LET ME TELL YOU
Paul Griffiths
Reality Street (£9)

by Alyssa Polish

Words, words, words. This is Hamlet, of course. But it is also, conceivably, Ophelia. And such words are the matter of Paul Griffiths's new novel, Let Me Tell You, in which he has lifted the relatively few words that Ophelia speaks and reenacted them to compose a remembrance of her life that interrogates its very foundation. "What words do I have?" she asks at the novel's outset. "Where do they come from? How is it that I speak?" Like a Beckett character marooned on an RSC stage set, Griffiths's Ophelia suspects her uncanny words even as she utters them. This is an Ophelia who may incidentally quote Nietzsche or the Beatles, briefly approximate Oscar Wilde, or consistently mimic the late Beckett, but cannot say her own name (the suggestive cipher of "O" is as close as she gets). She lacks the proper word for mother, and has very mixed feelings about her own promiscuity and absent one. (Also curiously suppressed is the name of the "young lord" of Denmark.) She can recite, from childhood memory, a fantastical dinner menu featuring "D科普ed Dove" and "Heart of Owl, with rose honey"); and she is capable of recalling the rhetorical flourishes of her father's finest speeches. Her own words, however, remain a source of consternation:

But now and again words come to me as if it raised words in my head—words given me by some other, as if I had no hand in what I say, as if all I may do is give speech, let the words come and come, and go on, and go on and on, and whilst they go on I cannot say what I would truly wish to say. I may do nothing, hold still by my own words—if they are my own. My own words go on, but I cannot speak.

It is the sense of this other in her words and actions that leads her to reach into her memory to recall and thus reassess her life, from birth up to those first ominous calls of the play. There she turns over, in syntax that trips over itself as it trips along, the details of her childhood closeness to her now absent brother, her earlier love of "the young lord," and the bright presence of the maid who brought her up at the foot of "the cold green mountain" that serves as the backdrop for her version of Elsinore. Yet what emerges most significantly from this self-examination is her suspicion that she follows a predetermined course that will end in her own death—and her determination "to make another way."

Griffiths's formal constraint, using only Ophelia's words from Hamlet (fewer than 500 of them), follows the tradition of Oulipo, the literary movement whose belief is that the imposition of constraints forces an artist to the over-trodden path of habitual thought and expression. While the least successful Oulipo texts fail to transcend their technical restrictions, Griffiths succeeds because his thematicatization of the constraint conveys a psychologically substantive narrative. The very literal limitations of O's language underscore her own sense of its inadequacy to her interiority; thus, the slightly irregular syntax that is all her limited vocabulary allows makes her lamentation all the more affecting. "How little they seem to me, the words that I have!" she cries.

As a restimulation of Hamlet, Let Me Tell You avoids the deflating effects of many other attempts precisely because its formal constraint necessitates Griffiths's focus on Shakespeare's words themselves. Much of the wonderful ambiguity integral to Shakespeare resides in the indeterminacy of his language, and Griffiths can retain that quality by pressing upon the pluri-

potency of each word in its turn. Here, his work as music critic and translator shines through; his limited repertoire of words he has composed a prose work whose components resound like familiar notes. Some of this resonance results, no doubt, from particular words' distinct echoes of their original context: these are Shakespeare's words unloosed from meter and reformulated like the eric repetition of memory. On the syntactic level, such resonance is the effect of words' more immediate, often chiasmic, repetition: "to know what it is that we truly know—and what it is that we know to be true." For instance. On the scale of the entire novel, Griffiths has forged a leitmotif from certain words suggestive of his heroine's problematic conception of herself: memory, mind, he, nothing, self, words, other, speak, thought, and know acquire great weight as this increasingly willful Ophelia begins to consider a means of defining herself outside a language "that again now is no home to me."

But as the novel's conspicuous refrain of "go on" suggests, involving those Beckett narrators who try and fail to shed the words they speak, O may have no real choice. Griffiths leaves the narrative appropriately ambiguous, but we sense that all the while in the world may not leave O from having to go on as she is. That Griffiths has pulled this story from Shakespeare's 400-year-old language raises fascinating questions about just how we do still go on in words.