

Poetry as Plastic Art: The Example of W.S. Graham

Throughout the twentieth century, major advances in modernist poetics regularly occurred through contact with experiments in the visual and plastic arts. The most canonical examples include the ‘cubist’ poetics of Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob, and Pierre Reverdy, or for that matter Gertrude Stein; the New York School’s links to Abstract Expressionism; and, most recently, conceptual writing’s regular citation of Brion Gysin’s claim that “writing is fifty years behind painting.”¹ Poets would find their community amongst visual/plastic artists; but also, the poetics itself would emerge out of a critical engagement with the work of the poets’ artist peers: adapting compositional practices and techniques; adopting conceptual vocabularies. The shape this relation might take varies, just as do the artists’ own aesthetics: some poets blur the boundaries between the visual/plastic arts and poetry’s own verbal medium; for others, the engagement with visual/plastic media subtends a renewed focus on the medium-specificity of poetry as verbal art.² It is this latter tendency that I will trace in the current essay. The visual/plastic arts both constitute a threat and rival to poetry, and an example to follow and live up to: reacting to their threat, poetry retrenches into the peculiar possibilities of language as a material and resource for art-making. Rosalind Krauss notes the duality immanent in “the idea of a medium as such” when she describes medium as “a set of conventions derived from (but not identical with) the material conditions of a given technical support.”³ The case of W.S. Graham (1918-1986) is particularly illuminating in this regard, as it brings about a radical rethinking of the *plasticity* of poetry as a medium: not just the plasticity of its verbal materials, but also of the conventions of syntax, imagery, diction, versification, which are shaped by, but subsequently then shape, these materials.⁴

If his life was spent in obscurity and neglect, Graham’s work is nevertheless central to any story of modernist poetics in Britain from 1940 onwards: he was associated with the “New Apocalypse”

¹ See Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 295.

² This is also present within visual arts, whether in mixed-media work, conceptual work, or the defences of painterly abstraction found in Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, and others. ref to Broodthaers.

³ Rosalind Krauss, ‘Reinventing the Medium’. *Critical Inquiry* 25:2 (1999), 289-305, 296.

⁴ This is not, in itself, an innovation peculiar to modernist painting and poetics: earlier versions are found both in Gottfried Lessing’s *Laokoön* and Walter Pater’s claims, in ‘The School of Giorgione’, that the different arts simultaneously retreat into their own spheres of expression, whilst also gravitating towards a shared concept of “art”, which he terms their *Anders-streben*. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 105-106.

poets of the early 1940s, and then came under the patronage of T.S. Eliot at Faber at the end of that decade, before falling out of fashion as the anti-modernist “Movement” began its long hegemonic rule over the various organs of poetic taste. But he is also central to the story of modernist art over the same period. Unlike Stein and Reverdy, Ashbery and Guest, Graham was not an art critic; but like them, he lived throughout his life as a “poet among painters.” From his first forays into poetry while living in Glasgow in 1940s, to the decades he spent in the environs of the “artists’ colony” at St Ives, his friendship circles read like a Who’s Who of mid-century British modernist painting: initially Jankel Adler, Sven Berlin, Robert Colquhoun, Benjamin Creme, Robert Frame, Robert MacBryde, and John Minton; later Roger Hilton, Peter Lanyon, Alan Lowndes, Bryan Wynter (and to a lesser degree Wilhemina Barnes-Graham, Terry Frost, Patrick Heron, Karl Weschke, Nancy Wynne-Jones).⁵ He himself was quick to downplay the impact this had on his work, telling Tony Lopez (author of the first PhD, and later monograph, dedicated to his work): “I have lived beside some writers and artists in my life but searching in my work I do not think they have been of any influence. I have never come near being part of a movement or group (not that I am necessarily against that but that is how it was).”⁶ Nevertheless, both his poems and his thinking about poetry—be it in statements on poetics, in letters, or in the poems themselves—suggest otherwise. Even his lifelong insistence in conceiving of language as the *medium* for poetry bears the mark of mid-century British modernist painting and sculpture, whether in the work of post-cubist figurative painters such as Colquhoun and MacBryde, neo-romantic painters such as Minton and Wynter, or artists working at the thresholds of figuration and abstraction, notably Hilton and Lanyon. As Robert Frame, one of his artist contemporaries, said of the young Graham: his work was characterized by his “feeling for the medium”, inspired by his artist interlocutors’ “acute sensitivity to the *matière*.”⁷

Graham’s relation to the visual and plastic arts is multifaceted: he was a proficient artist himself, producing numerous small-scale works (largely drawings of friends and figures from his poems, but with some abstracts); and, an apprentice draughtsman in the shipyards of Clydeside in his teens, he

⁵ This is all documented in David Whittaker, *Give my Your Painting Hand: W.S. Graham in Cornwall* (Charlbury: Wavestone Press, 2015).

⁶ Letter to Tony Lopez, 30 March 1981, in *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters of W.S. Graham* ed. Michael and Margaret Snow (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), 366. As various critics have noted, his artist friends were themselves also resistant to being lumped together in a “school.” Lopez’s monograph was published in 1989.

⁷ Robert Frame, “W.S. Graham at Sandyford Place.” *Edinburgh Review* 75 (February 1987), 60-65, 62-63.

later made calligraphic copies of his poems as presents for friends. And yet, while other poets of his generation experimented with the visual arrangement of the poem on the page, he remained resolutely with a linear rather than tabular page, and became increasingly committed to “the ever-present metronome in verse.”⁸ If his conversations with his artist peers drew him back to the specificity of his verbal medium, they at the same time led to a reflection on their shared artistic calling: “the poet or painter steers his life to main / Himself somehow for the job”, as he puts it in a poem addressed to Lanyon, “The Thermal Stair”.⁹ He becomes a poet of artistic community, but also of the aspirations of art as such. There are two further features of Graham’s relation to his artist peers that this essay will parse: firstly, his adoption of a conceptual vocabulary made up of terms central to modernist painting and sculpture (most notably “abstract” and “construction”) into his own poetic idiolect. And, through Graham’s exploration of his medium, the poems inhabit the fissures between the *visual* and the *plastic*. These concerns—the artist’s “calling”, the conceptual vocabulary offered by modernist painting, and the fissures of the visual and the plastic within poetry’s verbal medium—will form the schema through which to evaluate the singular contribution of one of the major, if under-recognized, British poets of the last century.

Calling

The painter Alan Lowndes once quipped: “You know why painters like to have writers around? So they will write about them.”¹⁰ Although he did not specify which writers he had in mind, it would not be much of a stretch to surmise that he was thinking, at least in part, of Graham. Both were based in and around the artistic community centred on the Cornish fishing port of St Ives, which since Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth had moved there in the mid-30s had come to be recognized as the center of British modernist art production. Moreover, Graham is perhaps most famous for the elegies he wrote for four of the painters there: ‘The Voyages of Alfred Wallis’, ‘The Thermal Stair’ (to Peter Lanyon), ‘Lines on Roger Hilton’s Watch’, and ‘Dear Bryan Wynter’. The elegies to Lanyon, Hilton, and

⁸ “W.S. Graham comments”, in James Vinson (ed.) with D.L. Kirkpatrick, *Contemporary Poets* (London & Chicago: St James Press, 2nd ed., 1975, 575.

⁹ W.S. Graham, *New Collected Poems* ed. Matthew Francis (London: Faber, 2004), 164. Subsequent quotations in main text with abbreviation NCP.

¹⁰ Cited in Alison Oldham, *Everyone was Working*, 52-53 (from Norman Levine’s Catalog to the exhibition, *Alan Lowndes Paintings 1948-1978*, Penwith Galleries, 1979)

Wynter are particularly interesting as performances of intimacy: at once acts of private grief and public eulogy. The private and public axes of these poems can hardly be disentangled; part of the poems' testament of friendship lies in their shaping the artists' posterity, thereby setting up not only painter but poet as public figures.¹¹ Graham was already aware of this in an earlier address to Bryan Wynter, 'Wynter and the Grammarsow',¹² published in 1970 (Wynter died in 1975):

[...] Of course I try to separate
Any regard for you from the made
Object before me. Maybe in a kind
Of way it is legitimate to let
One's self be added to, to be moved
By both at once, by the idea
Of the person, and of the object
Adrift stationary in its Art law. (NCP 187)

However, it is most acutely the case in 'The Thermal Stair', written after Lanyon's death in 1964. The poem's first "publication" came in the form a reading Graham contributed to a BBC Radio program celebrating the life and work of Lanyon, which aired on 26 February 1965, six months after his death; as such, it is already bound up in a very public work of commemoration and critical appreciation. Such commemorative, critical work is equally operative within the poem itself, as intimate address gives on to a broader reflection on painterly and poetic making. The poem stages a dialogue between Lanyon and Graham, both as friends and in their roles as painter and poet, where they come to stand as archetypes of painting and poetry respectively. Their friendship, by virtue of art, becomes a public friendship, and

¹¹ Regarding the tension in Graham's work between the public-communicative and private-inward poet, see Natalie Pollard, *Speaking To You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. 49-52; Matthew Francis, *Where the People Are: Language and Community in the Poetry of W.S. Graham* (Cambridge: Salt, 2004); Peter Robinson, 'Dependence in the Poetry of W.S. Graham', in Robinson, *Twentieth Century Poetry: Selves and Situations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 69-98.

¹² "Grammersow" is a Cornish word for "woodlouse", and Graham had taken to using the word, with its demoticized spelling, to describe himself.

a friendship which outlives Lanyon's death. As the poem registers this, it reflects back not simply on the aspirations of "Art", but also on its own condition as work of language.

As a genre, elegy has long been especially concerned with the possibilities and limitations of poetry—its inability to overcome absence, mitigated by its work of memorialization and mourning, whereby it might create, in the poem itself, of a surrogate presence. "The Thermal Stair" is self-consciously elegaic in this regard. The poem's opening, "I called today, Peter, and you were away," twins the intimacy of everyday friendship with the programmatic *inventio* of classic elegy:¹³ he searches for a place from which "to speak and soar to you from". He "called" on his friend, but also called *to* his friend, and through this "call" seeks to reanimate in his language the no longer animate friend. In this, the poem aligns itself with those lyrics which "call to be calling", in Jonathan Culler's phrase: "both to display their poetic calling and to mark the belief that language can sometimes make things happen."¹⁴ Like Culler's "poetic calling", Graham here links the "call" as speech act to the "calling" of vocation—or, in this poem's less exalted vocabulary, the poet/artist's "job". In asking Lanyon to "Find me a thermal to speak and soar to you from" (NCP 164), Graham alludes to Lanyon's 1960 painting "Thermal", but also to his having taken up gliding in 1959: a painter always fascinated with the Cornish landscape, gliding gave Lanyon as a means of obtaining an aerial view on the land, but in becoming physical immersed in thermals and updraughts, came to understand atmospheric pressure with far greater acuity. This had a profound effect on the work he produced in the early 1960s, and led to some of the most powerful advances in British "weather" painting since J.M.W. Turner.¹⁵ But it had also led to his death, from injuries sustained after a crash landing of his glider. The thermal not only becomes a symbol of poetry's calling, but also of Lanyon's own calling.

Indeed, the conversation the poem goes on to stage is precisely about what it takes to be an artist, and to what end. As he continues:

The poet or painter steers his life to maim

¹³ This is echoed in his elegy to Wynter, which channels William Carlos Williams in stating "This is only a note / To say how sorry I am / You died." (NCP 258)

¹⁴ Jonathan Culler, "Why Lyric?" PMLA 123:1 (2008), 201-206, 204.

¹⁵ Margaret Garlake, *Peter Lanyon* (London: Tate Publishing, 1998), 67.

Himself somehow for the job. His job is Love
Imagined into words or paint to make
An object that will stand and will not move. (164)

Graham had first used the phrase “maimed for the job” in an early worksheet for his 1957 poem “The Dark Dialogues”,¹⁶ seven years before it found a home in “The Thermal Stair”—indicating that the poem was not simply a spontaneous response to Lanyon’s death, but the culmination of many years’ reflection on the vicissitudes of artistic vocation. It was a phrase he would regularly return to in the years to come: “I think my phrase in Lanyon’s poem is true although I can make fun of it. I mean I am ‘maimed for the job’;” “Here I am, Elizabeth, somehow ‘maimed for the job’, making my poetry up.” Similarly, he writes to his daughter: “I write the poetry that I have steered all my life into making.”¹⁷ That he calls this a “making” also refers back to “The Thermal Stair”: the aim is “to make / An object that will stand and will not move.”

The recurrence of these phrases in different permutations is indicative of how condensed Graham’s poetic idiolect had become by the mid-1960s, but also point to his multidimensional understanding of what was entailed by poetic “making”. The term “making” itself conjures up the Scottish tradition of the “makar”, and the etymological root of poetry in *poiesis*. Even the desire to create “An object that will stand” is, within this idiolect, an articulation of the poet’s vocation. Throughout his letters he describes a poem being successful when it “stands”: in 1943 he writes to his fellow Scottish poet Edwin Morgan that “three poems I mentioned earlier will stand with me I think,” in 1956 he tells Roger Hilton: “I’ve finished two poems that I think will stand.” And in 1970, again to Hilton: “I try to speak. I try to make an object which will stand.”¹⁸ “Stand” comes to signal the art object’s autonomy from the artist, or as he puts it in ‘Wynter and the Grammarsow’, “the object / Adrift stationary in its Art law.”

¹⁶ The lines of this early draft run: “I hope I do not write / Only for those few / Others like myself / Poets maimed for the job.” W.S. Graham Fonds, University of Victoria, File 20.

¹⁷ Letters to Ronnie Duncan, 31 October 1972, to Elizabeth Smart, 22 July 1973, to Rosalind Harris 24 May 1974 (*Nightfisherman* 266, 267, 278).

¹⁸ To Edwin Morgan, 22 September 1943 (*Nightfisherman*, 15); to Roger Hilton 13 December 1956 (*Nightfisherman*, 154); to Roger Hilton 13 June 1970 (*Nightfisherman*, 244).

In a review of *The Nightfishing*, the influential critic Donald Davie complained that Graham was aspiring to create “an artefact, not a communique.”¹⁹ He could admire the poetry’s success on these terms (“it is the making that counts, not what it is made of”), but he did not approve of such an aspiration. Whatever one thinks of Davie’s aesthetic affiliations, it was a perspicacious account of Graham’s project; as Graham wrote of the long poem ‘The Nightfishing’, in a 1955 letter to Alan Clodd, director of Enitharmon Press: “With all its mistakes and blemishes I think it is a knit object, an obstacle of communication, if you like, which has to be climbed over or gone round but not walked through.”²⁰ Davie’s complaint is not just that Graham produced aesthetic objects, but these objects were wilfully obscure, and for Graham there is an internal coherence between the two—its being “knit object” and “obstacle of communication”. His brief 1946 essay, ‘Notes on a Poetry of Release’, the only concerted statement on poetic craft he published, had made this clear: “language [...] is obstacle and vehicle at the same time.”²¹

In his letter to Clodd he continued: “I think it just might make its wee disturbance in the language.” The phrase “disturb the language” was something of an informal mantra for Graham, but the only time the word “disturbance” surfaces in his poetry is when describe the effect of Bryan Wynter’s painting:

SOUND a Wyntermade

Disturbance of what

We expect light to do.

Hold it Hold it CUT (NCP 186)

If poetry’s aspiration is to “disturb” the language through its making, painting disturbs light itself: its medium would be not just the plastic support, but the visual field as a whole.²² This surfaces in his

¹⁹ Donald Davie, ‘Three Poets’, *Dublin Magazine* 30:4 (1955), 38-40, 39.

²⁰ Letter to Alan Clodd, 9 February 1955. *Nightfisherman*, 141.

²¹ *Nightfisherman*, 380.

²² Around the time of composition of this poem, he wrote to Roger Hilton “The representational thought we superimpose onto the neverending flat plane must result in some disturbances which, at least to the painter, are a hieroglyph of a world with values we had never experienced before, an extra to one’s life, an addition to one’s range of sensitivity” (*Nightfisherman*, 219).

elegy to Lanyon also. Graham's initial sketch, 'On the Death of Lanyon', ends: "If he was a painter who was good I only / Know that because he disturbed the best in me."²³ By the final version this has been refigured as conversation in which Lanyon tells Graham

That words make their world
In the same way as the painter's
Mark surprises him
Into seeing new. (NCP 164)

Disturbance is now figured more gently as "surprise"; what was "Wyntermade" in 'Wynter and the Grammarsow' is here conceived of as made by word or visual mark. But in each case, what is "made" is not simply the artwork, but, for poetry, the "world" of words, and for painting, the possibilities of light and seeing. Poems, Lanyon teaches Graham, are not things made, but things that make. He then goes on to give an example:

You said "Here is the sea
Made by alfred wallis
Or any poet or painter's
Eye it encountered.
Or is it better made
By all those vesselled men
Sometime it maintained?
We all make it again." (NCP 165)

But the slippages in this passage seem to undermine the earlier confidence: "any poet or painter" is strangely diffident in its capaciousness, and then Lanyon suddenly shifts tack, to ask if the world is better made by seafarers than by artists (Alfred Wallis was both). At this juncture he seems to have

²³ W.S. Graham Fonds, University of Victoria, Notebook 3.

dissolved any claim to the singularity of artistic, let alone poetic, making. The consoling “We all” does little to resolve this problem.

One is reminded at this juncture of ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’ by Wallace Stevens, an abiding influence for Graham. As the poem reaches its climax, it finds itself torn between two claims for artistic “making”. On the one hand, the singer the poet-speaker and his companion observe

was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker.

This claim, however, is diluted almost immediately:

there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

In other words, her song makes not *the* world, but *her* world; “the world / In which she sang” is no longer an intersubjective, collectively inhabited world, but a place of solipsism.

Shortly afterwards, Stevens’s speaker observes the lights of the fishing village, which “portioned out the sea / Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles, / Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.”²⁴ The “blessed rage for order ... The maker’s rage to order words of the sea” is, it transpires, not the sole preserve of the poet-maker after all; as with Lanyon’s invocation of “those vesselled men”, it is the mastering of the sea which stands as the paradigmatic achievement of human “making”.

Stevens, like Graham, is left with the task of re-establishing the singularity of the poet’s making —of their vocation as *poietes*. Perhaps this explains the strikingly elevated diction that accompanies his description of the fishing village, with its punning “emblazoned zones”, the dense internal rhyming, and the way the prosodic prolongation of “arranging | deepening | enchanting” cuts against the largely

²⁴ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1960), 110-111.

iambic cadence that preceded it. As Lanyon in 'The Thermal Stair' puts it, the singularity of poetic making lies in words' capacity to "surprise[us] into seeing new." But where Stevens' poem thereby achieves some solace, Graham's is permeated by the anxiety that poetry will be unable to live up to its exalted task. In part, this arises from its elegiac awareness that the surrogate presence it creates will not stand in for the absence of the person addressed; however, it also operates within a broader reflection on the friendly but fraught rivalry between poet and painter. For painting offers a solidity that poetry lacks. "Give me your hand, Peter," he asks, "To steady me on the word." The poem continually puns on "air", at once the sky which Lanyon glided through, and insubstantial song. A buzzard in the sky "slides of the broken air"; the "early beam / Engine" of local tin mines "broke / The air with industry"; and finally: "Climb here where the hand / Will not grasp on air." This reaches its apotheosis in the final section, when he says: "give me your painting / Hand to steady me taking the word-road home" (NCP 164-65). "Give me your hand" as gesture of friendship and aid is transposed into a collaboration between painting and poetry. Or rather, painting comes to poetry's aid so that the poem is able to orient itself in its chosen medium: words.

At this juncture, Lanyon's person and painting does not simply stand as an example for Graham to emulate, as person and poet, in terms of the poet-artist's "calling;" his example necessitates a reflection on what kind of medium poetry itself is—and how the "painting hand" might steady his inhabiting of word and air. In a letter to Roger Hilton 7 November 1966, and thus around the time of the composition of 'The Thermal Stair', Graham plays on this locution: "Lend me your painting I (eye) for a mo that I might look through it and distinguish the significant shapes of my always personal world."²⁵ But between "eye" and "hand" lies the salient distinction between painting as *visual* art and as *plastic* art; and, as we shall see, it is painting's *plasticity* which is most powerful for Graham in poetry's attempts at "shaping" its world.

Construction-Abstraction

If this is made explicit in poems from the mid-1960s, then it was already being articulated two decades earlier. In the 'Notes on a Poetry of Release' Graham channels Stéphane Mallarmé's renowned *bon mot*,

²⁵ *Nightfisherman*, 206.

reported by Paul Valéry in his 1939 Oxford lecture ‘Poetry and Abstract Thought’, that “a poem is made of words, not of ideas.”²⁶

A poem is made of words and not of the expanding heart, the overflowing soul, or the sensitive observer. A poem is made of words. It is words in a certain order, good or bad by the significance of its addition to life and not to be judged by any other value put upon it by imagining how or why or by what kind of man it was made.²⁷

Graham thus aligns himself with a specific literary lineage—that of late-Romantic modernism incarnated by Mallarmé, but filtered through Eliot and Stevens in a British/Anglophone context. Not only is this avowedly “formalist” (a decade later he will describe the poem as a “formal construction”²⁸), but it treats words as the *material* out of which poems are made. The mantra “A poem is made of words” is contrasted overtly with whatever extra-verbal qualities might be deemed “poetic”: heart, soul, observation, its “values”, its creator, its “intention.” In this respect, ‘The Thermal Stair’, with its focus on the “maimed” artist whose job is “Love / Imagined into words or paint”, would signal a departure from the austere formalism of the ‘Notes on a Poetry of Release’: technical virtuosity has in the meantime developed into a sense of vocation.

Graham’s assertion that words are the poem’s material support goes beyond the kind of formalism he might have picked up from Valéry, however. His own compositional practices attended to the thingness of the words themselves, as he was mulling on what “certain order” they might take. Ben Nicholson wrote to the critic Herbert Read in 1944 that “Graham’s method of working at his writing seems like my method of working at my painting,”²⁹ though he does not specify what these methods would be. The painter Robert Frame, who lived with Graham in a collective of artists in Sandyford

²⁶ Paul Valéry, ‘Poetry and Abstract Thought’, in *The Art of Poetry* trans. Denise Folliot (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 52-81, 57.

²⁷ ‘Notes on a Poetry of Release’, in *The Nightfisherman*, 379-383; 380. He had written “POETRY’S MADE OF WORDS” in a letter to his friend and early supporter William Montgomerie, dated 20 August 1944, two years before the publication of the ‘Notes’. The shift from “poetry” to “a poem” is one further indication of his insistence on the thingliness of the poem.

²⁸ *Nightfisherman*, 163. Angela Leighton reads Graham’s entire practice through the prism of the poem as formal construction in *On Form*, esp. 219ff.

²⁹ Quoted in Chris Stephens, “Introduction” to *The Constructed Space* exhibition catalogue (Ilkley, 1994), n.p.

Place, Glasgow, in 1942, and would provide drawings for his first collection, 'Cage Without Grievance', offers a more detailed account of Graham's "method":

In preparation for the final draught [*sic*] of his poem, he liked to compile long lists of words; these were taken from dictionaries and thesauruses or from memory: they were usually typed out, one word below another. These lists of words were the bricks from which the finished work was constructed. As poems are made not from great ideas, fine sentiments or powerful observations, but from words, it followed logically that, in the poet's technique, words had to come first.³⁰

It appears that this practice endured throughout his writing life. In a letter to Robin Skelton, a friend and perhaps his greatest patron, dated 8 December 1972 (three decades after the time of Frame's recollection), he writes of his poem-in-progress 'A Dream of Crete' that "it covers nearly my whole wall and really has to be hacked to pieces and put together again half the size."³¹

The fact that Frame incorporates almost wholesale the phraseology of 'Notes on a Poetry of Release' indicates not only that Frame was well acquainted with that text, but also that the ideas guiding the 'Notes' were already being worked out during that period, during Graham's first forays as a poet. And in this regard, Frame is in no doubt of the importance of Graham's exposure to the compositional practices of the visual artists he was friends with. He continues:

Perhaps this method could be related to Surrealism, an artistic movement much in the air in England in the forties. Devices like verbal automatism and the free play of the unconscious are used consistently by the Surrealists; in Sydney's case the emphasis was altered, to borrow a term from painting, by a "feeling for the medium", just as a painter's feeling is for the quality of his paint. These ideas might well have derived from the conversation and example of our mutual

³⁰ Frame, "W.S. Graham at Sandyford Place", 62.

³¹ *The Nightfisherman*, 266. He will then write of another (ultimately unfinished) poem, 'With the Dulle Griet in Canada': "it has great possibilities and it's got to the stage of being on the wall" (Letter to Skelton, 30 January 1975, *The Nightfisherman* 287).

friend, Jankel Adler, whose most outstanding virtue as a painter was his acute sensitivity to the *matière* (as the French call it) and the extraordinary imagination with which he used it.³²

For Frame, it is Adler's "acute sensitivity to the *matière*" that had most impact on Graham; this would lead not to an adoption of the techniques Adler employed himself, but rather to a corresponding sensitivity to a very different *matière*. Frame points to one of the guiding paradoxes of Graham's poetry, and perhaps the key to understanding the interrelation between his work and that of the artists he was close to: on the one hand, Graham insisted on the peculiarities of poetry as a *verbal* art; on the other, he adopted practices from visual/plastic arts, both where they provided analogies in order to conceive of language as artistic support, and where they might offer means of exploring the possibilities and limits of this support. In other words, his reflections on medium-specificity arise out of a long engagement with artists working in a very different medium, and take place simultaneously through attending to points both of convergence and of mutual incommensurability.

But how are we to gauge such points of convergence and incommensurability? When Lanyon tells Graham that "words make their world / In the same way as the painter's / Mark surprises him / Into seeing new," this "In the same way" is neither questioned nor elucidated. It has been a commonplace in Graham criticism to attempt to propose a strong analogy between Graham's aesthetic development, and the work of the painters he was close to. His friend of the late 1940s, Sven Berlin, observed in Graham a "sculptural vision—a need to get behind images and words seeing them all round and through to the other side," which he attributed to "the result of living near visual artists and stone cutters."³³ Berlin, himself a sculptor, and was writing of 1949's *The White Threshold*, when he identified this "sculptural vision"; most subsequent criticism has focused in on painting, and concerns Graham's poetry from the 1950s onward.

Neil Corcoran is one of many to treat this in terms of figuration and abstraction:

³² Frame, 62-63.

³³ Berlin, *The Coat of Many Colours*, 144.

Graham spent most of his later life in Cornwall, among a community of artists who, beginning as figurative painters, gradually moved towards abstraction (without necessarily, in all cases, wholeheartedly or permanently embracing it). ... Their move away from figuration towards self-reflexively “painterly” values, towards a primary concentration on the material itself and the material’s behaviour, undoubtedly influenced Graham’s own linguistic experiments.³⁴

Similarly, for Ralph Pite, Graham “shared with the painters a concern with work in which abstract and figurative meet; that is, in which the medium (paint or language) encounters ‘something other than itself’—a landscape or the selfhood of the artist or the ‘effects which [...] things produced.’”³⁵ Pite then goes on to see Graham’s poem ‘Hilton Abstract’ as “join[ing] urgency with cool, the adolescent’s hot blood with aloof intellectuality, philandering with unworldliness” and in this regard not only reflects Hilton’s rather tempestuous personality, but also “repeats the tension and contention of post-war abstract art.”³⁶ Peter Maber also attempts to identify such analogues, only with regard to Wynter rather than Hilton:

By 1956 Wynter’s painting had eschewed all explicit traces of representation, characterised by its all-over chains of brushstrokes with no specific focal point, so that the viewing eye is left to wander; then, around 1960, landscape traces returned to his canvasses, but in abstracted, element states that can never be categorically pinned down. Complexity and directness engage in an ongoing debate, one sometimes leading to the other, while at another moment seeming

³⁴ Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940*, 49-50. Ned Gooding remarks a comparable shift in Roger Hilton’s painting, starting in 1957—the year after he met Graham and relocated from London to Cornwall. This later work exhibits “greater openness of his composition from 1957 on—a more atmospheric and aerial, or aquatic, pictorial space, a kind of weather.” Cited in Oldham, 69.

³⁵ Ralph Pite, ‘Abstract, Real and Particular: Graham and Painting’, in Pite and Hester Jones (eds.), *W.S. Graham: Speaking Towards You* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 67.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 68.

mutually exclusive terms. These are precisely the polarities and convergences that Graham's poem [Wynter and the Grammarow], and even his poetry as a whole, negotiates."³⁷

For both, Graham's work becomes a kind of latent art criticism, interiorizing the problematics of his contemporaries' painting into verse. W.N. Herbert, by contrast, argues that Graham has adopted the techniques of his peers, and their forerunners: "Like the cubists with perspective, he reduces the referential play of language, the recessional space in which narrators strut and landscapists shape, to a deft area of echoes, perfumes, keys and janglings, that will allow us only infuriating glimpses round its shoulders."³⁸ This would imply that Graham's debt to painterly abstraction contradicts what Charles Altieri identified in modernist American poets, where "[t]he crucial question ... is not whether poetry can adapt the same principles of formal syntax that the painters employed, but whether it can respond in its own ways to the transformations of ethos and agency made possible by locating the semantic force of the work in the qualities of authorial action to which the work becomes testimony."³⁹ For Herbert, it is precisely a question of adapting this syntax. This relation is further complicated by Graham's own description of his 1955 poem 'The Constructed Space': "It is meant to be as 'abstract' as I can make it, unvisual in its images and suggesting no place or atmosphere."⁴⁰ When abstraction is displaced from painting to poetry, it abstracts away from the visual as such: it is something adopted from cubist treatments of perspective, perhaps, but subsequently displaced away from the visual field the cubists explored.

Herbert's denial of "recessional space" in Graham's poetry, however, overlooks both the openness of Graham's linguistic play, and the continual commitment to place elsewhere in his poetry—both the place set up by the poem, and the places the poem inhabits. As Graham puts it in a late

³⁷ Maber, "Strange to Language": WS Graham's Bryan Wynter and the Problematics of Verbal-Visual Communication', 38. In another article on Graham and the St Ives School, Maber also seeks out analogies of stylistic resemblance: "We might find a parallel between the poem's ['Hilton Abstract'] repeated lines and the repeated figures which recur time and again in Hilton's paintings of the period; such repetition might also be said to draw attention to the surface of the poem, to its physical reality on the page, and to its artificiality—providing still further points of connection with Hilton. [...] Just as Hilton's flat surfaces begin to recede and project, and his forms to soften and to move, so Graham's form melts and his textures vary." ("The poet or painter steers his life to maim': WS. Graham and the St Ives modernist school." *Word & Image* 25:3 (2009), 258-71, 264)

³⁸ Herbert, 'The Breathing Words', *Edinburgh Review* 75 (1987), 101-02.

³⁹ Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (CUP, 1989), 223.

⁴⁰ Letter to Alan Clodd, 9 February 1955. *Nightfisherman*, 143.

interview, he aspires in his poems “to make a place at that time where you can feel more truly *in*.”⁴¹ In these respects Graham would seem closer in spirit to Lanyon, whose work Patrick Heron identified as an attempt “to reconcile the shallow space of Cubism with the infinite depths of landscape.”⁴²

Heron’s observation can help situate Graham’s poetics within a broader set of debates in postwar modernist art theory. When Corcoran sees the St Ives painters’ to be turn to abstract to involve “a primary concentration on the material itself”, he is effectively echoing the account Clement Greenberg gives of modernist painting in general.⁴³ Graham’s artist peers, however, never did fully subscribe to the work of those painters Greenberg advocated.⁴⁴ In the mid-1950s, the moment of greatest artistic upheaval for these painters, Heron wrote: “the illusionistic operation of any image recorded on a flat surface is painting’s inherent magic, its unique power. [...] The merest scratch of a line on a white surface induces sensations of recession—of an imagined form advancing out of or falling back through the place where the marked white surface stands.”⁴⁵ The refusal to choose between abstraction or figuration issues from this belief that no mark on a flat surface leaves the surface intact. As Pite puts it, “the medium (paint or language) encounters ‘something other than itself’”, and it is precisely the exposure to something “other” that distinguishes “medium” from *matière*. Medium, as its etymology suggests, entails mediation. Heron saw this as the point at which he and his peers in St Ives were out of sync with the Abstract Expressionist. Of the Tate Gallery’s 1956 exhibition, “Modern Art in the United States,” which introduced Rothko, De Kooning, Kline and others to British audiences for the first time (Pollock had been shown at the ICA in 1953), Heron wrote: “I was fascinated by their

⁴¹ Interview: “I Would Say I Was a Happy Man” (with John Haffenden), *Poetry Review* 76 nos. 1/2 (1986), 67-74. cf. Peter Lanyon, “I paint places but always the Placeness of them,” from a letter to Paul Feiler, 1952. In *Peter Lanyon, 1918-1964*, 125.

⁴² Heron, quoted in the Hayward Gallery catalogue *Peter Lanyon: Air, Land, Sea* (London: South Bank Centre, 1992), 6.

⁴³ Clement Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting’, in *The Collected Essays and Criticism vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* ed. John O’Brian (U Chicago Press, 1993), 87

⁴⁴ See Pite, 66-67.

⁴⁵ Patrick Heron, “Space in Contemporary Painting and Architecture,” in *The Changing Forms of Art* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), 46.

consistent denial of illusionistic depth, which goes against all my own instincts as a painter. Also, there was an absence of relish in the *matière* as an end in itself, an absence of worked-up paint quality.”⁴⁶

What is at issue, then, is a matrix of questions concerning not just abstraction and figuration, but also relations of surface and depth, of material and illusion, of different levels of space and of referentiality. This provides a backdrop for two of the central terms in Graham’s conceptual vocabulary: *construction* and *abstract*. Graham had taken to calling his poems constructions by 1942, writing to Montgomerie first, “The poet must make use of the ‘inner word’ but with it construct carefully and certainly,” and a few months later, “I construct in sound.”⁴⁷ At this juncture, the word “construction” was for artists most associated with the works in perspex produced by Naum Gabo.⁴⁸ Yet Graham might just as easily have taken the word “construction” from his experience as an apprentice engineer in the Greenock shipyards during his teens. In his ‘Notes on a Poetry of Release’ he intimates as much. Not only is the poem to be thought formalistically as “a successful construction of words,” but the poet should “be the labourer carrying the bricks of his time and on the scaffolding of an unknown construction.”⁴⁹ Berlin notes that Graham, like himself but also like Gabo, had been a trainee engineer, and considered this integral to his “sculptural vision.”⁵⁰

Nevertheless, the enduring importance of “construction” in Graham’s poetic vocabulary bears the imprint of Gabo. Lanyon had himself taken to making “constructions” as studies for his paintings from the mid 1940s, and wrote of Gabo’s “space construction” that they “construct space—and it is space that interests me.”⁵¹ Graham too put together an installation of constructions for a reading he

⁴⁶ Heron, ‘The Americans at the Tate Gallery’, in Mel Gooding (ed.), *Painter as Critic. Patrick Heron: Selected Writings* (London: Tate Publishing, 1998), 102. He would later write: “the fact is that our attitude of indifference to American art came to an abrupt end in January, 1956: and it was the contents of a single room at the Tate Gallery that did the trick—a mere canvas or two apiece by Rothko, Still, De Kooning, Tobey, Pollock, Motherwell and Kline, principally.” Heron, ‘Influences and Affinities: Americans at the ICA / Tobey, Wynter and César’ (1958), *ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁷ *The Nightfisherman*, 17, 21.

⁴⁸ Graham is likely to have met Gabo in St Ives around 1943-44: Gabo was there for the duration of the Second World War, at the invitation of Nicholson and Hepworth; Graham was living nearby, and in contact with Nicholson, from 1943.

⁴⁹ *The Nightfisherman*, 379, 381. The construction is “unknown” insofar as, Graham argues, “The poet does not write what he knows but what he does not know” (*Nightfisherman* 380). Here we hear an echo of Stephen Dedalus forging out of the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of his race, though Graham, very suspicious of McDiarmid and Scots Nationalism, would not have sanctioned such collectivizing claims for his poetry.

⁵⁰ Berlin, 73, 144.

⁵¹ Andrew Lanyon (ed.), *Peter Lanyon: 1918-1964* (Newlyn, 1990), 280.

gave at Newlyn Art Gallery in 1960.⁵² Gabo's constructions were also crucial to Heron's understanding on pictorial, as well as sculptural, abstraction. Not only do they "brilliantly pursue the definition of a concept in terms of space, and space only,"⁵³ but they ultimately allow him to go on to argue that illusion is "the sensation of a spatial configuration existing behind (and occasionally in front of) the surface of the picture." As such, abstraction "is inseparable from the sense of space," and "space is the 'medium' in terms of which any pictorial configuration has its being."⁵⁴

In the same year as Heron's article, Graham was composing 'The Constructed Space'. The poem bears uncanny resemblance in its lexis to Heron and Lanyon's writing, describing its eponymous "space" as an

abstract scene

Stretching between us. This is a public place

Achieved against subjective odds and then

Mainly an obstacle to what I mean. (NCP 162)

Where Heron and Lanyon are concerned with pictorial space, Graham's is a "space" of communication. Here again, Graham takes up the conceptual framework of 'Notes for a Poetry of Release': language is "vehicle" in constructing this space, but the space is "obstacle" to the communication itself. Whereas Davie's criticism of Graham supposes "artefact" and "communique" as mutually exclusive, here they operate in dynamic interplay. Graham takes communication too seriously to reduce it to a communique. Similarly, when he asks "what lonely meanings are read / Into the space we make", there is an echo of the 'Notes': meanings are "read / Into" our speech through the "space" that is opened up by our speaking. As he put it in the earlier piece, "The poem is the replying chord to the reader. It is the reader's involuntary reply."⁵⁵ But now the "chord" has become a "silence":

I say this silence or, better, construct this space

⁵² *Nightfisherman*, photo 17, before p. 181.

⁵³ Heron, "Space in Contemporary Painting and Architecture," 43.

⁵⁴ Heron, 46.

⁵⁵ *Nightfisherman*, 381.

So that somehow something may move across

The caught habits of language to you and me.

This will become a recurring figure in Graham's mature poetry. In 'Approaches to How They Behave' (also published in the 1970 collection *Malcolm Mooney's Land*, but written in the late 1960s), he writes of "Having to construct the silence first / To speak out on" (182).

The dynamics of construction have now been displaced onto the problematic of communication: what is "constructed" is the space in which we communicate, an "abstract scene" opened up by an "abstract act." Indeed, a notebook from the period suggests that the poem's initial title was "The Abstract Space".⁵⁶ Within this "abstract scene", we will then read meaning into words put there by another, will draw sound from out of the silences between us. This then suggests a further analogy with painterly abstraction: where for Heron, Hilton, Lanyon, Wynter, and others, pictorial abstraction signified a shift from representing figures within the field of the visual to a study of the emergence of the field of the visual as such, Graham's poetic abstraction moves away from individual acts of meaning-making towards charting the emergence of the field in which meaning-making takes place.⁵⁷

Such abstraction belongs to the medium of poetry in two senses: language as a material resource (its syntactic, lexical, phonological structure and so forth), and the "caught habits" of linguistic communication, be it our sociality or particular generic features of poetry.⁵⁸ What is most provocative in this regard is that in his letters Graham aligns poetic abstraction with *meter*. A notebook sent to Wynter in November 1958 contains the reminder:

⁵⁶ W.S. Graham Fonds, University of Victoria, Notebook 1. It will only have been changed when the third stanza was added.

⁵⁷ Here, in fact, is a further discrepancy from Altieri's account. Altieri sees abstraction to involve a return to "the structuring activity of the artist" (Altieri, 38), but for Graham, the agency is displaced onto a language that is *abstracted away* from intentions, so that meaning is

⁵⁸ Indeed, a 1949 notebook indicates that Graham's focus on the "abstract" in poetry was filtered through his reading of Wallace Stevens's "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" as much as his responses to abstract painting: here he intones to himself: "It Must Be Abstract." Graham, 'From a 1949 Notebook, given to Elizabeth Smart in the 1950s', in *Edinburgh Review* 75 (1987), 25-36, 32.

I remember that always somewhere under the live and speaking idiom of the Voice in poetry there is the count, the beats you can count on your fingers. Yes always under the shout and whimper and the quick and the slow of poetry there is the formal construction of time made abstract in the mind's ear. And the strange thing is that that very abstract dimension in the poem is what creates the reader's release into the human world of another.⁵⁹

That which creates intimacy, which allows the individual "Voice" to speak, is the "formal construction of time made abstract". To Ruth Hilton (wife of Roger) on 24 January 1966 he makes a similar claim: "Art expression is a voice between two things. Abstract formality and the very human gesture. And one doesn't work without the other."⁶⁰ And, when asked to comment on his poetics in 1974, he writes: "Although I love the ever-present metronome in verse, I am greedy for my rhythmic say. The gesture of speech often exists, moving seemingly counter to the abstract structure it is in."⁶¹ Jeremy Noel-Tod has suggested that Graham's use of the line-break should be understood as emerging out of his close connection with the St Ives painters: "Appropriately for a poet who lived so long among artists, the line-breaks of Graham's later work draw attention to themselves with a graphic and even plastic force, in order to draw a live individual out of the mountain of 'almost physical language'."⁶² What Noel-Tod sees happening in line-breaks I would apply to meter more generally: it is when the line-break points to a prosodic pattern not subordinated to semantic emphasis, after all, where it attains an autonomy to shape speech rather than merely be shaped from out of speech, thereby disclosing its "plastic force".

Language is a "plastic" medium in two senses. On the one hand, it is "almost physical"; but on the other it is characterized by a protean capacity for being reshaped, reworked, and reshaping and reworking in turn. At those moments when "the formal construction of time made abstract" surfaces inside a "live and speaking idiom", we are alerted to both forms of plasticity. This is central to one of the most distinctive features of Graham's "rhythmic say": the way that stanzas come to rest in iambic cadence. Thus, when he writes in 'The Thermal Stair' that—

⁵⁹ *Nightfisherman*, 162.

⁶⁰ *Nightfisherman*, 197.

⁶¹ "W.S. Graham comments", in Vinson (ed.), *Contemporary Poets*, 575.

⁶² Jeremy Noel-Tod, "'So, Farewell / Then': W.S. Graham, E.J. Thribb, and the Shaping Line-Break", *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 4.1 (2012), 23-32, 30.

The poet or painter steers his life to maim

Himself somehow for the job. His job is Love

Imagined into words or paint to make

An object that will stand and will not move.

—we should note how the final line, “An object that will stand and will not move”, resolves into pentameter.⁶³ Similarly, the closing statement of ‘The Constructed Space’: “Yet here I am / More truly now this abstract act become”. In the former, the object’s ability to “stand”—its autonomy from its author, its objecthood—is secured by the abstract patterns of meter; in the latter, the insistence on “abstraction” is echoed in its metrical resolution (here made more conspicuous by the syntactic inversion that both facilitates this pattern, and is exacted by this pattern). At such moments, as he puts it in ‘Approaches to How They Behave’, “I / Was tripped and caught into the whole / Formal scheme which Art is” (NCP 182). What poetry takes from painterly abstraction is twofold: its awareness that Art itself is a “formal scheme”, and the need for any such scheme to emerge out of the specific materials of a medium at once verbal and plastic.

Plastic and visual

Whereas his painter contemporaries were turning to abstraction in order to “disturb[] ... what / We expect light to do,” Graham used abstraction in poetry to grasp the sites of communication. His resources were “unvisual images” and the “count” of meter. This points to two kinds of analogy with painting and sculpture: firstly, that where painting/sculpture turns to abstraction to explore the modalities of vision, Graham’s abstraction concerns the modalities of communication; secondly, that Graham adopts from painting/sculpture an attentiveness to the plasticity of his medium—viz., words. However, when Graham was experimenting with “visual ideas of Kandinsky’s deep seaweed ribbon

⁶³ Interestingly, in his instructions on reading this poem aloud to Anthony Astbury, he says the delivery should remain “easy like casual speech,” indicating that the irruption of metrical cadence should never wholly give up its “live and speaking idiom.” Letter not dated, though the reading was 5 November 1977. Greville Press Archive, Brotherton Library, Leeds University, Box 15.

painting”;⁶⁴ abstract painting’s treatment of the visual suddenly itself became a resource for poetry, and Graham started experimenting with ekphrastic description. All that ultimately made it into publication was the line “Kandinsky’s luminous worms” (NCP 251), from ‘Implements in their Places’ (1970-72), but in his manuscript sketches show the extent to which Graham worked through a set of verbal motifs, before deciding, as he told Clodd, that it “came to nought.”⁶⁵

What kind of ekphrasis is this? “Deep seaweed ribbon painting” might suggest a specific work (although Kandinsky titled no painting thus); alternatively, it might indicate a particular style of Kandinsky painting, and hence constitute what John Hollander has termed “notional ecphrasis.”⁶⁶ One undated draft puts together the following image:

The choir of urchins and the sea-stars sing
From their dark ledges and Kandinsky’s ribbons
Of weed with yellow follicles lean with the moon.⁶⁷

Another worksheet from the same file, however, describes “a black / Ribbon of weed with follicles / Influenced by Kandinsky’s eye”: which would indicate that Kandinsky is being deployed to provide a general “visual idea”, rather than the poem incorporating specific motifs from a specific work. Skelton dates these to approximately 1968. If so, the first extant Kandinsky worksheet is from a draft for ‘Malcolm Mooney’s Land’ (dated 5 February 1965). This evokes

The skiller pack
Viciously after the tongues of the great sound
Starfish, urchins, electric plankton dredged
Up from Kandinsky’s pressured trench.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Letter to Alan Clodd, 5 February 1970, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 12468/7

⁶⁵ Letter to Clodd, 5 February 1970.

⁶⁶ Hollander, *The Gazer’s Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago UP, 1995), 4.

⁶⁷ W.S. Graham Fonds, University of Victoria, File 20, undated. The sketch is given the name ‘Kandinsky’s Ribbons’ by Robin Skelton, and published first in *Aimed at Nobody: Poems from Notebooks* (reprinted in NCP 304).

⁶⁸ National Library of Scotland, Acc. 12468/7

But here too, “Kandinsky’s pressured trench” could imply either a specific painting, or a more generic repertoire. Either way, it is striking that Graham’s response to Kandinsky’s abstract work is to identify individual figures, something which seems to contravene his earlier poetics.

These Kandinsky sketches resurface throughout Graham’s letters and worksheets of the late 1960s and early 70s. A letter from January 1966 is interrupted with the evocation of “Electric plankton. Gigantic microcosm. Speckled colliding nebulae. The little shocks in the labyrinths of the silent areas. Kandinsky’s dredge from the nether deep.”⁶⁹ Then, also in 1966, a manuscript draft sees him experimenting with several variations of the phrase “a nest / Of electric creatures from / Kandinsky’s deepsea dredge”.⁷⁰ Graham has two draft poems under the title ‘Kandinsky and Cousin Bridget’ in 1966-67, the latter of which ends by describing the sky as “like a hoisted deep / Sea dredge of creatures”, an image then taken up in the (again unpublished) poem ‘Beginnings Idiom Invention’. Here

the lit sky
Looking down swings over
Us like a hoisted deep
Sea dredge of creatures.

An even more concerted description survives in a letter to Roger Hilton which, although undated, is estimated by the editors of *The Nightfisherman* to be from late 1969 or early 1970:

From a deepsea sac Kandinsky dumped
His individual trawl. A list. Certain
Sea-stars, frail urchins from lost ledges,
Yellow-follicled weeds which only waved
From far above, sad horses from twenty
Fathoms down, long-pronged darlings

⁶⁹ Letter to Ruth Hilton, 24 January 1966. *Nightfisherman*, 196

⁷⁰ National Library of Scotland, MS. 26019.

Of their dark territory, frilled worms
Of light, moving cucumbers who are not
Sex symbols, and printed ribbons of gigantic
Weed which are even saying something on their
Own, torn-off anemones, their frills
Still waving in the air, and some small fish
Maybe who have not been blown up by the
Changed pressure [...].⁷¹

The closest Graham comes to completing these is in the poem ‘The Dredge’, although this too remained unpublished during his lifetime. This poem starts:

With you present I empty out
The deep-sea dredge. Is there any
Creature which interests you? You
Must watch your feet and put this down
In your life-book and begin

A new curiosity. On this deck
A knot of seaweeds and creatures
Squirms. Kandinsky’s micro worms
Are still alive under the weed
To nose out at us two who read. (NCP 305)

As the sketches accumulate, we see Graham circling round the same motifs and gestures, revising and reworking, searching for alternative points of entry to the painting, or ways of incorporating the painting into a broader poem. Throughout, he employs a logic of figuration—and in

⁷¹ *Nightfisherman*, 236.

various senses. First of all, there is description: Kandinsky's painting becomes a "sac" in which is deposited a whole "trawl" (or "tranch", or "sea-trench", or "deepsea dredge") of "starfish, urchins, electric plankton"; of "electric creatures"; of "urchins ... sea-stars ... "ribbons / Of weed with yellow follicles"; of "Sea-stars, frail urchins ... Yellow-follicled weeds ... sad horses ... frilled worms / Of light... cucumbers... ribbons of gigantic / Weed ... torn-off anenomes ... some small fish / Maybe"; of "seaweeds and creatures ... micro worms". Further worksheet sketches describe "this streaming heap, iodine / Acrid", "brittle stars, / A beast on broken stilts ... A torn tentacle tip," and even a "black angler" and the "line" (presumably of a fishing rod) that "comes in / Quivering from the floor of the main."⁷² Figuration here operates through resemblance, indeed through metaphorization, attempting to bring these abstract configurations of line, shape and color. This is a language far removed from the "unvisual ... images" of "The Constructed Space".

Indeed, the visualization here is not restricted to the individual figures; Graham also attempts to place them within a recognizable scene. And here we find a second logic of figuration, at the level of narrative. In addition to describing what is in the painting, and even creating a scene that places these figures into relation within that painting, Graham employs different strategies of deixis and narration to situate the poem as speech act: "Remember," starts one draft, in imperative voice to an indeterminate reader-addressee; "Kandinsky dumped," starts another, constructing a narrative of the act of placing all these figures onto canvas, so that the contents of the "trawl" are transfigured into paint, then refigured into verse. And finally, "With you present I empty out / The deep-sea dredge": at once address and narration, and where the "I" itself becomes indeterminate, hinged between painter, describer, and inhabitant of the painting, turning to speak to the addressee only by way of this painting—a painting which by now is as much poetic invention as pre-existing artwork.

However, the development of the motifs across these different sketches also indicates a third kind of figural logic at work: that of *contiguity*. There are some metonymic substitutions from one draft to the next (planktons become creatures become worms; electric becomes luminous), but for the most part the substitutions proceed through sonic and verbal slippage: "dredged up" from the "tranch" becomes "sea-trench", then "trawl", then "deepsea dredge"; "pressured tranch" is expanded into

⁷² WS Graham Fonds, University of Victoria, File 20.

“towering pressures of the sea-trench” and then further into “have not been blown up by the / Changed pressure”; “tongues” resurfaces aurally in “long-pronged”, as “dredge” does in “lost ledges”, and as “skiller”, “brittle”, “stilts” and “frilled” do in “frills / Still”. In ‘The Dredge’ itself, it is at those moments where the lines most resemble a “list” of the various images that the poem’s verbal-vocal density is most conspicuous, rhyming “squirms” with “worms” and then “weed” with “read”. The final line of the second stanza of ‘The Dredge’ also gestures towards an iambic cadence, one further instance of metrical resolution in Graham’s verse practice: “To nose out at us two who read.” As generative metrists have long demonstrated, verse lines made up entirely of monosyllables have a particular metrical indeterminacy, always admitting of alternative interactions of weak and strong syllables.⁷³ To read “To **nose** out at us **two** who **read**” as tetrameter would be to endow the abstract formality of the meter with an agency over the words’ voicing. The words are plastic both in the sense of insisting on their physicality, and in the sense of shaping and being shaped in turn.

The drafts thus translate abstractions into figures, thereby charting the emergence of these images into the visual register of description; in so doing, they also perform the emergence of a field of linguistic sounding. Again, the visual opens on the plastic: the poem’s speaker and addressee cease to “watch” the creatures and start, instead, to “read” them. These “creatures” are, he says in ‘Kandinsky’s Ribbons’, “Your medium”, and indeed what Kandinsky ultimately offers Graham is one further point of entry for the abiding concern of his poetics: how to grasp language as a plastic medium for poetry.

Can this also be said of Graham’s only published poem to adopt the conventions of ekphrasis,⁷⁴ ‘The Found Picture’ (NCP 238-240)? The picture in question “is of the Early Italian School / And not great, a landscape / Maybe illustrating a fable”,⁷⁵ though it soon becomes clear that it does indeed illustrate a fable: Adam and Eve discovering their nudity immediately after tasting the apple. Graham’s interest is in Adam and Eve’s awareness that they are being watched, and their attempts to hide from a God who observes them whilst “hiding” from view himself. This latter is of especial

⁷³ See Natalie Gerber, ‘Stress-Based Metrics Revisited: A Comparative Exercise in Scansion Systems and their Implications for Iambic Pentameter’, *Thinking Verse* III (2013), 131-168.

⁷⁴ Thurston and Alderman see this as a further instance of “notional ekphrasis” (*Reading Postwar British and Irish Poetry* (Chichester: Wiley, 2014), 121); however, it is no more clear that this is *not* based on a specific painting than it is. As with the Kandinsky sketches, Graham seems to be playing on the indeterminacy between the two.

⁷⁵ Its first two proposed titles were ‘Of the Early Italian School’, in a letter to Bryan Wynter, 25 September 1974, (*Nightfisherman*, 280) and ‘About 1500 Artist Unknown’, in February 1975 (W.S. Graham Fonds, University of Victoria, File 16). The poem enters into final draft stage around January 1976.

fascination: insofar as the picture gives figural form for something abstract—God—it is doing something akin (at the level of technique, if not theology) to Graham’s own Kandinsky sketches.

In his ekphrasis, Graham does not simply behold and describe the picture, but sets up a matrix of beholding. At one level of beholding, Adam and Eve “turn / Slowly toward each other”; at a further level they “are aware” of being watched by “A third creature”, and “turn their tufts from out of his sight” (NCP 239). This third creature

Is not a bad man or a caught

Tom peeping out of his true time.

He is a god making a funny

Face across the world’s garden.

When the god is “hiding”, he inhabits a third level of beholding, where Adam and Eve are the observers and God the observed. But it also indicates a fourth: the field of vision that belongs to the picture’s beholder, where the hiding is not simply a withdrawal from the visible, but something itself visible, performed to an audience, designed to be seen. This level of beholding is complicated further by the material opacity of the picture itself (which, as “found”, had presumably once been “lost”). The picture is “Under its varnish darkening”, and the god is only visible when “I slant the canvas” and “look in / ... under the cracking black.” That is, Graham’s ekphrasis also takes in the picture’s physical decay over time.

This physical decay is not just a “darkening”, however. In a somewhat counterintuitive locution Graham writes: “the painted face is faded with light”, and follows up this image with one of only two full rhymes in the poem: “They turn their tufts out of his sight”. The semantically overdetermined light/sight rhyme, worn from historic overuse, gestures toward the very visualization that the matrices of beholding would deny. Yet the major instability of this visual field arises from the unstable identities of beholder and beheld, so that the poem continually dissolves any hierarchical organization of vision within the picture, or within the poem’s depiction of the picture. The opening stanza runs:

Flame and the garden we are together

In it using our secret time up.

We are together in this picture.

At first, “we” seems to point to “Flame and the garden”; then “we” are in the garden; then “we” are in the picture. “We” might denote Adam and Eve, or might denote the community of spectators which, in the shared act of beholding the picture, is transformed into a “we.” The following stanza, focalizing outward to describe this “landscape,” would reinforce our sense that the speaking voice as an external spectator. And yet, when the poem ends by asking “What shall we say to the hiding god?” it would appear that “we” is, once again, Adam and Eve, situated within the frame. But such complications are at work at a local as well as a structural level. “We are those two figures barely / Discernable in the pool...”, Graham writes. But who is “we”, and who is doing the discerning if not another “we”? This is further complicated by the line-break and the lack of punctuation, each of which open up syntactical vacillation: we are those two figures *barely*; then we are those figures *barely / Discernable*, and subsequently *barely / Discernable in the pool*. “We” are figures that we can barely discern, but these figures are in fact reflections in a pool, which it transpires is itself “under / The umbra of the foreground tree”: a reflection in a shadow, out of the foreground, and hence at least triply withheld from sight. In addition to this, the poem continually doubts the claims it makes: the picture is, after all, “*Maybe illustrating a fable*”. When Graham writes “Or this is how I see it”, we are brought to question the reliability of the poem’s beholder-narrator: its description of what it sees is also a translation of a visual medium into words. The two figures are “yearning in // Their wordless place”, and when “They turn their tufts out of his sight” this takes place “In this picture’s language not / Wanting to be discovered.” Again, the poem’s syntax and line-breaks introduce additional indeterminacy of syntax: they do not want to be discovered; the picture’s language does not want to be discovered; god’s sight is in this picture’s language...⁷⁶

⁷⁶ The February 1975 draft is even more stringent in this regard, merely saying of the figures: “They are not to be spoken to.” W.S. Graham Fonds, University of Victoria, File 16.

This elides not simply the identities of beholders and beheld, but also the different levels of beholding, and indeed the very distinction of what is interior and exterior to the picture. Earlier drafts demonstrate that this instability was hard won. The February 1975 draft starts “Flame and the garden *they* are together”, whilst in the September 1974 letter, the second stanza of the first section had immediately served to “frame” to picture: “It is not easy to enter,” he writes, thereby situating its speaker as definitively outside, before describing the picture itself as “A cave-mouth on the flat within / Four gilt sections with mitred corners.”⁷⁷ To frame the picture, he describes its frame. In this early draft, the physical decay of the picture fixes it in place as an object; in the final version, by contrast, it gives off an opacity which interrupts our fixing it in place.

This shared beholding then receives an additional participant in the poem’s third and final section. Structured around the imperatives “Observe”, “Now look”, and “See”, the lines bring one further spectator into play: the reader. Just as in ‘The Dredge’, ekphrasis serves as a vehicle for address—or, to put it in the terms of his earlier poems, to construct a space for communication. But here, the address is complicated by the indeterminate “space” of beholding and communicating that has been set up, as he explores both the poem’s ability to trace the visual field, and the instabilities of this field. In his comments for Vinson and Kirkpatrick, Graham had described his “major themes” as “The difficulty of communication; the difficulty of speaking from a fluid identity; the lessons in physical phenomena; the mystery and adequacy of the aesthetic experience; the elation of being alive in the language.”⁷⁸ Here one gets the impression that the fluid identity does not precede the speaking, but rather is forged from out of the speaking. And these identities, these physical phenomena, and indeed aesthetic experience itself, are not secured within the field of vision, but rather are shaped by the modalities and seeing and being seen.

John Hollander has argued of ekphrastic poems that, whilst they “purport to speak up for the silent picture, to make it speak out in some way”, they are first and foremost works of “writing”.⁷⁹ He takes this to mean that “what ‘speaks’ in iconic poems is their use of a complex set of generic, schematic, formal, and other rhetorical conventions”: ekphrasis, just as it gestures towards a different

⁷⁷ W.S. Graham Fonds, University of Victoria, File 16; *Nightfisherman*, 280.

⁷⁸ “W.S. Graham comments,” Vinson 575.

⁷⁹ Hollander, *The Gazer’s Spirit*, 90.

art medium, refers back to the specificity of its own medium. For Hollander, this is to be understood in terms of convention, something which fits with his project of outlining an ekphrastic tradition; Graham's ekphrasis, whilst evidently embedded in this tradition, expands outwards from a genre piece into a far larger exploration of language as simultaneously obstacle and vehicle.

Throughout 'The Found Picture', this is organized around problematics of vision and opacity: not just its matrix of beholding, beholders, and beheld, but also the fluidity of these subject positions within the poem; not just the material opacity of the picture described, but the poem's own linguistic opacity, organized around its indeterminate pronouns, its syntactic suspensions, its line-breaks. The poem's visualization of the painting is thus absorbed into an exploration of the plasticity of its verbal medium; once again, this plasticity is at work both through the words' materiality and through their mutability: the instability of the visual field is produced by the way the poem works its addresses, its pronouns, its line-breaks, its wordplay, into continually evolving shapes.

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Poetry has long been dialogue with the visual arts; yet might poetry share with painting and sculpture the condition of being a *plastic* art? This may well be the conclusion to glean from Graham's own relation to the painters and sculptors around him. As we have seen, his artist peers provided him with his major community—something which, for a poet concerned with "the difficulty of communication" was crucial enough. And, as his interlocutors, they became integral to his reflections on the aspirations of art, both as concerned the artist's "calling", their being "maimed for the job," and on the broader reflection of what art can achieve: how it can disturb the language, or the visual field, how it can trace the emergence of the spaces of vision and communication. At the same time, he adopted from those artists both compositional practices and techniques, and a vocabulary through which to think through his own poetics, both in his statements *on* poetry and his statements *in* poetry. Words such as "construction" and "abstraction" both rely on painters' and sculptors' understandings of these words, and diverge from them into the specificities of Graham's own verbal medium. This, finally, points to the major affinity between Graham and those artists with whom he drank, disputed, corresponded, debated, and whose work he commemorated and criticized in verse. For Graham came to attend to the

plasticity of words: not only their sounds, their syntactic indeterminacy, their situatedness in spaces of communication, but also language's propensity both to shape and be shaped, reshaped, its ability to work on the world, and to be worked and reworked themselves. If Graham's earliest statements on poetic "medium" were restricted to the somewhat laconic rallying claim that "the poem is made of words", in his mature work we find a more nuanced understanding of medium, comprising the technical resources offered by its verbal-plastic material, and the generic conventions, the repertoires of versification, address, diction, through which to grasp the plasticity of its materials. In this, he comes to stand as a crucial figure in the history of the radical rethinking of medium that has long been recognized as integral to the advances of modernist painting and sculpture across the twentieth century, but which is no less one of the major achievements of modernist poetry.