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Special Issue

Hybridity and Border Crossings in Contemporary North American Poetry

Edited by

Dr. Ann Keniston

MDPI

https://doi.org/10.3390/h14110211

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Metamorphosis: Jorie Graham's Transformative Turns

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Abstract

The poetic turn—a significant shift in the rhetorical and/or dramatic trajectory of a poem—is a considerably under-recognized aspect of poetry. Despite being a crucial element in the working of so many poems, no large-scale critical conversation on the turn, such as a monograph or a collection of essays, exists. Despite its supposed innovations, the criticism of and about hybrid poetry has done little to change this. While many accomplished poets, including a number of hybrid poets, are alert to the structural dynamics of their poems—that is, they are aware of and significantly engage turns in their work—hybrid poet Jorie Graham is relatively unique in that her poetics and poems foreground turns to an extent and in ways that few others do. Specifically, Graham tropes the turn so that it represents even as it enacts transformative power. Such troping is at work in much of Graham's oeuvre; however, it reveals itself especially clearly in her most recent collection, *To 2040*, in which the turn itself becomes one more natural, if sublime, element that is being lost to the ravages of unremitting environmental degradation. In *To 2040*, the turn becomes a hopeless craning—"we feel our soul turn frantic/in us, craning this way and that"—a desperate gesture that is ultimately empty as it has no safe place to land, no alternative position on which to rest or from which to relaunch. This powerful, if frightening, trajectory in Graham's work can be difficult to recognize, especially given hybridity's continued missing of the turn, but it is important to see: doing so can help to recenter the turn in discussions about poetry while also leading to an improved comprehension of Graham's prophetic, apocalyptic vision.

Keywords: Jorie Graham; poetry; poetic turn; hybridity

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Received: 1 June 2025
Revised: 5 October 2025
Accepted: 14 October 2025
Published: 27 October 2025

Citation: Theune, Michael. 2025. Metamorphosis: Jorie Graham's Transformative Turns. *Humanities* 14: 211. https://doi.org/10.3390/h14110211

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1. Introduction: The Turn Required Within Hybridity

The poetic turn—a significant shift in the rhetorical and/or dramatic trajectory of a poem—is a crucial aspect of large swathes of poetry. The turn is a well-known component in sonnets, where it is called the "volta." But the turn is not confined to the sonnet; it can regularly be found in very different kinds of poetry. Ellen Bryant Voigt states that "[t]he sonnet's *volta*, or "turn"... has become an inherent expectation for most short lyric poems" (Voigt 2009, p. 164). And yet, the turn remains a considerably under-realized aspect of poetry. This is not to say that the turn is unrecognized; it certainly is well-known enough to have been and still be used by myriad poets in their poems and by scholars and critics in their analyses of poetry—and, as will be touched on later, it has garnered a smattering of more focused attention from practitioners of and commentators on poetry. However, despite being a crucial element in the working, and the working out, of so many poems, no large-scale critical conversation about the turn, such as a monograph or a collection of essays, exists. Such extended conversations exist for formal versing and

figurative troping—many books have been written that focus on poetic form and the roles of figurative language in poetry—but the same cannot be said for structural turning.[1]

Concomitantly, collections that gather important works on or identify and summarize major trends in poetry criticism and theory pay scant attention to the turn. *The Lyric Theory Reader*'s 665 pages include only three pages focused on structural turning: the section titled "Organizing Structures" in Helen Vendler's "Introduction to *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*" (Vendler 1997, pp. 135–37). The sole treatment of the turn in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* is a one-paragraph entry on the "Volta" that focuses on the turn's importance to the sonnet, but contains nothing about the turn more broadly (Brogan 1993, p. 1367). The discrepancy between an acknowledgment of the turn's integral relation with the lyric endeavor such as the one made by Voigt and the sporadic attention the turn receives in larger discussions of poetry indicates the significant degree to which the turn is under-realized.

Despite its supposed innovations, the criticism of and about hybrid poetry has done nothing to change this dynamic: the thinking about hybrid poetry only perpetuates the widespread tendency to miss the turn. The hybrid poetry to which I am referring here is, specifically, poetry situated between the methods and aims of traditional, mainstream lyric and experimental, avant-garde poetry. As Cole Swensen puts it in her introduction to *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry*, one of the main anthologies of this sort of poetry, the hybrid situates itself as a third option in an American poetry milieu that is too often viewed as having only these two options; hybrid poetry challenges, as Swensen puts it, this "two-camp model" (Swensen 2009, p. xvii). Or, as the subtitle for another of its main anthologies puts it, hybrid poetry is *Where Lyric Meets Language* (Rankine and Spahr 2002), and here, "Language" refers to "Language poetry," the avant-garde school of U.S. poetry situated in opposition to mainstream poetry that rose to prominence in the later part of the Twentieth Century. So, if lyric on its own was already missing the turn, then lyric combined with the tendencies of recent innovative poetries would almost surely neglect the turn for the simple reason that recent U.S. avant-garde thinking has not shown any of its own interest in the turn, either—except perhaps for critiquing the mainstream's easy epiphanies.[2]

The lack of attention to the turn that hybridity repeats, and in so doing amplifies, is problematic given that the structural turn still operates in a significant portion of the works gathered in hybrid anthologies, many of which are, in large part, as Voigt puts it, "short lyric poems." Here, I will focus on a particularly noteworthy case: that of Jorie Graham, a key figure in hybrid poetry, and one for whom the structural turn is of explicit interest. Widely regarded as a central figure of hybridity, Graham's work appears in major anthologies of hybrid work, including *American Hybrid* (Swensen and St. John 2009) and *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*. In fact, Graham has been positioned as an exemplar of hybridity. In "Close Calls with Nonsense," one of the foundational essays for defining hybridity, Stephanie Burt writes that as the poetry wars raged between lyric and Language camps, what was sought was "something new—something more open to personal emotion, to story and feeling, than language poetry, but more complicated intellectually than most of the creative-writing programs' poets allowed. For many, that something was Jorie Graham" (Burt 2004). The editors of *American Hybrid* position Graham as a forerunner of the mode, observing that "Jorie Graham was one of the first outspokenly hybrid poets in the United States" (Swensen and St. John 2009, p. 165).

Beyond the fact that she has been viewed as a paragon of hybridity, Graham is a poet who has offered a statement of poetics that explicitly features the turn. In "Introduction: Something of Moment," her introduction to the poems she selected for the issue of

Ploughshares she guest edited, Graham makes clear her interest in poetic occasion, lyric cry, and the action of turning that binds and catalyzes them:

> In a poem, one is always given, I would argue, a sense of a *place* that matters—a place one suffered the loss of, a place one longs for—a stage upon which the urgent act of mind of this particular lyric occasion (be it memory, description, meditation, fractured recollection of self, or even further disintegration of self under the pressure of history, for example) "takes place." And although it is, most traditionally, a literal place . . . [it] is felt as a location that compels action, reaction, and the sort of re-equilibration which a poem seeks. A break in the comprehensible, in the morally absorbable—a fissure in the spirit's sense of just cause and effect, in a line of thought that can feel "true"—can constitute trigger-occasions, or situations, or kinds of place from which the spirit in language springs forward into the action of poetry.
>
> All such moments—where we are taken by surprise and asked to react—are marked places in consciousness, places where a "turn" is required. (Graham 2001, p. 7)

This clear formulation is reiterated in a condensed version a year later in "At the Border," a "poetic statement" in which Graham again explicitly acknowledges her appreciation for "great acts of description, actions of mind compelled by the poem more than the poet, 'cries' of their *occasion*, turns where the turning is a reaction to the world's action" (Graham 2002a, p. 147). For some time after this, Graham repeated this formula, or key elements of it, in various interviews, including reiterating the idea that "[m]ost actions born of genuine 'process' turn, modulate, choose, swerve, arrive at momentary stays, temporary truths, in a manner that is surprising" (Graham 2006).

Despite Graham's explicit interest in structural turning, no specific, significant attention has been paid to the place of the turn in her work. Only one scholarly treatment of Graham's work has picked up on the significance of "Something of Moment": a dissertation which, however, due to its explicit interest in place, cites the material I quoted above but cuts it before mention of the "break in the comprehensible" (Alghamdi 2018, p. 71). Because of this, it fails to indicate Graham's interest in the turn. The lack of explicit and focused discussion of the turn in the work of a poet as important as Graham is a significant lacuna. While this inattention very likely has been a result of the under-realization of the turn, in general, recognizing that the turn is central to a poet as well-regarded as Graham could have gone some way in drawing attention to the turn in poetry, more broadly.

Here, I aim to fill this critical gap by attending closely to Graham's turning. I employ "Something of Moment" mainly for the way it draws attention to the turn. I do so because while it accurately describes some of Graham's deployments of turning, the statement does not adequately account for the structural maneuvering in many of the poems in Graham's oeuvre. Graham's body of work, I will show, instead offers a range of kinds of turning, and Graham's work with the turn is both more artful and agonistic than she explicitly acknowledges. In fact, I will show that when she engages with previous significant acts of turning in the work of other poets and in poems from earlier in her career, it makes Graham especially creative and inventive. These discoveries, I will argue, shed new light on aspects of Graham's work, including her most recent book, *To 2040*, and they can help guide considerations of hybridity, as well, revealing opportunities to explore and possibly expand the kind of work typically considered "hybrid."

2. Ambivalence, Abundance, Agency: Complicating Graham's Use of the Structural Turn

Graham's poems are full of the action of structural turning. However, trying to read them all in light of "Something of Moment," which, given the relative dearth of critical attention to the structural turn, it might be tempting to do, would be a misstep. There certainly are poems in Graham's oeuvre that largely follow the pattern she lays out in "Something of Moment."[3] However, many also offer surprising insights in ways other than what is described in "Something of Moment." Graham, in fact, deploys a vast array of kinds of structural turning in her work. At one end of the spectrum are poems that make use of established genres of structural turns, and at the other end are poems that are much more experimental in their uses and treatments of the turn, including even some that seem to critique the turn itself.

Though the turn as described in "Something of Moment" is a prize achieved after an agonizing encounter with rupture, the structural turn can also be understood a bit more plainly as a poetic device. Just as there are formal traditions in poetry, there are also structural traditions, set ways for poems to turn, and Graham makes use of these structures in her work, many of which might be conceived of as generally confirmative and contrapuntal. Confirmative structures identify the kinds of turns that occur in poetry in the meditative tradition, broadly conceived. They follow an agenda similar to the one laid out by Louis Martz in his classic *The Poetry of Meditation*, offering "an interior drama of the mind," "dramatic action. . .in which the mind grasps firmly a problem or situation deliberately invoked by the memory," conscious engagement with that dilemma, and a conclusion that offers "a moment of illumination," an "answer" (Martz 1954, p. 330). Such a structure is similar to the one Graham describes in "Something of Moment," though important differences stand out, including that Graham likely would say that she wants not only the mind but rather the whole human sensorium deployed to engage the troubling occasion, and that the result may be less an obvious answer and more a profound surprise. Still, Graham seems to draw from these structures, which include the emblem structure, which turns from an organized description of an object to a meditation on, a consideration of, the meaning of that object; the closely associated metaphor-to-meaning structure, which moves from supplying a metaphor for a thing, an idea, or a situation to revealing the meaning of, the significance behind, that metaphor; and the three-part movement of the descriptive-meditative structure, which opens with the description of a scene, then, often due to an external trigger, turns to an interior meditation—for example, the expression and/or consideration of memories, concerns, anticipation—and then turns to a re-description of the scene, which, at poem's end, appears differently due to the changed mindset of the poem's speaker.[4]

Graham's oeuvre includes poems that employ each of these structures. I interpret Graham's "Prayer," the first poem from *Never*, as an emblem poem in my essay on the emblem structure in *Structure & Surprise* (Theune 2007a, pp. 31–32).[5] Graham's "The Wake off the Ferry" is a tightly crafted poem that follows the metaphor-to-meaning structure, using the temporary disruption of a ferry's wake and the distant but consistent mending of that temporary disruption as a metaphor for the melding involved in a relationship (Graham 2020, p. 81). Willard Spiegelman reads Graham's "The Sense of an Ending," a poem included in *Erosion*, as an instance of the descriptive-meditative poem (Spiegelman 2005a, p. 200).

Other of Graham's poems also turn to offer realizations, but these arrival points are not so much answers as much as contrapuntal, ironic demonstrations. For example, "Of the Ever-Changing Agitation in the Air" mainly describes a man who dances down an alleyway in a depiction that is lovingly detailed but also allegorical—described as a "nervous little theme pushing itself along. . .constantly incomplete so turning and tacking," the man is

meant to represent all of humanity—but this otherwise joyous celebration ends with a *memento mori*: the poem's final lines present "the blood-eye careening gently over the giant earth,/and the cat in the doorway who does not mistake the world,/eyeing the spots where the birds must eventually land—" (Graham 1997, p. 109). The second of three poems in *Overlord* titled "Spoken from the Hedgerows" operates, essentially, via the ironic juxtaposition of an account of the awful violence unleashed upon the soldiers involved in D-Day's "Keokuk" operation, the poor planning and circumstances of which led to carnage and heavy casualties—"bullets up through our feet, explosion of Jack's face, more sudden openings/in backs, shoulders, one in a neck" (Graham 2005, p. 37)—with the obfuscation of that violence in President Roosevelt's "Prayer to the World" (Graham 2005, pp. 38–39).

Given the above confirmatory and contrapuntal examples, it is clear that Graham's poetry can and often does deploy turns not only in ways less like the way she describes in "Something of Moment" but also in ways one might expect, given an awareness of other traditions of poem-making. This is not a critique of Graham or of such poems—it is difficult to imagine an engaging body of work that follows only the pattern laid out in "Something of Moment"—but rather is an effort to begin to show the range of structural approaches at work in Graham's poems. Still, the turn is at the heart of Graham's work. Asked about her poems' ability to raise awareness about global issues, Graham notes that she is "mixed" about this, acknowledging that, first and foremost, she is "committed to making poems" (Graham 2008a). For Graham, making poems necessarily involves shaping surprising turns. While such turns certainly may be hard-won, recuperative prizes from agonistic interactions with some portion of the world's trouble, as they are described in "Something of Moment," they also may arise from and be informed by a more straightforward expectation of the kinds of moves that short, lyric poems make.

Understanding the multiple kinds of deployments of turns in her work can help to pry us loose from Graham's own conceptualization of the turn and free us to explore how Graham otherwise treats the turn, including her great inventiveness with regard to crafting turns. Graham's representation of the development of turns in "Something of Moment" indicates a kind of natural, fully integrated process, an effort to authentically engage with and locate real disruption, and to turn accordingly. However, *conscious awareness* of this process complicates such engagement—and, indeed, alertness to turning is a crux for Graham, for whom recognition of the turn has two very different aspects. On the one hand, Graham reveals a deep connection to turning along with a sense of intimate participatory engagement with it. The action, especially as Graham describes it in "Something of Moment," seems to come naturally to the poet. This relation to the turn is made explicit in at least one poem: in "Sundown," the poet-speaker acknowledges that the poem's initial and initiating act of turning was brought on, essentially, intuitively, as if the world had offered a real, if subtle, invitation to turn: "I turned back my/head for no/reason as if what lies behind/one had whispered/*what can I do for you today* and I had just/turned to/answer and the answer to my/answer flooded from the front with the late sun" (Graham 2012b, p. 3).

However, on the other hand, whether a generic expectation or a deeply embodied personal inclination, or both, Graham's consciousness of the demand to turn can also have a very different result: at times, the poet-speaker in Graham's poems bridles at the expectation, including her own personal inclination, to turn. In the final movements of "The Post Human," a poem situated at the deathbed of the poet-speaker's father, and taking place in the minutes after his passing, the poet-speaker acknowledges "going through [her] motions," a kind of cry with a turn among them: the poet-speaker asks of her departed father, "Where are you waiting, *where out there*," but then quickly corrects herself, recognizing, "the wrong part of me now/wants to/ask," followed immediately by another recognition

about the process she is undertaking, that she is in fact going through all-too-familiar motions: "And turns around and says, cue consequence, cue/occasion" (Graham 2017, p. 27). Even though she still manages to arrive at a surprising realization—that now "daylight burns" within her sense of loss rather than the loss being a part of the day (p. 27)—the poet-speaker of "The Post Human" seems aware that this is both what might be expected of a typical Jorie Graham poem as well as the kind of redescription of a scene that one expects of the descriptive meditative structure—and in fact on its way to its realization, the poem contains a strange and frightening acknowledgement of what the father's death had provided: poetic material that proved "[h]elpful" by "[m]aking a space we had not used/before, could not" (p. 27).

In an interview, Graham cites a critic who observes that "[f]or Graham, life's most powerful experience may be ambivalence, as in competing passions, which becomes a startling kind of abundance,"and she deems this a "brilliant insight" (Graham 2012a, p. 39). I agree—including with regard to Graham's relationship with the turn: while intensely drawn to it, Graham can also chafe at it. But through it all, there is passion for it, love and suffering, and, as a result, great abundance.

Indeed, consciousness of the structural turn seems to open up opportunities for Graham's invention. Throughout her oeuvre, Graham tests the turn, experiments with it. It is something she knows she can invoke, conjure, and manipulate. In one poem, Graham acknowledges specifically seeking out material in the landscape "to make them trouble" her (Graham 2008b, p. 24), that is, to serve as occasions for turns. In some others, she creates the conditions for an act of significant turning by altering the way she interacts with her occasion—for example, by closing her eyes in order to specifically shift her engagement with the scene from visual to auditory (Graham 2002b, pp. 34–35), or else even by imagining having different perceptual powers that might allow her to take other kinds of turns—as she does in a poem titled "The Turning," in which, after dreaming of possessing amplified sensory abilities, including "hear[ing] the sound of petals falling/off the head that/holds them/when it's time" and detecting when "something is suddenly complete" (Graham 1997, pp. 105–6), the poem concludes by recognizing what it has not yet accomplished, turns it has not taken, observing "[t]he pinetree marionette-like against the wall—but still,/unused," and asking, finally, "Whose turn is it now? Whose?" (p. 106). In other poems, Graham's agency, even if limited, expands into vaster structural inventiveness. "What Is Called Thinking," for example, does not arrive at but rather opens with its surprise, beginning, "When I surprised the deer the wind was against me," and it then proceeds to take place in the dilated moment of that expected turn (Graham 1991, pp. 80–83). In such instances, the poem's turn does not emerge naturally from a rupture in the world, but rather is significantly co-created by the poet. In other words, even if the discovery of the turn is central to the fabula of many of Graham's poems, it does not necessarily offer all that much when it comes to understanding how turning is skillfully transformed into the powerful arrangement of story in Graham's poems.

3. Period of Ludicrous/Cognition → Suddenly in the Next Mode of Sentience (Graham 2017, p. 67)

Graham's abundance offers much to examine; however, I will focus here on one form of Graham's inventiveness with turns: her tendency to be inspired to vaster acts of transformation by previous noteworthy acts of structural turning. I will demonstrate this with two examples: one, an as-yet unacknowledged connection between the poem "Prayer" and some poems by James Tate that are deeply engaged with turning, and the other, some significant self-referential thinking about turning in Graham's most recent book, *To 2040*.

As previously noted, "Prayer" is, centrally, an emblem poem—that is, a poem that begins with a description of an object to then turn to offer a meditation on the larger meaning of that object. "Prayer" begins with a description of a school of minnows subjected to the forces of the currents around it and then turns to a meditation on how humans, likewise, are subject to forces beyond our control: "this is freedom," the poem says, right after its turn (Graham 2002b, p. 3), though "freedom" must be understood as ironic: that is, "this is *what is referred to as* 'freedom.'" In fact, the poem continues, "Nobody gets/what they want. Never again are you that same. The longing/is to be pure. What you get is to be changed" (p. 3). After its meditation, this well-crafted, but also rather conventional, emblem poem turns one more time to include a kind of coda that offers a necessary complication: such truth is not in fact easily said—that is, a clear statement about ubiquitous, constant transformation is at best paradoxical. So, the final portion of the poem recontextualizes the substance of the poem, referring to the completed portion of the emblem poem as "hands full of sand," as material allowed to "sift through/in the wind" (p. 3). In fact, the coda indicates that the whole poem is less a clear statement and more a small demonstration: "I was not saying anything. It was only/something I did" (p. 3). Everything seems, in the end, to be little more than "a ghost posed on [the speaker's] lips" (p. 3).

What is never indicated in "Prayer" is that much of its language is sourced, without attribution, from two different poems by James Tate. Tate's "Consumed" is a poem about the fact that a person may "undergo a radical//transformation" at any time, and it posits that "Nobody gets what he//wants," that a "dark star" may pass through a life, altering it irrevocably so that "never again are you//the same," and making it the case that "The longing to be pure//is over" (Tate 1991, p. 30). Tate's "The Whole World's Sadly Talking to Itself—W.B. Yeats" is a mysterious lyric that features an "I" taking leave of a "you," with the "I," perhaps in love, attempting to desperately communicate something to the beloved. The poem opens, "Hands full of sand, I say:/take this" though the speaker comes to understand that he in fact "was not saying anything" (Tate 1967, p. 239). The only response is that the "you. . .turned//and handed [the speaker] an empty sack," announcing they would not be coming back, "The ghost/of a flower poised on [their] lip" (p. 239).

Graham's borrowings here, I trust, are obvious. However, these are borrowings that criticism has not before recognized, and nor has Graham herself in any way indicated them. Willard Spiegelman reads "Prayer" as offering authentic if somewhat abstracted references to autobiographical details from Graham's life (Spiegelman 2005b, p. 236). I understood the poem similarly, including it without seeing any need to comment on the borrowings—which I had not detected at the time—in my chapter on the emblem poem in *Structure & Surprise* (Theune 2007a, pp. 31–32). There is a note on "Prayer" at the end of *Never*, but it makes no reference to the borrowings and instead only mentions that the poem was "written as a turn-of-the-millennium poem for the *New York Times* Op-Ed page" (Graham 2002b, p. 111). In comments offered on the poem after having read it, Graham herself treats "Prayer" no differently from any of her other poems, and in fact describes it as if it were a poem generated by the means outlined in "Something of Moment"; she states, "At a certain point there is a certain turn in the poem, and a series of pressures that the bodily experience of the witnessing of the minnows compels the speaker to suddenly undergo and they become feelings, then emotions, then they lead to thinking then eventually to a sense of moral or ethical predicament" (Damasio et al. 2003). Graham concludes these remarks by noting that the process she describes also is one that one of her interlocutors, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, "maps quite brilliantly in his work," though she concludes, "Obviously, we do it instinctively" (Damasio et al. 2003).

Though Graham does not clarify who precisely she means by that "we," whether poets or people in general, that is of less significance than the fact that Graham describes the

build-up of "Prayer" as something so natural that it is a matter of instinct. But of course, we now know that it is not so simple. "Prayer" is much less instinctual and much more intertextual. Of course, for Graham, the intertextual is virtually instinctual: it certainly is the case that "Graham's has always been a profoundly intertextual poetics" (Green 2021, p. 15). However, so far as I know, there is nothing like "Prayer" in all of Graham's oeuvre. No other poem borrows so much and, at least in retrospect, so obviously, and without attribution.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to say definitively what Graham is attempting with "Prayer," though the one other commentator I know of who noted these connections articulates well the questions they raise:

> How do we understand the imperative that our words be our own, when, in an enduring sense, they never are? When we give up on the directive to conjure some pure, unprecedented truth, is there a nourishment or consolation in the vision pre-existent, foreordained, within language—itself the accumulation of imaginative acts (Emerson: "Every word was once a poem")? What is there to gain by judging a poem that resonates as more than our own—polyvocal, in cahoots, wiser than us—to be evidence not of its exhaustion but instead of its vitality? (Boening 2017).[6]

While such questions are, I think, the kinds that "Prayer" raises, I want to add that I do not think that it is only "nourishment and consolation" or a "vision pre-existent" that Graham found in the Tate poems: she also found turns. "Consumed" is specifically about transformation, and it enacts that transformation with a significant act of turning. In fact, poet-critic Leslie Ullman uses its "dark star" to formulate "A 'Dark Star' Passes Through It," the title to an essay about lyric "centers," which, insofar as they "pivot or surprise" (Ullman 2017, p. 20), essentially are structural turns. Graham is not only encountering language, but an action within language, and an action that she interprets as an invitation to make herself, as the final lines of "Consumed" say, a "stranger" (p. 50).

And this is what she does in the performance of "Prayer." In "Prayer," Graham embeds herself in another's language and reveals that she barely needs to move a muscle to make that language seem like her own. The line between self and other, poet-speaker and stranger, is incredibly porous. Graham, in fact, seems to accept the turns in the Tate poems as real invitations; she gives up purity and accepts—at least for the space of this poem—a radical alteration of her work. The result is a poem that has fascinating and engaging turns, and that both is and—to the extent to which it embodies other im- and interpersonal, and intertextual, histories and truths—is not a Graham poem. Fiona Green argues that "it is Graham's listening to what lyric language can do in the voices and hands of other poets. . .that serves to tune out, or at least hold at bay, the things that conceptual intellect might say," adding that "[t]his capacity for listening is the means whereby Graham primes her own language so that unforeseen things might happen in it" (Green 2021, p. 36). I agree, though I would clarify that the turn is a crucial part of the lyrical language that Graham registers and artfully transmits.

Graham's surprising inventiveness with turns continues even into her most recent collection, a volume in which the turning that she is informed by is her own previous work. In *To 2040*, Graham anticipates with dread a near future of environmental and societal collapse. In many ways, this continues and intensifies Graham's longstanding project to write the poems from inside of system collapse, poems alert to these truths but also aware of the fact that it is living humans who are the recipients of this knowledge. This is a complex project that Graham has defined, in part, using the language of turning. In an interview occasioned by the publication of *[To] The Last [Be] Human*, which gathers the four volumes Graham published prior to *To 2040*, Graham notes that her work was to figure out "how to keep fighting to keep one's humanity awake—how not turn instinctively,

or accidentally, out of distraction, inattention, habit, towards destruction, greed, denial, the arrogant looking-away-from the face of the rest of creation?" (Graham 2022) Graham observes that "[n]ot being able to hold in mind the scale of 'extinction' tends to make us turn away," but she also maintains that "[w]hat cannot be held in mind can, though, be apprehended by other means. The imagination is built for this" (Graham 2022). In addition to not turning away from destruction, there is the responsibility to acknowledge the needs of those reading the poems. "Posterity," the final poem in *Overlord*, published just before *Sea Change*, the first book collected in *[To] The Last [Be] Human*, notes, "Wrote a poem with the lines/'how can I write in a lyric poem that the world we live in//has already been destroyed? It is true. But/it cannot be said/into the eyes of an other,/as that other will have nowhere/to turn'" (Graham 2005, p. 88).

Of course, significant structural turning occurs with great frequency in *To 2040*, as it does in all of Graham's previous collections. However, *To 2040* adds to these uses, or else concentrates a strain of them, using turns both as a descriptor of Earth's habitable ecology and humans' own vital responses to it, and also as a significant indicator of what is being depleted, eroded in the course of widespread destruction, subsumed in the unidirectional rush toward apocalypse. In "In Reality," as groundwater is depleted and rivers dry up, the poet-speaker "remember[s]" the health that constitutes a river, including "the spring, the headwaters, precipitation, swell. . .currents. . .the sweet cut into land of/channels, meanders," after which the poet-speaker adds, "Remember the/turns" (Graham 2023, p. 47).

Of course, these turns are physical turns, bends in the river. But they are also more than this. Turning is a part of the eventfulness of not only external nature but also is deeply connected to the workings of human psychology and creativity—as Graham notes in "Something of Moment," shifts in the world lead to changes in perception and registers of emotion and thought. As goes such turning in the environment, so goes the ability to turn meaningfully in our own lives and actions. The poem "To 2040" notes, "Look behind you, turn, look down as much as you can, notice all/that disappears" (Graham 2023, p. 22). Habitable ecology is disappearing, but so is the privileged interaction it allows imagining, creative, human creatures. Graham notices this and includes it in her awareness of what is being extinguished in this time of climate derangement.

This awareness is made manifest, concentrated, in "The Quiet," a poem that considers how existing in an environment that includes so little time left before the arrival of unyielding cataclysm conditions inner lives—indeed, the poem states, there in fact is no time left: the quiet is not really quiet at all, but rather, as the poem notes as its title shifts into the poem, "The Quiet//before the storm is/the storm" (Graham 2023, p. 74). The poem's opening lines depict the derangement about to come and already here, one thought of as a storm, but which will not bring rain (p. 74). Significantly, this transformation is registered through the desperate quality of the turning inside individuals: "we feel our soul turn frantic/in us, craning this way and that, yes the soul can twist, can winch itself into knots,/why not" (p. 75). The poem then largely plays out this craning by, for example, revealing the desire for a regressive turn to childhood and a childish desire for instruction from compromised nature (p. 75). While the poem acknowledges that it wishes to "rouse" its readers (p. 77), it also knows that any truly significant response to climate disaster will ultimately be constrained by a lack of larger realization and political will, and so the poem concludes with images of depleted turns: what once were options, choices, and decisions that could be artful, hopeful, and meaningful ultimately lead to nothing: "Whose turn is it now./Have you stood your turn in line./Have you voted./For what. . .for what." (p. 78). The frantic turning of craning ultimately leads to no great transformation.

Cranes make a few other appearances in Graham's body of work. While some of these—such as the action of "craning up" mentioned in "Picnic" (Graham 1991, p. 42) and its use to describe the action of a woodpecker as "he cranes up and stares" (Graham 2023, p. 42)—seem incidental, one is noteworthy: a crane appears in "The Way Things Work," the first poem from Graham's first book, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*. In that poem, the crane serves as an avatar of change. Located after a list of some of the kinds of hardware that can help to make things work—objects such as "levers and keys," as well as "cylinder lock, pully,/lifting tackle"—the crane seems at first to be a machine, similar to the things that precede it, but it in fact turns out to be animal: the line containing the crane reads, "Crane lift your small head—" (Graham 1980, p. 3). And the extravagant turning of which this creature is capable will become crucial for the poet-speaker, who says to the crane, "your head is the horizon to/my hand" (p. 3), aligning with the crane the poem's only clear reference to the poet-speaker's artistic action, essentially acknowledging that the crane's ability to turn offers access to distant, seductive possibilities, new horizons. At this point, the poem turns to its conclusion: the transformative potential embedded in the figure of the crane "hooks" the imagination so that "eventually/something catches" (p. 3).

Even if mysterious—the crane is simply omitted from Speigelman's interpretation of "The Way Things Work" (Spiegelman 2005a, pp. 178–79)—in retrospect we can come to see that crane as an initial intuition, a talisman, a familiar for a power Graham will use to shape the arcs of her work from its inception to much later in her career, where ambivalent and inventive as always, Graham in fact also advocates for wild turning: the poem "Cage" suggests that such desperate action may be necessary—especially if, as the poem suggests, the only other alternative is capitulation to political forces that want only compliance. "Cage" states, "This is America look close. No one wants u/to struggle," and as a part of this, the reader is told, "don't think, you cannot turn, don't/crane" (Graham 2023, p. 56).[7]

For anyone interested in the structural turn, it is a moving thing to have spotted Graham's crane—as is knowing that it, too, due to natural and human-made causes, is disappearing.

4. See Change

Notice all/that disappears. Of course, here, with this work on the turn in Graham's poetry and poetics, I hope I have helped to make the structural turn not only not disappear but actively appear, revealing it to be an aspect of lyric that still matters greatly to Graham—as a template for dynamic poetic action, as inspiration for poems to seek out new discoveries, and even as an impetus for further invention.

It certainly is the case that, if one wishes to experience as fully as possible the agon and the thrill of Graham's work, one must attend to the turns in them. Graham states, "I do not see my work as difficult, or even experimental. I think it is pretty straightforward—although, as with any artist's work, you might need to be acquainted with their body of work to have learned their vocabulary, as it were" (Graham 2012a, p. 38). As I have tried to demonstrate here, a very useful part of Graham's vocabulary—"as it were"—is the turn. For those already familiar with Graham's work, I have offered an underrecognized element on which to focus attention, and to those not yet acquainted with or newer to the work, I have provided a helpful, productive way to engage with it. Still, my work in this essay is only an initial effort. Certainly, further work remains to be done on Graham's understanding and deployments of the turn, including projects that attend more closely to the evolution of the turn in Graham's body of work, as well as a number of projects that will be informed by greater access to the poet's notebooks and drafts.

The illumination that understanding the turn offers to encountering Graham's work, in particular, and engaging lyric poetry, more broadly, can and should shine as well on

hybridity. I'm not the first to have felt the need to clarify the strong presence of the turn in the work of a hybrid poet. In "Lyricism of the Swerve: The Poetry of Rae Armantrout," Hank Lazer notes that "[t]he lyric, to sustain our interest, to have complexity and beauty, and to remain compelling requires. . .motion, tension, torque, and a twist" (Lazer 2002, p. 35), and he explores Armantrout's specific type of turning, which he characterizes as "peculiarly teasing, humorous, thoughtful (and thought-provoking)" (Lazer 2002, p. 31). Recognizing this, it thus seems even more likely that turning is in fact broadly relevant to hybridity.

However, one way the turn might be relevant is as a means by which to destabilize hybridity's boundaries, creating bonds with what has been excluded and ruptures among what has been included within its definitions. In her introduction to *American Women Poets in the 21st Century*, Spahr notes that she does not intend for her book to be "yet another attempt to stake a boundaried territory or to suggest a new movement"; rather, she hopes "to suggest new possibilities for dialogue, new pedagogical opportunities" (Spahr 2002, p. 10). Close consideration of the turn can help with this by showing that some poets not currently included in standard accounts of the hybrid could be included. For example, I conclude an examination of the surprising turning that occurs in *The Shadow of Sirius*—a collection by poet W.S. Merwin, a poet not counted among the hybrid poets—by arguing that Merwin's turning, in fact, is very much a hybrid, combining poetry's orphic and rhetorical powers (Halliday and Theune 2012, p. 167). That is, with close attention to structural turns, we may come to see similarities among seemingly different poets, such as Graham and Merwin. We might also come to see greater differences among poets who have been grouped together, such as Graham and Lyn Hejinian, the proponent of "open" texts who also regularly appears in hybrid anthologies (Rankine and Spahr 2002, pp. 222–307; Swensen and St. John 2009, pp. 185–91). In fact, heeding turns might encourage editors to downplay using authorship as a key organizing principle for their work and instead focus on characteristics inherent in the work, including, of course, particularly inventive engagements with the turn.

Joan Retallack states, "Swerves. . .are necessary to dislodge us from reactionary allegiances and nostalgias" (Retallack 2003, p. 3). But this should not be surprising: turning changes things. Closer attention to Graham's turning certainly should alter our engagement with and estimation of turning, more broadly. Graham's own close attention to turns led to new experiments and discoveries in her own work; such close consideration also has the potential to transform critical work with the turn. In particular, it is important to note that, when examined carefully, turns—which, indeed, can often seem abstract and mechanical—in fact come to seem otherwise: shape-shifters, turns are also substantial. In the poem "Earth," Graham articulates this complex and generative power, recognizing that our home planet's "almost eternal/turn" is made up of "the matter the turn takes-on as it is turned by that/matter—" (Graham 2012b, p. 67). Here, the poet imparts a fully materialized notion of the turn. We should, in our thinking about Graham's work, hybridity, and lyric poetry more broadly, work to more greatly realize it. Further surprising discoveries await.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] The only book to focus on the structural turn in poetry is my own *Structure & Surprise: Engaging Poetic Turns* (Theune 2007b), essentially a poetry writing handbook.

[2] Lyn Hejinian cites as an example of the "'closed' text," to which her more experimental "open" text stands in opposition, "[t]he coercive, epiphanic mode in some contemporary lyric poetry" (Hejinian 2009).

[3] One such poem is "Other," the first poem in *Overlord* (Graham 2005). This coming-of-age poem tells a story from childhood when the poet-speaker lived in the innocence of an untroubled immediacy until suffering the rupture of experience, waking up "sick," and so unable to attend school and, in that solitude, imagining her name called out in the classroom where she was meant to be and then having the dawning realization that the things around her "could not be/absent" though she could be (Graham 2005, p. 2). From this painful rupturing—the poet-speaker recalls, "I don't know if I cried out,/but they [the adults in the household] came running to see what was wrong" (p. 2)—a surprising understanding takes shape: "This is what is wrong: we, only we, the humans, can retreat from ourselves and/not be/altogether here. . ..we can be absent, no one can tell" (pp. 2–3).

[4] Discussion of the emblem structure may be found in Theune (2007a). Discussion of the descriptive-meditative structure originated in Abrams (1970) and additional elucidation of this structure may be found in Marks (2007). Material on the metaphor-to-meaning structure may be found at Theune (2009).

[5] I discuss this poem more fully further on in this essay.

[6] I noted the borrowings from "Consumed" in a Facebook post (Theune 2013). Justin Boening noted the connection, as well, in a later blog post, citing a friend who observed the connection to the additional Tate poem (Boening 2017).

[7] For another example of a creaturely avatar affiliated with the structural turn, see Peter Sacks' "You Only Guide Me by Surprise": *Poetry and the Dolphin's Turn*, which explores how the figure of the dolphin in poetry often indicates "a transformative veering from one course to another, a way of being drawn off track to an unexpected destination" (Sacks 2007, p. 3). Sacks is Graham's husband.

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