Jorie Graham's _____s

THOMAS J. OTTEN

IN HER THIRD BOOK, *THE END OF BEAUTY* (1987), JORIE GRAHAM begins to include in some of her poems blanks, word-length line segments denoting language's absence, like the kind meant to be filled in on a questionnaire or a grammar school quiz. These instances of italicized absence seem quite distinct from the extra-wide spaces between words Graham began using in the same book, spaces that draw out a caesura and therefore have a primarily temporal character. The blanks, on the other hand, are always part of a sentence's grammatical structure; hence, they almost always have a clear logical function even as they almost never have a clear solution or answer. In spite of the insistence in a poem in *Region of Unlikeness* (1991) that "you know this / already don't you fill in the blanks," only rarely do the poems with blanks present cues sufficiently explicit that a word seems to enter the gap and hover within the space of its own erasure (14). More often, the blank stays blank, and the apparent problem of filling in the right word gives way to the deeper problem of knowing how to read language's exclusion. Thus, the blank generates a strange ontology because while it is an emphatic mark of absence, Graham's usage endows it with substance: it usually serves as a noun, is usually used as a direct object or an object of a preposition, and is often a place or thing. Nothingness acquires a feeling of solidity as Graham's syntax endows this sign with what this sign excludes. What is so baffling, so conceptually difficult, about lines like "Mud, ash, _____, _____" and "corridors, windows, a meadow, the _____" and "Like a _____ this look between us" is that absence and substance occupy the same point and thus call on the reader to entertain simultaneously ideas that should logically exclude each other (*End* 25, 64, 65).

Understood in this light, the blank begins to emerge both as a stark graphic representation—an utterly simple picture—of lyric and as a

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reflection of late-twentieth-century material culture, a way of writing the surfaces and textures of contemporary everyday life. Considered from one angle, the blank reduces to their purest expression the alienating distance and opacity that give the lyric I its definitive and painful privacy. At the same time, the blank also replicates the nebulously material things characteristic of Graham's poems, things that hover on the furthest edge of a firm ontology, like the dust in the beam of a movie projector in "Fission" or the thin sheath of spandex stretched across a body in "The Dream of the Unified Field" or the floating colors, detached from any object, in an abstract expressionist painting that figure in "For Mark Rothko." Like those entities, the blank has a wavering materiality, one that renders the distance between persons as both a gap and a substance, a medium, something almost tangible. The blank and the things (or "things") associated with it become a concrete model for lyric, a way of giving a tenuous materiality to the tensions of the genre. "Materialism" is, in fact, one of Graham's key terms (it is the title of one of her books), just as one of her key images is the hole, whether a rip in fabric or a hole in the ground. While that term and that image may seem to pull in different directions, here they are virtually synonymous, for what Graham means by "materialism" is more akin to an ontological problem than it is to an assertion of the sufficiency or even just the primacy of the physical world. Like the ephemeral materials of late-century technology, like the gap between persons or between poet and reader, like the blanks themselves, holes are a hard case for the philosophical problem of what there is, almost a materialization of the ontological question. In this essay, then, I will argue for the inseparability of generic and material history as I seek to show how lyric's definition is subject to its changing physical analogues. Graham's blank offers the chance to see how the lyric genre intersects with the vagaries, the historical vicissitudes, of material culture.[1]

That there is something specifically lyrical about Graham's blank is signaled by the way it creates a visual pun on one of the definitive moments for lyric in the tradition of English poetry, Milton's meditation on his blindness in book 3 of *Paradise Lost*, a moment where the epic poet looks inward with the kind of intense loneliness that would become a dominant mood for the short poem of subjectivity.[2] In this passage, spiritual insight compensates for the poet's darkened physical sense of vision, a dialectic captured in small by the word *blanc*, which names darkness as whiteness and occlusion as revelation:

> But cloud instead, and ever-during dark
> Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men
> Cut off, and for the Book of knowledge fair
> Presented with a Universal blanc
> Of Nature's works to me expung'd and ras'd,
> And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out.
> So much the rather thou Celestial Light
> Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
> Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
> Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
> Of things invisible to mortal sight. (3.45–55)

In "Untitled," a poem in *Region of Unlikeness* (17–18), Graham compresses the poetics of the Miltonic passage into a terse "And of what we spoke of in the dead of _____ once long ago." This is one of the few places where you can with reasonable certainty fill in one of Graham's blanks, since earlier lines in the poem and the impulse to complete a stock expression both work to fill this white space with "night." With its latent semantic meaning poised against its physical appearance, this blank materializes and performs the ambiguity of Milton's *blanc*, first because its white transparency yields a moment of readerly occlusion and then because when in a split second the moment of éclaircissement comes, that clarity consists of darkness. Graham's blank substantiates the dialectic between physical blindness and spiritual insight that in *Paradise Lost* is epitomized by the shifting, contradictory meanings of *blanc*, a word that in seventeenth-century usage can mean white or gray and that by means of its etymology shades into *black* (*blank* and *black* both derive from the Indo-European base

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bhleg-, "to burn, to gleam" [Bloom 78]). This Miltonic heritage makes clear that Graham's blank encapsulates and intertwines issues of separation and substance: it means being "[c]ut off," enjambed from "the cheerful ways of men" into a wavering space of cloud and clarity, of "things invisible," a space filled with ungraspable matter, whether mist or light. The "Universal blanc"—the space of poetry, as "-versal" underscores—materializes the sense of lack, endows absence itself with substance.[3]

The image in Graham's poetry that lends a paradoxical solidity to this absence filled in with itself, the image that endows this absence with something like a structure, is the hole, an entity Graham variously characterizes as a void, a palpable substance, and an aperture: an "empty" (the word is used as a noun) and a "gaping hole" (*End* 20, *Errancy* 11). In "To the Reader" (*End* 23–25), one of her first poems to include blanks, Graham articulates her theory of reading and her *ars poetica* around the image of a hole in the ground. In this poem, a girl "who is me" digs up a square yard of earth in the middle of a meadow, marking its edges with lines drawn with a spade, measuring its strata of leaf, loam, and clay with a ruler, and pulling apart its details—seedpods, moss, "riffraff the wind blew in"—with a tweezers (*End* 23–24). Recording her measurements in a notebook and preserving samples in plastic bags, she is working on a project "for Science Fair," an assignment that requires her to excavate this small plot and "to catalogue and press onto the page *all she could find in it* / and name" (23). The poem depicts this scientific project as the beginning of Graham's poetic one: this plot of ground is where "this begins," where writing originates. Even without that direct statement, it is clear that this poem is about poetic composition: perhaps the most sustained metaphor in English and American poetry is the figuring of poetry as cultivation, the lines of verse as rows of crops, the metaphors and rhetorical flourishes as flowers arranged in a garden.

"To the Reader" falls squarely within that tradition even while radically revising it. Instead of handing readers a flower, the poem hands them a _____, an analysis of the contents of a hole, an analysis that hovers above vacant space: "her hole in the loam like a saying in the midst of the field of patience, / fattening the air above it with detail, / an embellishment on the April air" (*End* 24). The hole serves as a material model for lyric because it gives a degree of density and definition to the spaces between persons while remaining true to the facts of absence and distance that are so often the lyric poem's generating cause. The work of lyric is that of "fattening . . . air"; it transforms the gap between the writer and the reader this poem overtly addresses into a substantial medium. Hence, it follows that late in the poem, when the speaker asks, "Where do we continue living now, in what terrain?" the answer is "Mud, ash, _____, _____" (25). The poem lists as parallel items the ungraspable, amorphous, protean substances of mud and ash with the redoubled and substantiated marks for absence that complete the line; the implication is that such nebulous matter is the ground of contemporary culture, that it epitomizes our experience in the world of spaces and things.

A second way of understanding this question and its answers is that the poem's continued life is somehow a matter of nebulous substances, holes, and blanks. This is the idea, the theory of reading, the poem explores in the extraordinarily complex image at its end. The poem depicts itself as a

> hole on the back of [a] man
> running
>
> through which what's coming towards him is coming
> into him, growing larger,
>
> a hole in his chest through which the trees in the
> distance are seen
> growing larger shoving out sky shoving out storyline
>
> until it's close it's all you can see this moment this
> hole in his back
>
> in which now a girl with a weed and a notebook
> appears. (*End* 25)

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The hole in the ground with which the poem has identified itself becomes a cognitive space that is in turn fleshed out by the hole in the running man's back. The hole, the poem, becomes a perceptual tool that can take in the surrounding landscape and people it with the figure of the girl with weed and notebook. The poem ends, then, by offering us a model for how it does its work, a model in which Graham thinks through the matter of intersubjectivity by appealing to the strange materiality of holes. In the Magritte-like scenario with which the poem closes (a scenario that not only resonates with René Magritte's reversals of the represented and the real but also partakes of some of the painter's clinically surreal gruesomeness), the reader's experience is depicted as one of seeing through a nearly vertiginous series of holes, a series that connects the perceptions of the man, the girl, and the reader's own self.[4] But even if this very partial explanation holds, a formidable conceptual opacity remains here at the end of the poem, where the hole image is most highly elaborated; a sense of cognitive blockage sets in just where the poem offers an image that promises a clear aperture, windows between various selves. The poem's holes seem simultaneously transparent and opaque, void and material.

As "To the Reader" suggests, contemporary poetry "begins" with the hole, the blank. In other words, it begins with what T. J. Clark has described as modernity's "blankness," its "great emptying and sanitizing of the imagination" as "agreed-on" traditions lose their force and contingency fills their place. In modernity, Clark writes, "meaning is in short supply" (7). Clark's argument helps to suggest why it is that blankness and absence, the language of negation, come to be the modernist dialect. For Graham's emphatic use of empty space comes with a nearly century-old tradition trailing behind it. Reading the twentieth-century portion of *Earth Took of Earth*, Graham's anthology of her "indispensable poems" (Introduction xvii), one encounters the "nothingness" of the illusive transformations of Ezra Pound's Canto 2 (129), the "isolate flecks" with which William Carlos Williams closes "To Elsie" (126), the mythical "old stories" set adrift in the white space of the page in Robert Duncan's "A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar" (212), the definition of a poem as "erasures" in Donald Justice's "Poem," and the gap of immolation (an incineration of tradition) that appears at the end of Adrienne Rich's "The Burning of Paper instead of Children": "*burn the texts* said Artaud" (271). "Nothing" is one of modernism's key terms, a crucial word for Robert Frost—who counterpoises it with the indefinite "something," as Richard Poirier notes (317)—and for Wallace Stevens, whose "Snow Man" becomes "nothing himself" as he "beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." Graham subjects this tradition of absence to a materialist reinterpretation; modernism's metaphor of nothingness receives in the holes of "To the Reader" as much concreteness as it can hold. Here it will be helpful to bring to bear two philosophical perspectives on holes and things. The first will be from recent analytic philosophy; the second will be Marx's historical materialism.

In an essay entitled "Holes," the philosophers David Lewis and Stephanie Lewis take up the question of whether a hole is a purely linguistic, immaterial entity or a real, material object, albeit one that is hard to describe. On the one hand, the word *hole* could be a description of a particular kind of shape, a word that designates an attribute, which ordinary speech misleadingly turns into a substantive: a piece of cheese can have holes in it, but that does not mean there is such a *thing* as a hole (3). On the other hand, perhaps holes are indeed material objects, not because they are filled with air or ether (although this possibility does briefly arise) but because they are defined by their material edges; what we call a hole would more accurately be labeled a "hole-lining" (5). As A. R. Ammons (another great ontologist of contemporary American poetry) puts it in his recent long poem *Glare*, "[E]ven nothing has a / rim around it, which makes it a / something" (117–18). The

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weaknesses of this solution, as the Lewises point out, are that defining the hole lining would then be perfectly arbitrary ("How much cheese do you include as part of one of these holes?") and that a hole would be then defined as solid substance, the opposite of what we intuitively think a hole is (6). As "Holes" unfolds and its competing intuitions and hypotheses accumulate, the hole emerges as a totally equivocal entity, a focal point for the endlessly contradictory relations that nonetheless govern the ways in which we take in and express the spatial and material world: a hole is an absence with a material edge to it, emptiness with a grain of substance, demonstrably a fiction—even a wholly linguistic entity—yet a fiction that points to a decidedly concrete thing that is also nothing.

Some of this uncertainty about what a thing (or nothing) is pertains as well in another philosophy of thingness—Marx's theory of the commodity, from which Graham quotes in the long poem "The Break of Day," originally entitled "Materialism" when it was first composed (*Materialism* 112–27). In the passage quoted, from *Capital*, Marx writes, "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (Marx 163). Once it enters the market, Marx writes in the same passage, an object is no longer an "ordinary, sensuous thing" but instead "changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness" as it forms the basis for a relation between persons, a relation it also negates, occludes, blanks out. Objects are everything to Marx: the pages of *Capital* are virtually overstocked with coats and gold and pins and flax and glass bottles and coal and bread. At the same time, objects are nothing in *Capital*, things whose physical substance dwindles away in importance when it is compared to the social significance that is nowhere discoverable within them.

These are the contexts in which we should understand the formulations in Graham that endow nothingness with a tenuously positive identity, that often specify an absence with the definite article: "the nothing-on-the-page," "the nothing with use in it," "a part of the place but cut out from the place," "The mind with the white hole in it," the "thick . . . empty" (*End* 47, 49, 85; *Region* 53, 20). As we have seen in "To the Reader," Graham identifies her aesthetic with the problematic nature of holes and characterizes the work of poetry as that of solidifying a gap, "fattening the air . . . with detail." In "The Guardian Angel of the Swarm" (*Errancy* 81–84), a poem published ten years later, Graham thinks through more explicitly the ways in which she has predicated her writing on the materiality of absence. This poem quotes and reworks passages from Gilles Deleuze's book on Leibniz and the baroque. Graham turns to Leibniz because on Deleuze's reading he can be understood as materializing the spaces between persons and materializing them into a kind of perceptual matter. The distance between us as we sit beside each other or the distance between you and this page becomes the stuff, the substantiated space, of perception: as the next-to-last lines of the poem observe, "[T]he facade is riddled with holes, although there is no void / (a hole being only the site of a more rarified matter)," a formulation taken almost verbatim from Deleuze (*Errancy* 84; cf. Deleuze 28). In Leibniz, there is nothing outside or apart from the monad, the basic and impenetrable unit of substance; hence, matter may have "different styles," but there is no such thing as an empty hole (Graham, *Errancy* 81). In *Toy Medium*, a recent study of materialism and lyric, Daniel Tiffany points out the persistence of Leibnizian thought in lyric poetry, especially lyric's penchant for things that hover on the border of materiality, like ether, rainbows, snow, and atoms (212).[5] Here I would like to go a step further and explain why this tradition is present and what it does in the specific instance of Graham's poetry. Leibniz answers here because his philosophy offers a universalist doctrine that does not deny holes and fissures, that can wrest a kind of concord and coherence from

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the riddled world without falsifying the world into an unruptured whole. The theory of the monad may be the closest thing in the history of philosophy to a grand unified theory of gaps, an ontology of a continuous material surface—"the dream of the unified field," Graham calls it in the title of her volume of selected poems—that is composed of units totally separate, fractured into disunity. Further, Leibniz's account of matter turns out to be oddly consonant with the particulate and virtual nature of contemporary materials like halogen, latex, plastic, and acrylic, substances named in *The Errancy* (58, 34, 13, 59). The Enlightenment philosophy becomes a tool that brings to light—heightens the visibility of—our own physical world.

Like her visual quotation from Milton and like her penchant for angels—the debate over whose physical substance spurred a huge cottage industry in Milton's time—Graham's conception of the hole reaches back to seventeenth-century materialism, the origins of modern materialism, but the intuitions and topoi of that tradition are brought to bear on a range of materials deeply characteristic of our own time, materials that define and shape the "terrain . . . [w]here . . . we continue living now," as "To the Reader" puts it. I will develop this point by detailing a list of substances, snapshots or swatches of Graham's material world. Alternatively, the following might be considered a catalog of Graham's technemes, the term by which Philippe Hamon designates the basic units of substance, the objects and resources that concretize ambiguity at a given moment in technological and literary history (192). My four examples are the beam of a movie projector, a latex shade, the property of color, and a Formica countertop. Taken together, they will lead to a closing indication of what is at stake for criticism of lyric poetry in the history of such surfaces.

In a poem called "Fission" (*Region* 3–8), the speaker recalls the November afternoon in 1963 when as a young girl she sat in a movie theater watching Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita*. The image on the screen is of Humbert's first view of Lolita herself and then her reciprocal glance back at him through her famous sunglasses, her "heart-shaped shades" (4). The beam that creates these images is described as a "corridor of light / filled with dust," a "tunnel / of image-making dots licking the white sheet awake"; with this phrasing, the poem substantiates the pathways of sexual desire, finding in the dust motes and dots of light an ambivalent materiality that reflects both the emotionally real and so phenomenologically substantial presence and the vicissitudinous nature of the erotic pathways that connect persons (3, 4). As it "lick[s] the white sheet awake," the projector's beam reflects onto the speaker's face and finds its echoing reflection in her psyche as well; the film's story of the growth of a very young woman's sexual self-awareness repeats itself as the illuminated image on the screen "lick[s]" the "small body" of the speaker and she finds herself "want[ing] someone to love" (6). These reflections and quasimaterialized links dissolve—undergo fission, as the poem's title has it—when a screaming man runs to the front of the theater and delivers the news that President Kennedy has been shot. As the man struggles for the crowd's attention, the image on the screen begins "whiting . . . out" in successive stages: first it "grays" and "pales" as the house lights come on, and then it becomes "a smoldering of whites" as the theater's skylight is opened (4–5). Like the electron that splits the atom, the assassin's bullet breaks the bonds that hold the material—and so, for Graham, the affective—world together; dematerialized in the white light of fission, the image on the screen becomes "vague stutterings of light," "bits of moving zeroes" in an "infinite virtuality," "not particulate." Early in the poem, persons had been held together by vision, the medium of love (Lolita's heart-shaped glasses), which had seemed so palpable that it resembled the physical contact between bodies (the beam "laps" and "lick[s]" the screen). Now the space in which vision operates has become an empty gap, one that pro-

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vokes desperate attempts to bridge it: the man who announces the shooting waves his hat and weirdly slams "one hand flat / over the open / to somehow get / our attention," the speaker's father cries, a woman in the row behind begins to pray (5). Like the blanks, which in the reader's experience switch back and forth between substance and emptiness, the virtual matter of late-century technology alternately solidifies and dissolves, a fluctuation that comes to reflect the vicissitudes of the interpersonal.

In a poem near the beginning of *The Errancy* called "Spelled from the Shadows Aubade" (34–35), the speaker awakes with her eyes focused on a "latex shade," blank but with its "borders . . . gleam[ing]" from the rising sun. The room is still "grainy" and full of shadows, but the shade's edges are defined, "harshed-up" by the dawn until, at the end of the poem, the shade emerges as a "frame of light." The shade thus takes on the "dilation" and the "special luminosity" that Geoffrey Hartman identifies as the properties of mediating phenomena in modern poetry; it is like the fog and smoke in Wordsworth, nebulously material stuff that blurs the edges of the external world so that things outside the perceiving mind come to seem like intellectual substance (166). In the instance of Graham's latex shade, mediation is thickened into matter as the shade particulates, granulates, and atomizes into "lightflecks"—"bright bits of busyness"—the space between the lyric I and the outside world. Latex is an emulsion—rubber or plastic globules suspended in water. Considered as such, the medium of vision is a solid fluid, equivocal matter nearly though not entirely opaque; it lets through flitting shadows that could be flags or birds or clouds and leaves. Latex is also sticky and elastic and so epitomizes a recurrent impulse in Graham to convert the act of vision into adhesive matter that stretches between subject and object, to imagine the "iridescent sticky stare" as composed of "molecules of watching" that glue together perceiver and perceived (*Region* 102, *Materialism* 132). Latex is also one of those highly adaptable and malleable multiuse products that reappear endlessly in the domestic environment, metamorphosing into glue, shades, paint, and synthetic rubber; as *The Errancy* unfolds, it remarks on this replication, noting first the latex shade, then, in another aubade, "the glittering exterior-latex" of a neighbor's house, and then the "sheen" of the interior latex a child's eyes "luster on" (34, 36, 92). Hence, latex substantiates a link between inner and outer, between a "tint of mind" and the objects the mind takes in (34). In such moments, the theory of vision Graham's poems articulate chooses tangibility and substance over transparency, even if—as in the case of the shade or the blanks—opacity is the price for that materialism.

In a poem called "The Lovers" (*End* 64–65), Graham imagines the interlocking gaze of a couple as "the glance, between them," "the glance afloat." The glance, the means of connection, is also described as a "howling and biting gap"; it is "[l]ike a _____ this look between us." The problem the poem tries to work out is how to give definition to this distance, this gaze—how to imagine it as something more than "dear nothingness," how to make visible the space across which persons connect emotionally. The poem likens the risky feeling of "a small terrified happiness" to "an idea of color / like an idea of color sinking to stain an instance, a *thing*"; hence, the poem imagines the _____ as a transient emotion and then gives that moment in time a wavering ontological status that is both nebulous, like an idea, and permanent, like a stain. The conceptual ambiguity and the physical properties associated with color here point toward a particular kind of painting; they evoke unprimed canvases saturated by poured or sprayed pigments, the color-field paintings of Mark Rothko and Morris Louis and their contemporaries. In an early poem entitled "For Mark Rothko" (*Hybrids* 36–37), Graham similarly construes Rothko's aesthetic as one that depends on giving diaphanous color continuity over time and hence making something visible:

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> Shall I say it is the constancy of persian red
> that permits me to see
> this persian-red bird
> come to sit now
> on the brick barbecue
> within my windowframe. Red

Like one of Rothko's nearly monochromatic paintings, the image this stanza frames offers closely related shades—the brick red, the persian red, the "Red" the stanza break strands from syntax—that waver between definition and dissolve, between keeping color continuously visible and blanking out vision by saturating it with an expanse of reds. Color becomes substantial—perhaps even "a *thing*," as "The Lovers" indicates—but substance is itself at issue.

In another poem about abstract expressionism, "Pollock and Canvas" (*End* 81–89), Graham writes that Jackson Pollock's aesthetic seeks "to paint nothing," a precisely equivocal phrase that itself grammatically hovers between the equally relevant alternatives of representing nothing and coating it with paint (88). As the "and" of her title suggests, Graham's poem about Pollock happens in the space between the brush and the canvas, "the blank," which Pollock "hover[ed]" above (82); color becomes an action that takes place in the gap, "mid-air," a whatness that will not stay put (84). In a 1967 essay on Jules Olitski's color-field spray paintings, Michael Fried defines the ontological question at work in Graham's concept of color, the historical shift in painting's representation of the material world that manifests itself in "The Lovers" and the poems about Rothko and Pollock. Characterizing the diaphanous, misty hazes of Olitski's canvases, in which color seems to exist as a thing in its own right, Fried argues that such paintings ask, "Why should a color be *of* an object at all, why can't color escape objects altogether?" (145). As "the idea of color" in "The Lovers" suggests, relationships between persons in Graham hover within this ontological schism in which color thickens the blank and bestows a "constancy" (*Hybrids* 36) upon vision even as color loses its implications of solidity, its need to belong to an object. The equivocal materialism Graham discovers in new techniques and technologies like spray paint drives a wedge between objects and their properties. Hence, in a poem called "Room Tone" (*End* 73–76), two lovers who come "as close as one can" to another are "like the gloss of the thing and the thing," as the identification of things with their qualities fractures into proximity and the ontological questions of light and color stand in for the question of what a relationship is and whether it is real (74).

By now it should be clear that connection and separateness are what is at issue in the blank and in the substances that give that blank their substance. These forms of equivocal matter equivocate at the point where it is an askable question whether the spaces between us connect or divide, whether the transitory is present or absent, whether the amorphous is solid or dissolved. That this kind of material ambiguity is also a matter of ethics is developed most powerfully in "From the New World" (*Region* 12–16), a poem centered on narratives of the Holocaust and thus placed in a context in which the burden to preserve memory—to keep something present, as an object does—is in tension with the conviction that materialism and image making and even just poetry are out of place, suspect because they reduce the distinctive atrocity of the death camps to the status of one stylized aesthetic object among many. The materialized blanks, the stuff of late-century culture, become a way of giving shape and solidity to an ethical dilemma, even a way of giving substance to the question of whether aesthetic objectification is a morally salutary response to annihilation.

In "From the New World," the speaker visits her grandmother in a nursing home at a time when the old woman's ability to remember persons and events is slipping away. The poem unfolds within the historical horizon of a trial in Israel of a concentration camp guard, identified in the 1980s by former camp prisoners. Hence,

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the visit to the grandmother occurs in a framework of testimony, evidence, and verification; on its microcosmic and macrocosmic levels, the poem works at the point where identity and experience are in danger of being lost, disavowed, or annihilated. This sense of erasure extends to the poem's speaker and to the poem's connection to other moments in Graham's work. It extends to the speaker because while she is explicitly identified as the poet, this identification happens in a negation and only there: the one time the poet's name appears is when the grandmother fails to recognize her, telling her, "[*N*]*o, you are not Jorie—but thank you for* / *saying you are. No. I'm sure. I know her you* / *see*" (*Region* 13). This sense of relation as aporia extends to the poem's connection to other poems because while Graham's closest readers could be expected to associate—literally or thematically—this rest home with the one that names the poem "At the Long Island Jewish Geriatric Home" in *Erosion* (24–26), a book published eight years earlier, that relation is never firmly established. Jewish identity becomes a matter for indirection, for pronominal vagueness, as the speaker says that the experience in "From the New World" is "the one time I knew something about us / though I couldn't say what" (*Region* 12).

The poem takes on the problems of how to imagine—to make into an image, to materialize—this sense of erasure, of absented reference, and how to forge some credible link between these experiences of annihilation (the death camps and the grandmother's loss of memory) without falsifying either one. In the now voluminous commentary on the Holocaust and art, these problems emerge as one of how to keep the Holocaust present without simultaneously redeeming its horror into something palatably humanized; as Adorno famously and radically termed it, the problem is whether it is not in fact "barbaric" to "continue to write poetry after Auschwitz" (87). More specifically, if the Holocaust is to be kept present, it must be translated into contemporary terms, a translation in which its indescribable horror must—so this anxiety goes—be compromised. As Ulrich Baer puts it in an essay on present-day photographs of the extermination camps, "How do we remember the *shoah* without forgetting that this event undermined the human capacity for memory and questioned the notion of survival in ways we are still struggling to comprehend?" (43).

In its opening and again at its close, Graham's poem makes this anxiety explicit by questioning the sufficiency of its own language. In its opening, the poem first invokes the gas chambers and the trial in Israel and then asks:

> Can you help me in this?
> Are you there in your stillness? Is it a real place?
> God knows I too want the poem to continue,
>
> want the silky swerve into shapeliness
> and then the click shut
> and then the issue of sincerity. . . . (*Region* 12)

Faced with the incomprehensibility of the events it has summoned, the poem verges on blanking out its link to the reader, prematurely ending in silence, and then casts under suspicion the desires in this context for aesthetic pleasure ("the silky swerve into shapeliness") and for closure ("the click shut"). Like Adorno, who in his essay on the politics of literature after Auschwitz suspected both the "aesthetic stylistic principle" and the process of what he disparagingly called "working through the past" (88), Graham here questions the rightness and fitness of qualities that make poems poems. At its close, "From the New World" imagines a prisoner surviving the gas chamber, and then the poem stutters in a faltering repetition, "*Like* what, I wonder . . . *like what*, I whisper . . . *like, like* . . ." (16). The substitutions of figurative language—the logic of *like* and *as*—are left dangling in incompletion because as tropes of comparison they are precisely unsuited for representing the incomparable. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe argues in his commentary on Paul Celan, one can only articulate the post-*shoah* abyss by stuttering, by "drawing a blank" (18, 19).[6]

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Between these opening and closing performances of the ethical dilemma the Holocaust poses for the poetic image, the poem seeks to materialize that dilemma, seeks out an image that can reflect annihilation without falsifying it into something monumental and enduring. In the poem's narrative, this effort takes the form of the speaker's search for some refuge where she can compose herself after the shock of her grandmother's failure to recognize her, a nonrecognition that resonates with the simultaneous trial of Ivan and the history of the death camps he guarded. When the speaker locks herself in the adjoining bathroom, these two moments of effacement come together in a profoundly uncomfortable association of death camp and nursing home as places where memory is erased, as places where Jews come to die. The speaker imagines that the bathroom is a gas chamber; there is gas on the floor ("something there on the floor now dissolving") and the room is filled with the visionary presence of the Holocaust's victims ("they were all in there . . . the about-to-be seized, / the about to be held down . . . hands up to their faces" [13]). For just a moment, the poem takes in the bathroom's accessories, first "the mirrored wall" and then "The sink. The goldspeck formica. The water / uncoiling" (14–15).

These details may seem of little significance, especially given the cataclysmic nature of other references in the poem. And yet "formica" all by itself captures and crystallizes most of the poem's work and the poem's ethical problem, both because it contains the word *form* and so suggests the process of giving form to the shapeless and absent, and because it carries with it the sense of metaphoric substitution (*Formica* derives from the material's origins as a substitute for mica in electrical insulation). In response to its own anxieties over the morality of the image, the poem materializes the process of dissolving as it wrests a moment of perception from substances that ultimately efface the perceiving subject. The clinical surfaces the poem details are ones that erase individual characteristics; they are institutional surfaces that will not stain and so can easily be purged of the traces of former occupants as new ones take their places. In other poems, Graham associates this kind of laminate material with mimesis: an "imitation-woodgrain tabletop" in *Materialism* (12), a "face that seems to shine / in the linoleum" in *The Errancy* (38). Here in "From the New World," that association is even more pronounced as the bathroom's mirrored wall, Formica countertop, and flowing water make the room a space of endless reflection. Hence, in this poem the space of erasure is also a space of mimesis and of particulate materialism. The poem switches back and forth between abyssal intimations of the final solution and an exaggeratedly close-up view of the material world; similarly, the poem represents a range of materials with careful specificity (noting the "goldspeck" details, for example), but those materials turn out to be not clearly defined images but instead specks, grains, dust motes, water draining away, fields on the point of visual dissolve. Like the blanks, like "the face that seems to shine / in the linoleum," Graham's imagery casts a human presence on matter that concretizes dissolution. Adorno's worries that artistic representations of the Holocaust would compromise its distinctiveness by rendering it one object among many and would endow it with a satisfying or at least alleviating sense of narrative closure are answered here by a metaphysics that keeps the question of matter hovering, that finds in the products of late-century technology a substantiated resistance to closure.

In "From the New World," the Holocaust emerges as a kind of ultimate circumference for the tenuousness of relationships, for the substantial emptiness between persons. In Graham, interpersonal relations in the late twentieth century are shadowed by Nazi genocide and by nuclear annihilation, as in "Fission."[7] These shadows become what Graham calls the "event horizon" for the interpersonal, a frame that bounds the understanding of some occurrence or routine action, shaping the constructions it is

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given and intensifying its import. More specifically, material processes and intimate personal relations—the daily life that continues in the face of atrocity—are tinged with and recoded by their widest historical and global context (the poem "Event Horizon" concerns the act of washing a stain from a red dress while the events at Tiananmen Square are unfolding [*Materialism* 50–54]). The quotidian and the cataclysmic continually blend because in Graham's historical materialism the act of washing a dress is not some reassuring constant but is instead an image that reflects a changing horizon, one frequently filled with atrocity. The mimetic substances that figure relationship in Graham's poetry—water, mirrors, laminated surfaces, beams of light—reflect gaps and shadows. The blank, the space of connection, reflects the abyss that surrounds it.

What emerges in this way of understanding the blanks and the other characteristic substances of Graham's poetry is a culture in which the interpersonal takes on so much psychic weight that it comes to seem like a substantial thing; at the same time, the interpersonal is largely undefined by any larger frame and so is terrifyingly open and amorphous. Hence, in "The Lovers," "this look between us" is "[l]ike a _____" as relationships are both nullified and endowed with heightened or even exaggerated import. Here it will be revealing to notice some loose analogues between Graham's metaphors and those of social theorists who have worked to sum up late-modern experience. In *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Charles Taylor writes of a "bleached" sense of self, a self that is "ungrounded," defined only in terms of its own Cartesian awareness of itself, shorn of constitutive relations and set adrift in moral space (49, 175, 25). The modern self is "punctual," reduced to a single point in a vacuum, and so for Taylor the "map of our moral world" is full of "gaps" and "erasures," canceled relations to all that lies beyond the unimaginably small circumference of each component dot (49, 11). In *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Anthony Giddens distinguishes intimate relations in our time from those in tradition-bound eras by noting that relations today are "not anchored in external conditions of social or economic life"; such intimate bonds are "free-floating," experimental, "open," insecure, and "risky" (89, 91). Because they lack the definition provided by externally established protocols, such relationships have a "core" of "reflexive questioning" (91). Similarly, because sexuality is liberated from its reproductive telos, it becomes "plastic" and malleable (*Transformation* 178). In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard argues that the social order can no longer be considered the unified totality claimed by the modern sociology of functionalism or be divided into the two antagonistic classes described by modern Marxism; rather, society is composed of selves woven into "a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before" (15). The postmodern social bond for Lyotard is a matter of the "'atomization' of the social into flexible networks of language games," utterances that follow elastic protocols and that make each self a linguistic "nodal point," utterances no longer contained by a master narrative (17, 15).

Thus, when social theorists conceptualize contemporary identity and the relations it is both stripped of and constituted by, these theorists' images take on qualities of the protean substance, the substance drained of color, and the abyss or gap that is construed both as a field open to new possibilities and as a terrifyingly empty space. The language of social theory becomes lyrical when it attempts to render the object of its inquiry as a physical object, when it needs to thicken and substantiate the space between persons while also acknowledging that space as a gap. The language of the interpersonal becomes an idiom of the materialized indefinite, an idiom in which social relations and material history shape each other. This sense of the materialized indefinite is why, I think, a moment in Walt Whitman echoes so powerfully in Graham,

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the moment where the poet asks, "What is it then between us?" in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (310).[8] In Graham's implicit rereading of the line, Whitman's sentence becomes not a rhetocal question that collapses the temporal distance between speaker and addressee but instead something like a positive statement: between us lies what, the substantiated indefinite of contemporary materials, "[l]ike a _____." The mobility of pronouns' referential anchorages becomes the grammatical analogue of the slippages that constitute our contemporary sense of the material and the interpersonal.

I have been describing in this essay a material idiom of mediation, a repertoire of images and substances that shape and reflect back to us our understanding of social bonds, of affective ties, of what is between us. As the term *idiom* implies, these substances come to seem a kind of language, come to shade an understanding of what language is and how it does its work in the gap between persons. Hence all the materials this essay has examined allegorize the properties of writing: the projector's screen and the latex shade resemble blank pages, while "latex" carries an echo of "latent text"; paint is a medium of representation; Formica is in various senses a mimetic substance, and the particulate nature of its specks, like the dust in the projector's beam, imitates letters scattered across a page, "dots" that "connect" (*Region* 106). In social theory, too, matter becomes "graffiti on air," as Graham calls it (*Materialism* 67): in Giddens, the "core" of the contemporary interpersonal relationship is a process of "reflexive questioning"; in Lyotard, the social realm "atomiz[es]" into "language games," as he puts it in *The Postmodern Condition*, or consists of "abyss[es]" and "gaps" between the language of moral prescription and the community that would be formed by such usages, as he puts it in *The Differend* (123, 144), a book Graham quotes in *Materialism* (72–73).[9] Hovering on the edge of what we think of as substantial, the language of contemporary lyric returns the pressures of modern intimacy to us as an ontological question; such poems represent their own language as graffiti—spray paint—in the moment before it settles on a surface, in the moment that it makes visible an emptiness, a hole.

This essay has attempted a materially specific reading of lyric imagery; it has tried to follow Graham's poems as they hone in on flecks of dust or glinting specks in Formica, the small spaces in the material world where intimacy is objectified and tested. I am arguing for a kind of attention to the materials and surfaces—the history—that lyric criticism has become tremendously proficient at abstracting away as it defines lyric in terms of recurrent, seemingly transhistorical rhetorical patterns: lyric is defined as a chiastic reduplication of means and ends (by Timothy Bahti), as the figure of apostrophe (by Jonathan Culler), as a moment in which language's allegorical and representational functions confront each other (by Paul de Man). In Sharon Cameron's work, timelessness itself becomes the defining characteristic of the lyric genre; what happens in lyric is "arrested, framed, and taken out of the flux of history" as incident is "sever[ed] . . . from context" (71).

Such analyses are triumphs of genre criticism, extraordinarily successful at generating reading methods widely portable across a range of disparate moments in literary history (Bahti's examples range from Shakespeare to Hölderlin to Celan, Cameron's from medieval lyric to Stevens). But these victories come at the price of a minute history, the history of subjectivity's changing material shapes and textures. If my reading of Graham's blank is accurate, then lyric history might be an account of how consciousness makes its own image out of the materials and technologies that constitute a given cultural moment, an account of how evolving materials yield an evolving idiom of identity and the interpersonal. In this argument, lyric emerges as the most intimate material history that literature records, the genre in which the gap—even just the physical distance—between a speaker and a world of objects is at its narrowest,

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the genre most dependent for its intelligibility on material things as they fill in and bestow a sense of location on the blank antecedent of the first-person pronoun. What material history can contribute to the study of lyric, then, is to show how subjectivity changes as isolation, connection, and desire are thought through the substantial and ephemeral things that surround the self. As the example of Graham's blanks suggests, lyric is a most sensitive register of how changing technology shades acts of self-definition.[10]

Notes

[1] The blanks have received only the most passing of critical commentary, and the impression that emerges from this commentary is that they are an eccentricity that will not bear too much inspection. In a review of *The End of Beauty* published in the *New Yorker*, Vendler suggests that these gaps are the marks the poet makes "when she comes to a concept not yet conceivable" ("Married" 74), and then Vendler drops the matter entirely in her more recent, longer essays on Graham ("Nameless" and "Moment"). Gardner briefly suggests that the blanks appear when "naming . . . exhaust[s] itself" (181). Bedient treats the blanks as part of Graham's "elaborate system of deferrals of closure" (827); Costello makes the same point but far less sympathetically: "Graham's blanks represent a poetic failure—honest, perhaps, but hardly satisfying" (37–38). Longenbach, in an essay on the problematics of closure in Graham, never mentions the blanks, even though they seem highly pertinent to his theme. My own argument assumes that a dramatic change in the way lines of poetry are structured signals the presence of other, larger changes—in the way a genre is conceived, in the social relations that genre conceptualizes, in the imagery that finds its way into a poem—and that the blank is not so much a failure of language (as other critics have suggested it is) as a mark for changing material and social realities that cannot be adequately named in any other way.

[2] On the various genres—including lyric—contained in Milton's epic, see Lewalski.

[3] For further evidence that Graham thinks in Miltonic terms of this ambiguous materiality as the space of the interpersonal, see "Self-Portrait as the Gesture between Them (Adam and Eve)," the first poem in *The End of Beauty* (3–8). As its title implies, this poem recasts personal identity as interpersonal relations, which are in turn defined as operating in an amorphous, highly fraught zone of physical gesture (the poem's title refers to Eve's handing of the fruit to Adam).

[4] For Graham's association of Magritte and holes, see the poems in *The Errancy* based on Magritte's *Le manteau de Pascal* (1954), a painting that depicts a huge and slightly ghostly topcoat full of holes that the stars of the night sky peep through.

[5] Tiffany's explanation of the equivocal nature of matter is one of the aspects Graham singles out in her blurb for his book: "*Toy Medium* moves the question of Art's encounter with Science to an utterly original point of conflagration: where matter is mostly not matter" (qtd. in Tiffany, first unnumbered p.).

[6] For further discussion of the breakdown of poetic logic and aesthetic mastery in Holocaust poetry, see the analysis of Celan's later work in Felman (25–40). In her commentary in *Stupidity* on Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy," Ronell builds on Lacoue-Labarthe's work by arguing that poetry identifies itself with the stupid, the nearly inarticulate: when it encounters an experience of "extreme unreadability," poetry is most itself, stripped down to its rhythms, to the tones of nondenotative language, like the stuttering of "From the New World" or the unintelligible "burrs" of Wordsworth's boy (272). In such moments, language fails but poetry succeeds. The argument is important for explaining how the semiologically void can convey a meaning that cognitively intelligible uses of language would falsify.

[7] "What the End Is For" explicitly uses images of military technology to figure the dissolution of an interpersonal relationship (*End* 26–29); "History" and "Annunciation with a Bullet in It" attest to the presentness of the Holocaust (*Erosion* 64–65, *Materialism* 66–77).

[8] The poem is quoted twice in *Materialism*, once as an epigraph to the volume and again as one of the extended quotations that appear between Graham's own poems (x–xi, 108).

[9] The material quoted from Lyotard concerns the notorious controversies surrounding the verification of the reality of the Holocaust (*Differend* 3–4, 8); Graham's poem places these controversies in an imagistic and thematic framework concerned with the materiality of language, the "one universal, stubborn black / out of which—*in* which?—the dark words *seem*" (*Materialism* 75). In this instance, the poem's images for writing—and hence for connections between persons and the sharing of histories between them—are almost literally shadowed by the Holocaust, while the unsureness of connections between persons is conveyed by the kind of amorphous materialism I have been seeking in this essay to identify.

[10] For examples of the kind of work I am advocating here, see Fumerton on jewels, miniature portraits, and Renaissance sonnets; Scarry on paper and glass in Donne's lyrics; and Noland on machines and French poetic modernism. Like the present essay, these pieces of criticism proceed from the assumption that the lyric I "remains inarticulate until processed through a filter," as Noland puts it (202), and hence from the assumption that lyric's history must be a materialist history of the I's changing filters and mirrors.

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