



# Go Back to Personal Experience: on the Self and the Other in the Dream of the Unified Field

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**Abstract.** A renowned contemporary American poetess and Pulitzer Prize winner, Jorie Graham has received great attention and much research in contemporary times for her creative talent. This thesis will select the poem *The Dream of the Unified Field*, which has the same title as her Pulitzer Prize-winning poem collection and explore Graham's thoughts through her shaping of the self in relation to others in this poem. Through Roland Barthes' concept of *punctum* and the gaze theory of Lacan, Merleau-Ponty and Satre, this thesis will analyse the raised questions. It concludes that by describing the gaze from oneself and the other, Graham calls for a return from purely philosophical reflection to personal experience in order to feel the true integrity of life. This thesis's exploration of the poem may serve as a small entry point for the reader to understand and grasp Graham's deeper thoughts and poetic system.

**Keywords:** Jorie Graham; *The Dream of the Unified Field*; *Punctum*; Gaze

## 1 Introduction

Jorie Graham, is one of the greatest poets of our time. Her poetry is eccentric yet magnificent, with great scope for exploration in terms of both poetic structure and poetic themes. Using the poem of the same name from her 1996 Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry anthology, *The Dream of the Unified Field*, as the main text for analysis, this thesis is going to explore two questions from the perspective of artistic and philosophical angle: firstly, is there a sense of break in the narrative of the poem's content? Secondly, what is Graham's deeper meaning hidden in the fracture? The thesis will begin by introducing a pair of concepts proposed by Roland Barthes, originally applied to the analysis of photographic art: *studium* and *punctum*. By using these two concepts, the understanding of the design in the narrative of the poem would be clearer. Then on the basis of previous research on the art of *punctum* in poetry, this thesis will argue for the possibility of the existence of the unconventional part in the text of *The Dream of the Unified Field*. The conclusion will be that the presence of a particular stanza creates a sense of fracture throughout the poem. Thereafter, this thesis will analyse the relationship between self and other as shaped by Graham in the fractured narrative text. The analysis will be supported by the theories of the gaze of

Lacan and others, together with theories related to the relationship between the self and the other. And in this section, the conclusion will be that Graham draws on the fractured stanzas to explore the role of the self-gaze and the other gaze for the self to achieve completion. After exploring these two issues, a general grasp of the poem will be obtained. Similar to the concept of unified field theory in physics, Graham is also trying to find a harmonious and unified relationship between the self and the outside. She believes that, unlike ideas, the insights generated by personal experience are also a very important part of what makes up our lives.

## 2 From Physics Theory to Poetic Conception

Graham won the Pulitzer Prize in 1996 for *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems, 1974-1994*. Among her poems, there is a piece with the same title as this anthology, also under the title *The Dream of the Unified Field*. To be precise, it was Graham who chose the title of this poem for one of her most important poetry anthologies. In the definition of physical theory, unified field theory, is a physical theory that attempts to describe the relationships between all fundamental forces and elementary particles in a single theoretical framework, which describes and reveals the common nature and intrinsic connections of fundamental interactions in a unified manner. The elucidation of the nature and laws of the various interactions in nature is an extremely important aspect of fundamental research in physics, and the quest to establish a unified theory of interactions is motivated by a strong philosophical belief in the unity and harmony of the material world, and by a tenacious desire to strive to discover the intrinsic nature of things. Graham's application of the terms of physics to her poems is by no means unintentional, and the borrowing of unified field theory does not just stay at the level of naming poems.

According to Karaguezian: "By entitling her book of Selected Poems *the Dream of the Unified Field*, Graham indicts all of her previous work for its trespass upon the visible world." [1] This suggests that the dream of the unified field contains certain fixed concepts that Graham wanted to convey. In order to complete the presentation of one of her philosophical reflections across time, Graham not only alludes to them in this poem, but chose dozens of poems to be in the anthology on this particular theme. As Graham is such an enigmatic poet capable of seeing everything in the smallest detail, the reading and understanding of her should be a similar process. Thus, the poem, *The Dream of the Unified Field* has an important value of inquiry. Through this poem, the reader is likely to find a small entry point into Graham's profound world of thoughts, and thus be able to grasp the larger context of the poetry of the selection, and even get some inspirations of the vein of Graham's poetry creation.

Graham's creation of poem is based on the poetic tradition, she ponders the important issue of how emotions and feelings are connected with language. [soul says] However, her poems often exhibit a strange sense of fracture, the emergence of which is particularly evident in *The Dream of the Unified Field*. Willard Spiegelman has noted in Graham's poetry that: "Dreams of a unity that can occur only through fracture." [2]. Thus, in Graham's attempt to find a unified spirit and a unified being, the

first thing she does is to create rupture. In her poetic texts, the attempt manifests itself in semantic fragmentation, imbalances in the articulation of long and short sentences, and the reversal of time and space, which, like tangled vines, conceals the core of the issues she explores. Her phrases are obscure and enigmatic, each simple word linking unprecedented worlds, and thus may be seen as inexplicable in their thematic expression.

### 3 The fracture: An Inquiry-Based on Roland Barthes' Punctum

In order to explore Graham's unconventional artistic expression, this thesis will introduce a pair of Roland Barthes' concepts to analyze *The Dream of the Unified Field*. This pair of concepts emerged from Barthes's last book, *Camera Lucida* (French: *La Chambre claire*), in which he introduced two concepts in Latin: *studium* and *punctum*, originally intended to discuss issues related to the art of photography, but also applicable to other art forms. Drawing on Barthes's expressions in *Camera Lucida*, it is possible to understand that *studium* represents a universal feeling, albeit passionate, but not intense. *Studium* in art can often generate an extension of the image and is easily perceived as part of the communication of the conventional tradition. And *punctum* means puncture, it is a small spot, a small wound, or a pinprick. The artistic element it creates is contingent and can sting the viewer. The concept of *punctum*, which provides an explanatory term for many artistic phenomena that can be observed but difficult to articulate through discourse and has been the subject of much scholarly attention and discussion. It has been introduced into the critique of poetry. [3,4] In the field of poetry, unlike the continuity of tradition in *studium*, the art of *punctum* is characterised by two features: firstly, it brings an unusually strong impact. This impact is unexpected, unprecedented and illogical. Secondly, it conceals a deeper meaning that is sometimes difficult to decipher. The *punctum*, while shocking and challenging, is wrapped in unique meanings or deep critiques that are sometimes not understood due to certain limitations but encourage the reader to actively engage in thought and desire dialogue with them. [5] Returning to poetry, in a way, what the poetry gives us is not meaning, but the possibility of meaning. *Punctum* is the very being that allows poetry to form the possibility of meaning.

In *The Dream of the Unified Field*, the *punctum* appears in the fifth stanza of the poem. The entire narrative of the poem is based on the fact that the poet is walking in the evening on a snowy day to return a leotard that belongs to someone else. In the beginning, in the first four stanzas of the poem, the poet's thoughts are merely drawn by the bird she saw, creating some stream-of-consciousness imagery, and all related thoughts remain in the physical time and space of the moment. Then, in the fifth stanza of the poem, the poet portrays a time and space that arrives in memory, the authenticity of which cannot be proven, it may be a fragment of the imagination. This stanza breaks the harmony of the poem as a whole in its temporal dimension, as it is based on a different context from the other stanzas.

Graham likes to lengthen every line of poetry to include several short expressions, allowing thoughts and emotions to escape the confines of metrical poetry, while abruptly intertwining long and short lines, as if to simulate the process of separating emotions and thoughts from a fluid narrative. In the section of the poem based on realistic contextual descriptions, Graham weighs and considers the form and content of the poem, and selectively abandons part of the content, choosing to continue refining her study of poetic structure in what, according to Helen Windler, a break from the long horizontal line to the long vertical sentences [6]. Because of the capture of what is happening around at the moment, the narrative is like running water, thus such an arrangement does not escape from the *studium*, for what it brings is some sustained and smooth energy. The abruptness of the fifth stanza thus makes a possible perceptive insight into the reader's contemplation. The reader is dragged into an unrecognizable time and space and gets a sting in the reading experience. Contemplation is due to the extended context, while perception is a break from contemplation [7]. The excellence of a work of art depends, in a sense, on the arrangement of the *punctum*. This is a rule that applies to all artistic genres, as any text can be homogenized and averaged out by society and lose its artistic power.

However, Graham's design is not simply to create a rupture to get the elimination of banalisation of the poem. Thus, what more important for the readers is to find the profound meaning that Graham explored in the rupture. This exploration forms the core of the whole poem and is arguably the question she has continued to ponder throughout her whole poetry writing career.

#### 4 The Self and the Other: An Inquiry-Based on Gaze Theory

Graham has a complex cultural background born in the United States, grew up in Rome, Italy, studied philosophy in Paris, France, and later returned to the United States. This cross-culture and inter-disciplinary background has had a profound impact on Graham's poetic writing [1,8]. Firstly, her multicultural background makes it difficult for her to escape the influence of geography when thinking about identity, specifically, Graham would be particularly concerned with the survival of individuals in the clash of civilizations and cultures. Secondly, because of her training in philosophy, philosophical guidance and the use of terminology, as well as the reanalysis and reinterpretation of various philosophical theories and concepts, all frequently appear in her poetry. In the fifth section of the poem, Graham delves into an analysis of the connection between the self and the other in a gazing relationship. By analyzing the relationship between self and other, Graham emphasizes that one's sense of self comes from concrete experience rather than pure discourse, while the concrete experience of others can also be borrowed by "me".

Moving on to the specific text of the poem, in the fifth stanza, the imagery of the mirror appears directly in Graham's verse twice, once at the beginning:

*what had she seen, Madame Sakaroff, at Stalingard, now in  
her room of mirrors tapping her cane*

The other is in the middle of the stanza:

*one hand still on the massive, gold, bird-headed knob,  
and see—a hundred feet away—herself—a woman in black in  
a mirrored room [9]*

In both cases, the direct relationship with the mirror is a woman whom the poet calls Madame Sakaroff. The poem reveals her to be the poet's childhood dance teacher, an immigrant from Russia. When Madame Sakaroff gets close enough to touch the mirror, her twin images almost merge together, which in the context of the poem represents the conflict between the exteriority of the body and the interiority of the soul, in which a longing is born to establish a connection between the two. For Graham's being a zealot for philosophy, the presence of the mirror is significant here, not only as a supposed reflection of oneself on an imaginative level, but also as a hint of the theory which inspired Graham in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences. In fact, the reader can easily relate to Lacan's Mirror Stage. According to Lacan's expression, the mirror image can be said to be the beginning of the formation of the self, the beginning of all imaginary identity. [10] From the moment the infant recognizes the image in the mirror as his or her own, the sense of self is born. The acquisition of identity through the mirror image is the key to the formation of the self. So, from the image in the mirror to self-identification and then to the emergence of a sense of self, there is a smooth line of reasoning. Lacan's theory of the mirror stage is based on a mirror apparatus, this mirror apparatus can at the same time be seen as a viewing apparatus, a device that captures and structures our visual activity. In the fifth stanza, Graham repeatedly emphasizes the existence of a mirror to concretely imply the theory of the Mirror Stage, which may support some of her expressions in the stanza.

Although it is clear that Madame Sakaroff's gaze into the mirror in the poem cannot be studied within the scope of the Mirror Stage on any level, it is highly possible that this may be Graham's partial borrowing and applying of this theory. [11] Her allusion to Madame Sakaroff's immigration status can be important grounds for argument, and it is further suggested in some studies that Madame Sakaroff may have been a refugee [1]. In short, the question of Madame Sakaroff's identity is not a casual mention by Graham, but a specific setting. What can be inferred here, therefore, is that Graham sees this act of individual migration as a new birth of a person, and therefore Madame Sakaroff, who is given the status of migrant along with this act, is a newborn in this sense. What Madame Sakaroff is trying to imagine and identify is a self in a foreign context. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the constitution of the self and the subject are respectively linked to a particular structural moment, the individual's viewing and speaking: the completion of the self is accomplished through viewing and mirrored gaze, along with the symbolic identification. The subject is achieved through the mediation of the *langue* or *parole*. In the poem, Graham writes: "No one must believe in God again I heard her say", where the speaker is Madame Sakaroff, whose *parole* is formed while gazing into the mirror. Although the meaning of this statement is obscure, it can be argued that Graham alludes to the constant generation of the self and the subject.

The ideal self is constituted by identifying with that mirror image that which the self sees in the mirror and which it sees imaginatively, and the alienation of the self is

confirmed because of this reversal mechanism of viewing. Before the individual enters the world of language, the most direct way of identifying the self is approximately by looking. However, although the mirror image contributes to the creation of self-consciousness, there is no doubt that the mirror image is not the real self, it is merely an illusory being. In the fifth stanza of the poem, Graham goes on to write:

*but to what? —regarding what—till closer-in I saw  
more suddenly  
how her eyes eyed themselves: no wavering:  
like a vast silver page burning: the black hole  
expanding:  
like a meaning coming up quick from inside that page—  
coming up quick to seize the reading face—  
each face wanting the other to take it—  
but where? And from where? — I was eight—[9]*

Here, Graham's expression is very clear: despite the immobility of the gaze to identify oneself in the mirror, one still cannot get a real sense of touch, the burning of the page, the magnification of the black hole, all these are hints of the portrayal of nothingness, together with the uncertain "But where? And from where?" These lines reinforce the notion that the dialectical relationship between the subject and the world, is based on illusion rather than reality, difference rather than sameness. The result of gaze is the imposition of an illusion on oneself. The mirror stage is real, but the mirror image itself is unreal, and the essence of the mirror is that of an unreal, alien subject. It is a sense of discomfort that Graham alludes to, arising from the irreconcilable dilemma of being confronted with both the self-outside the mirror and the self in the mirror, that is to say, to face a shelved identity.

In the fifth stanza of the poem, in addition to Madame Sakaroff, there is also an "I" of childhood. Graham thus creates two identities: Madame Sakaroff, who is always staring at herself in the mirror, is the self; and the "I", who is always staring at Madame Sakaroff, is the other. Through the interaction and connection between Madame Sakaroff and the "I", Graham suggests a relationship between the self and the other, that is, a borrowing of experience.

Merleau-Ponty once said:

How are we to name, to describe, such as I see it from my place, that *lived by another* which yet for me is not noting, since I believe in the other—and that which furthermore concerns me myself, since it is there as another's view upon me? Here is this well-known countenance, this smile, these modulations of voice, whose style is as familiar to me as myself. Perhaps in many moments of my life the other is for me reduced to this spectacle, which can be a charm. [12]

What he intends to illustrate is the possibility of a connection between the self and the other, a state of life association. Graham's introduction of an image of the other is intended to set this connection in motion, to complete the construction of two identities, in a way demonstrating precisely this relationship that Merleau-Ponty is talking about. In the second half of the fifth stanza, Graham alludes to a number of moments in which experience is shared, and indeed the sharing of experience begins when "I" spy on Madame Sakaroff and hear she said, "No one must believe in God again". In

Sartre's formulation, the intervention of the "gaze" is better explained in the construction of the relationship between Graham's thinking of self and other: "Thus through the look I experience the Other concretely as a free, conscious subject who causes there to be a world by temporalizing himself toward his own possibilities. That subject's presence without intermediary is the necessary condition of all thought which I would attempt to form concerning myself." [13]. It is the gaze that allows the other to complete the understanding of the self. In Graham's poem, she uses a strange shift in personification to emphasize the possibility of the unity of the identity of the self and the other. At the end of the fifth stanza, she writes:

*through, no signal in it, no information...Child,  
what should I know?*

*to save you that I do not know, hands on this windowpane. [9]*

In the logic of the fifth stanza, "I" am an eight-year-old child, and there would be no human being I shall call as "child", so the "I" in the context of these lines is no longer the poet at the age of eight. In relation to Madame Sakaroff's status as an immigrant or refugee, and to the merging of self and other that Graham has accomplished through the preceding lines, the "I" here refers to none other than Madame Sakaroff, or still "I", but an "I" in Madame sakaroff's existential context. Madame Sakaroff is worried because her child is in the same condition as her. Because of my gaze at Madame Sakaroff, "I" entered into her situation, "I" am capable of feeling her worry and pain. Therefore, in the first person of me, a sad question was raised: "What should I know to save you?"

Peter Burke once said: "The gaze often expresses attitudes of which the viewer may not be conscious, whether they are hates, fears or desires projected on to the other." [14]He is illustrating that the gaze indicates the ways and attitudes in which we view the world. However, Graham expressed a similar but somewhat different idea. Through the imaginative depiction of self gaze and the gaze from the other, she is trying to say that one's sense of self comes from concrete experience rather than sheer speculative philosophy. Unlike the other stanzas of the poem which describe the philosophical thinking of the poet on the way, the fifth stanza, which is the *punctum* of the poem, is based on the concrete experience of the act of gazing. Although it cannot be said that the rest of the poem is unimportant, it can indeed be said that these parts, which are the *studium*, are, in a way, in the service of the fifth stanza. [15]

## 5 Conclusion

In the study of the fifth stanza of Graham's *The Dream of the Unified Field*, a conclusion can be drawn: human thought originated from people's experience of the material world, human existence is first of all material existence, and human senses are the most basic way of understanding. Therefore, individuals should return from abstract thinking to concrete perception. The feeling of the subject is by no means empty and abstract. [16] The realization of the self needs to return to the physical body, which can be realized through the perceptual experience and the connection with the object. However, only one person's direct feelings are limited, so the experience of others can

be borrowed, and this can be achieved by using the function of gaze. For Graham, the key to managing one's relationship with the world around oneself is to complete the clarification of the relationship between self and others. To do this, one needs to have access to real experiences.

Helen Wendler, a professor at Harvard University and a poetry critic, commented that Graham had made a difficult leap, for she connected those moments that were far apart in time and space, thoroughly opened up those isolated spiritual levels, and explored the connections hidden in the poet's internal feelings and external culture. [17] Graham's thoughts can not be simply summarized in a poem or a collection of poems, nor can the life experience in her poems be fully grasped through literary and philosophical analysis, which is also in line with the way she advocates feeling the material world: it is not only a reflection of words and thoughts, but also real contact and specific self-experience.

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