-Strauss’s argument concerning the Nambikwara is that they were completely innocent before the introduction of writing.<sup>29</sup> We have of course, previously encountered this prejudice against writing along with its critique. Not content to merely point out the presence of violence among the Nambikwara before they were introduced to writing in this instance, however, Derrida traces this prejudice to the source and places it opposite the prejudice that those without writing are “savages”—that is to say, in yet another binary operating within a metaphysics of presence. Derrida must tear down this binary even though it places the Nambikwara in a favorable light; it prevents them from being encountered outside of a privileged hierarchy that subjugates the Orient in favor of the Occident. Undoing their “innocence” undoes that logic. By making violence a product of the arche-writing behind all speech rather than writing in the traditional sense, he reestablishes a common humanity rooted in original sin—yet, paradoxically, simultaneously defies the logic of original

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<sup>29</sup> The move is not unique to Lévi-Strauss, of course, but is a symptom of metaphysical prejudice in general. See, for example, Saussure’s *Course* 42 (mentioned earlier) as a trivial example that shows the degree to which discussion of writing is tinged with negative moral connotations in even trivial examples. For a Rousseau example, see *Of Grammatology* p.168.

sin. If morality is inaugurated as violence—let alone as a secondary violence—then to speak of morality as a “ground” for a common sense of humanity misses the point. For Derrida, violence is inevitable, yet not in the Christian understanding of sin and its inevitability. Although “violence” invites ethical questions (even for Derrida), it is not a strictly ethical concept. It lies outside of ethics; it is “The nonethical opening of ethics” (140). “Violence” is merely used to describe an effect that happens as *différance* fulfills its productive capacity. It is, therefore, inevitable.

In light of this point, Jorie Graham’s lamentation that she has “...borrowed one person’s name, then another’s, also gave one name to a newborn / person” (*Overlord* 17) acquires a new urgency. What at first appeared as an ethical problem only in the general sense of responsibility now has an explicit connection with her main concern of repetitive violence. Giving a proper name is a repetitive act and foreshadows future violence (on every level of Derrida’s schema) even as it recalls past violences committed to previous bearers of the name. Yet that example does not exhaust its explanatory power. Reading *Overlord* after an examination of *différance* also has the benefit of situating all of Graham’s ethical concerns on the same level of importance. Because it is writing which generates the ethical code, the ethical code is always already violent and any grappling with it—transgressive or obedient—is an experience of the same violence. This is the first violence encountered; the specific subject and object of the ethical injunction do not matter. Without Derrida’s theory of violence as a product of archewriting, Graham’s use of a cat with AIDS to describe both the torture of the human condition and the inevitability of the Earth’s death could be easily dismissed as histrionic. In this reading, however, such examples show that every act is equally ethical—including linguistic acts such as

the writing of a poem. We now have a justification (if one was needed) for the high ethical stakes which Graham affords to language.

The speaker of *Overlord* can simultaneously lament the Overlord as perpetrator of a cycle of wasteful violence yet still call it “Lord” (82) precisely because the Overlord is a personification of *différance*. It is true that the character which I have termed the Overlord never appears in the text, yet the fact that Graham’s speaker directly addresses it in at least one place and indirectly addresses it through the “Praying...” sequence only strengthens my argument that the Overlord and *différance* are intricately connected. It is never encountered—it is perpetually absent, and the speaker uses language as a supplement for this lack of presence, to address something that is not strictly there. In the last chapter, we also saw that the Overlord’s dominion was inevitable and that it was propagated not only through physical violence but also speech in general and the lyric tradition in particular. The Overlord functions as an anti-god, a perpetual absence who nonetheless generates the presence of violence—which is, in effect, the presence of absence. Such an entity must be neither absence nor presence. In this reading, Graham must resist the closure of her poems for the same reason that Derrida resists the explication-as-closure for *différance*. It is impossible to present the full picture of the Overlord. The poems are wounds that continue to open themselves, not in hope of healing, but because they are evidence of a deeper wound. “My person is sick,” (*Overlord* 58) writes Graham, and the evidence is the violence in the poems and the violence of the poems. It is an irresistible violence.

I have yet to answer the question of why the Overlord is able to exert an ethical pull on Graham’s speaker—indeed, I have only complicated the question. If the Overlord is a personification of *différance* and the violence of *différance* is, in Derrida’s vocabulary, “nonethical,” it seems highly paradoxical to assert that Graham’s speaker is under any ethical

obligation from such an entity. While this is a good intuition, it does not in itself exhaust the possibility of an ethics of *différance*. Exploring this tension is central to not only interpreting Graham's text, but also to determining what, if anything, can be written ethically and how it should be written. One of the most distinctive aspects of Graham's poetry is the way in which it continually places the ethical question before the reader, in the act of reading. Derrida and J. Hillis Miller, as we will see, share this concern. It is to J. Hillis Miller that we now turn in order to discover not only whether an ethics of reading is possible, but also whether an ethics of the arche-writing can even be imagined.

## Deconstruction *e(s)t* Ethics?

The question that remains is perhaps the most important question: what ethical obligations does this tyrannical Overlord demand of Graham's speaker, and how does it derive the authority to demand these obligations? If I am correct about the Overlord's identification as the personification of *différance*, then this question becomes the following: what, ultimately, are the ethics of *différance*? Furthermore, in pursuing that question, do I have an ethical obligation to represent Derrida rightly, or even to choose whether or not to represent him at all? I have, so far, appeared to defer that question, though in practice I have been answering it. Now that I have made a case for Jorie Graham's Overlord as another expression of *différance*, we are in a position to answer the ethical question posed by Graham's speaker—why she “must not shout” (*Overlord* 80), and from whence the statute comes. Yet we are also aware of the fact that the questions that Graham poses for herself and her speaker are ones that we must ask of ourselves. If we do not want to “fall asleep” to the ethical dilemma of writing, then we must answer the ethical question posed by the fact that Graham's speaker exists in writing—namely, how can one write ethically? My specific exploration of the ethics of *différance* must keep in mind not only the ethical situation described *in* the poem but also the ethical question of the poem's existence.

It is not too hyperbolic to say that the question of how one can write ethically bears upon the entire poetic tradition and the possibility of its continuation. Other ethical theories might condemn the lyrical project because it produces nothing of substantive value or because it blindly reproduces hegemonic structures.<sup>30</sup> Such theories, however, begin outside of verbal art, and

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<sup>30</sup> I mean, of course, Utilitarian and Marxist theories. This list of critiques is not exhaustive by any means.

literature's defenders have always been able to muster a plausible defense against them by an appeal to literature's supposed uniqueness—its subversion of norms and the opening it provides for irony and satire. This capacity of language to resist itself is, of course, present in the concept of Derridean play. Yet *différance* is not merely a formalization of these claims; it takes the logic of the sublime to its (ir)rational end. Derrida's theory is revolutionary because it is, first and foremost, rhetorical. It provides a theory of ethics that we might be tempted to call natively linguistic were it not for our knowledge that the correct phrase is “natively grammatological.” If Derrida's theory holds, it is possible to deconstruct every other theory of ethics, thereby revealing ethics as produced by a *différance* which is itself unethical. *Différance* might provide a powerful framework for an apologetic of the lyric were it not for the fact that it simultaneously makes the lyric intrinsically ethical and reveals ethics as the product of an original violence. It offers the “poison pill” of supplementarity to the problem of ethics in writing; it insulates all writing from the claims of ethics as traditionally conceived only to pose a more serious challenge by making the formation of every letter an ethical act which conforms to the “law” of violence. It is my goal to show in what way *différance* makes irresistible ethical demands by exploring J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading*. I will also illustrate how his ethical thought helps interpret the paradox in which Graham's speaker finds herself—wanting to resist the Overlord but obeying regardless. I will then complicate this ethics of *différance* by deconstructing it, showing that, on its own terms, ethical actions are only possible if the “ethics” of *différance* is unethical; in turn, this will necessitate showing that *différance* is ultimately an inverted metaphysics inaugurated in the same move that makes ethics impossible.

## *The Ethics of Reading*

To explore the ethical demands of *différance*, it is helpful to turn to J. Hillis Miller's exploration of that very topic in *The Ethics of Reading*. This book follows its title closely; it is an attempt to adapt Derrida's arche-writing into a comprehensive theory of how one can read ethically. Hillis Miller is similar to Derrida in that he develops his theory of reading by reading the works of other thinkers and then responding to them. Like Derrida, his readings are deconstructive. This fact is not surprising, but it takes on new urgency due to Hillis Miller's goal; he is trying to develop an ethics of reading in form and in content. While this approach might seem premature, we need only to recall Derrida's observation that "We must begin *wherever we are* and the thought of the trace...has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely" (*Of Grammatology* 162). Such is the *modus operandi* of deconstruction which, if it works, will justify itself in retrospect.

Before he begins reading, however, Hillis Miller offers a defense of *différance*. A reader encounters, early on in this work, the part of *différance*'s poison pill that proclaims the importance of literature as an ethical cause:

Literature must be in some way a cause and not merely an effect, if the study of literature is to be other than the relatively trivial study of one of the epiphenomena of society, part of the technological assimilation or assertion of mastery over all features of human life which is called 'the human sciences.' (*The Ethics of Reading* 5)

And, furthermore:

The study of literature [if literature is completely subject to social or historical forces] would then be no more than the study of a symptom or superstructure of

something else more real and more important, and literature would be no more than a minor by-product of history, not something that in any way makes history.

(8)

It is clear from these two quotes that J. Hillis Miller's attempt to form an ethics of reading also doubles as a defense against the devaluation of literature.<sup>31</sup> If literature can be shown to have causal power—if it can originate from a place outside history—then the study of literature must truly matter.<sup>32</sup> It is important to notice that this attempt to develop an ethics of reading also starts with a defense of deconstruction against misreading. As Hillis Miller writes, “Deconstruction, such (mis)readers of it claim, asserts that the reader, teacher, or critic is free to make the text mean anything that he wants it to mean” (9). It is clear from the outset that one of Hillis Miller's primary goals is to disabuse the reader of the idea that deconstruction allows deliberate misreadings—an idea that a surface-level reading of Derrida would certainly encourage. The primary problem with such an argument is that it misunderstands the moment at which reading becomes an ethical problem; it is “not a matter of response to a thematic content asserting this or that idea about morality. It is a much more fundamental ‘I must’ responding to the language of literature in itself...” (9-10). The ethics of reading does not respond to what is in a particular text, but to the ethical problem inherently raised by language. After reading Derrida's description of the inherent play in all language, we are primed for such a distinction.

Given Hillis Miller's formulation of the ethical dilemma as “I must,” it is not surprising that he turns to Kant's categorical imperative as a starting point, yet this starting point proves problematic from the outset. Kant is, of course, not the only philosopher of ethics to talk about

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<sup>31</sup> It also introduces a distinction between cause and effect for which pure *différance* does not allow.

<sup>32</sup> I will revisit this particular defense in the deconstruction of deconstruction's ethics, but for now it is sufficient to remark in passing that this desire to defend literature manifests in what might almost be called a metaphysical defense.



the necessity of being ethical, but he is perhaps the most imperative that ethics be followed. Furthermore, Hillis Miller declares early on—and uses as a refrain throughout *The Ethics of Reading*—that “The choice of examples...and their ordering, is never innocent” (10). This is similar to Derrida’s proclamation that we must begin “*wherever we are*” (*Of Grammatology* 162), but it includes an ethical dimension that the latter’s does not. If there is the possibility of innocence, there is also the possibility of guilt. Hillis Miller is guilty of misreading from the start and says so. His argument might have developed otherwise; it does not, and it becomes an apology for misreading. He attempts to be faithful to Kant’s text and use it as a springboard for establishing a theory of reading, but he instead finds that “What the good reader confronts in the end is not the moral law brought into the open at last in a clear example, but the unreadability of the text” (*The Ethics of Reading* 33). The “I must” which he learns from a deconstruction of Kant becomes “I must misread.” Faithfulness to the text necessitates contradicting it. As Derrida writes, “The supplement transgresses and at the same time respects the interdict” (*Of Grammatology* 155). After reading Kant, Hillis Miller is caught within the deconstructive paradox of a faithful faithlessness.

Although Hillis Miller initially leaves open the question of whether misreading is inevitable, there is no doubt by the end of the book that this is the case. Hillis Miller’s additional readings of de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin merely confirm the initial pattern established in his reading of Kant. This, however, does not stop him from appropriating Kant’s language—much like de Man before him, or like Derrida appropriates the language of metaphysics. As he says, “...each reading is, strictly speaking, ethical, in the sense that it *has* to take place, by an implacable necessity, as the response to a categorical demand, and in the sense that the reader *must* take responsibility for it and for its consequences in the personal, social, and

political worlds” (59).<sup>33</sup> Hillis Miller finds the vocabulary of the categorical imperative conducive to his discussion, but he does not believe that Kant’s theory is an appropriate model for an ethics of *différance*. This becomes very clear when, reading de Man, he reaches the conclusion that “...the imposition of a system of ethics is absolutely necessary. It is necessary in the double sense that it *has* to be made and that there can be no civil society without it” (55). The latter point is immediately clear and harmonizes with Derrida’s assertion that the violence of *différance* is behind all law; the former proposition, however, seems mysterious until we recall (or one reads in the chapter) that all linguistic acts are *de facto* ethical. Every action—even the act of perception, according to de Man—is already a linguistic exercise; therefore, the ethical cannot be avoided. The theory presented by Hillis Miller is far, far removed from Kant’s categorical imperative, founded in a truth-giving *logos* that is the hallmark of metaphysics. Kant might say that “For me to deliberately misread is a violation of the categorical imperative, because I cannot will that all should misread. This would result in chaos.” For J. Hillis Miller, though, the only imperative is to misread.

### **Jorie Graham and the Ethics of Writing**

As I have said before, the problem of misreading is specifically manifest, for Jorie Graham, as the question of how one can write ethically. To show how Hillis Miller’s ethics of reading can be used to explain the ethical injunctions of Graham’s Overlord, we need only take Derrida at his word when he claims that every reading is also a writing:

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<sup>33</sup> We might expand upon the phrase “has to take place” by remembering the spatial component of *différance* and reading “take place” as the command of metaphysics which demands a being occupy space, be present. Of course, adopting this language is not without consequences—as we will see later.

Reading should...produce the law of this relationship to the concept of the supplement. It is certainly a production, because I do not simply duplicate what Rousseau thought of this relationship. The concept of the supplement is a sort of blind spot in Rousseau's text, the not-seen that opens and limits visibility. But the production, if it attempts to make the not-seen accessible to the sight, does not leave the text. It has moreover only believed it was doing so by illusion. (*Of Grammatology* 163)

This selection comes from Derrida's chapter on the supplement; the use of the word "production" here is no accident. Reading, like the supplement, is productive. It should therefore not be surprising that "...what we call production is necessarily a text" (164). Reading is always already a writing. We did not even need to refer to Derrida in particular to arrive at this conclusion; the idea is replete in the writing of deconstructive critics.<sup>34</sup> The claim is necessary to make, however, because it prepares us to read the ethical demands of the Overlord in the context of Hillis Miller's differencial imperative.

Hillis Miller's "I must" ultimately bears upon Jorie Graham's "I must not shout," the latter of which mourns the cost of an unpreventable misreading. The former is a question of ethics in general; the latter is a question of the ethics of writing. The ethical injunction that Graham's speaker must follow—the injunction placed by the Overlord—is the injunction to misread. This is why Graham's speaker in "Praying (*Attempt of April 19 '04*)" cannot offer a remedy to the student. It is not simply a matter of service to the truth; the report that the speaker's student holds is "an updated report" (*Overlord* 80), and truth cannot be updated. What

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<sup>34</sup> It even surfaces in Hillis Miller's chapter on de Man. It should be noted that some version of this defense is the one which the practitioners of deconstruction (and poststructuralism in general) commonly resort to in order to justify their claim that a work of literature has no primacy over the works of criticism based on it.

Graham fears more than truth-as-correctness is the closure of the appearance of truth, or at least the violence that proclaiming something as truth does to the real. As she writes:

The verdict

*is* irreversible. Meaning the word cannot be taken back.

It is said. It is said. That is what the boy who jumped

left in his note. (81)

That “The verdict *is* irreversible” expands from a description of the student’s climate data to a generalized pronouncement concerning all words. The word, once released into the world, cannot be undone; no amount of updating will reverse the fact that the word was spoken or written, reenacting its violence. Therefore Graham’s speaker allows the student to cry out what has already been written and imposes no interpretation on it:

I, here, today, am letting her cry out the figures, the scenarios,

am letting her wave her downloaded pages

into this normal office-air between us. 19 April. 2004. (82)

By doing so, Graham is “keep[ing] us in the telling” (33), including the seemingly futile gesture of recording the date as a way to stall the closure of death, the end of the poem which implies a decision—even if that decision is a lack of decision. Every action would be a capitulation to the misreading of the Overlord, and the stakes of the failure to read (as evidenced by the mention of a suicide note) are high indeed.

By multiplying signs, however, Graham signals her resistance to a violent Overlord that she nonetheless obeys. The paradox of the poem—which is also an ethical enigma—is how Graham’s speaker can resist the Overlord yet call it “Lord.” The passage which gives rise to this interpretive question follows immediately from the last selection and ends the poem:

I do not know what to tell her, Lord. I do not

want her

to serve you. Not you. Not you above all. (82)

If Graham's speaker does not want her Lord to receive any converts, then why does she refer to it as "Lord?" The passage is only coherent if her "Lord" exercises an irresistible lordship, demanding that which the speaker does not willingly give but must yield all the same. Yet this is not all one can say about the Overlord. Since the speaker condemns "...a belief that hums so loudly no human reason / will ever reach into that hive again..." (Ibid.), it is unlikely that her Overlord is the deity of any Orthodox faith. It might, more properly, be called an anti-deity—the deity of doubt or the void. Its demands, then, must not be given by a clearly delineated law enacted by the will, but by a law of absence that will be followed *de facto* even though its edicts will never be published.

This description, of course, is that of the ethics of *différance* that J. Hillis Miller develops in the *Ethics of Reading*. Its explanatory power, however, has yet to be exhausted. That writing is always already a violence explains why no amount of writing will ever cover the need for presence. This is why Graham's speaker identifies with the cat that is beginning to break down from AIDS; its repetitive scratching "...looks, to my species, like shame, the work of the / ashamed. I feel there is nowhere to turn" (17). There is nowhere to turn for help for the cat, but also nowhere to turn for the poet—certainly one cannot turn to the scratching of words. "Words no longer prophesy" (66) because they can no longer be conceived as descriptions of the ontological; *différance* has revealed the vatic as vapid, forever misread. No amount of deferring will stave off the "nonethical opening of ethics," as Derrida would call it. The multiplication of signs only serves to increase silence. Not even the deferral of lyric is a salve. Even as Graham

delays choosing a response—or “reading”—to her student, she is nonetheless making a choice.

As Hillis Miller says:

To live is to read, or rather to commit again and again the failure to read which is the human lot. We are hard at work trying to fulfill the impossible task of reading from the moment we are born until the moment we die. We struggle to read from the moment we wake in the morning until the moment we fall asleep at night, and what are our dreams but more lessons in the pain of the impossibility of reading, or rather in the pain of having no way whatsoever of knowing whether or not we may have in our discursive wanderings and aberrancies stumbled by accident on the right reading? (59)

I repeat here a previously-cited passage in Graham only because it shares a remarkable correspondence to the above:

Keep us in the telling I say face to the floor.  
Keep us in the story. Do not force us back into the hell  
of action, we only know how to kill. Once we stop singing we  
only know how to get up and stride out of the room and begin  
to choose, this from that, this from that, this from that... (“Praying (*Attempt of  
June 14 '03*) 33)

Although Hillis Miller’s “reading” lacks Graham’s anguish and urgency, it nonetheless captures the recurring problem of Graham’s attempt at an ethical lyricism. Even the telling is itself about violence and a violent act because it engenders war. The story, acting as the deferral of violence, is no escape. It is only the supplement of violence, the repetition of violence. Graham knows this well; it is precisely what causes the ethical dilemma in the last “Praying” poem.

## Speaking Ethically and Speaking Ethics

That Hillis Miller employs the language of the categorical imperative to develop something quite different is an important fact which must be kept in mind, for upon close inspection he is doing the same thing with respect to ethics in general. The failure—or, within its own framework, the triumph—of *The Ethics of Reading* is that it discusses an “ethics” that is not ethical. I do not mean to imply that Hillis Miller is deceiving his reader. Yet, if his ethical theory is true, how can he do otherwise? Not intentionally, of course—we have left the question of intentionality behind. Language inexorably resists itself; “The failure to read takes place inexorably within the text itself” (54). His writing will be misread, no matter how careful he is. The only truly deceptive choice that Hillis Miller might have made is the choice to write in the first place, but this is no choice at all. Writing is inevitable; to act is to write, and even the choice not to write is a type of act: “Either way I have had it. And yet I must act. I must act. Not to act is an act, not to choose a choice, and I want with all my heart to act morally, to be able to say that what I do I do out of absolute duty, do because I must do it” (27). This is his response to Kant, but it is impossible to fulfill. Even if the ethics of *différance* is an ethics in the sense that it concerns ethical questions, it is not ethical. Though it must be followed, it does not present a decision-making or evaluative paradigm—essential elements for any ethics. *The Ethics of Reading* simply says that all actions are ethical, but also that to act ethically is impossible. Given Derrida’s assertion that *différance* is “The nonethical opening of ethics,” (*Of Grammatology* 140), perhaps we should have expected this conclusion all along.

Just how unethical this ethics is can only be grasped when one considers what the term “misreading” means in *The Ethics of Reading*. Recalling our earlier point that all readings are

writings, we can safely say that all misreadings are miswritings. Yet the very term “miswriting” flies in the face of grammatology and deconstruction. There is no such thing as miswriting; there is only Writing. The word no longer has meaning. It is an artifact of an obsolete lexicon, a holdover from the practice of ethics which, by association, is revealed as nostalgia. There is no possibility of speaking in accord with the ethics of *différance*; ethics is simply a language game which we must play in order for language—and society—to continue. David Bentley Hart discusses the problem of postmodern ethics at length in *The Beauty of the Infinite*. He claims that postmodernism’s response to the violence of metaphysics is itself problematic, writing, “...postmodern discourse compounds the issue with its own violences...in which all of [its proponents] repeat without fail a narrative of being wherein the ethical occurs as an inexplicable nostalgia...” (149). Reading J. Hillis Miller supports this view; what we encounter is not an ethics in the traditional sense but an experiment—an attempt to think ethically—that ultimately fails. Even “misreading” is misread.

I have asked the question of whether it is possible to write ethically; what now remains is to ask if it is possible to write of ethics. The two questions are not the same. The former asks what steps must be taken to form grammatically correct words—or, in this case, to form ethically correct words. Ethics is, after all, a type of grammar, and even more so if all actions are always already linguistic. We have, however, discovered that one always writes “ethically” in the sense of the word that Hillis Miller gives it. All ethical sentences—all actions—are permissible. This is exactly the critique which Hillis Miller derides as the product of reading Derrida superficially; it is, nonetheless, the critique to which I am ultimately led by as faithful a reading of his text as I can muster. To “write of ethics,” however, is a different matter. It questions not how to form ethical words within an ethical system, but how the ethical system is conveyed and how it is



legitimated as such. This is ultimately the question of how the ethical system performs as a language—not only what it is possible to write, but a qualitative description of the language as a whole. Of course, Derrida’s critique of Saussure tells us that it is impossible to know a language as a whole, and that the only possibility of doing so is if the language is immediately present in its totality. This also implies that the language is able to be produced in the mind of the individual without ever being written or spoken, which means that it would be a language kept to oneself—an absurdity easily dismissed. One might therefore wonder what can be accomplished by raising the question of the quality of deconstructive ethics’ “whole.” It seems that I am walking into my own trap on this point. Yet I am only following the track prepared by deconstruction itself, the track generated by the arche-grammar of deconstruction.

Let us suspend judgment on the ethics of deconstruction (which deconstruction begs us to do) and assume that deconstruction has a set of ethical principles, although these principles are never known definitely. Perhaps it is the ethical language spoken by Derrida, by J. Hillis Miller, or some combination thereof—only these principles cannot be transmitted perfectly because of the misreading that is inherent in the text. The ethics of deconstruction is therefore the language that belongs to one person, or perhaps it is divided unequally among several persons. In the latter case, it is no language at all; it would be a series of languages, which is a contradiction to the premise that deconstruction has a discrete system in the first place. Even if it were fully present to one person, however, it would fall prey to the critique which Hillis Miller levies against Kant’s categorical imperative as a solipsistic language. It cannot, after all, be written:

A private intention, however, is like a private language, that is, it is vulnerable to the argument Wittgenstein makes against its possibility. Like a private game, a private language has no independent measure by which it is possible to be sure

that its rules remain the same from moment to moment. A private language is therefore no language, or there is no such thing as a private language. (37)

Per deconstruction's own rules, we may substitute the word "ethics" for "language" in the above selection and thereby reveal the full significance of the passage to J. Hillis Miller's work.

Deconstructive ethics is a language (or, more accurately, languages) to oneself. It is not possible to write of the ethics of *différance*, and therefore the ethics of *différance* is an impossibility.

The problems which arise from forming a language to oneself are illustrated by certain strange passages in Derrida in which he makes his prose difficult in order to achieve an effect. At least, it seems that his difficulty is meant to achieve some end. Recalling Derrida's strange pronouncement that "Differance is neither a word nor a concept" (*Speech and Phenomena* 130), I still agree with Umberto Eco that "...frequently Derrida—in order to stress nonobvious truths—disregards very obvious truths that no one can pass over in silence" (*The Limits of Interpretation* 36). While this is a generous reading, it is, however, not the reading that *différance* requires us to produce. I might disregard the fact that Derrida was a brilliant thinker and believe him to be some sort of imbecile. At the very least, I might suspect that he had a poor copy editor. Although this reading would likely not be what Hillis Miller call a "faithful reading," it is still a reading—and we have seen that *différance* puts precious little stock in faith in any case. *Différance* makes no demand save that I read, and this demand is automatically fulfilled. Hillis Miller's defense of deconstruction by claiming it requires us to be faithful to the text is therefore invalid. Nor is he alone in prolonging this "ethical nostalgia." Derrida writes similar things in *Speech & Phenomena* such as, "Despite the very profound affinities that differance thus written has with Hegelian speech (*as it should be read*)..." (145, emphasis added) and "Only a form is *evident*...this is a point of certainty that no interpretation of the

Platonic or Aristotelian conceptual system can dislodge” (108). While these are good readings, *différance* did not guide them to generosity. After all, *différance* provides no rules for decision making. If one were to deliberately misread, that misreading could always be plausibly rationalized as a product of the text’s own unreadability.

This problem is especially evident when one attempts to assign an ethical significance to “violence” as used in descriptions of *différance*. It becomes a word to oneself. Derrida writes, concerning the breach of trust that Leví-Strauss incites among the young Namibkwara, “That one of them should have ‘struck’ a ‘comrade’ is not yet true violence. No integrity has been breached. Violence appears only at the moment when the intimacy of proper names can be opened to force entry” (*Of Grammatology* 113). At first reading, the quote is unsettling; surely physical violence is violence. With a nod to Eco, we can say that Derrida is probably not denying this fact. But regardless of the probability distribution which predicts what Derrida thinks, it is not *true* violence. The implied questioning of “struck” by placing it in scare quotes connotes as much. Derrida’s relegation of physical violence to the tertiary level of his hierarchy of violence attests to this fact: “...a third violence can *possibly* emerge or not (an empirical possibility) within what is commonly called evil, war, indiscretion, rape; which consists of revealing by effraction the so-called proper name, the originary violence which has severed the proper from its property of self-sameness” (112). Using the same word for all three<sup>35</sup> levels of his hierarchy of violence opens the possibility that Derrida finds no difference between the violence of the word and physical violence. If the violence of the word is inevitable, so is rape—and not through the process of cause and effect, but tautologically. Confronted with the “strike” that one

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<sup>35</sup> The second, as discussed in the last chapter, being the violence of the law

“comrade” renders to another, the ethics of *différance* neither corrects nor affirms. It merely shrugs a laconic, “I have written as much.”

## Deconstruction as Metaphysics

It is in thinking about Derrida’s hierarchy of violence that deconstruction itself is called into question—not because of the content of the terms in the hierarchy, but the fact that Derrida uses a hierarchy in order to describe a point of contact between *différance* and life as it is lived. The hierarchy is always already metaphysical; it is because the binary is hierarchized that it can be deconstructed. There is no small import in the fact that Derrida must employ a metaphysical structure in order to give *différance* explanatory power. Although it could be argued that attempting to think outside of metaphysics inflects his use of the metaphysical lexicon, it seems obvious from any reasonable reading of “The Violence of the Letter” that Derrida means this hierarchy to be taken seriously. I do not claim that the need of a hierarchy to sustain the argument is a lapse which Derrida overlooked (even though it might be). Regardless of what Derrida intended, regardless of what he believes the effect of his argumentation is, and regardless of the claim that *différance* is neither presence nor absence (see *Speech and Phenomena* 139), this use of hierarchy shows us the metaphysical aspirations at the center of the project of *différance*. As David Bentley Hart writes of postmodernity, “The past accompanies the present always, even when it is repudiated, and what we reject determines what we affirm” (*The Beauty of the Infinite* 35). If *différance* produces<sup>36</sup> presence and absence alike, is not this claim in itself a hierarchical claim which privileges *différance* over its productions? Derrida uses the term

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<sup>36</sup> In the sense that Derrida gives it in such passages as, “This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*” (*Of Grammatology*, 158).

originary<sup>37</sup> instead of original in order to efface the question of the origin, yet the etymology of “originary” leads to an origin in “origin.” Try as he might, he cannot write beyond the past.

The strangeness of *différance* is that it requires the words of metaphysics in order to be expressed, even if those words must be crossed out in order for it to do so. Laying aside the question of logos as Word, it is true to say that *différance* requires *logoi*, words in the literal sense. The gambit of *différance* is that this crossing out empties the word of its presence or at least shows the supposed presence as an absence. Hart, however, questions the effect of this move:

What sort of gesture, in the end, is this act of playing words *sous rature*? Is it not perhaps a kind of effacement that still too ostentatiously calls attention to the effaced? Perhaps the very act of inscribing certain words with a *kreuzweise Durchstreichung* serves not only to indicate the places in a text where thought strains against the boundaries of language and tries to think at the margins by ironizing certain inescapable ways of speaking, but also to bind those words down securely to the page. (55)

“Striking through” emphasizes even as it questions, leaving open the possibility that the move is actually a metaphysical one—even if the metaphysics is a metaphysics *ad absurdum*. Reading Derrida, one may well question why certain words are struck through and others are italicized. Striking through questions, but italicization emphasizes. This, at least, is the traditional way to read them. But this reading grants ontological weight to graphic difference, a move which Derrida would not authorize even though he uses it as an author. Might those flourishes not serve the same purpose? Furthermore, if Derrida is correct about the metaphysical baggage of all *logoi*

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, *Grammatology* 37, 62, 112

(whether or not they are employed by a Logos), then how does he justify the arbitrary application of *sous rature* throughout his texts? Surely every word could be struck out; the fact that he repeatedly chooses certain words is arbitrary, and it is vulnerable to Hart's critique. Yet why stop at erasure? If words are only the supplement of absence, then one does not need to write in order to evince that concept. The choice of words to erase is only a subset of the problem of which words to use in the first place. Why not leave the page unfilled as a question posed by the void?

If the wordplay which founds this deconstruction seems arbitrary, it should be remembered that, according to the logic of *différance*, arbitrariness does not bear upon validity. I will let deconstruction swallow itself here, and refer to the words of Derrida: "We must begin *wherever we are* and the thought of the trace, which cannot not take the scent into account, has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. *Wherever we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be" (*Of Grammatology* 162). Marshalling the native resources of a text against it is the definition of the task of deconstruction. Of course this is a violent activity, but it is defensible because it does not introduce violence into an otherwise inviolate field; the violence is there from the start. In that sense, nothing has been transgressed by the transgression. I do not wish to belabor the point, because we have now come back to the "originary" question which began this argument. Yet I wish to point out another way in which *différance* confirms the metaphysical tradition. Metaphysics imagines rhetoric as fundamentally violent. In all of Derrida's writing, he never challenges this claim; he only questions violence's assignment to an inferior position in a hierarchized system. This hierarchy is made manifest in and transmitted through the Definition<sup>38</sup> of violence, which is already weighted with ethical import per the terms of metaphysics. Instead of arguing that rhetoric is nonviolent, Derrida opts

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<sup>38</sup> Taking "definition" as a metaphysical concept, a definition would always be a hypostasis. Metaphysics cannot conceive of an arbitrary definition.

to change the definition of violence, emptying it—and it necessarily follows that he makes ethics nonethical as a result. The move by which Derrida turns from metaphysics and the stable hierarchy-definition is the same move that makes ethics an impossibility. The hierarchy is a necessary prerequisite for ethics. Its loss is the cost of *différance*, the sacrifice made at its foundation.

## Conclusion

That the intersection between Graham's "I must not shout" and J. Hillis Miller's "I must" should occur is not too surprising; many people (philosophers and poets included) have said "I must" or "I must not" at a certain point. Yet I am making a claim for the central significance of these statements to each work, and while Hillis Miller explicitly foregrounds his "I must" within his text, it is only with long argumentation that I have elevated Jorie Graham's "I must not shout" to the level of primary importance it occupies in this work. Might I not be giving myself an unfair advantage—and thereby disadvantaging what Graham's text means, or at least what it means to her? I have, after all, been forced by concerns of time and space to exclude the bulk of Graham's poetry in *Overlord* from my analysis. Even if I were able to include every poem, sentence, line, and punctuation mark, analysis is itself a mediation. The only way to guarantee that Graham's text is not misrepresented would be to let it speak for itself by reproducing it line for line, but this would not be a literary project, nor would it add anything of value to the conversation—even assuming that such a perfect reproduction were possible. Under these terms, the project of literature is to multiply misreadings.

Yet in order to salvage the question of ethics in Graham's work, it is clear that I must move beyond *différance*. Graham's ethical feeling is not nostalgic. The ethical is that which

Graham “cannot pass over in silence.”<sup>39</sup> If Derrida is able to say that Plato’s writing should be read so as not to exclude the concept of “form,” then it must be permissible to make such a definitive claim. Even so, I do not make that claim according to the logic of *différance*; neither did Derrida. Graham’s ethical commitments must be explained through some other avenue that nonetheless remains true to the loss experienced in *différance*—though not necessarily on *différance*’s terms. Kirstin Hotelling Zona declares that Jorie Graham’s poetry is an important contribution to American verse because she poses questions of writerly authority as questions of play (670). Questions of authority, as questions of hierarchy, are necessarily ethical questions; therefore Graham is “indispensible,” at least in part, as a consequence of her ethical commitments. In order for Graham’s ethical appeals to have weight—and in order to think of writing as an ethical task, Graham’s writing must allow for something other than an originary violence. I will therefore attempt to read Graham once again, but this time for signs of something beyond *différance*. There will be one final confrontation with the Overlord, but this confrontation will not be as “obedient” as our last. Having begun the hard work of reading, it is now possible to resist.

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<sup>39</sup> The phrase is from Eco, of course. *The Limits of Interpretation* 36.



## “The Given Thing”

In the previous chapter I argued that reading Jorie Graham’s *Overlord* through *différance* offers little explanation for her ethical commitments. Yet this does not remove *différance* from the text; the *Overlord* can still be read as an addressable *différance*, and its influence can be seen throughout the volume. In closing, I wish to expand upon my assertion that Graham’s ethical commitments open the possibility of true resistance to the *Overlord* by reorienting my analysis toward her text. As Helen Vendler correctly observes, “When a poem is deprived, in critical discussion, of its material body—which is constituted by its rhythm, its grammar, its lineation, or other such features—it exists only as a cluster of ideas, and loses its physical, and therefore aesthetic, distinctness” (71). Although it reveals Vendler’s own theoretical commitments, her statement nonetheless serves as a warning that being faithful to a text requires encountering it as a whole and not a matrix of ideas independent of a material body. It is to the material body, therefore, that I turn—not only the material of Graham’s text, but the materiality within. Although this theme collapsed into one of many binaries during my initial reading, we can now read Graham’s materiality as providing the necessary site for ethics. In turn, ethics prevents materiality from collapsing into one half of the material-spiritual binary. Although *différance* is an important presence in Graham’s poetics, it is not lord—and certainly not lord above all. Graham’s writing is, therefore, neither unethical nor self-defeating. It is a continual recommitment to the excessive burden of ethics.

## True Resistance

In the previous chapter, I implied that the successful deconstruction of deconstruction is a death knell; what I have shown, however, has far more ambiguous implications. That deconstruction can be deconstructed at first seems a coup for metaphysics, a sign which determines the end of the poststructuralist (French) terror. As necessary as this move is, however, it is still in lockstep with the revolution. That deconstruction is subject to its own critique can be easily read as a triumph. After all, is not deconstruction always provisional? It has not appeared; therefore it cannot disappear.<sup>40</sup> If it is deconstructed, the deconstruction is only one interpretation which is itself a rewriting of *différance*—and so on and so forth, in an infinite chain. The question then arises: why wait until now to say so? If one inters *différance* prematurely, it will return as a revenant. Each hasty burial gives credence to Hillis Miller's claims that deconstruction is always being unfairly misread by intellectual bigots.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, however, this reservation does not totally invalidate the claim that the ethics of deconstruction allows no meaning for words like "unfair." For now, we must be content with this ambiguity.

At the end of deconstruction—both in the sense that I am at the end of discussing it and that I am writing after early Derrida has fallen out of the limelight—it is not enough to attempt the burial of *différance*. If it is to be done away with, it must be exorcised. Writing that statement betrays a deep-seated metaphysical prejudice, but it is nonetheless necessary to write. The legacy of deconstruction currently operative in the academy is not contained within the corpus of canonical poststructuralists. The spirit of deconstruction, however, survives. Whenever

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<sup>40</sup> "Any exposition would expose it to disappearing as a disappearance. It would risk appearing, thus disappearing" (*Speech and Phenomena* 134).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, the introduction to *The Ethics of Reading*, especially p.9.

difference is named in present research, it necessarily invokes the “*sameness* which is not *identical*” (*Speech and Phenomena* 129) by the blunt fact of history. This is true of frameworks as diverse as studies of queering, disability studies, and postcolonial studies—theoretical paradigms which have much to say about lived experience. The successors of *différance* are not silent on matters of aesthetic, ethical, and political import. It is therefore with some reluctance that I write that *différance* is hermetic; I am afraid that I will be misunderstood. The successors of *différance* are not hermetic—even a large part of Derrida’s own thought is not—but those movements which descended from Derrida’s thought are, after all, only the topmost layer of the superstructure of *différance*. What I mean by *différance* is what Derrida means by *différance*. “Difference is neither a word nor a concept” (130), he writes. His own writing tells us that he has never described *différance*, that his theories are only theories of *différance* and not the thing itself. It remains perpetually behind the veil, sealed off, and therefore forming a closure. This is the cost of its inviolability: it must be immaterial. It must be, in a sense, spiritual.

It is therefore fitting that Jorie Graham imagines *différance* theologically, manifest in the Overlord. Graham’s Overlord, after all, is a hermetic god—never encountered in spite of her speaker’s continued exertions to make it present. This approach opens a new way to read the ethics of *Overlord*—not as accession to an imperative to misread, but as resistance to a god whose absence is tyrannical. I stated in the previous chapter that Graham’s ethics could not be explained by appeals to *différance*. Her ethical sensibilities are also qualitatively different from those encountered in Derrida and Hillis Miller. At no point could she be imagined to say, “That one of them should have ‘struck’ a ‘comrade’ is not yet true violence” (*Of Grammatology* 113). It is outside her paradigm to demote physical violence below any other type of violence, poststructural or otherwise. This observation would hold true even if Graham’s ethical

sensibilities were revealed as nostalgic—an unlikely development in any case. What is important is not their defensibility from a theoretical standpoint but the fact that Graham assigns the distribution of violences different weight than Derrida or Hillis Miller. Resistance to the Overlord is *a priori* ethical. To borrow from Hillis Miller, however, formulating the statement in that way runs the risk of shifting the ethical question to a position far later than its actual appearance. Even if it is not completely triumphant, ethics is itself resistance.

### **Ethical Remains**

Now that *différance* has been excluded as the source of Graham's ethical consciousness (though not excluded from her poetic), it seems necessary to reexamine Graham's critical reception after Derrida and the death of theory—yet doing so only begs the question of why he is absent, for Derrida is rarely present in contemporary discussions of Graham's poetry. This would not be such a problem if some of the things said about Graham's poetry did not bear such an uncanny resemblance to the theory of *différance*. The following passage from Kirstin Hotelling Zona provides an especially acute example:

Jorie Graham's poetry is indispensable to discussions of American verse because it clearly locates writerly authority not in the ruptured referent, nor in the lyric 'I' who appears to choose one action over another, but in the play *between* these positions—between presence and absence, desire and dislocation—from which the 'I' emerges. (670)

Zona does not give an orthodox formulation of *différance*, of course, but for those who have read Derrida it is difficult not to think of *Of Grammatology* when Zona mentions a position “between presence and absence.” What makes this example even more significant is that Derrida's name

appears nowhere in Zona's bibliography; it would seem that either what we call *différance* is fundamental to Graham's poetic, or that knowledge of *différance* has so diffused into the academic culture that it is properly foundational. Another passage that seems particularly ready to embrace Derrida is Susan McCabe's statement that "This poem ["Praying (*Attempt of June 8 '03*)"], like many others in *Overlord*, fitfully interrogates 'agency' in self and in language, invoking 'the enemy' as an accident of violent, arbitrary 'difference'" (192). The words could almost be Derrida's, but the authors are not identical. Nor are these the only examples.<sup>42</sup> Derrida is simultaneously present and absent in these works.

My purpose in broaching these passages is not to accuse their authors of lax scholarship, but to show the way in which contemporary discussions of Graham's poetry are vulnerable to being revealed as arguments from *différance*. Critics may, of course, take or leave Derrida's theoretical paradigm, and the fact that many of Derrida's key terms have percolated through academia hardly comes as a shock. I formulate these texts' agnosticism as a problem only because my aim in these closing pages is to think through Graham's ethical commitments, and I have already ruled out *différance*'s contribution. As long as Derrida remains unacknowledged, the useful observations which some critics<sup>43</sup> make about the way in which Graham's materiality<sup>44</sup> challenges the void can serve only a supplementary purpose. It does my argument no good to ground Graham's ethics in materiality by using Timothy C. Baker's salient point that

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<sup>42</sup> When discussing Graham's earlier *Region of Unlikeness*, Thomas Gardner seems to describe the agony of an inevitable misreading when he writes that, "What the poet realizes... is that she is in a place where action has been discredited and whited-out and is yet demanded" (Gardner, *Jorie Graham*, 131). Helen Vendler toys with her reader on p.83, explicitly using the term "supplement." See, in addition, Blazer p.147—although it should be noted that he explicitly references poststructuralism and has *Of Grammatology* in his bibliography.

<sup>43</sup> Such as Timothy C. Baker, James Longenbach (94), Elisabeth Frost, and, if we include the stylistic level in general, Helen Vendler.

<sup>44</sup> I use this terms because it makes more explicit the disambiguation which Elisabeth Frost gives when interpreting the title of Graham's *Materialism*: "... 'materialism' ... refers not to American middle-class values... but to the physical world—to matter and life in their troubling otherness and flux, and to our attitude toward that world, including our own bodies."

“...materiality reveals the void by showing everything that the void is not: the invisible is revealed by the visible” (144-5). If that statement is underwritten by the logic of *différance*, then it always already invalidates Graham’s ethics. Since Graham’s poetic cannot be entirely explained by *différance*, however, Derrida’s presence in contemporary Graham criticism would be itself supplemental. The absence of *différance* from the discussion is not a problem in itself; it is, however, problematic in that it exposes much of what is written about Graham’s poetry to a ready-made deconstruction. By definition, that deconstruction would be unable to account for the force of Graham’s ethical commitments.

Materiality, however, remains vital to Graham’s poetry because it provides the necessary site for ethics. Since Graham refuses to yield on the significance of physical violence, it is not surprising that her ethics primarily concern actions and interactions in the material world. In “Praying (*Attempt of June 14 ’03*),” Graham presents a conclusion which seems altogether outside of *différance*:

Look, the steps move us up through the dark, I can hear them  
even though I can’t see them, we are moving further up,  
this that this that and the pain sliding all along,  
sliding into the fine crevices on the side walls of this brain we are  
traveling up, and the pain lodging, and the pain finding the spot of  
unforgetting,  
as in here I am, here I am. (*Overlord 33*)

In this passage, the cavern which stores nuclear waste is imagined as a brain—not the speaker’s brain nor the brain in particular, but “this brain.” It is also significant that the brain is not described as a mind; Graham’s diction evokes an organ with material substance, not a

disembodied psyche. Longenbach observes that “Graham’s notion of selfhood throughout *Materialism* is similarly external; she dramatizes consciousness by focusing on the movement of the material world outside the self, ultimately suggesting that the self exists only inasmuch as it is composed of material phenomena” (94). Surely that description is applicable to what happens in this poem, where the cavern itself is imagined as a metaphorical brain that remembers. What it “remembers” is the nuclear waste which it stores—a metaphor for recurring pain. Yet Graham does not speak of memory—not quite. “Unforgetting” is not synonymous with “remembering,” which is the process of dredging up past events in an attempt to make them present. Rather, “unforgetting” implies that the event of pain does not need to be remembered because it is inviolably present. Radioactive waste will present the same danger fifty years from now as it does today. In this way, the material world provides “the spot of / unforgetting,” a site for ethical questions. The materiality of pain serves as the mechanism through which one can write “here I am, here I am.”

The force of Graham’s ethical consciousness legitimizes her materiality as something more than deconstructive fodder, not vice versa. Earlier I referred to Graham’s poetic as a poetic of loss, which is fundamentally different from a poetic which denies the possibility of stable presence. This is not to say that presence is unproblematic for Graham; that is definitely not the case. Her poetics, however, embraces presence to the degree that it embraces the ethics of materiality. The scratches that the cat with AIDS makes in the floor are a trace, but a trace which leaves a physical impression that only the most radical skeptic could deny. The scratches are given staying power—remain present—to the degree which they present an ethical dilemma. Likewise, the radioactive waste stored in the cavern will continue to be an undeniable fact for as long as it might cause harm. Communicating across deep time is a problem not only because of

the possibility of harm across deep time, but also because of our responsibility to warn others of the harm. The dumping ground is a “spot of unforgetting” because it continuously reopens the wound, replenishing its presence as the presence of an ethical dilemma. Were that ethical dilemma to cease, so would the need to communicate. This faith requires more than materiality, and more than the material-void binary. The physical permanency of the wound must exist, but the wound itself must be recognized and declared as such—an ethical process at the heart of Graham’s “here I am, here I am.” In order for the ethical dilemma to present itself, however, Graham’s poetics must be a poetics of erasure, not of the always already erased.

With this observation in mind, it is possible to reread Graham’s resistance to the Overlord as something more than total subservience. If ethics itself is resistance, then one might expect this to be borne out by the text—and it is. Graham writes that “The verdict / *is* irreversible. Meaning the word cannot be taken back. / It is said. It is said. That is what the boy who jumped / left in his note” (*Overlord* 81). Graham’s italicization—even if it is a species of *sous rature*—reinforces the reality of a verdict which is at once linguistic and material. Similarly, the boy who committed suicide left a note, a physical, textual artifact that remains extant and fulfills the function of his verbal remains. For Graham, words are powerful because they leave a material trace, a trace which always already serves as the site of ethics but not, as in Hillis Miller, the (non-)ground of ethics. Perhaps *différance* is internally cohesive, but employing it as an absolute ground of unmeaning is a usurpation of the highest order. Graham’s problem is not the existence of the Overlord but absolute fealty to it: “I do not / want her / to serve you. Not you. Not you above all.” “Praying (*Attempt of April 19 '04*)” comes the closest to despair of all Graham’s “Praying” poems because its central ethical challenge is the obliteration of the material world in the form of ecological collapse. In this light, Baker’s previously-referenced statement that, “For



Graham, material things, whether they include the infinite material possibility of the world or are limited to ink on a page, are a solution to the void. Materiality does not replace the void...instead, materiality reveals the void by showing everything that the void is not: the invisible is revealed by the visible” (144-5), takes on new meaning. If there is no visible site for ethical demands, then there is no resistance against the Overlord; there is nothing more to write.

Graham, however, continues to write. It is an anguished writing, aggressively self-conscious and self-critical. But how could it be otherwise? That Graham continues to write does not make her a hypocrite; rather, every new poem is a recommitment to ethical writing. To use Graham’s metaphor in the above poem, the choice to write is the choice to continue knocking:

Knocking against a stone wall says the poet  
*knowing* the wall will not yield to any im-  
ploration. But the poet lived when there was a wall  
[take away wall]. The poet lived when imploration  
rose up in the human throat. When hands rose to  
knock. (81)

The removal of the wall, of course, is the end of materiality. It is the possibility which Graham is forced to confront in this poem. Yet, for the time being, the wall remains. She continues to knock and implore, fulfilling the task of the poet. Perhaps that task is already lost—perhaps the wall is even now crumbling, never to be rebuilt. Were she to cease writing, though, she would be guilty of hastening the absolute closure of silence. By declaring the wound—by refusing to succumb to ethical stupor—she proves that the wall still stands against the void. The ethical knock remains.

## Outride

My argument admittedly provides no ground for ethics, but that has never been its aim. What I have attempted to provide is a careful reading of Graham's poetry. Of course this does not remove the need for a ground. Graham does not posit one; at least in *Overlord*, her ethical sensibilities are properly primary. Ethics is her ground without ground, the necessary given in which she (dare I say it?) believes. It is enough to show that ethics is the outside of *différance*, to recognize it as a point of departure which can never be justified within the sealed logic of the supplement—a logic which, nonetheless, continues to contend with it. The fact that her emphasis on materiality outside of its place in a binary found no home in *différance* now makes sense; Graham posits the material world as the necessary site of the ethical, and *différance* does not accommodate ethical urgency. Although recovering the core of Graham's poetic necessitated going through *différance*, it would be improper to stop there. It would be improper to pass in silence over that which resists.

Yet the end must come. Even this outride attempts to delay the inevitable closure of the end, when every word will be inscribed and subject to an irreversible verdict. Was it necessary to exhaust this much space to make only a provisional argument about Graham's poetry? Given what little ground has been traversed, we might call the length of my writing excessive. Perhaps that is fitting. "Posterity," Graham's final poem,<sup>45</sup> certainly has a moment in which its own excesses seem to threaten the disintegration of her project:

Wrote a poem with the lines

“how can I write/in a lyric poem that the world we live in/

has already been destroyed? It is true. But/it cannot be said

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<sup>45</sup> This is also the poem that David Orr is reading when he declares *Overlord* a “sententious, well-meaning blunder” (15).

into the eyes of an other,/as that other will have nowhere

to turn.” Took the lines out. Thought “what would be the *subject*.” (88)

Once again, Graham is considering what it is acceptable to say and how she should say it. At this point, however, the poem threatens to collapse under its own weight. The lineation of the interior fragment interrogates the arbitrariness of the exterior’s line breaks. Not only that, but the fragment’s very existence seems to contradict what Graham says about its redaction. Yet from which poem was it redacted? Graham only identifies the original as “a poem,” leaving her reader to speculate. Perhaps it was inappropriate in that particular poem, but for some reason it is acceptable here, where Graham’s struggle against the lyric reaches critical mass. It arrives as arguably the strongest example of *différance* yet encountered, serving as a self-referential supplement that collapses the boundary between the poem’s interior and exterior. Perhaps it is only one last attempt to foreclose on closure.

Yet *Overlord* does not end there. After the moment of erasure’s excess—and after Graham admits, “Oh I have talked too much” (Ibid.)—she once again affirms the necessity of the given thing:

The thing itself—forgive me—*the given thing*—that you might have persuaded yourself is

invisible,

unknowable, creature of context—it is there, it is there, it needs to be there. (Ibid.)

The lines are almost manic in their assertion that the given thing “needs to be there.” Having done the hard task of reading, however, we cannot write off Graham’s desire for a ground as uncritical metaphysical prejudice. The entirety of *Overlord* grapples with the problem of

ontological surety, and Graham's choice to include a glaring white gap in the midst of her assertion of presence is nigh unthinkable if she imagines presence and absence as a mere binary. This passage, moreover, comes soon after the last; that Graham's lyrical assertion of the need for givenness outlasts her most radical critique of lyricism and presence only reinforces the power of her assertion, even if the given thing has no ground other than her claim that it simply must exist.

Graham ends not in the moment of excess, but after it—after the lyric ceases to struggle against itself. For those familiar with Graham's poetic career, the brevity of her final six lines evoke the concision of her earliest volumes, indicating a recovery of sorts:

unknowable, creature of context—it is there, it is there, it needs to be there. I

awaken

again. The

man, last night, his hands

no longer operational.

I wake up operational

over what country now.

The rain has ceased,

I stare at the gleaming garden. (Ibid.)

Since Graham formulates the question of ethical responsibility as “stay[ing] awake” (81), it is significant that the admission of the need for a given thing leads into her speaker awakening. As I have shown, Graham's ethical commitments are her “given.” The fact that they remain only after a thorough critique allows her to end the volume not by resisting closure, but embracing it. After one final outburst, the repetition of “operational” establishes a parallel between the homeless man that she tried to help and Graham's speaker—an unthinkable moment earlier in

the poem, even if the parallel is established by negation. Then, the final two lines burst into a flight of lyricism. Even here Graham's poetic of loss is at work; the feeling of radical alienation ("what country") combined with Graham's choice to include a garden in the scene calls to mind the expulsion from Eden. It is clear that, whatever her creedal commitments, Graham writes after some original—or originary—violence, after the introduction of death. Yet the garden is still "gleaming"; beyond hope, it survives. And if the garden survives, then its walls do as well. Again, the ethical knock remains.

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