

# ***Overlord* vs. the Din: Writing Poetry to Promote Peace Now**

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## **Biography**

Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec teaches English at the University of Caen in Normandy and at the Catholic University of Paris. She is a founding editor of *Arts of War and Peace*, and has written articles on British and American modernist and contemporary poets. Her editorial work includes *La Poésie de Geoffrey Hill et la modernité* (L'Harmattan 2007), *Selected Poems from Modernism to Now* (CSP, 2012), *Poetry & Religion: Figures of the Sacred* (Lang, 2013), and an English language issue of *L'Amitié Charles Péguy* (#142): *Péguy Alive: 140 Years and Beyond* (April-June 2013).

## **Abstract**

Jorie Graham's recent works engage with language and discourse. *Overlord* (2005) recasts the sacrifices of American soldiers in Normandy, reacting against the standard American pro-war discourse of World War II heroism, particularly during the post September 11, 2001 Bush years. The poems present the acceptance of death as related to camaraderie more than to a nationalist cause. Graham's poetry has struggled to foster the desire for peace by exposing the media's use of language to promote wars that seem unjust (cf. George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," 1946). One way this poetry encourages peace is by getting past the din, the constant white noise of TV news broadcasts from CNN and Fox during the 1990s and the persuasive lies of 2002 and 2003 that brought about a decade of unending war. Today's poetic and irenic challenge includes out-writing the blips of the internet screen. Poetry can avoid using the words the media uses -- or it can take those clichés and give them a new twist.

## **Résumé**

La poésie récente de Jorie Graham prend à bras le corps l'utilisation du langage comme justification de guerre par des les responsables du gouvernement américain et par les médias. Pour les combattants représentés dans ces poèmes, l'héroïsme est plus lié à des sentiments de camaraderie qu'à une cause nationaliste. Pour déjouer les discours de guerre, il est nécessaire d'exposer les clichés médiatiques, de les capter pour les détourner. Ainsi la mémoire simpliste de la bataille de Normandie, exploitée pour justifier la guerre en 2003, est exposée et déjouée dans *Overlord* (2005).

## **Keywords**

Jorie Graham, *Never* (2002), *Overlord* (2005), Gulf War 1991, Weapons of Mass Destruction, Lucille Clifton, Geoffrey Hill, Toni Morrison, Carl Phillips, Adrienne Riche, Rosanna Warren, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, D.H. Lawrence, Sylvia Plath, Ivor Gurney, George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" (1946), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), Amina Lawal, Susan Sontag,

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## War Poems

When did Jorie Graham's first war poems appear? Leubner noted that her collection *Swarm*, published in 2000, "invites us to consider plays on its title: war and storm" (Leubner 51). *Never* (2002) was published shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The book makes little direct reference to the attacks, although possibly the odd phrase does have a direct relationship, such as in "Afterwards": "...war is: / morality play preface: what there is to be thought: love: / begin with the world: let it be small enough." (5). In "Covenant" the phrase "unprotected, thank you, exactly the way I feel" may be another allusion to a world caught up in terrorism (73). Yet Graham's primary focus seems to be the uncooperativeness of the United States to share in the work of preserving the planet's natural environment, as in "The Taken-Down God" which records an Italian newspaper headline (96), which "translates as 'The United States refuses the Kyoto Accords—farewell to the world.'" (112). Fighting for ecology is a primary battle, and connected to the geo-political. Graham, whose mother is Jewish and who spent much of her childhood in Rome, has engaged with war and memory since her earliest poems. Many individual poems have a bearing on war. The poem "Two Paintings by Gustav Klimt" from *Erosion* (1983), comments on the title of one painting: "It is called / Buchenwald, it is / 1890." (Graham 1996, 44). "From the New World" in *Region of Unlikeness* (1991) speaks about the trial of Treblinka's "Ivan the Terrible," John Demanjuk in February 1987 (1996, 106-109). "Manifest Destiny" from *Materialism* (1993), covers several wars at once, including the Shiloh battle of the Civil War (1996, 186).

To put her preoccupation with ecology and war into perspective, most of Jorie Graham's poetic work, eight of eleven collections of poetry, have been published since the first Gulf War of 1991.<sup>1</sup> Slight turns of phrase may leave the reader wondering if the allusion is not directly to the first Gulf War itself, although the rest of the poem seems to be about something else, as in "Via Negativa" in *Never*: "The desert is fueled. My desert is fueled." (79). But perhaps nowhere is her engagement with the Gulf Wars more apparent than in *Overlord* (2005). Using the title of a military operation for the title of a book makes a clear alignment to World War II. This is fitting in a book that also directly addresses the American conflict in Iraq. Perhaps no other war has ever been so burdened with World War II discourse. Facile comparisons of Saddam Hussein to Hitler sounded the idea of fighting a just war in 2003, because Hussein was allegedly hiding weapons of mass destruction.

Since the media's live presentation of the Iraq war in January 1991, when CNN directly captured the US's opening shelling as lights flashing like fireworks through the night sky, followed by the discourse of American military leaders promoting "smart bombs," and pointing to scientific-looking charts to "prove" their points, a number of American and British writers have responded by increased attention to

their use of language when alluding to terrorism and war. In this regard, along with Graham, one thinks of Lucille Clifton, Geoffrey Hill, Toni Morrison, Carl Phillips, Adrienne Riche, and Rosanna Warren, among others.

Writing about Graham's recent books, *Erosion* (1983), *Materialism* (1993), *The Errancy* (1997), and *Swarm* (2000), Ben Leubner noted that, like Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*,<sup>2</sup> Graham is preoccupied with semantic erosion (Leubner 41). Throughout her poetry, Graham has always "taken up the question of how meaning is simultaneously generated and frustrated, secured and set adrift by language" (Leubner 37). She may be close to Wittgenstein, but she is also attentive to Orwell in "Politics and the English Language" (1946): "...the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language..." (Orwell 120). Even so, some of her better critics have not understood the way her project has evolved. Calvin Bedient, reviewing *Overlord* wrote:

Graham's increasingly direct, hands-on treatment of her subjects, which began in *Never* translates into a poetics of hurry. . . . Nuance is sacrificed. (Bedient 2005)

But I doubt Bedient would go so far as to compare Graham to the less successful poems directly inspired by September 11, 2001. Close reading of Graham brings the rewards one expects of great poets.

American poets write about war with a backdrop of traditional talents such as Melville, Whitman and Dickinson on the American Civil War. Graham is especially in step with the latter two. Willard Spiegelman emphasizes Graham's Whitman-like positioning in his review of *Overlord* (176-177ff). He feels that she has been moving toward Whitman, in her later work and especially *Overlord*, which directly engages with the public sphere. Graham's familiarity with Dickinson's Civil War stance may be seen in her oblique way of addressing contemporary terror and war in *Never* and in *Overlord*. Two planes went through the World Trade Center buildings on September 11, 2001. But Graham avoids saying that so plainly. What she says in *Never* is:

- "All day there had been clouds and the expectation of sun. It could 'break through' anytime, they said." ("Surf," 81).
- "More birds fly through." ("By the Way," 88).
- "a partly open door [of sorts] through which some of / the residue of / origin can, broken off from source, ride, just a little higher, deeper, / deeper-in, / in-through." ("Relay Station," 106).

Of course, Graham is not the first poet to highlight the preposition "through". One thinks of D. H. Lawrence's *Look, we have come through* (1917) or of the ending to Sylvia Plath's 1962 poem "Daddy" published in *Ariel* (1965): "Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I'm through" or, of Ivor Gurney's poem "The Silent One":

But I /... / saw the flashes and kept unshaken,  
Till the politest voice – a finicking accent, said:  
'Do you think you might crawl through there: there's a hole'  
Darkness, shot at: I smiled, as politely replied –  
'I'm afraid not, Sir.' There was no hole no way to be seen  
Nothing but the chance of death, after tearing of clothes.  
(Silkin, 116)

“Through” is even more pronounced in *Overlord*, where the soldiers landing on Omaha Beach must go through the line of fire, in “Praying (Attempt of June 8 ’03)”:

where gun emplacements were less thick and channels between lines  
of tracer-fire  
could be read through the surface of  
the beach  
because mercifully the guns  
could not be rotated  
so much as an inch,  
such that the stitchery of fire, once tracked on sand, or on  
successive rows of flesh, lets you  
guage-out, for just a flash—if you  
are someone granted that cracked  
flash, two seconds, maybe three, of life—the  
*passage through*—[there it is, the word *mercy*] [me shooting  
the very sound up now  
with faulty weapon]... (*Overlord*, p.9)

Primeval reasons for war are not lost on Graham’s use of “through” in “Impressionism”:

I feel there is only one question.  
Everywhere the shine covering the *through*  
Through which hunger must move. (*Overlord* p.55)

### **Crunching Dates and Numbers**

Jorie Graham’s collection *Overlord* was first published in the United States in March 2005, and in Britain the same year, the 60th anniversary year of the end of World War II in Europe. The book apparently began to be composed in 2003, on the year preceding the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the D-Day landing. The commemoration on June 6, 2004, included leaders from both the former allies and axis, together for the first time: Queen Elizabeth II, George Bush, Jacques Chirac, Tony Blair, Gerhard Schroeder, and Vladimir Putin, with a million poppies “dropped off the coastline of Normandy in remembrance of those who lost their lives” (BBC on-line, Sunday 6 June, 2004, consulted Nov 13, 2010). Portions of the invasion were re-enacted by veterans. Tom Hanks featured rather prominently, chatting with veterans, following the success of *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), for which a special commemorative D-Day edition of the film on DVD was issued in 2004.

This immediate context situates Graham’s volume as a commemoration for the war dead of World War II from all sides (close to 250,000 people died in the 80-day battle for Normandy). Graham makes it clear that the dead count, whether they were American or not. She has difficulty thinking about only American sacrifice, and her poems present the acceptance of death as related to camaraderie more than to a nationalist cause (cf. Von Hallberg, 2008).

“Praying (Attempt of June 6 ’03)” laments: “I cannot make out what borders are. What they express is not clear / to me...” (*Overlord* 18). In a poem about the German Cemetery in La Cambe (the German cemetery closest to Omaha Beach) she notes the “21,222 German soldiers. Some named, some not.” (*Overlord* 12). The

poem develops how bodies still being found are distinguished and identified by the remains of buttons and cloth. “There is great peace in knowing your person is found” asserts the speaker (13), although the line here blurs between observer/speaker of the poem and the cemetery official. In the same fashion, the lines blur between opposing sides, as Susan McCabe astutely noted in her review of *Overlord*. She saw that the soldiers are presented as almost interchangeable, in this poem when “In 1947 the American bodies ‘and parts-of’ were moved and then ‘these available German parts and wholes pulled from their / holding grounds and placed in openings Americans / released.’” (McCabe 190). This is similarly portrayed in “Spoken from the Hedgerows” where one of the dead named Dan:

March 21 boarded the Duchess of Befrod in NY,  
An old English freighter which had been converted  
To bring over the load of German prisoners, whom we replaced

going back to England. (*Overlord* 34, see McCabe 190).

The titles of the poems in *Overlord* may contain dates, given in parentheses, and one remarkable thing about these dates is that they appear, for the first third of the book, to go backwards in time, before shifting to move forward (after page 31).<sup>3</sup> Is this to suggest that to move toward the future one must revisit and understand the past? Most often the dates found in the volume are found in parentheses, accompanying titles to poems: “Dawn Day One (Dec 21 ’03)” (4), “Praying (Attempt of June 8 ’03)” (8), “Praying (Attempt of June 6 ’03)” (16), “Praying (Attempt of May 9 ’03)” (24). A notable exception is the first of three poems called “Spoken from the Hedgerows” (34-6) which contains numerous dates within the body of the text, as fallen soldiers in the D-Day offensive relate something about themselves. Several other poems suggest precise dates in code: “Omaha (Lowest Tide, Coefficient 105, Full Moon)” (28) and “Spoken from the Hedgerows [*H-Hour—146 Minutes*]” (37).

There are notes at the end of the volume that explain allusions to many of the poems, and also some of the dates, but considering each of the dates found in a title on their own, in relationship to their place in the historical scheme of things, both in relationship to World War II and in relationship to the second war in Iraq, which was taking place during Graham’s composition, leads to a deeper understanding of the volume. Some dates reflect events in Iraq, and some reflect the Normandy invasion and the Battle of Normandy in slight detail.

WWII events <sup>4</sup>	Dates in <i>Overlord</i>	Events in or connected with the wars in Iraq <sup>5</sup>
		Thanksgiving 1990. US Military stationed in desert are visited by President George Bush.
		Jan 16, 1991. Operation Desert Storm officially begins, with live coverage on CNN.
		September 11, 2001.
		October 26, 2001. Patriot Act signed into law by George W. Bush. (Measures in effect until the end of 2005).
		February 5, 2003. Colin Powell speaks before the UN Security Council about weapons of mass destruction, and next day before US Senate Foreign Relations Committee.
		March 17, 2003. George Bush declares that without doubt Iraq has weapons of mass

		destruction in a televised speech lasting 13 minutes. "This was definitely a paternal moment" (Rutherford, 34).
		March 20, 2003. "Operation Iraqi Freedom" begins: the United States invades Iraq.
		April 9, 2003. American forces enter Baghdad, ending Saddam Hussein's dictatorship.
		April 10, 2003. A new television service called Nahwa Al-Hurrieh or "Towards Freedom" was inaugurated by George Bush and Tony Blair (Rutherford 60).
		May 8, 2003. Five groups that opposed Saddam Hussein were designated by Washington to meet and form a provisional government in Baghdad. Meanwhile, in London, representatives from 15 governments met to form stabilizing social and military forces to support this new government (Here the USA sidestepped both the UN and OTAN).
	May 9 '03 (24)	May 9, 2003. Before the UN Security Council, the USA, Britain, and Spain presented a resolution to lift sanctions against Iraq that had been in effect since 1991.
		June 4, 2003. American specialists appointed to find arms of mass destruction arrive in Baghdad. After weeks of searching, no such arms were found.
June 6, 1944, Operation Overlord begins with D-Day landings on Normandy's beaches.  (June 6, 2004, 60 <sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration).	June 6 '03 (16)	June 6, 2003. Prime Minister Tony Blair denies influencing public opinion about weapons of mass destruction. Pew Research Center reveals that the image of the United States had seriously declined around the world.
		June 7, 2003. Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Aznar was asked by parliament to explain where the weapons of mass destruction were.
June 8, 1944. Liberation of Port-en-Bessin.	June 8 '03 (8)	
June 12, 1944. Winston Churchill and Dwight D. Eisenhower arrive in Bayeux.		
June 14, 1944. General De Gaulle arrives, landing between Courseulles and Graye (commemorated today by a cross of Lorraine on the beach).	June 14 '03 (31)	
July 19, 1944. Caen liberated.		
	Dec 21 '03 (4)	
		February 5, 2004. Tory leaders demand the resignation of Tony Blair, noting that he did not sufficiently examine intelligence reports leading to the war in Iraq.
	Feb 6 '04 (65)	February 6, 2004. Colin Powell and Dominique de Villepin meet for lunch in New York.
		March 2, 2004. "220 people were killed in suicide attacks in Karbala and Baghdad during the Ashura festival that marked the death of

		Imam Hussein” (Etherington p.153).
		April 8, 2004. Abou Ghraib scandal comes to light.
		April 18, 2004. Newly elected Spanish President Zapatero announced that Spanish troops would withdraw from Iraq.
	April 19 '04 (80)	April 19, 2004. Honduras announced its soldiers would withdraw from Iraq. Visiting Paris, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said that the United States had never been so hated in the Arab world. Bob Woodward’s <i>Plan of Attack</i> is published by Simon and Schuster. The book revealed the divisions among White House staff about the invasion of Iraq, with Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Tenet supporting the war, while Powell, Franks and others were more reserved.
		April 20, 2010. Bob Woodward’s <i>Plan of Attack</i> reviewed by <i>Le Monde</i> : “a book exposes the mechanism of the race toward war and internal conflicts that led to it” / “ <i>un livre raconte le mécanisme de la marche à la guerre et les conflits internes qui l’ont accompagnée....</i> ”
May 8, 1945. End of World War II.		
		November 8, 2004. Marine offensive on the Sunnite town of Fallouja.
		October 26, 2005. Writing in the <i>New York Times</i> , Sabrina Tavernise noted the discrepancies between tallies of civilian deaths in Irak, varying from 30,051 to 100,000.
		November 19, 2005. 24 Iraqi civilians killed by US Marines in Haditha, leading to trial where US Marines found guilty.
		June 7, 2006. Al-Quida leader, Abou Moussab Al-Zarkaoui, was killed in an air-raid.
		December 30, 2006. Saddam Hussein hung in Baghdad.
		January 10, 2007. George Bush announced 30,000 American soldiers would be sent to Iraq.
		November 26, 2008. Baghdad and Washington sign an agreement to disarm.
		Janurary 1, 2009. Iraq takes control of the Green Zone in Baghdad.

Coming rather late in the volume, the poem “Copy (Attacks on the Cities, 2000-2003)” (74ff) brings a different focus: the commemorations of the Normandy Invasions in 2004 were made within the global context of terrorism, and what may be seen as the beginning of another global conflict. In this poem, the terrorist attacks are those happening around the world, and the reader’s empathy is asked to expand from the pro-American sentiment that was generated following September 11, 2001 to compassion for other victims of terror. Graham takes media to task for the distortions they cause to our humanity.

Yes, it is true, someone is always crying out for you to listen.  
Out from the screen. Where they play tricks with the soul.  
Where they cry out “whosoever brings forth the bitterness most vividly,

whosoever makes us laugh when the blood shoots forth  
from the open mouth of an other—any other— (...)” (77)

The description of body parts in the following lines shows both the uses of television to cover war, but also the sights on screens, broadcast as “entertainment,” that make killing an adventure or a thrill in a virtual reality that distances our minds from thinking about real death. The pronoun “whosoever” gives the lines a faintly biblical tone, as though we are in the presence of the proverbial truth about dehumanization.

*Overlord* opens with the poem “Other” which presents the childhood memories of the young girl Jorie Pepper. When describing the D-Day invasion in “Dawn Day One,” the speaker of the poem is applying eye cream (4): presumably there is a connection to the inner eye needed to make sense of the media din that surrounds the war (“I think they are robbing us blind and we want to stay/ blind” 18), but there is also an acknowledgement that the woman is assertively writing a war poem, and it is almost beyond acknowledgment. No one asks whether or not women can write war poems today. It is an outdated question, and yet there are so few women written into the history that Graham is weaving into her poems in this volume that the mention of Susan Sontag, and the efforts of Amnesty International to free Amina Lawal (who was acquitted in September 2003) seem remarkable (74). Graham is leaving the question of the way war is gendered as a path of enquiry for the reader.

### **The Din**

As a subscriber to the European edition of *Newsweek* in the period following the terrorist attacks on the US in 2001, my shock grew at the increasingly bleak outlook of the magazine, the jingoist tonality of the coverage of the conflict in Afghanistan, and also at the anti-French bias that was evident in its pages, particularly following Dominique de Villepin’s refusal to be subservient to Bush’s ploy for war. This is not entirely insignificant for Jorie Graham, whose secondary residence in Normandy is a place she inhabits at least several months a year. Her father, Curtis Bill Pepper “was a war correspondent, the head of *Newsweek*’s Rome bureau” during her childhood (Karagueuzian, 4). The contrast between the *Newsweek* of her father’s era, and the *Newsweek* of the decade of the 1990s is striking. My guess is that Graham would have been appalled at the subservient tone the magazine kept toward the American administration, whose decisions it supported and promoted. The editorial line of *Newsweek* seemed to give unqualified support for American foreign policy in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, while providing a platform for pro-war propaganda. “This book is dedicated to the life of my parents... and to the life of my daughter,” writes Graham at the beginning of *Overlord*, and one feels that in this statement, as in certain of the poems, her personal meets her political.<sup>6</sup>

Paul Rutherford’s 2004 study, *Weapons of Mass Persuasion: Marketing the War against Iraq* has clarified the din following September 11, 2001 or “nine-eleven” as Americans often call it, which should be associated with both marketing and propaganda.<sup>7</sup> Propaganda “promotes right thinking, right feeling, and right doing, in each case a moral property” even as it skirts debate and avoids dialogue (Rutherford, 13). In the introduction to his book, Rutherford explained: “I will treat the war as narrative and spectacle, as a form of ‘infotainment’ and, more broadly, as a commodity, something that was consumed by millions of people via the media” (4). James Bond pictures “were a foretaste of the coverage of the invasion of Iraq” with the British dubbing their assault on Basra “Operation James” and George Bush

presenting Saddam Hussein in the “stereotype of the cruel villain” (21). Indeed, Hussein was compared to numerous villains of the past, including Hitler. Rutherford underscores that there was little debate about Gulf War II, merely two monologues of conflicting propaganda: “The debate that occurred was in the heads of the journalists and the citizens at the receiving end of all this propaganda.” (24). The media victory achieved by terrorists against the United States on September 11, 2001, possibly in direct retaliation for the live US media coverage by CNN of the bombing of Baghdad in 1991, ensured this. Rutherford writes, “The propaganda war was rooted in the tragedy of September 11, 2001,” such that propaganda theorist Jacques Ellul would be entitled to classify “the destruction of the World Trade Center’s twin towers in New York” as “a gruesome instance of ‘the propaganda of the deed’” (Rutherford 24).

With the old adage “truth is the first casualty of war” being operative well before the second war in Iraq began in 2003, responses to the din were somewhat muted in the U.S. by the Patriot Act (2001, renewed in 2005). Contrary to the cartoonists, Graham’s response to the portrayal of Saddam as Hitler resulted in a serious comparison of the sacrifices of D-Day to the lives sacrificed in Iraq, both civilian and military. In “Praying (Attempt of June 6 ’03)” she writes: “It seems that many more people are being killed by us / than they are telling us” (16). As in 1991, the “smart bombs” were not smart enough to avoid civilian targets. No poems could be further from the satirical. The D-Day mission has been given the historical credibility of being a “just war” needed to fight tyranny and preserve democracy. Should the invasion of Iraq be seen in the same way? The weapons of mass destruction never materialized to justify the war, as Tony Blair was called upon by Parliament to admit on June 6, 2003, and Graham’s poem with the same date jeers:

Others are sure, they provide data, the experts  
do what they wish with it and the rest is lies.  
Oh but the thieves are beautifully presented, waving, getting on and off  
their planes. Unlike my dream, they have all the time in  
the world, waving as they descend the fore stairs, or the aft,  
as no one is shooting at them. (16).

Graham remains serious in tone throughout *Overlord*. She is aiming at the truth, but she will not take the reader toward it with laughter: there is no parody here. During the period following her Pulitzer Prize (1996), Graham explained that poetry’s end was to discover the truth (Karaguezian 7). In her essay “Some Notes on Silence” she said, “my choices in poems are never merely aesthetic or technical, but always, somehow, moral,” (171, qtd. Karguezin, 7). Like Simone Weil, whom she paraphrases in “Praying (Attempt of June 6, 2003),” Graham is aware of the historical import of war, of the uses of history to promote and undermine propaganda, and of the role of propaganda to prepare the way for war. Her epigraphs to *Overlord* provide this perspective:

Belief is like a guillotine, just as heavy, just as light. (Kafka)  
The gods keep changing, but the prayers stay the same. (Amichai)  
Before a war breaks out, it has long begun in the hearts of the  
people (Tolstoy)

The poem itself cautions: “We have / covered it with history, it is still a murder and a forgetting.” (18).

Simone Weil, after participating briefly in the Spanish Civil War, wrote: “To clarify thought, to discredit the intrinsically meaningless words, and to define the use of words by precise analysis — to do this, strange though it may appear, might be a way of saving lives.” (Weil, “The Power of Words” qtd Fan 149). Graham seems to be taking this advice literally, in her quotation of Weil within the poem, as she notes that the dead soldier, whose voice she hears in the hedgerows next to her residence, is made of matter:

On account of  
its perfect

obedience, matter deserves to be loved, Weil says. Matter she says is  
entirely passive and in consequence entirely obedient to God’s will. I  
[am God’s  
matter, says the voice from the just-greening eight-foot hedgerows. I  
was. (19)

The enjambment here clarifies the belief of the soldier: “I am God’s”. He is a reality, not a virtual entity; he is both object and subject. In such a way, the World War II American soldier sacrificed in Operation Overlord speaks the same language as the suicide bomber attacking the United States or other nations in 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005... Three pages later, the poem “Upon Emergence” concludes with the incriminating lines, in italics: “*Where is your brother* hisses the page” (22). This is both a way of suggesting American guilt for the present conflict and of pointing back to the archetype story of conflict, the Cain and Abel story.

Kit Fan, in his discussion of Simone Weil in contemporary poetry comes to Jorie Graham’s poem quoted above as his last example. Graham is presented as a summa: Weil is “forcefully resurrected” by her (Fan 151), and she acknowledged her borrowing from Weil most clearly (151): “I have borrowed faith. I have borrowed/ words, style, thoughts, obedience.” (*Overlord* 17). For Fan: “The appearance of Weil at the close of Graham’s poem contextualizes the apocalyptic terror that permeates its core.” (153). And this apocalypse is at times played out at very close personal range, in realms of the mundane and futile, that some associate with the feminine gender. Trying to reassure a confused cat in the body of the poem, the speaker says to it, (but also to the reader): “No no there is nothing there you have done nothing I say.” (p.17). But in fact neither the reader, nor the cat, nor the speaker feel better for the assertion, as the poem continues:

The compartment of species-distinction I’m in slides its small door  
shut. There are people who need ammunition right now or it will be  
too late.  
There are people  
whose names are being typed onto a paper right now. One is on his  
hands and knees and cannot find his voice to say please, for which  
he might be killed. There is the category of by mistake for just about  
everything especially death. (17-18)

In fact, speaker and reader take the words “No no there is nothing there you have done nothing I say” as a kind of incrimination of those who pretend to be innocent bystanders....

Georges Duhamel wrote in *La Vie des Martyres*, 1914-1916 (published by Mercure de France in 1917) “...*l’être dans sa chair souffre toujours solitairement, et*

*c'est pourquoi la guerre est possible.*” Reviewing the book in 1917, John Middleton Murry translated that sentence as: “A human being suffers always in his flesh alone, and that is why war is possible” (Murry 1920, 60). In his review, entitled “The Discovery of Pain” (1917), Murry, made a convincing argument about the role of literature to promote peace. An artist understands that “pain is individual, inaccessible, incommunicable,” and that knowledge makes art even more important. For by using imagination, the artist enables pain to be communicated. Murry even suggests that art itself is more powerful to “guard humanity” against war than international socialism or leagues of nations, because the virtue of art “rests upon an imaginative understanding of the possibilities of pain.” (Murry 1920, 42).

The “imaginative understanding of the possibilities of pain” is one of the gifts Jorie Graham gives to her readers in *Overlord*. Another is the constant fight against media distortions. “To think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration...” wrote George Orwell in “Politics and the English Language” (1946) (Orwell 103). For him, “The great enemy of clear language is insincerity” (116). “Political language” he wrote, based on his experience of Britain in World War II, “...is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind” (120). Graham inverts this process in *Overlord*: she takes the wind of the din and turns it back into something that seeks the truth. To demonstrate this a bit differently, I propose a close reading of the final poem in the volume, “Posterity” (pages 80-88).

It is no accident that *Overlord*, which deals as much with the War in Iraq as it does with Operation Overlord, ends on a poem that speaks of the American holiday Thanksgiving (“Thanksgiving traffic” in line 54). The title is also noteworthy: “Posterity” which must, in this case be interpreted as somewhat ironic: the posterity of Bush I led to Bush II. And here is the posterity of World War II. An old man (who would be among the generation of those who fought in D-Day) is out begging in the cold. The poem opens directly upon a kind of imaginary dialogue with the reader (whom Graham has repeatedly vocatively addressed throughout the book). This time the speaker addresses “sweet friend, reader,” to ask for acts of resistance and help, in line 3: “I believe you to be a person who would hide me if it came to that.” The following line describes the kind of space used to hide resistants and Jews during World War II. The “you” involves the reader directly in the action related, and this continues throughout the poem (“you” in lines 20, 28, 29, 40, 52, 74, 75, 80), and with “ah friend” (line 27) or the imperative: “Know I am supposed to use the poem, however sorry, to lift the subject to a place of beauty” (lines 19-20).

What relationship does the Grail bear to the beggar, one may wonder while reading lines 10-14. The definition in quotation marks contains the phrase “The cult of Holy Blood” (line 13) and dates to “Mantua—804” (line 17). These features may suggest a relationship to Islamic practice, in that all religions have made links between holiness and blood, sometimes leading to crusades or Jihad. But in line 15, the holiness seems transferred “To somebody’s person”—to the man so old and cold he is “unable to ask for anything anymore” (line 22). He is just outside the convenience store called “7/11” (line 24), a clever reminder of the commodity culture terminology used to shorthand terrorist attacks as “9/11.” Possibly one should read line 25 as less about the man and more about the state of the United States, “drunk or stoned or hungover and cold he cannot even remember”... this is further suggested by the phrase “this hall of mirrors” (27). Either the old man is a mirror of American society or the readers’ actions toward him mirror the values of American society:

...I have to suppose you will not walk past, although what you will do after that is anyone's guess (lines 28-29).

The speaker of the poem gives a graphic account of her gifts to the man: first juice (line 34), and then "In November. . . I handed him the chicken" (lines 34-5). The relationship has progressed from a gift of money, to a gift of liquid, to a gift of substance: the meat of the chicken, purchased for "our dinner" (l.35). This scene is related in steps, in minute detail, so that the reader is forced to witness it in a kind of slow motion. One can remark that Graham's poetic voice is somewhat halting. In lines 31-32, the enjambment "I do not know / the right thing to do." suggests hesitation and self-doubt. The fact that most lines begin at the left margin, but several seem to make a path on the right is perhaps also important, showing different levels of gradation concerning the speaker's and the reader's realization concerning the man, on pages 86-87. These are not stanza breaks, yet they resemble stanza breaks to some extent. The speaker is presenting an eyewitness account of the events that the reader is made to see as well.

The speaker exerts great effort to persuade the man to eat, giving time, money, and attentive gestures. But the man cannot be persuaded to eat, it seems. In desperation comes the question "What, what is it that is / so near death it is willing to take / any love it can get?" (l.66-69): the man is dying, or is he? Is he not just an allegory for the thing the speaker wanted to write, but did not dare (lines 70-73). The old man, "somebody's person" stands in as the "other" in this poem. Graham ends the poem and the book by skipping across borders:

I wake up operational  
over what country now.  
The rain has ceased,  
I stare at the gleaming garden. (end, page 88)

This affirmation suggests that writing poetry remains worthwhile, in spite of all, possibly also to make things happen, to try to alter the horror of what is.

It is difficult not to also read historical events into this scene. There is first its relationship to the Leo Tolstoy quotation that serves as one of the epigraphs to the volume: "Before a war breaks out, it has long begun in the hearts of the people." There is a suggestion here of a society that no longer cares for its old, weak, poor, or even its youth. With a beggar so forlorn in civilian life, it is no wonder that soldiers are treated as cannon fodder. But the Tolstoy quotation also works well concerning the specificity of the Iraqi conflict. On Thanksgiving Day 1990, George Bush Senior dressed as a soldier, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, spent time with troops in Iraq, dishing out the holiday meal to them, and listening to them sing, even as the visit was broadcast live to Americans gathered together for the holiday. There were televised shots of the president carving the bird, and serving it to the troops. This was in the months leading up to the first Gulf war, eventually dubbed as "Desert Storm". American troops were stationed in the desert for a period of several months before the war officially began on January 16, 1991. Part of the propaganda leading to that war was effectively carried out on Thanksgiving Day, 1990. Graham ends *Overlord* by coming full circle on several planes at once. The old man is like a neglected old veteran who was part of Operation Overlord. The speaker of the poem may be a symbolic figure of anti-Bush and anti-pro-war-in-Iraq propaganda, one who makes the gesture of sharing a Thanksgiving meal in a totally different and non-jingoist context. The volume began with the narrative of a child beginning to sense the notion

of now, of human presence and absence. It ends with the mature adult, trying to be present to someone whose absence is evident.

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<sup>1</sup> Jorie Graham's poetry collections include: *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* (1980), *Erosion* (1983), *The End of Beauty* (1987), *Region of Unlikeness* (1991), *Materialism* (1993), *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems* (1997), *The Errancy* (1997), *Swarm* (2000), *Never* (2002), *Overlord* (2005), *Sea Change* (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Written 1950-51, published posthumously, translated into English in 1979.

<sup>3</sup> The dates accompanying titles are: "Dec 21 '03" (4), "June 8 '03" (8), "2003" (12), "June 6 '03" (16), "May 9 '03" (24), "June 14 '03" (31), "2003" (50), "Feb 6 '04" (65), "2000-2003" (74), "April 19 '04" (80).

<sup>4</sup> The events in this column are drawn for the most part from Lecoutrier (124).

<sup>5</sup> Various journalistic sources were used to construct this list of dates, including *Le Monde*.

<sup>6</sup> The personal meeting the political seems evocative not only of the feminist movement, but also of a poet such as Robert Lowell, whose unique background gave particular poignancy to personal testimony in certain poems, such as "For the Union Dead" (a poem written in 1960, collected in a volume of poetry with the same title).

<sup>7</sup> Until recently 911 was a telephone number one dialed in the event of an emergency. The sound of these numbers may also evoke the 7-11 Food store chain.