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Comparison as the Gesture Between Them: John Burnside and Jorie Graham

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Though the juxtaposition of the poetry of American Jorie Graham and Scottish-born John Burnside is not an obvious one, no fewer than three poems in Graham's 1987 The End of Beauty and Burnside's 1992 Feast Days share either title or subject matter. The coincidence cannot be attributed to cross-influence, as Burnside was not familiar with Graham's work in 1992, though, interestingly, he is now.. Placing two pairs of these poems together for close reading reveals each poet's endeavour to come to terms with the ambiguity of change, the consequences of naming and the definition of a true story.

The End of Beauty is held together by five 'self-portrait' poems, two of which are discussed here. Exploration or re-writing of myths, especially Greek, is central to the volume. A strong religious element is also evident in prayer poems and references to saints. Graham's style is characterised by disruptions, interruptions and deferral of definitive meaning. Though her poems are full of asides to the reader, numbered sections and the use of an algebraic 'x', close examination reveals them as emotionally compelling.

Feast Days is given a framework by poems relating to festivals and feasts ranging from the well-known to the strictly personal. Less fragmented than Graham's, the poems are human and engaging, though they draw on a variety of cultural and literary traditions—Greek, Spanish, Italian and Scottish. These references are juxtaposed with quotidian. In the two volumes of poetry, Graham uses the everyday to illuminate and develop myths; Burnside uses myths to enhance and explain the everyday.

I.

By an uncanny coincidence, Burnside's 'Septuagesima' and Graham's 'Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them' explicitly refer to the Garden of Eden and begin their respective volumes. These poems introduce each text, describe to the reader what it may have been like 'in the beginning', before and immediately after 'the Word' and names. The poems act as creation stories that set the stage for the genesis of meaning in the volumes as a whole. Each modifies the emphasis of the Biblical story: Burnside adds a chapter, as it were, pausing for reflection before Adam's arrival. Graham, by contrast, changes the story from within, allowing Eve to join Adam in naming the animals and justifying Eve's gesture rather than vilifying it (and her).

Despite these thematic parallels, the formal similarity of the poems is negligible. 'Septuagesima' is accessibly organised into five stanzas of three verses each with an unambiguous first person narrator dreaming in the present tense of a moment which belongs firmly in the past. Though the poem discusses Eden, it allies itself strongly with the world after the Fall in two key ways. First, the title refers to a rather obscure Catholic holiday celebrating the third Sunday before Lent, seventy days before Easter Sunday. As such, it is a holiday linked to Christ and the New Testament, unrelated to Eden. Second, Burnside's narrator is dreaming of the Garden rather than being part of it, imagining the silence in the world 'the day before Adam came' (1). The poem focuses not on the usual story of the Fall of Adam and Eve, but on the moment before naming changes everything. It is a reflection on the problematic nature of change. Because the world Burnside describes is pre-human and, thus, pre-gesture, I have chosen to treat 'Septuagesima' as the symbolic 'prologue' to 'Gesture'. For the purposes of this comparison, Burnside's poem will be read as representing the Garden of Eden the day before not only Adam but Graham's Eve arrive in it. By doing so, a deeper reading of both poems is possible.

'Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them' is made up of thirty-three numbered sections of varying lengths that are not divided by any obvious system. The

narrator seems to be someone watching Eve, interpreting things from her point of view. However, this third person narrator throws the title into question because the exact nature of the self-portrait is obscured. The identity of the 'self' is never satisfactorily established, it resides in the gesture linking Eve and Adam. There is also a mixture of tenses in the poem. Unlike 'Septuagesima', 'Gesture' does not position the narrator outside the Garden after the Fall. The gesture, the passing of the apple between Eve and Adam, takes place in the present tense; the events which lead to it are in the past tense. Rather than a shift from namelessness to naming, 'Gesture' focuses on the change from inaction to action.

Turning to 'Septuagesima' first, the Garden, newly-created, is dormant: no action takes place there within the confines of the poem's moment. The narrator connects this lack of activity to 'a winter whiteness/ haunting the creation' (8-9). Septuagesima is celebrated in winter, preceding the prescribed waiting period of Lent. However, though nothing seems to be happening at this time of year, the observance of a feast day suggests impending change. I read this change as occurring in 'Gesture', which also connects inaction with winter. The period preceding Eve's gesture shows her 'keeping the thought of him keen and simple in a kind of winter,' whilst Adam does not even need to breathe (10:5). However, the hush of winter is not presented positively. Rather, Eve's gesture is necessary: 'But what else could they have done, these two, sick of beginning' (5:1). Burnside's narrator imagines a world where the 'gold skins' are 'newly dropped/ from God's bright fingers' (4-5). The gesture represents 'rip in the fabric *where the action begins*' (2:1 my emphasis). The unmoving golden skins in 'Septuagesima' are the fabric which must be ripped in order for Graham's poem to be able to begin. Thus, connecting the two poems provides a balanced discussion of both positive and negative aspects of change.

'Septuagesima' is a self-acknowledged dream, outside the traditional notion of the 'true story'. It embellishes the familiar Biblical tale by adding a preface to the known (or rather, the assumed and accepted). The narrator does not present this vision as absolute, rather, he calls it 'a day like this, perhaps' (4). Burnside's use

of the word 'perhaps' in describing Adam's arrival prevents the account from being authoritative and keeps open other possibilities. Thus, Burnside stretches the 'true story' of the Bible's version without replacing it. This formal aspect reflects the message within the poem about naming, which is another kind of story, prescribing the limits of what is named (or narrated).

Naming is used in order to differentiate between things. Though this is not necessarily restrictive, once something is named, convention and habit take over and the shape may cease to be examined based on what it really is, but rather it is accepted at face (or name) value. The importance of naming in 'Septuagesima' is made clear through its epigraph, a quotation from Jorge Guillén:

> Nombres.
>
> Están sobre la pátina
>
> de las cosas.

Burnside's translation is 'Names. They exist on the surface of things.' Names make clear the *surface* of shapes in order to aid their categorisation. However, a name is not equivalent to the thing itself; it has the capacity to limit its 'subject' in unsatisfactory ways. Naming and loss are linked in the poem through the evocation of

> …the forms
>
> we might have known
>
> before the names,
>
> beyond the gloss of things (12-15).

The beguiling gloss of names blinds us to what lies beyond them just as the 'winter whiteness' in the poem gives a shape to the landscape but is no legitimate indication of what really lies beneath it. On the 'surface', 'Septuagesima' seems to lament the change to naming. The desirability of change is put into question due

to the mention of what 'might have been'. However, Burnside's presentation of change is ambiguous rather than uniformly negative. Burnside writes that

> we are sometimes
>
> haunted by the space
>
> we fill (10-12).

The use of 'haunted' connotes death, emphasising the loss which results from naming. However, there is liberation in the very space which haunts because it cannot be named or fixed, forcing us to push our own boundaries, perhaps. In this way, Burnside's expansion of the creation story highlights tension between names and reality, the surface and the interior.

'Gesture' poem also explores the notion of limitation in spatial and narrative terms, as demonstrated in Section 4:

> The passage along the arc of denouement once the plot has begun, like a
>
> limb,
>
> the buds in it cinched and numbered,
>
> outside the true story really, outside of improvisation, (1-3)

The buds are simultaneously inside and outside the story. They are encased inside the plot, 'cinched and numbered', made to stay in order and appear only when the plot calls for them. However, they are outside the 'true story'. Graham suggests that plot is not the true story; it is simply what fixes it, what gives it a form, just like the names lamented in 'Septuagesima'. That which is immured by a plot or a name is not free to improvise. The true story is characterised by the freedom improvisation rather than the fixed structure of the limb. In keeping with this theme, Graham has freed the Adam and Eve narrative from the plot by changing the story from within, epitomised by references to Eve's secret in Section 9:

> But a secret grows, a secret wants to be given away.

> For a long time it swells and stains its bearer with beauty.
>
> It is what we see swelling forth making the shape we know a thing by.
>
> The things inside, a critique of the given. (1-4)

Whereas Burnside warns that names may become the only thing we see, Graham asserts that it is the secret, the interior, which makes 'the shape we know a thing by'. This shape is the true story, in contrast to the surface gloss of the given name or plot. The plot, because it is 'like a limb', is also like a name: it is on the surface, providing definitions and boundaries. Eve is herself the 'thing inside' who is a critique of the given, the Garden in which she resides. Her mind, though described as 'narrow' (10:1), is, nevertheless, the place 'which was her own' (10:2).

The plot does continue to exist, however, while the poem focuses on the spaces of Eve's thought:

> Meanwhile the heights of things were true. Meanwhile the distance of
>
> the fields was true. Meanwhile the fretting of the light against the backs
>
> of them
>
> as they walked through the fields naming things, true,
>
> the touch of the light along the backs of their bodies…(11: 1-5)

This world of the meanwhile is the world of the plot in which quantifiable properties such as height and distance are 'objectively' portrayed without adjectives, embellishment or improvisation.

The restriction of the meanwhile forces Eve's gesture, which grows out of her swelling secret. Though Eve's gesture is the original sin in the Biblical account, Graham's version challenges a positive interpretation of the perfection in the Garden before the sin's commission. Rather, it is the sin that liberates Eve and Adam from the (Garden) plot and gives them

the feeling of being capable,

<div align="center">26</div>

of being not quite right for the place, not quite the thing that's needed,

<div align="center">27</div>

the feeling of being a digression not the link in the argument,

a new direction, an offshoot, the limb going on elsewhere,

<div align="center">28</div>

and liking that error, a feeling of being capable *because* an error,

<div align="center">29</div>

of being wrong perhaps altogether wrong a piece from another set

<div align="center">30</div>

stripped of position stripped of true function

<div align="center">31</div>

[…]loving that error, loving that filial form, that break from perfection

<div align="center">32</div>

where the complex mechanism fails, where the stranger appears in the

clearing,

<div align="center">33</div>

out of nowhere and uncalled for, out of nowhere to share the day.

The juxtaposition of 'feeling of being capable' and 'not being quite right for the place, not quite the thing that's needed' is as startling as Graham's previous connection between 'true story' and 'improvisation'. Both serve to emphasise the

need to shatter perfection confirmed in Section 28: 'The feeling of being capable *because* an error'. Despite the disconcerting state of 'being a digression and not a link in the argument', there seems a note of triumph here. Graham emphasises the negative quality of the perfection of an ordered plot by reintroducing the limb, which is 'going on elsewhere'. This is the final refusal of the plot and its metaphorical equivalent: naming. When 'the complex mechanism fails' and the stranger arrives, all are rescued from eternal boredom. Against all the rules and principles of the Garden, the stranger comes 'out of nowhere and uncalled for, out of nowhere to share the day'. This is a final play on truth, a contrast between the truth of objective dimensions and the real 'true story' of imperfect improvisation that allows the entry of a stranger who wants to *share* the day, the space which Adam and Eve fill.

Treating 'Septuagesima' as the prologue to 'Gesture' emphasises that the world Burnside paints is without action, dormancy verging on stagnation. His Garden is 'where the form is complete where the thing must be torn off' ('Gesture' 19: 1); this complete form is torn off or changed by Eve's gesture. Change in 'Septuagesima' represents the beginning of limitation through naming whilst in 'Gesture' it represents freedom from the external limitation of the given name. Though the manner of exposing it differs, the poets are united in their resistance to restriction. Analysis of the second set of poems will further illuminate these ideas.

II.

By their nature and subject matter, the Adam and Eve poems consider beginning, always going back further to yet another creation story. By contrast, the Penelope poems discuss an ending which is foreseen but always pushed away. Whereas 'Septuagesima' was treated as the symbolic prologue to 'Gesture', in this pairing, 'Penelope' will be treated as the symbolic epilogue to 'Hurry and Delay' because Burnside provides a vision of what may have happened after the events of Graham's poem. The symbolic function ascribed to Burnside's poems embodies

the themes of all four: they represent one more beginning or the ever-deferred ending.

'Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay' and 'Penelope' are based on Homer's story of Odysseus' wife, Penelope, from The Odyssey. Because Odysseus does not return from the Trojan wars, Penelope is expected to remarry with one of the suitors courting her. She asks for and is granted permission to delay marriage until she has finished what she is weaving. To forestall even further, every night she pulls out what she has woven during the day. In Homer's story, this is successful: Odysseus returns, gets rid of the suitors and resumes his life with Penelope. Though Graham and Burnside again exploit the same story, there is little or no overlap of the 'plot' in either set of poems, demonstrating all the more clearly the possibilities offered by pushing the limits of plot through improvisation.

'Hurry and Delay' is composed of twenty-three sections numbered and arranged in the same manner as 'Gesture'. It is an exploration of Penelope's ability to control both the story told in the tapestry she unweaves and the story of her own life without Odysseus. Graham again changes the story from the inside, re-writing Penelope's narrative from within the traditional story, from the perspective of another ambiguous third-person narrator who allows the reader access into Penelope's thoughts.

'Penelope' is made up of three non-rhyming couplets and two single line stanzas. The action in Burnside's poem takes place some years after the events in 'Hurry and Delay': it skips the main events with the suitors. His Penelope has gone on with her life despite Odysseus' prolonged absence. The poem begins, 'The suitors have been and gone. The loom is still' (1). A third person narrator describes the reunion between Penelope and an old man found on the beach. Though Burnside again stretches the limits of the traditional story he recounts, in 'Penelope' his narrator, like Graham's, is placed within the poem's moment.

The consequences of change explored in the Adam and Eve poems are also explored in the Penelope poems. However, each poet takes the opposite position

from that of the first set of poems. It is Graham, not Burnside, who is more ambiguous about the benefits of change. Whereas in 'Gesture' action (change) is desirable, in 'Hurry and Delay' the whole purpose of Penelope's action is to *undo*, to prevent an action from happening. Ambiguity remains because the poem presents both the hurry and the delay of change. The relevance of this title is clearly shown in the first lines of the poem in two ways. Hurry is first represented by a one-line complete sentence—'So that every night above them in her chambers she unweaves it' (1:1). This is then immediately followed by delay, several clauses which are not 'finished' with a full stop until section 8. This form exactly mirrors the content, what Penelope is doing 'above them in her chambers'. It is a postponement of the end of Graham's verse, and of what Penelope is weaving. The second example occurs within the 'delayed' full stop section. Penelope is 'working her fingers into the secret place, the place of what is coming/ undone'(1: 3-4). This secret place is undoubtedly similar to Eve's mind, the place which is her own. The placement of the enjambment is vital to the meaning. 'The place of what is coming' represents a future to be hurried, such as Odysseus' return. However, this is a false completion: the 'true' meaning is only revealed in line four with the word 'undone'. This represents the delay in the story Penelope is untelling every night and embellishing every day through her weaving, just as the poem is embellished with ever more clauses until section 8, where the postponement is ended. This double meaning signifies ambivalence toward change. Indeed, a reunion between Penelope and Odysseus would not necessarily be one of unmixed joy:

> Yet what would she have if he were to arrive?
>
> Sitting enthroned what would either have? (16:1-2)

There is recognition here that, though Penelope may have been trying to prevent change, it has occurred nevertheless. Their enthronement is a symbol of the potential limitations caused by his return. Ultimately, the focus of the poem remains more firmly on the side of delay because Penelope is left 'beginning

always beginning the ending' (23:1), perpetually and ambiguously deferred and unfinished.

The stories of both Penelopes are freed from the 'rigid inscription' described in 'Gesture'(17:7). Thus, more power is given to characters, who, despite third person narrators, are able to choose their own 'plots'. Graham explicitly deals with this issue in 'Hurry and Delay'. Penelope possesses the ability

> to have them for an instant in her hands both at once,
>
> the story and its undoing, the days the kings and the soil they're groundcover
>
> for (5: 1-3)

Through her weaving she manages to heal herself, ready herself to 'go on living'. The undone is the undecided, that which is still under her control. She loosens her weaving to find the 'secret place' of her postponement (her duplicity towards the suitors) and

> to see what was healed under there by the story when it lifts,
>
> [...]
>
> the bandage the history gone into thin air, (3:1, 4:1)

By reacting against any story set in the weaving, she resists history, the restrictive plot. The image of the bandage functions toward history in the same way that the image of the limb functions toward the plot. History, like a bandage, restricts and limits, just as the limb-plot encases the buds in 'Gesture'. The bandage of history also covers wounds from view, glossing them over with words. A bandage nicely conceals blood, scars and weeping, with all the sanitised order of plot. His-story is not close to the 'true story' of non-fiction, despite its pretensions to the contrary. This will not do for Penelope: because of her unweaving, the threads *and* the history are 'gone into thin air'. There is the potential for a new self, a new life that needs to be rid of the bandage once it is healed. Thus her weaving has two

benefits: postponing her marriage to one of the suitors and liberating the story so that she is able to heal and become the Penelope of Burnside's poem. Penelope is able to have a 'place in both worlds' (8:3), to tell the story each day and unweave it at her leisure when the suitors have gone to sleep.

However, not all characters are as liberated as Penelope. 'Hurry and Delay' challenges all extremes—those of too much freedom as well as too much restriction. Penelope, referring to Odysseus, 'knows he's here who wants to be trapped in here' (14: 1). Odysseus allows Penelope to control what is possible because of his desire 'to be narrowed, rescued, into a story again' (14:8). This narrowing would enable him to understand his own experience by setting its boundaries. He expresses a need to be saved from the very openness for which the gesture is made in Graham's Adam and Eve poem. Odysseus willingly inserts himself in Penelope's plot,

> knotting and clasping it within his motions,
>
> wrapping himself plot plot and dénouement over the roiling
>
> openness...(15: 2-3)

For Odysseus, openness is seen as a threat: there is neither regret for the forms that might have been nor exaltation of the freedom offered by a gesture. However, the limits Penelope sets are ever-shifting, thus they avoid the negative implications of the absolute. Absolute boundaries may be detrimental but are also necessary, for Penelope as well as Odysseus, to be able to distinguish 'something which is not something else' (13: 9). Consequently, 'Hurry and Delay' recognises the need for both setting and transgressing boundaries.

Despite the stillness of the loom, Burnside's 'Penelope' does not display the stillness of 'Septuagesima'. Burnside describes a new and positive beginning for Penelope, after the presumed ending. Her power is taken for granted because she has managed to remain unmarried; the suitors did not need Odysseus' intervention to be sent away. In addition, the loom is still. Penelope no longer needs the

weaving to have the story and its undoing in her hands. The period of life being defined by Odysseus' absence is mentioned and then pushed aside. It is history, as it were. This impression is conveyed because Odysseus' absence is neither regretted nor accounted for. The only explanation offered by the narrator is

[…]Perhaps he

stayed away; perhaps he died. (1-2)

Burnside's narrator is unconcerned by the openness of Odysseus' absence. 'Perhaps' is again used to broaden the story. However, in this poem, change is presented as a realm of possibility rather than one of loss or danger.

But now the boy has met an old man on the beach. Even the dog is

fooled. She takes him in. (3-4)

This old man, just as uncalled for and unexpected as the stranger in 'Gesture', has come to 'share the day' with Penelope and her family. However, the poem does not pretend that the 'reunion' between the pair is easy. His Penelope has grown used to her solitude and has built a life for herself. Thus, when the old man returns, it is only 'After a time [that] she becomes accustomed to his voice' (5). It takes desire and effort to let him 'make her laugh', to live again. The end of 'Hurry and Delay' expresses the feeling of 'the wanting to go on living'. This is exactly what happens to the Penelope of Burnside's poem: Penelope *goes on living* and accepts him into her life notwithstanding the risk.

It may appear that Penelope is not in control because, despite the eponymous title, the old man is the only one who is shown to speak. However, the poem makes clear that Penelope writes her own story. 'She takes him in' *not* 'she is taken in', though 'even the dog is/ fooled'. Burnside does not close the story by giving clues about Penelope's knowledge or ignorance of the old man's identity. This is yet another demonstration of her control. Penelope is powerful because she is the one with all the choices. She lets the old man into her life rather than handing her life over to him. He must earn his keep through his stories, living on her charity.

Burnside's narrator indicates that it is because of his stories that Penelope takes the old man into her life.

> And the stories—she loves them for the women. Her other selves:
>
> [...]
>
> Every night she lies with him to listen.
>
> Even though she knows they are untrue. (5-8)

Penelope is not on a search for the kind of truth represented by the 'meanwhile' in the Garden of Eden, not the 'objective' truth outside the mind. The old man's stories are not absolute truth, but versions of Penelope herself. His stories are not his-story, that which needs to be undone. They are not centred around 'the days the kings the soil they're groundcover/ for' ('Hurry and Delay' 5:3). Penelope loves the old man's stories 'for the women', not her supposed husband's bravery or exploits. 'Her other selves' are those with no rigid inscription, those full of improvisation, not limited by time and space.

The old man's power to speak generates an interesting reading of the figure of Odysseus. As has been seen, the Odysseus of 'Hurry and Delay' wants to be under Penelope's control. This is the apparent opposite of her listening to him, 'lying with him to listen'. However, Burnside's Penelope 'takes him in', tacks him down in a similar way to Graham's. In a way, he is always in her world because this is not plot, but story. He has entered into her weaving in 'Hurry and Delay', and in 'Penelope' tells the stories she has woven for him. This is the history that he can relate to the Penelope after the loom is still. In both poems she remains the one in control, giving Odysseus his identity.

Whilst the Adam and Eve poems deal with myth largely through spatial relations, the Penelope poems more explicitly integrate time into the exploration. Mythical time is not of the same rigid linearity as historical time. Historical time is exemplified by the past tense. Action and its significance has been fixed and decided. Mythical time is that of the present tense in which both the future and the

past are open for interpretation. When Graham's Penelope is pondering her weaving, time passes with no precise account of it, simply, 'Reader, minutes' (12:1). Penelope is able to revel in 'immaculate present tense' (9:1). Nor does Odysseus reach a destination, an ending. He is 'ever approaching the unmade beneath him' (15:1). This precarious balance between hurry and delay is what creates the 'present tense' in which all of the poems reside. This present tense makes the poems alive—open to choice, change and improvisation, clearly allied to mythical time. 'Penelope', too, presents the condition of living in the middle, deferring the ending so there is no definitive meaning; there are always decisions to be made. By accepting the old man, she demonstrates a willingness to allow room for the unexpected, carving space into the *known*.

The boundaries and limitations of naming and plot are subverted not only in the content of four poems but in the form. These poems show that shape is not merely something physical but also the shape or form of the story which is told. Thus, the same elements can be *shaped* together to generate different meanings. Exploring multiple meanings of the naming, which usually both limits and de-limits, is Burnside's and Graham's way of shifting boundaries and extending the frontiers of possible interpretation. Though the two sets of poems are nicely complete, with prologue, epilogue and even epigraph, they contain something which goes beyond them. The gesture of comparing poets working in complete isolation from each other but who have shown striking thematic similarities further propels these themes outside of their potentially enclosed worlds.

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First Response

An interesting illustration of how contemporary poets re-work "myth." In part perhaps more a review article than a fully scholarly/academic study.