

**Illinois Wesleyan University**

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**From the Selected Works of Michael Theune**

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2001

**<em>Swarm</em> by Jorie Graham**

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Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/theune/53/>

*Swarm* by Jorie Graham. HarperCollins, \$23.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL THEUNE

In “*from* The Reformation Journal,” *Swarm*’s initiating poem, Jorie Graham announces the advent of a re-formed aesthetic, stating, “I have reduced all to lower case. // I have crossed out passages. // I have severely trimmed and cleared. / \* / Locations are omitted. // Uncertain readings are inserted silently. // Abbreviations silently expanded.” Aired-out with generous—and often generative—spacing, chiseled with caesurae, and riddled with lacunae, the poems in *Swarm* continue Graham’s impressive formal experimentation and lead her heroic self-transgressing exploration of *what matters* directly into postmodernism’s rarified, theoretical realms.

Though all the elements of *Swarm*’s spare formality—spacing, caesura, minimal punctuation—make appearances in Graham’s work from *The End of Beauty* on, in no previous work are those elements as obviously significant; in *Swarm* the paring down of form reflects a massive paring down of subject and structure. Whereas Graham’s earlier work is highly dramatic, entwining the pageantry of the grand narratives of love and war, the *sturm und drang* of the desired and the desiring, with both domestic events and the pressures of

historical accountability, *Swarm* presents detailed inspections of the pageants. *The End of Beauty's* tense, revelatory retelling of myth in "Orpheus and Eurydice" and its dense, interiorization and allegorizing in "Self-Portrait as Apollo and Daphne" in *Swarm* are refined to monologues, asides. "Underneath (Eurydice)" attempts to listen in on the silent one's thoughts about being spoken, and "Daphne" provides a long list of clipped imperatives, a strange advice column: "Ink makes a sound. / Here listen. / Play with me then discard."

There are a number of possible reasons for Graham's more ascetic aesthetic. The aesthetic involves the style and subjects of Michael Palmer's poetry, poetry Graham appreciates, referencing it in her own work and endorsing it with inclusion in her collection of great poems in English, *Earth Took of Earth*. Also, the new reserve advances a theme of weariness developing in Graham's work. In her previous volume, *The Errancy*, Graham repeatedly bemoans the theoretical exhaustion of thinking, stating, "Even the accuracy / is tired—the assimilation tired— / of entering the mind. / The reader is tired. / I am so very tired." A text with repeated references to hives and swarms, including "The Guardian Angel of the Swarm," a poem that stylistically prefigures the new work, *The Errancy* is a volume *Swarm* obviously takes off from; however, *Swarm's* flight does not transcend weariness—in it the soul, "walking in circles," is still a "weary scribe"—but instead enacts it. Graham's previous, richly cinematic and operatic poems are reduced to checklists—"from The Reformation Journal" later confirms, "have reduced, have trimmed, have cleared, have omitted"—and severely drained tragedy, its stage directions barely indicating at all: "(looks around) / ... (gestures) / ... (gestures further)."

Most importantly, though, Graham's revised aesthetic seems self-consciously experimental, allowing an investigation of a concept that, though central to, has long gone unexplored in Graham's work: the underneath. While previous work refers to "the old dream of the underneath" and states that when "[s]he reached in there was no underneath," in *Swarm*, Graham makes the underneath—the fundamental, the substantial—her main subject; sixteen poems with different parenthetical addenda are titled "Underneath." In each "Underneath" Graham tests a theory spelled out in "Fuse" which hypothesizes that sentences are "filled with deferral, / built on forgetting word by word how life / feels" and that "god persists / On pauses (a style)" Acknowledging that a new form is necessary for further exploration—as she states in "Underneath (13)," "the tools that paved the way broke"—Graham engages, enacting and examining, "the old dream" with atomistic, allusive bits of language that buzz and crackle with static and resonance to see if anything turns up.

Many things do. Although rarely opulent, Graham's discoveries attract with the alien promise of the unearthed relic, the half-ciphered inscription. "Underneath (Upland)" is a dark and shiny alloy of Christian and pagan, the sophisticated and the savage: "light-carriers carrying light for the Lord / (who are all these fallen / the light lifted / for us to step over / reveals?) ... light swinging in the right hand of this me the follower ... trying to overhear the low secret though not too hard / light touching everything / grace and slenderness of its touching / as if it would ravage of course but it won't / made precisely to hold back (precisely) / while the creatures are felled ..." Beginning with the erotic, "How neatly you describe the thing // tongue in my ear," "Underneath (Eurydice)" trembles toward a stark, deathful revelation:

nights ripen and fall off  
 into our flesh  
 narcotic the waiting  
 merciless  
 for there is in addition a body  
 of rites and customs  
 how neatly silence describes the thing

Because the risks Graham takes in trying to recharge the elements of her own writing—and of a whole manner of writing—are substantial, occasionally the experiment falters. Although *Swarm* needs to be read as a collection—its poems always echo and argue with each other—some of its individual poems are too lean, too theoretical to appeal. More often, though, *Swarm*'s hazarded phrases and pregnant pauses amass, accumulating, folding, gaining the flourish, the prospect of possibility. While her previous work agrees with Keats that poetry is created through a fine excess, in *Swarm*, Graham shows that poetry also can be a process and a precious extract.