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William Olsen
Western Michigan University, william.olsen@wmich.edu

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William Olsen

Lyric Detachment: Two New Books of Poetry

Jorie Graham. *Region of Unlikeness*. New York: Ecco, 1991.
Chase Twichell. *Perdido*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1991.

As artists, poets should naturally want to distance themselves from what they regard as mere fashion—which is to say that fashion influences those who would shed it almost as deeply as those who would cling to it. At present it seems fashionable to deride the personal in poetry. We have approached a juncture where contemporary American poetry is collectively congratulating itself for having escaped the malignant confines of a personal poetry, especially as practiced by the so-called confessional poets—currently, our most widely spanning and therefore most meaningless pejorative. A poetry of self-confrontation is seen to be a product, if not the cause, of the excesses of a narcissistic culture. Further, a strictly personal poetry is seen to be aesthetically incorrect: if the Marxists are right and our consumer society created an ethos of the self out of a need for ever more selfish consumers, then any poetry dealing with the personal only strengthens the stranglehold our greed has on us. Our newest truism is that a less private, more public poetry is less apt to be given to narcissism, sentimentalism, self-promotion, etc. A more public poetry will lead us away from all of these things. In the meantime the introspective had better watch their step.

No doubt genuine change in the arts occurs slowly, maybe too slowly for those of us mired in the present moment to comprehend. That so many voices are clamoring against the personal suggests, among other things, how strong a pull the personal still has on poetry.

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And arguably, of the various kinds of discourse, poetry is actually blessed, not cursed, with a small (the sophists would say elite) audience; for if poetry has one custodial function in our culture right now, it may be to preserve the potential for genuine community that eludes more massive forms of communication. You can't talk back to a TV, a poet-friend once said to me. True, you can't talk back to a poem either. But when you listen to a poem or read a poem, you listen as part of a small group or you read by yourself and not as an indistinguishable member of a tyrannical majority. The individual called the poet depends on the fact that other individuals called readers are out there. However, even in our most revolutionary poetry, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, what we have (arguably) instead of a public poetry is a poetry that could not possibly be more subjective, a poetry that chooses the most private of all aesthetic paths, absolute stylism.

What really has changed in American poetry in the last thirty years or so is not so easy to talk about. It may have less to do with poetry eschewing the subjective than with its tiring of postured ways of behaving subjectively in poems and its rejecting specious alchemical formulas for the private life. In reading new books by Jorie Graham and Chase Twichell, it becomes clear to me that the dynamics between poetry and personality have changed somewhat. Both poets use post-modernist strategies of artistic self-consciousness—like David Letterman knocking on the camera lens to see if anyone at home is really at home—but they do so only out of the hyper-earnest desire to be more honest about poetry's status as artifice. Though both poets aspire to a more public role for the poetry, by and large they are still cartographers of the interior. Their poetry is characteristic of one current branch of mainstream poetry, a poetry of lyric detachment.

These poets view human experience less as dramatic participants or as agonized soliloquists and more as detached observers. It is poetry's very capacity to distance us from experience that attracts—and frustrates—these poets and paradoxically impassions them with responsibility. There is a suprapersonal, yet pained restraint in their treatment of the qualms of the inner life and the unpredictabilities of a deterministic world. On the one hand, detachment becomes a necessary evil. On the other hand, as the essential flipside of involvement, it actually facilitates worldly engagement. For Chase Twichell, "music"—poetry—becomes a protective agent, or "a chord, like the membrane, broken only once, that keeps the world away." More than her first two books, *Perdido* admits moments of devastating personal revelation, but only because a dispassionate overtone makes these moments possible. Jorie

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Graham adheres to a camera-like point of view so as to tease herself and her reader into sympathy for a living world abandoned to lifeless analysis. Graham has at once a great distrust for language and an equal fascination with its powers of abstraction. In *Region of Unlikeness* language is almost personified into an interrogator of experience and a perpetrator of our omnicidal history.

Chase Twichell aspires to a poetry of lyric detachment because the world of her poetry is too cruel for any other response. Her goal is imaginative sympathy, but for her such sympathy is conceivable only after scrupulous investigation of the darker motives alive and brooding somewhere just behind craft. The speaker in *Perdido* seems to report her discoveries from behind a plexiglass surface of memory. Her strategies are mock-inductive: however quirky and ungrounded and unscientific her conclusions are, she arrives at those conclusions only after compiling the requisite perceptual data, descriptions that shimmer in the phenomenological no-man's land between the subjective and the objective. Her imagery, usually pleasing enough in itself, is never just flashy: it urges the speaker toward statement, personal disclosure, and intimations of vulnerability. Unlike so much bad magazine verse that bulldozes piles of observant description as proof of a sometimes missing intelligence, Twichell is just as engaged by speculation as by observation. In good keeping with post-Heisenberg metaphysics, she constantly makes the point that speculation alters our methods of observation and transforms and even mutates whatever it is we observe. Her first-person speaker is ideational: a speculative witness that consistently laments her abstraction from the physical world. Yet in her own words, the disclosures are "unrepentant."

Oddly, the exploration of consciousness Twichell's poetry documents is something like a descent into an underworld, a Darwinian, subterranean world plainly visible to the powers of intellection if somewhere just beyond full comprehension. The one domain of her poetry encompasses the twin zones of memory and desire, and her journeys therein open out into pre-human worlds teeming with creaturely presences. From a biological perspective, these poems assert a continuity of being among the lower and higher life forms. From a psychological perspective, her poetry aims to achieve self-realization only upon something akin to regression, some slippage into the depths of the psyche, that murky place where all at once the libido takes hold and consciousness begins. Yet Twichell is never guilty of species-ism, and I'm guessing she would hesitate to accept Roethke's idea of a poem as "in a sense . . . a kind of struggle out of the slime." If anything, the

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pre-human realms of *Perdido* comprise a world of sometimes remarkably clear actualities, a world neither more nor less than our world of brutal intelligences. In Spanish, *perdido* means "lost," "strayed," "ruined," "mislaid." In these poems "Perdido" is the name both of the Alabaman river that empties into the Gulf and of some seemingly pre-lapsarian city of light. Between the subhuman and human realms there are endless border crossings.

So far all I have done is to scratch the surface of a world view. Consider how rich the opening poem "Why All Good Music Is Sad," is, how hypnotically its rhythms unfold, how much the poem is about the pull of its own musical seduction, how the cadences hover between free verse and metered verse, how the images hover between loveliness and venom; and how, more than the poem's candid statements, even more than the rich mystique of its conceit that produces the final equation between fish and speaker, the rhythms themselves embody the unending struggles between body and spirit, desire and memory, insentience and sentience:

> Before I knew that I would die,
> I lolled in the cool green twilight
> over the reef, the hot sun on my back,
> watching the iridescent schools
> flick and glide among stone flowers,
> and the lacy fans blow back and forth
> in the watery winds of the underworld.
> I saw the long, bright muscle of a fish
> writhing on a spear, spasm and flash,
> a music violent and gleaming,
> abandoned to its one desire,
> The white radiance of Perdido
> filtered down through the rocking gloom
> so that it was Perdido there too,
> in that strange, stroking, half-lit world.
> Before I knew that love
> would end my willful ignorance of death,
> I didn't think there was much
> left in me that was virgin, but there was.
> That's why all good music is sad.
> It makes the sound of the end before the end,
> and leaves behind it
> the ghost of the part that was sacrificed,

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a chord to represent the membrane,
broken only once, that keeps the world away.
That's how the fish became the metaphor:
one lithe and silvery life impaled,
fighting death with its own failing beauty,
thrashing on the apex of its fear.
Art was once my cold solace,
the ice pack I held to love's torn body,
but that was before I lay
as if asleep above the wavering reef,
or saw the barbed spear strike the fish
that seemed for an instant to be
something outside myself, before I knew
that the sea was my bed and the fish was me.

However metaphorical this poem is, it never cloys into allegory. From the strangely icy and matter-of-fact first line that provides the poem's personal frame, we move through flashing schools of fish and the undulating lacy fans to the poem's crux, the sight of a fish impaled on a spear, "abandoned to its one desire." It is not death that the fish seems to be suffering so much as bodily isolation. The paradox is that desire, normally a vehicle for escaping isolation, is the cause of isolation. At this ironic "apex of its fear" Perdido filters from the world above to the "half-lit world" below, until worlds subhuman and human, preverbal and verbal, presexual and sexual, unfold the same problems, are prone to the same violence. Twichell captures whatever it is about human apperception that makes it easier to lounge on the surface and enjoy the freakshow below. Yet at the same time her speaker's observation grows out of such dark instincts as can only be appeased—if that—when they are comprehended. The ending is fairly easy to anticipate (that the sea has been a metaphor for the bed hardly surprises us), yet this unsurprising closure, or the sorrowful ease of it, strikes a common nerve with the stunned awareness that the speaker is unfathomably alone, yet ever just able to say so.

It is characteristic of Twichell's poems to flatten out their own worst foreboding news. If Twichell means to be moving away from an art which is no more than "cold solace," her poems now reach new emotional depths as a result of the dramatic distancing of the speaker from her experience—this because deep feeling shows up most clearly against a backdrop of reserve. The problems these poems occasionally run into have to do with one of Twichell's strong suits as a poet,

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metaphor-making. Sometimes she seems too willing to reduce unstated psychic dilemmas into fairly formulaic images, worldly and pathetic and terrible for being put so flatly, yet still reductive. In a poem ironically titled "A Whole Year of Love" (it turns out that a whole year of love doesn't amount to a can of minnows!), we get a glib equation like this: "just as a whole year of love, for example,/might shrink to a stack of pale-colored,/just laundered shirts. An image." Here Twichell's usually hard-won flatness of voice lapses to mere posturing, and tonal effect becomes a shortcut to substance. These poems also sometimes go wrong when they provide pat emblems of their own emotional inaccessibility, as at the end of "Window in the Shape of a Diamond":

> *Beloved* is a word concealing
> four sharp points,
> four kinds of innocence,
> four winds of change.
> One look inside it
> and the world abruptly petrifies
> into another of its
> small cold monuments.

This gesture of unsaying the sublime, meant to be sublime in itself, does not produce much more than mute pathos. Thus the poem speaks no more accurately of the poet's inner life than it does of the world outside the window.

But the truth is that *Perdido* gains emotional and intellectual ground because of its willingness to overreach. It may have been more difficult to tell the good poems from the weak poems in Twichell's first two promising collections, *Northern Spy* and *The Odds. Perdido* is a stronger collection. It has Twichell's penchant for images as smart as they are dazzling, but it also allows her imagination more auditory depths. Though this isn't true for the poetry of every poet, Twichell's poetry has gained in passion and meaning as her syntax has relaxed and as her ear has joined her eye in writing the poem. I quoted "Why All Good Music Is Sad" because it best illustrates the vision of *Perdido.* I can't leave unmentioned other equally strong poems like "Dream of the Interior," "The Shades of Grand Central," "One Physics," "Useless Islands," "Revenges," and the remarkable closing poem, "The Stolen Emblem." In this tour de force poem Twichell has made the dream of her interior ours, its language our language. She does so by playing endless riffs on the book's by-now recognizable discovery that our

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perceptions cloud the world, but with twists that take the poem beyond the common bounds of pop-quantum physics:

> When the mind fastens on something alien,
>
> it sharpens to a cruel wind.
>
> But when it tries to picture *itself,*
>
> it slips with its twin into the mirror's
> watery light, and together
>
> they swim toward an imaginary shore.
>
> So the image of the world arrived
> contaminated in my eye,
> contaminated by its history in me.

That the failures of mind and heart are ultimately anonymous, that as she puts it elsewhere, memory is a "hybrid sadness," only makes this poet's quest for values that much more urgent. *Perdido* is as elusive as its worlds are rich, as rich as its worlds are elusive, and its poetry keeps pace with the pleasures we derive from its manifold subjects.

Even more than Twichell, Jorie Graham takes perception to be the alpha and omega of ethical activity. What makes Graham's tremendously convoluted poetry urgent is its conviction that every phrase, every syntactic turn, every image, every breaking of every phrase across every line, every hanging syllable is capable at once of being a truth and a betrayal of the very same truth. Like Twichell, Graham uses lyric detachment as a backdrop against which to play out scenes of imaginative sympathy. Graham also protests the very equanimity that art requires from perception. One paradox of American poetry is that our most abstract poets are those who feel themselves and their culture most terrorized by abstraction, and Graham is one of our most abstract poets. In *Region of Unlikeness*, her fourth collection of poems, language itself becomes the foremost agent of cultural violence, and one of Graham's means of countering its lockhold is to do violence back to it, to resist the paralysis of idea-making—what she calls "immobilism." In doing so, or in failing to do so, Graham attempts to fashion tonal latitudes out of the verbal prison and make out of an individual sensibility a common place. Like some of our L=A=N=G=U=

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A=G=E poets, Graham seems to suspect that language never does more than to convince us that the objects of our desire are obtainable and therefore exploitable. But Graham's attitude toward language is more profound than I've just suggested: this is a poet who in an interview once said that "even the act of description itself is an act of rape," but who also defined the poetic act of transformation, however violent, as "the way we survive . . . our boldest and most noble instinct." Graham does not reject language wholesale, and right now may be the most ambitious form-maker we have.

Graham's forms put their highest premium on spaciousness. For Graham, if form is to be authentic, it must be roomy and elastic enough for its content to be contradictory. Hence, I'm guessing, the book's title. *Unlikeness* not only implies chaos; in fact it would seem that Graham wishes her poems to attain to a condition of unlikeness—what Coleridge called multeity in unity, what the ecologists call climax, what Heidegger called "The Open," what Blake called organized innocence—a place of conflicting energy sources all asserting themselves and creating a kind of accord out of conflict. George Eliot, another writer given to capacious forms, went so far as to define form as unlikeness: "the relation of multiplex interdependent parts to a whole which is itself in the most varied and therefore the fullest relation to other wholes." Anything less than unqualified spaciousness is confinement. So in "From The New World," a poem that splices the narrative of Graham's grandmother assigned to a rest home with a narrative of a girl who survives the gas chambers only by giving in to rape, this latter victim is a victim of language, of *likeness*, of the poem's own insatiable longing for closure:

> . . . At the point where she comes back out something begins, yes,
> something new, something completely
> new, but what—there underneath the screaming, what?
>
> Like what, I wonder, to make the bodies come on, to make
> room,
>
> *like what*, I whisper,
>
> *Like* which is the last new world, *like, like,* which is the thin
> young body (before it's made to go back in) whispering please.

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Here and elsewhere, Graham generates tension by despairing of her own methods, methods she takes as complicitous with those of the enemy. This girl is also raped by perception, and though Graham cannot undo this rape, though in one sense her subject is the unavoidable voyeurism involved in any art about suffering, what she can do is give one case of one individual's one last outcry *unlike* any other.

I suspect that Graham is attracted to the received narratives of history both private and public precisely because they tell us so little about the lost moment. What Graham does is to splice narratives together without entirely abandoning story-telling, so that a meditative storyline—breathless with unending sentences and Dickinsonian dashes and unceasing enjambments—takes hold and rushes headlong toward conclusion. Her challenge is to retrieve lost moments without freezing them into idea or closed myth. Take for instance one passage from "Fission," an astonishing poem that parallels the loss of a young girl's innocence with her culture's loss of innocence by interweaving the narrative of the movie *Lolita* with the narrative of the child's watching the movie and the usher's breaking up the movie with the news of John F. Kennedy's assassination:

> a man comes running down the aisle
> asking for our attention—
> Ladies and Gentlemen.
> I watch the houselights lap against the other light—the tunnel
> of image-making dots licking the white sheet awake—
> a man, a girl, her desperate mother—daisies growing in the corner—
> I watch the light from our real place
> suck the arm of screen-building light into itself
> until the gesture of the magic forearm frays,
> and the story up there grays, pales—them almost lepers now,
> saints, such
> white on their flesh in
> patches—her thighs like receipts slapped down on a
> slim silver tray.
>
> her eyes as she lowers the heart-shaped shades,
> as the glance glides over what used to be the open,
> the free,
> as the glance moves, pianissimo, over the glint of day,
> over the sprinkler, the mother's voice shrieking like a grappling
> hook,

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the grass blades aflame with being-seen, here on the out-

skirts . . .

For all the acceleration of the cadences, how slowly the individual and cultural panic unfolds! In this passage strategic detachment is merely a pretense, a convention, the best and only way to tell a story whose hurtful embellishments erupt at every turn. What's so breathtaking here is that all the warring energies come down to a single focus. The adult speaker removed from her childhood counterpart is drawn into the child's fixed perspective even as she speaks apart from that perspective. And that child at the bottom of all these twists and turns of point of view is almost lost, a victim of spectatorship, as detached from the dual narratives of history (the assassination) and art (the movies) as she is an unwitting product of both. She is a victim not only of events beyond her control but of the poem itself, which despite its best intentions, participates in and in a way speeds up the sense of impending doom *even as it tries to slow all of this down.* So in the face of insurmountable odds the sentence attempts to extend itself indefinitely, as if at the instant the sentence ends, the instant itself and all its open-ended complicated richness will become an irretrievable ghost.

In the face of the blinding white light of the outdoor which makes One Vision out of all vision and which is the bright white light of rational thinking, of Reason, of Language, of Conclusion, somehow the poem maintains its wealth of disparate presences: the poor usher apart from the moviegoers; the discreet image-making dots, the white sheet apart from the projective light; the paling movie-star characters apart from each other (Lolita and her heart-shaped sunglasses, the licentious Humbert Humbert, and the desperate mother); the grappling-hook shriek of the mother apart from the mother; the very grass blades "aflame with being seen"—everything seen in Graham's poetry is interrogated, is on fire, and therefore glares obscenely from the acquisitive nature of perception that is analogous to our acquisitive nature of the new world and to the acquisitive nature of Humbert Humbert's designs on his step-daughter. Against linear narrative, the simultaneity of consciousness. Here and typically, Graham keeps opening narrative into moments of blinding revelation, moments somehow transfigured at once by pause and kinesis.

Graham could not possibly be as successful all the time as she is in "Fission." The strongest gravitational force in these poems straining for public perspective is still a single speaker. In their weaker moments

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Graham becomes entranced by her own sensibility, and enlightened relativism becomes indistinguishable from self-aggrandizement. Sometimes Graham's self-questioning methods lapse into mere nominalist rhetoric. One wonders at what point expansion and variation become a colonizing of space rather than an opening of space. But this is the necessary cost of a poetry which refuses to exclude its flaws in the name of Seamlessness.

Maybe the most affecting poems are those which create a convincing drama out of their own imperfections. In Graham's poetry the most consistent source of drama, and of imperfection, is attention to the physical world. "She wants to *feel* what she *sees* now," Graham says of one of her female avatars in "History," reversing the syntax but preserving the spirit of what Ralph Touchett tells—"You want to see but not to feel"—the untraveled and naive Isabel Archer in Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*. Graham rejects the imagist's idea that it is possible to see a thing with absolute accuracy or that somehow ethics can rise out of the beatific erasure of the self in the act of seeing. She also rejects the Romantic idea that the physical world is impoverished unless we grant it the benediction of our attention. At the same time she obviously affirms some elemental force behind the transformative nature of perception that can leave the world undismembered, unraped. That force depends upon its own vulnerability and its bird-like agility:

> That what I wanted was to have looked up at the only
>   right time, the intended time,
> punctual,
>   the millisecond I was bred to look up into, click, no
> half-tone, no orchard of
>   possibilities,
>
> up into the eyes of my own
>   fate not the world's.
> The bough still shakes.
> ("History")

If this bough is the bough from which Eve plucks the apple of knowledge, then there is no end to the reverberations of this story or of any story, no end to interpretation—and no end to how our desire for knowledge, for recognition, for self-realization, has real consequences in the physical world. "Shakes"—an emotive word, and a verb, a description of a physical condition that survives just outside the tyranny

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of the eye which wants merely to see. Graham's poems fly, they assume quickness, they refuse to be reined down, they sustain flight, they carry us forward as well as inward, darting back and forth as soon as we feel their attentions hover. Ultimately, they direct our sympathies toward a world which doesn't always have reason to trust our attentions.

Perhaps a poetry of lyric detachment is one natural response to a world in which there is less and less room for *any* human activity, including sensibility. All but our very most selfless affections, Graham seems convinced, are at bottom appropriative. And by way of an equally possessive rage for comprehension, the invisible reader is just as complicitous in this as the would-be transparent poet. A poetry of lyric detachment creates dramatic tension through the grace with which it acts out the impossible longing to understand the world without disturbing that world so much as a hair's breadth. For Twichell, detachment is on the one hand a regrettable result of a fall into a disruptive consciousness and on the other hand the only honorable premise behind a poetry resigned to its own hostile energies. In Graham's poems the same given necessity of detachment demands even more rigorous strategies of self-effacement. The goal of her poems is to accelerate their perceptions to some threshold of acuity, till the observational eye is able to leap so weightlessly that "It can run along the branches without their knowing it./It can leap without the branches being forced" ("Immobilism"). Both poets may signal a growing trend in contemporary American poetry to worry less over the guilt-ridden foibles of the self and more over the suspicion that poetry is just as predatory as the rest of creation. We write poems, that is, to survive, to assert our being, our right to take up space. Meanwhile, rising out of the brightest intentions, the darkest delusions, and gray circumstance, all the poem ultimately proves is that our motives are beyond our understanding.

I'll end with a primitive analogy for the state of art at the end of this or any century, the Lascaux wall paintings. Their first function is survivalist: to record the actions of the tribe through lifeless friezes of deer and buffalo, or more specifically, to ritualize, celebrate and make endure beyond the passing of generations those human skills that are necessarily destructive. In our own time, no doubt, these paintings draw us to them for additional reasons: our thirst for a connection to and contiguity with our more elementary nature, our curiosity about the past, our desire to see our species and our selves more clearly in the diminished light of a defeated time. And now for more than twenty years no one but anthropologists have been permitted to view the

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Lascaux wall paintings. When it was discovered that flashbulbs were draining the paintings of their color, tourists were never allowed in the caves again. So photography feeds on painting; one form of preservation reaches across the centuries to feed upon another; one culture's innocent wish to daytrip in the past erases the last vestiges of another culture.

What is so sacred, so tenuous that merely by looking at it we help to wash it away? The poetry of lyric detachment reflects a deep distrust of all hands-on forms of knowledge. It admits the poet's doubts that art can be protective and survivalist, then transforms these doubts into even larger wonder. It may accept as truth the notion that art feeds us and feeds on us, but ultimately it means to surprise us into astonishment, those unchosen moments when compassion becomes possible.

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